

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

TWENTY

RUNE

RUNE SNUCK INTO THE first-class library, where the armchairs were plusher and more comfortable. She curled up in one and slept there until late morning, when the librarian arrived.

Afterward, Rune avoided their cabin, hoping that in doing so, she'd avoid Gideon, too. Instead, she explored the ship. Since the *Arcadia* was friendly to witches and Rune needed a seaworthy vessel to smuggle the sibyl, herself, and potentially the Roseblood heir out of the New Republic, she wanted to know if the *Arcadia* could be used for such a purpose.

They couldn't board as passengers; they'd never get past the witch hunters and the hounds in port. But a ship as big as this one was bound to have multiple cargo holds, and if Rune managed to find one, or at least find out how and when they were loaded, it might be a way off the island.

She tried several times to get down to the ship's lower levels. But dressed as she was, she couldn't pass for staff, and every time she got beyond a door, a staff member would spot her and lead her back out again, thinking she was lost.

Rune considered using spells to unlock the doors, but that meant leaving a trail of bloody spellmarks and crimson moth signatures in her wake. Which would lead those two police officers straight to her.

By evening, she was no closer to her objective than she'd been that morning.

She needed someone to get her past the doors. Someone who belonged on the other side, and would therefore help her blend in.

"I PROPOSE A NO-DRINKING policy this evening," said Gideon as they made their way to Deck C to meet Abbie and her friends. He wore Soren's most casual suit and had left the jacket buttons undone.

"I'm never touching a drink again," muttered Rune, shivering in the brisk air.

I should have brought a shawl.

Tomorrow, they would dock in the New Republic's largest harbor. Which meant Rune had only tonight left to find a way down to the cargo holds. Her best chance was to endear herself to Abbie's friends, who she assumed worked aboard the *Arcadia*, and convince them to give her a tour of the lowest decks.

The moment they emerged into the open air, Rune heard the crack of a gun firing. Startled, she was reaching for Gideon's arm, unsure what they were walking into, when the sound of shattering porcelain, followed by laughter, stopped her.

Huh?

As they turned the deck's corner, she found the source of the shooting—and the laughter.

“Sharpe!” a young man in a red cap with his sleeves rolled to his elbows yelled across the deck. “I confess: I didn’t believe Abbie when she said you were aboard. Come to show her up?”

Beside the young man stood Abbie, her curls freed from their bun. She held a rifle aloft while another young woman across the deck threw a bone-white plate into the air.

BANG!

The plate shattered, its pieces dropping into the ocean.

“She’s kicking everyone’s ass.”

“As usual,” said Abbie, lowering the rifle and grinning at Gideon. “You’re welcome to try beating my record.”

Rune suddenly realized what Poor Man’s Trap was.

“We’re ... trapshooting?” asked Rune, shivering again as a gust of icy wind hit.

Gideon didn’t hear her. “I doubt I’ll have to try very hard,” he called to Abbie as he tugged off his jacket, dropping it over Rune’s shoulders. The warmth of him settled into her skin, and Rune couldn’t help snuggling into the fabric, thankful.

The eyes of Abbie’s friends followed Gideon’s jacket, landing on Rune.

“Whoa. Who’s the aristo?”

“His wife,” said Abbie, who’d stopped grinning as she handed the rifle to Gideon.

Someone whistled in appreciation.

It was then that Rune realized she was in unfamiliar territory. Give her a ballroom, an evening gown, and a four-piece band playing a waltz, and Rune knew exactly who she was

and how she was supposed to behave. But here, on the lower deck of a ship, with people who broke china for fun and whistled at girls they found pretty ... Rune was at a loss.

“Clearly it pays to be the hero of a revolution.”

“Enough,” growled Gideon, cocking the gun.

The catcalls quieted.

Rune came as close to the group as she dared, remaining a few steps away as Gideon took three shots in a row, shattering all three plates. In the distance, the sun hung low in a red sky.

“Isn’t this a little ... wasteful?” she said.

Abbie threw her a look that said Rune was the silliest thing she’d ever encountered.

“We only use the broken china,” said a voice at her ear. “When the sea gets fierce, and the ship rocks enough to send the furniture tipping, it’s hard to keep the dishware secure. A lot of it ends up chipped from sliding around or broken from crashing on the floor.”

Rune looked up to find the young man who'd kindly brought her wine before being scared away by Gideon. He wore the navy *Arcadia* staff uniform now, and the sea breeze blew his golden hair back from his face as he studied her with an amused smile.

"I'm William, by the way."

"Kestrel," she said, holding out her hand to him. "Sorry about Gideon's behavior last night."

He took her gloved fingers in his. "No offense taken. I get grouchy when I'm seasick, too."

Right.

"So," said the boy in the red cap, who'd first called out to them. Like Gideon, he was built like a soldier. "How did a classy girl like you sully herself with a man like Gideon?"

Sully herself.

The phrasing brought to mind Rune's illicit dream from last night. She could almost feel the heat of the boilers and Gideon's hands on her skin.

Gideon lifted the rifle and fired another shot, bringing her back to reality.

Five for five.

“Love doesn’t sully you,” she said. “Love purifies you.”

Real love, anyway.

Gideon paused as if to glance her way, but reloaded instead.

“That so?” The young man grinned. As if he was *very* amused.

“*Singh*,” Gideon growled, already aiming again. “Lay off her.”

“You seem to know my husband,” she said, watching Gideon. “Did you fight alongside him at the New Dawn?”

The boy Gideon referred to as Singh took off his cap. “Yes, ma’am. Abbie and I both did.”

This was new information. Rune tried to absorb it while studying Abbie, who looked fierce in the wind, her reddish- brown curls blowing across her face, her shirt partially unbuttoned with the sleeves half-rolled as she watched Gideon fire.

“How did you end up on the *Arcadia*?” asked Rune. “I thought they didn’t let witch hunters aboard.”

“Oh, we’re no witch hunters,” he said. “In my opinion, the revolution went too far. Something needed to change—don’t get me wrong. No one should cower beneath their government’s boots. But the Republic has become what it meant to correct: a nation ruled by fear. It’s the Reign of Witches without the witches.” He glanced at Gideon. “No offense, Sharpe.”

Gideon said nothing. Just took another shot, shattering a plate into the wind.

Rune liked this boy.

“No politics,” said Abbie. “You know the rules.”

He shrugged, but shot Rune an easy smile. “I’m Ash, by the way. Ash Singh.”

“Kestrel,” she said. “Kestrel Sharpe.”

Gideon missed his next shot. He handed the rifle to Abbie. “Nine in a row. What’s your record?”

“Eleven.” Reloading the gun, Abbie turned to Rune. “Wanna give it a go?”

“*That*”—Gideon intercepted the gun—“is a terrible idea. Unless you want to get shot. Kestrel shoots like a...”

Rune arched a brow. “Like a what?”

Gideon shut his mouth.

Smart boy.

Rune shrugged off his jacket, grabbed the rifle—which was a lot heavier than she’d expected—and hoisted it. She’d watched him shoot several times now. How difficult could it be?

“I’m ready!” she called to the girl throwing dishware.

A white dessert plate shot up into the air. Rune closed one eye, aimed the gun at it, then pulled the trigger.

The shot went wide. The girl throwing plates ducked, covering her head, as the plate dropped into the sea.

“Good effort,” said Abbie, patting her shoulder.

Was that derision in her voice?

Instead of giving the gun back to Gideon, Rune kept trying.

Abbie’s friends all gave her advice. Ash and William cheered her on. She was starting to relax when, after her sixth miss, she noticed neither Gideon nor Abbie was nearby.

Lowering the gun, she spotted them several yards away, at the railing. Abbie leaned her hip against it, staring up at Gideon, while Gideon bent toward her, fully absorbed by whatever she was saying. Abbie brightened beneath his attention, the way a sunflower soaks up the sun.

An old friend, Gideon had called her last night.

Rune doubted it.

She took another shot. Again, it went wide. Ash and William were losing their enthusiasm. The others wandered away, in search of more interesting sport. But Rune was determined to hit a plate. Just one plate. As she took aim again, she saw Gideon and Abbie moving further up the deck, out of hearing distance. Into her line of sight.

Abbie teasingly punched his arm. Gideon laughed.

What are they talking about?

They had an easy way about them. No tension or friction or argument simmering beneath the surface.

Was that the kind of girl Gideon wanted?

Is that who he ends up with?

Something twinged in her chest as Abbie slid her hand into the crook of Gideon's elbow, pulling him closer, biting her lip as she stared at him through her eyelashes—all tricks Rune herself had used to seduce men.

Rune pulled the trigger without looking where she was aiming.

BANG!

Gideon grabbed Abbie, pulling her out of the line of fire and into his chest.

Whoops.

Rune lowered the gun. Gideon glared straight at her.

“Sorry!” she yelled. “I’m so sorry!”

“I warned you,” he said loudly to Abbie, leaving her behind as he stalked toward Rune. He was a dark force, like a thunderstorm spreading across the deck.

Rune took a step back.

He grabbed the rifle. No longer having the higher ground, she let him take it.

“I could kill that prince for giving you a weapon without teaching you how to use it.”

What?

Instead of storming off and taking the rifle with him, he took Rune’s arm. “Come here,” he said, positioning her in front of him.

“Wh-what are you doing?” she whispered as his hand dropped to her waist, pulling her against him.

His breath warmed her neck. “Teaching you how to handle a gun.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she said, feeling hot despite the cold air.

“For the safety of everyone on deck, I do.” He placed her hand on the barrel. “You want to grip the stock firmly. Like this.” He squeezed lightly to demonstrate. “Next, you want to steady the butt against your shoulder.” He drew the gun back until it pressed securely against her shoulder, between her arm and collarbone.

“Now, put your finger on the trigger.” He guided her hand so the end of her gloved finger—right in the center of her fingertip and the first joint—rested on the trigger.

“Keep your elbows down and in.” His lips brushed her ear. “And try to relax.”

Relax. Yes, easily done when he was *everywhere*. Forcing her to remember how big and warm and strong he was. How was she supposed to relax when his arm coiled around her waist and the heat of his chest seeped into her back?

Her heart started to pound. She closed her left eye, trying to focus.

“*Don’t* close your eyes,” he said. “Pay attention to your breathing instead.” He pressed his free hand high on her torso, just below her breasts. “Breathe from here. You want to inhale, and only when you exhale do you squeeze the trigger.”

Her body was on fire in all the places he was touching her.

“That’s ... a lot of things to remember.”

“You don’t have to get it right the first time.”

“Okay,” she said, sucking in a lungful of air.

And then she fired.

The plate fell into the sea, perfectly intact.

His voice softened. “Very good.”

“I missed.”

“Yes, but your aim improved. Try again.”

Rune did. She missed all the shots she took, but not wildly so. They fell into an easy rhythm. Rune shooting. Gideon correcting her form. Reminding her to breathe, or to follow through when pulling the trigger.

When she finally relaxed, his rough cheek brushed hers. “What were you dreaming about last night?” His voice was low, near her ear. “When you called out for me.”

Rune’s shot went wide.

What?

She'd called out for him?

Humiliation flooded her.

She kept her gaze fixed on the girl with the plate, trying to focus. But feverish images from last night kept flashing through her mind. "It was nothing. Just a dream."

His arm tightened around her, anchoring her to him. "It didn't sound like nothing."

Rune lost control of her breathing. Lowering the rifle a little, she turned her face toward his. Their breath mingled in the space between. "Trust me," she said, her gaze dropping to his mouth, "you don't want to know what it was about."

"Oh?" His eyebrows shot upward. "Now you *have* to tell me."

She shook her head and lifted the rifle anew, mentally running through each piece of advice: Relax. Breathe. Both eyes open. Elbows down and ...

"Rune."

“You’re distracting me.”

“Am I?” He dragged her closer against him.

Rune swallowed. “We were arguing. About a cravat.”

“You’re lying.”

Only partially.

“Tell me the truth.”

The girl across the deck flung the next plate into the air. Rune fired. This time, the china exploded.

Rune watched the white shards plunge into the sea like falling stars.

“I hit it,” she whispered in disbelief, lowering the gun to her side. “Gideon! Did you see? I hit it!”

Pride surged, ballooning her chest. She turned to face him.

“Sharpe!” Abbie interrupted. “We’re moving inside where it’s warmer. Fancy a game of cards?”

“Always,” said Gideon, letting Rune go. Just like that.

He moved to Abbie like metal to a magnet. The cold rushed in, making Rune hug herself. Ash and the others were already filing into the stairwell. As Abbie turned Gideon in the direction of her friends, Gideon smiled at something she said, forgetting Rune.

They looked so natural together.

It was a reminder: Gideon needed Abbie and her friends to believe his fake marriage was real. What better way to do that than to flirt with his fake wife while teaching her how to handle a gun?

“Is he always like that?”

Rune dragged her eyes away from Gideon and Abbie to find the golden-haired William standing beside her, frowning at the pair.

“What do you mean?”

“Attentive to other women, at your expense.”

“What? Oh ... no. It’s not like that. He and Abbie are old friends.”

William said nothing. Only studied Rune with something like pity.

If William saw what Rune saw when she watched them together, maybe her gut feeling was right. Abbie was infatuated.

Was Gideon?

It doesn’t matter. I don’t care.

Even if Rune *did* care—hypothetically speaking—there was no way to compete. Abbie wasn’t a witch, but a normal girl. Something Rune could never be.

A heaviness sank inside her. Like a boulder weighing her down.

Above them, the sky was darkening. Rune shivered in the chilly breeze. She glanced at Gideon's jacket, still lying on the deck at her feet.

"I know a good place to warm up." William held out his arm. "If you want to join me."

His eyes sparkled as he smiled at her.

Rune's gaze dropped to the white name tag on his uniform, declaring him part of the *Arcadia's* crew. Recalling the doors she couldn't get past and the cargo holds she needed to find, Rune said, "I'd love that. Thank you."

She took his arm and they followed the others inside, leaving Gideon's jacket in a crumpled heap behind them.