

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

SEVENTEEN

RUNE

BY SUNDOWN, THE BOAT was out at sea and Gideon still hadn't returned. Hungry and tired of being confined to their cramped cabin, Rune donned a pastel green evening gown and a pair of cream-colored gloves, then set out to find dinner.

The *Arcadia* had six decks, and after asking for directions from the staff, Rune eventually found her way to the third-class dining saloon on the lower deck. Through the portholes, the sea churned beneath a blackening sky. Caelis's harbor was long gone on the horizon.

The saloon was abuzz with the sound of conversation and the clink of silverware. The narrow room was dimly lit by candles burning in sconces on the wall, and there was no reception desk, forcing Rune to choose a seat herself. But diners crammed every table, most of them shooting glances her way.

I'm overdressed, she realized.

Overdressed and drawing unwanted attention to herself.

She found a vacant booth across the room and slid into it.

Two menus lay on the table. Picking one up, she pretended to skim it while simultaneously scanning the saloon.

At least this is the Arcadia.

The *Arcadia* was governed by Caelisian laws. That's why she'd chosen it. The safety it provided, along with the illusion disguising her features, gave her enough cover to relax, at least temporarily. The spell would wear off later tonight and need to be recast tomorrow morning.

But once Rune stepped into the New Republic, she would be unprotected. As soon as they arrived in port, witch hunters and their hounds would board and check every cabin. Only after everyone was accounted for and thoroughly searched would they let passengers disembark.

Rune would never get past the dogs, who would sniff out her magic immediately. If Gideon couldn't circumvent them, this would all be over.

She was completely at his mercy.

What have I done?

“Why is a pretty girl like yourself dining alone?”

Looking up, Rune found a young man standing over her. His mouth curved in a friendly smile, and his eyes sparkled in the candlelight. His hair reminded her of Alex’s—a tawny gold—and in one hand he held a wine bottle; in the other, two glasses.

“My ... um ... husband is seasick,” she lied.

He didn’t wear the staff uniform, suggesting he was a passenger.

“Pity.” He set both glasses down and began pouring wine. “Would you like some company to help pass the time?”

“She already has company.”

The familiar voice was like an earthquake’s tremor, reverberating through Rune.

The young man glanced up midpour. Rune reluctantly followed his gaze.

Gideon had changed into a dark green suit from Soren's luggage. The jacket was too tight, the seams stretched to their limit. But the ill fit only made Gideon look more impressive, drawing attention to his well-defined shoulders and the strength in his arms.

"You're the seasick husband, I take it?"

Gideon glanced at Rune, who smiled weakly up at him.

"The very one." His attention returned to the young man. "And *you* were just leaving."

Sensing he couldn't win this fight, the man quietly withdrew, leaving the wine and the glasses. Gideon slid into the booth across from Rune and set the glass of water he'd brought with him down on the table.

It was too small a space for someone as big as Gideon. Beneath the table, his legs crowded hers, forcing Rune to tuck her knees between his.

"Do you have to be so rude?" she said, watching her wine benefactor retreat.

"You're naive if you think all he wanted from you was some company."

Rune rolled her eyes. “Not everyone has ulterior motives, Gideon. Some people are just *nice*. You could try it sometime.”

“Trust me.” Gideon watched the would-be suitor search for another table. “I’m a man. I know what he wants.”

She scoffed. “You’re ridiculous. All men have built-in radar telling them the thoughts of other men?”

“Something like that.”

His gaze lifted to her. For a moment, that sparkling silence from the cabin returned. Rune became aware of the candle burning low in the sconce on the wall beside them. Of how small and dark and far away their booth was from the other diners. Of how she and Gideon looked to everyone else in the room: like a couple having dinner together.

This was a game they hadn’t played before.

She cleared her throat and changed the subject. “Any luck finding a second cabin?”

He shook his head. “They’re all full.”

Just like she'd told him when they boarded. She circled the rim of her wineglass with the tip of her gloved finger. "You were gone so long, I thought maybe you'd jumped overboard and swam back to shore."

"And why would I do that?" He lifted his glass to his mouth. "The Barrow Strait is freezing this time of year."

"But perhaps less daunting than sharing a bed with me."

Gideon choked on his water. His eyes lifted to hers as he set down the glass.

"Why should I be daunted?" He lowered his voice. "I've survived the beds of witches before."

Is he referring to Cressida? Or to me?

Both, she realized.

For some stupid reason, being lumped in with Cressida, as if they were one and the same, hurt fiercely. Ordinarily, Rune tried not to think about the night she'd spent in Gideon's bed. But she was thinking about it now.

“Is that what it was between us?” She lowered her gaze to her wine. “Something for you to survive?”

“That’s rich, coming from you.” Gideon leaned back, crossing his arms. An agitated energy rolled off him. “The entire time you were seducing me, you were in love with my brother. So don’t pretend like your feelings are hurt.”

Rune glanced up.

What?

“Oh, come on. You’re going to play coy with *me*?” His mouth curled like he’d eaten something rotten. “There’s no need to pretend anymore. I see you clearly, even with that illusion.” He lowered his voice and nodded to her altered face. “Seeing you with Soren made your skill at seduction abundantly clear. Watching him so utterly convinced of your affection was like watching myself, two months ago.” She heard the disgust in his voice. “You might have deceived me once, but you won’t do it again.”

Rune glanced away.

Had she feigned feelings for Gideon at first? *Yes*. Had she tried to seduce him to obtain valuable intel? *Of course*. It was the only way to rescue Seraphine.

But at some point, she'd stopped pretending.

At some point, the lie became real.

Gideon had no reason to believe Rune's feelings had been sincere. So it shouldn't have surprised her that he believed she was in love with Alex. She was still wearing his brother's engagement ring, after all.

There's no point explaining it to him.

He'd never believe her. Even if he did, it wouldn't change anything. She was a witch. Nothing Rune did could ever change his mind; her inherent, unalterable *essence* revolted him.

She finished her wine in one gulp.

"Poor, innocent Gideon. Deceived by a witch." On an empty stomach, the alcohol hit fast. Her face grew warm, and the chatter dimmed around them. "What a victim you are."

Her anger flared and she reached for the wine bottle, pouring herself another glass.

“Of *course* I deceived you. If you’d known the truth from the beginning, you would’ve had me executed!”

Gideon glanced around the saloon. “Keep your voice down.”

Rune winced. He was right. She’d spoken too loudly.

Following his gaze, Rune looked out over the room but found no one watching them. Hopefully the roar of conversation, combined with their distance from the other diners, would make eavesdropping difficult.

Still, Rune and Gideon were supposed to be newlyweds on their honeymoon. They should look disgustingly infatuated with each other. Instead, they looked more like rivals in a verbal shoot-out.

Gideon must have had the same thought, because he reached across the table and laced her gloved fingers through his.

Startled, Rune stared at their hands.

It’s fake, she reminded herself. He’s playing the role of doting husband.

Pulling her hand closer, Gideon turned it over so her palm faced him. Slowly, delicately, he traced her gloved hand, feigning affection, trailing his fingertips over her palm.

She remembered the way his hands had adored her that night in his bed. Before he knew what she was.

She wanted to take off her gloves. To feel his skin against hers again.

No. That's the last thing you want.

She needed to keep her wits about her. She could never, ever trust this boy. No matter what, she mustn't let down her guard.

"How could I possibly have been myself with you?" she whispered, letting the rancor in her voice give her true feelings away as he gently stroked her hand. "You *hunt* people like me. You would have hung me up for the crime of my existence and cheered while my enemies cut open my throat."

His fingers stopped tracing as some dark emotion flooded his eyes. But it was there and gone before she deciphered it.

“So yes: I lied to you. I lied to *everyone*.”

“Not Alex,” he said, as he touched the place where a ring still rested on her finger, hidden beneath the glove.

“No,” she whispered, withdrawing her hand and curling it in her lap. “Not Alex. Your brother didn’t hate what I was.”

“And for that, he’s dead.”

The words made Rune’s eyes burn.

“You know what? Let’s not do this.” She looked out over the dimly lit room crammed full of diners. “We have to tolerate each other for a few more days. But once we both get what we want, we never have to speak again. So let’s just ... stick to the plan.”

“Fine by me,” said Gideon, crossing his arms over his chest again and leaning back in the booth.

“Speaking of plans.” Rune took another swallow of wine, getting down to business. “What is yours, exactly? How are we going to get past the hunting hounds once we make port?”

He avoided her gaze as he spun the water glass between his thumb and forefinger.

“Sometimes the dogs make mistakes,” he said.

Rune squinted at him. “What do you mean?”

“They can smell magic on someone who’s unknowingly come into contact with a witch or a spell, but who isn’t a witch themselves.” He ran his hand over his jaw, as if still thinking it through. “Once they board, the dogs will smell your magic—there’s nothing you can do about that. But before the Guard can arrest you, they’ll have to take you aside for questioning and check you for scars. Since you’re an exceptional liar, and you don’t have any scars, they’ll assume it was a mistake.”

Rune winced. “Actually...”

He glanced up at her as he took another sip of water. “Actually what?”

A storm of emotions swept through her. Shame, anger, fear.

“I do have scars.”

He slowly set down his glass. “You’re joking.”

Rune lifted her chin in defiance. *Does that repulse you?* she wanted to ask. When she’d had none, at least he could pretend she wasn’t the thing he hated most.

“Where are they?”

“I’m not showing you.”

“You might have to.”

“You’re a captain. Surely you can make them—”

“A *disgraced* captain.”

“You outrank every Blood Guard officer waiting in every New Republic port.”

“Outrank them, perhaps. But I can’t refuse to let them search you.”

“No?” She leaned in, holding his gaze, keeping her voice low. “If I were truly your wife, you would let their filthy hands strip me naked while their gazes wolfed me down?”

The look that crossed his face was primal. *Raw*. Like she’d let a prowling animal escape inside him.

“Of course not,” he said, wrangling it. “I’d never let them strip a girl I loved and search her body for scars—but we’re not talking about that. We’re talking about *you*.” His eyes had gone cold as the sea. “You’re not a girl. You’re a witch.”

The words stung worse than a slap. Rune looked away to hide the hurt.

“I have a better idea,” he continued. “Once we arrive on the island, I’ll arrest you, put you in manacles, and tell the Blood Guard officers waiting in port that I have orders to bring you to the Good Commander alive.”

“And then you’ll refuse to unlock the manacles and *actually* hand me over.” Rune sipped her wine, avoiding his gaze. “No, thank you.”

Her attention suddenly collided with the police officer from Caelis. The one who’d shamelessly ogled her in their cabin. He was taking his seat at a table portside, staring at Rune while he lowered himself into a chair.

Goose bumps erupted over her skin.

Why is he still on the ship?

Before she panicked, Gideon pressed his knees against hers beneath the table. She glanced up to find him glowering at the officer. Gideon didn't seem surprised to see him, almost as if he knew the man had remained onboard after they disembarked.

"Speaking of trusting each other..." Gideon reached for a loose strand of Rune's hair. Twirling it around his finger, he tucked it securely behind her ear. It was so gentle, so sweet, Rune almost forgot how dangerous he was. Almost forgot they were being watched.

She had the strangest urge to lean her cheek into his palm.

Blaming it on the wine, Rune dragged her eyes back to his.

"If I'm going to defy my orders," he said, "and smuggle a condemned criminal into the Republic, I need to be sure you're not helping Cressida from the inside. Tell me what your plans are."

Rune shook her head. "That wasn't our deal."

“Neither was this,” he said, placing his hand on her knee beneath the table. “I didn’t sign up to be your pretend husband.”

“No,” she said bitterly. “We both know how much you loathe that prospect.”

Again, something dark flooded Gideon’s face. As if taking her words as a challenge, he reached his other hand beneath the table and hooked them both under her knees, pulling her toward him, stopping only when she was nestled securely between his legs. Rune gripped the edge of her seat to stop from being pulled under completely.

What is he doing?

His hands were so big, he could almost close one around each leg. A reminder of how easily he could overcome her.

“How about a trade?” he said. “I’ll get you past the witch-hunting hounds *if* you tell me your plans.”

“You already promised to get me past the hounds.”

“That was before your little newlywed trick. I’m rethinking my offer.”

Before Rune could rail against the injustice, he cupped her legs above the knees. The warmth of his palms penetrated her dress, seeping into her skin. Rune's grip tightened on her seat as his thumbs stroked her. Tenderly, and a little possessively.

Her heart sped up.

This is fake, she told herself. He's trying to lower my defenses.

He made no move to release her, and Rune made no move to force him.

Instead, she studied the stern lines of his face. He was inscrutable, this man. Probably plotting her downfall.

But if he was, what would make him change his mind?

Rune knew his suspicion of her was fair. Gideon had no reason to trust her. Not after she'd deceived him. Not after she'd aided Cressida, both wittingly and unwittingly.

Keeping her plans secret would deepen his suspicions.

Could she tell him just enough to make him trust her?

If he trusted her, he'd have no reason to betray her.

"You told me there's a missing Roseblood heir," she said, a little breathless from his stroking hands. "If that's true, I ... I'm going to find them. All I want is a chance to warn them of Cressida's plans." *And get them as far away from her as possible.*

He narrowed his eyes.

"According to Cressida, this person is concealed by a powerful spell," he said. "No sibyl can See them."

Interesting.

He hadn't mentioned that.

Gideon's legs still pressed against hers, pinning her like a moth to a board. "It will take months, if not years, to track them down."

"For you, maybe. But I know a spell that will summon them to a specific location."

His stroking stopped. “Which location?”

“You think I’d tell you?” She shot him a haughty glance and took another sip of wine. The familiar fog of intoxication was creeping in, blurring everything beyond their booth and muddying her thoughts. “If I give you the location, you’ll have your witch hunters lying in wait to ambush us.”

Rune wasn’t naive: if Gideon found this missing Roseblood first, he’d kill them. There would be no hesitation. Killing them would put a permanent stop to Cressida’s resurrection plans.

“Why should I believe you?” he said. “You could summon this person and hand them over to Cressida.”

“I’m trying to *escape* Cressida, not help her.”

“I thought you were trying to escape Soren.”

Rune flinched. *Right*. Soren was the reason she’d given Gideon for making this truce.

“I’m escaping them both,” she said, finishing the second glass of wine. The warmth of it flooded her thighs.

She really needed to eat something.

“How do I know you’re not lying?” he said. “To convince me to get you past the hounds?”

Annoyed, Rune reached into the pocket of her dress and pulled out a gold locket. It was identical to the one the officers had brought to their room. Only inside this one was a portrait of Soren.

And something else.

Cupping it in her hands to hide it from prying eyes, she popped the locket open.

Gideon peered down. “What is that?”

Rune picked up the lock of white hair and held it to the light. “Cressida’s hair. To summon the missing Roseblood, I needed hair, blood, or nail clippings from someone directly related.”

Hair was the easiest to obtain. Rune had used *Ghost Walker* to creep into Cressida's room the night before last and snipped it while she slept.

Dropping the hair back into the locket, she snapped it shut.

Gideon's eyes lifted to her face, and Rune thought she saw admiration there.

Must be a trick of the light.

"Once I have the sibyl," she said, "once I've found and warned this missing heir, you'll never see me again. I'm done with all of this. I'm going to run as far away as I can get."

"You could use the sibyl to find the remaining witches on the island and recruit them to Cressida's war. To attack from within *and* without. It's what I would do."

"But I'm *not* doing that."

They stared each other down. His gaze was a heavy weight, his eyes full of calculations.

He was trying to decide if he believed her.

“At some point,” she said, “you’re just going to have to trust me.”

“Yes,” he murmured. “That’s the problem. Isn’t it?”

Movement nearby made them glance toward the police officer. His partner had joined him, taking a seat at his table. The officer motioned in Rune and Gideon’s direction.

“I’m not sure he’s convinced by our charade,” said Rune.

“No,” said Gideon. “I don’t think he is.”

So far, Gideon was doing all the work in their game of seduction. Perhaps it was time for Rune to join in.

She turned back to find him watching the officers, his brow furrowed and his mouth stern. What would it take to make that mouth smile—even just a little?

Leaning across the table, Rune pressed the pad of her thumb against his lower lip. Gideon’s gaze returned to hers as she dragged her thumb slowly across.

Instead of smiling, Gideon shivered.

It sobered her. Rune remembered the day he learned she was a witch. When he made it perfectly clear how sickened by her he was.

I'm not sure what disgusts me more, he'd said. What you are, or that I fell for your act.

Gideon was only pretending he couldn't keep his hands off her to throw their watching audience off their scent. Deep down, he couldn't stand the thought of touching her.

It made Rune go cold.

How far could he take this before his disgust overrode everything else?

She met his dark gaze, wanting to know.

Pouring a third glass of wine, she took a long swallow, then slid her gloved hand beneath the table, placing it over one of his. The wine hummed loudly in her blood now, stripping away her inhibitions as she dragged his palm further up her thigh.

Gideon drew in a sharp breath. “Rune...”

See? thought Rune. *I can play this game, too.*

He made no move to withdraw. “What are you doing?”

“Performing. Same as you.” Her cheeks were warm from the wine. “We’re newlyweds, right? Let’s make them believe it.”

His hand tightened around her thigh. “Is this how you’d behave with a real husband?”

She looked up at him through her lashes. “I suppose that would depend on the husband.”

The shadows in his eyes darkened. *With disgust?*

No. Not exactly.

In fact, Rune thought she saw desire there.

An echoing desire howled through her.

“Rune...”

She liked how he said her name. Half-desperate. A little crazed.

“Yes, Gideon?”

He leaned in so close, he could kiss her if he wanted to. His lips parted, as if he was about to tell her some secret, when a feminine voice interrupted them.

“Captain Sharpe? Is that you?”