

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

THIRTY-ONE

GIDEON

IT WAS ALWAYS A shock these days, stepping into the Good Commander's gaslit study. The room itself hadn't changed. Familiar leather-bound books lined the walls, and a solid mahogany desk stood on the carpet with a wingback chair behind it.

The sight was almost comforting.

It was the man seated behind the desk who was not.

It should have been Nicolas Creed in that chair. A father figure, mentor, and friend. Gideon still recalled Nicolas's calloused hand pressing a pistol into his palm before they took the palace by force at the New Dawn. It was Nicolas who'd first believed in Gideon. Who'd taught Gideon how to believe in himself.

But Nicolas was dead. Yet another victim of Cressida Roseblood. Gideon had dug the man's grave himself, right after digging his brother's.

And the person sitting at the desk was his son, Noah.

The new Good Commander.

Noah wore his father's black uniform, with a scarlet cloak pinned over one shoulder. He propped his elbows on the desktop and steepled his fingers while listening to the young woman already inside the room, standing before the desk, giving an account.

Even from behind, the Good Commander's master of spies was easy to recognize. Her black hair was pulled up into a topknot. The bottom half of her head was shaved close to the scalp, drawing attention to her missing ear—taken from her by witches she'd been indentured to under the Sister Queens' reign.

At the sight of Gideon stepping through the door, the Good Commander's jaw tightened—a movement so slight, Gideon wondered if he'd imagined it.

Noah held up his hand, halting his spymaster's words.

"Impeccable timing, Sharpe. Harrow was informing me of trouble on the Continent. And here you are: the source of it." He nodded for the soldiers to bring Gideon forward.

With his hands shackled, Gideon let himself be nudged toward the Commander. When he stopped beside Harrow, her bright gold eyes locked on his. Not so long ago, Harrow had been Gideon's informant, freely bringing him information to aid in his witch hunts.

Now Harrow reported to the Good Commander, who disseminated her intel as he saw fit. Gideon couldn't blame her for the shift in loyalty. He'd failed her—failed all of them. Which was precisely why he needed to convince them to support his new plan. He had to fix what he'd broken.

“Start over, Harrow.” Noah looked Gideon up and down, as if inspecting every crease of his shirt and fleck of dirt on his pants. “I'll deal with you in a minute, Sharpe.”

Glancing back to Gideon, Harrow said, “I have a contact who's infiltrated the witch queen's ranks.”

Gideon frowned, interrupting her. “To infiltrate Cressida's ranks, this contact would have to be a witch.”

“That's correct.”

“You're sure she can be trusted?”

“That's why we're bringing in the sibyl,” said Noah. “To verify.” He nodded for Harrow to go on.

“My contact says Soren has given Cressida an army and will sail with her to lay siege to the New Republic in a matter of days.”

“I could have told you that if you’d simply waited for my report,” said Gideon.

Harrow cut him a look. “Soren has also *doubled* his initial war chest because of his fiancée’s kidnapping.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said Gideon. “There’s a way to circumvent this war *and* destroy Cressida. But it requires keeping the Crimson Moth alive.”

Harrow narrowed her eyes, turning her full attention on him. “You’re compromised, Comrade.”

Gideon brushed this off. “*You* aren’t thinking strategically. None of you are.” He looked around the room, which, other than the soldiers, contained a handful of Noah’s ministers. “If we kill the Moth, it will only enrage the prince. You think it’s bad now that he’s doubled his war chest? If his fiancée is dead, he’ll hold nothing back. You will make things worse.”

Harrow crossed her arms. But she was listening.

It wasn’t Harrow he needed to convince, though. It was the new Commander.

He turned toward Noah, who was staring Gideon down from behind his father's desk, his eyes cold as glittering ice.

"Cressida believes she has a long-lost sibling. A missing Roseblood heir, who she can use to resurrect her sisters."

Startled murmurs rippled around the room.

"Resurrection is a myth," said Noah.

"You certain of that? Because we can't afford to be wrong."

Gideon ignored the intense dislike radiating at him from across the desk and forged ahead. "Rune is hunting for this Roseblood heir. Once she finds them, she intends to smuggle them back to the Continent. My plan is twofold. First: we ambush them. I'll learn when and where Rune is planning to launch her escape and ensure the Blood Guard are lying in wait.

"Second: once we have them surrounded, we execute the Roseblood heir and arrest Rune, who we use to negotiate with Soren. All the prince has to do if he wants his precious bride back is cooperate with us. And all we'll require of him is this: once we prove to him that we have Rune in custody, he must order his soldiers to turn on an unsuspecting Cressida, killing her and every witch in her army. If he doesn't comply, Rune dies. If he *does* comply, we return Rune to him, unharmed."

Gideon glanced around the room, meeting the eyes of every official and soldier, one after another.

“We will prevent a war we’re not sure we can win, *and* we’ll rid ourselves of Cressida, along with any possibility of resurrecting her or her sisters.”

The room fell quiet.

“And if you fail to deliver?”

Gideon turned to Noah.

“If I fail, we’ll go to war and lose.” He glanced at Harrow. “If I fail, Cressida will not only reclaim her throne, but resurrect Elowyn and Analise and usher in a new Reign of Witches—”

Gideon broke off as palace guards escorted a shackled young woman into the room. Iron cylinders encased her hands, preventing her from casting spells, and her copper hair hung in greasy strings down her back.

The woman was Aurelia Kantor: a witch they'd been using to track down others of her kind. As a sibyl, Aurelia saw into the past, present, and future. This Sight allowed her to know the exact locations of every witch on the island—which the Blood Guard had been forcing her to tell them, one by one.

"I want to see my daughter." Aurelia's voice scratched, as if she'd gone too many days without water. "It's been two weeks. I don't even know if she's still alive."

The daughter in question was a two-year-old child in the care of a guardian halfway across town. Her name was Meadow. Kept under lock and key, Meadow was the only thing securing Aurelia's obedience.

"Ask her," said Gideon. "Let her verify everything I've said."

The sibyl's head turned, hawklike, to face Gideon. Her emerald eyes thinned as she took in his restraints, a question in them.

"Is Cressida Roseblood planning to resurrect her sisters?" said Noah.

Her eyes shuttered and she looked away, pressing her thin lips together.

"Is it possible?" he asked.

Still she didn't answer. Gideon was preparing to barter with her. Better rations, increased visits with her daughter—these things usually worked. But before he could, Noah spoke from behind his desk.

“Bring in the child.”

Gideon hadn't seen the kid since the two were captured together. The unspoken threat to Meadow's safety had always been enough to make the sibyl comply.

A soldier brought the toddler into the room and set her down on an armchair that dwarfed her tiny frame. It was clear she'd been taken far better care of than her mother. White ribbons tied her wispy red hair into pigtails, and the clean dress she wore looked more expensive than anything in Gideon's closet.

But her eyes were wide and terrified.

“Mumma?” Her chin trembled at the sight of her mother, in chains and kneeling on the floor several paces away. The girl held out her tiny hands to Aurelia, whispering: “Mumma, Mumma. I want to go home.”

Gideon watched the witch struggle to control the emotion in her voice as the tears ran down her daughter's cheeks. “I know, baby. Soon. We'll go home soon.”

It was a lie. Aurelia knew perfectly well that neither she nor her child was ever going home.

Noah rose from his chair. “Is Cressida Roseblood planning to raise her sisters from the dead?”

“I don’t know,” said Aurelia.

“Bring the child here,” said Noah. “And hold its hand down on the desk.”

What?

Gideon spun to watch Noah lift his dead father’s sword down from the wall. A dark dread coiled in his stomach.

This was not how he would have done it.

Because you are soft, said a voice inside him. *And your softness gets people killed.*

The Good Commander was demonstrating what a strong leader looked like.

But this ...

“No! Please!” The witch’s voice shook as she looked to Gideon. “Don’t let him hurt her!”

“He won’t,” he said, hoping this was true. “If you answer the question.”

As Noah gripped the sword in two hands, the child tried to back away. One guard grabbed her arms while the other seized her wrist, pinning her little hand to the desk.

Meadow started wailing.

No mother should be put in this position. No *child* should be put in this position.

Gideon stepped forward. But what could he do? His hands were bound. He was as much a prisoner here as the witch and her child.

Noah lifted the sword into the air. The blade glinted in the lamplight.

“Stop!” Aurelia stumbled forward, chains clinking. “I’ll tell you what you want to know. Just don’t hurt her! Please!”

“Then answer the question: is Cressida the last living Roseblood?”

The witch’s shoulders slumped as she realized the choice before her: the witch queen—who would kill her for her treachery—or her daughter. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she stared at her terrified child.

“Forgive me, my queen...”

Gideon watched as her green eyes clouded over, turning milky white. Her breathing slowed as her body went still as marble. More statue than flesh.

“Cressida’s mother, Queen Winoa, had a fourth child with her second husband,” she said finally. “But the sickly thing died in childbirth. The queen never fully recovered from her grief. For years, she heard it crying at night, and would wander the palace halls in search of it.”

Gideon knew the story. Cress had told it to him more than once. Cressida’s mother had remarried when her first husband died. Cress and her sisters hated their stepfather—who, by all accounts, was an unspeakably cruel man—and blamed him for turning their mother against them after the stillbirth.

“Everyone thought she’d gone mad,” he said.

Even Cressida.

“But the child didn’t die,” said Aurelia. “It was stolen away in the night.”

Gideon frowned. “Why?”

“To save it from the royal family’s dysfunction? To fulfill a prophecy—or stop one from coming true?” She shook her head. “It’s unclear.”

“And this person—are they alive? If so, who are they? And where can I find them?”

Aurelia’s eyes went whiter still. Her brow creased as she concentrated hard.

“They’re alive, but...”

It was several minutes before the clouds retreated from her eyes. When they did, she drew in a sharp breath and collapsed to the floor.

“I can’t See them.” Aurelia bent over like a dog while the guards kept her daughter’s hand pinned to the desk. “Something’s blocking my Sight.”

Noah raised the sword again.

“She’s telling the truth,” said Gideon, stepping forward to intervene. “Cressida said the same thing, that a spell is blocking sibyls from seeing this person. As if someone wants to keep them hidden.”

Reluctantly, Noah lowered the sword. He glanced at the sibyl. “This missing Roseblood—can they be used to resurrect Elowyn and Analise?”

Aurelia released a breath. “Yes.”

“If this person were found and killed,” said Gideon, “could Cressida use her own blood to cast the spell?”

Aurelia shook her head. “It’s an Arcana spell—it requires the blood of a close family member. A parent, child, or sibling. But it isn’t just blood that’s demanded, it’s *life*. The spell requires the kin’s life be sacrificed in exchange for the resurrection of the dead.”

“So if Cressida used herself as the blood sacrifice, she’d die in the process.”

Aurelia nodded.

“In other words: if this missing Roseblood were disposed of before Cressida found her, Cress wouldn’t be able to cast the resurrection spell.”

“That’s correct.”

Gideon looked to Noah. Aurelia had just made it clear Gideon’s plan was the best one they’d come up with. Noah had no choice but to concede.

The Good Commander nodded to the guards still pinning Meadow. The moment they let go, the girl ran for her mother, locking her little arms around the witch’s neck. Despite her chains, Aurelia hugged her child tight, forming a protective shell around her.

Harrow stepped forward, walking a slow circle around the chained witch. “We know Soren has given Cressida an army. What we need are numbers. How many ships, soldiers, and artillery does she have at her disposal?”

Gideon remembered the steamships sailing into Caelis’s harbor.

“Eleven ironclads, nine gunboats, and seven troopships,” said Aurelia. “Plus thousands of well-armed soldiers.”

It would be more than enough to take the capital by force.

Harrow glanced at the Commander and nodded, as if the sibyl was indeed verifying the information delivered from her contact.

“And the terms of the alliance?” asked Noah.

“Once Soren’s army helps Cressida take the capital, the prince will marry Rune Winters. If the wedding does not take place as promised, Soren will retract his men, artillery, and ships, leaving Cressida to fend for herself.”

Gideon watched as Aurelia hummed a familiar lullaby against her child’s cheek, trying to calm her. It was the same lullaby his mother once sang to him and his siblings, frightening away their nightmares, soothing them when they were sick.

He shook the thought away.

This witch was nothing like his mother.

A soldier crouched in front of Aurelia, whose arms tightened around her child. The song in her throat quieted and her lips curled in a snarl, like a she-wolf ready to tear out his throat if he came any closer.

“Captain Sharpe.” Noah’s voice pierced the silence, forcing Gideon’s gaze to the Commander. “Soren’s ships may have already disembarked from the Continent. If so, they will be here in three days. In order for your plan to work, we need to get a message to the prince, and have the Crimson Moth ready to hand over when he arrives. I’m therefore giving you two days to come through on your promises. If the Crimson Moth slips through your fingers once again, I’ll have to assume it’s intentional. *Two days*. Understood? If you fail, you’ll be accused of sympathizing with witches and put in a cell to await execution.”

Execution.

The word rang through him like a gunshot.

But could he do it in two days?

Did he have a choice?

Gideon steeled himself. “You must let me work unhindered. I need your complete trust, even if it looks like I’m compromised. To get the information we need, I must convince Rune I’m on her side. No sending soldiers to search my apartment or arrest me. No interference whatsoever.”

The Crimson Moth could not expect an ambush, or she would outmaneuver them.

Noah slit his eyes. “Fine. Agreed.”

“Great,” said Gideon, flatly. “Now, if someone wouldn’t mind releasing me”—he held out his manacled fists—“I’ll escort the sibyl back. I have a few more questions for her.”

“THIS ISN’T THE WAY to my cell,” said Aurelia. They’d taken her child away, and ever since, her eyes had gone dark.

Gideon led her through the palace’s gaslit halls, boots thudding on the marble floors. “I’m not taking you to your cell.”

She glanced up at him. “Then where are you taking me?”

Gideon couldn’t help but compare the feral-looking thing beside him to the aristocratic woman he’d originally brought in. Two months in the palace prison could drastically change a person.

“That depends on your answers to my questions.”

She narrowed her eyes.

“Where is Cressida keeping the bodies of Elowyn and Analise?”

Aurelia glanced away, pretending to study the marble walls as if they were made of complicated tapestries rather than blank stone.

He stopped, forcing her to halt. “Tell me where they are, and I’ll get you out of here.”

She cocked her head, studying him carefully. “Why should I trust you?”

Gideon shrugged. “You can’t.” He glanced behind them, then up ahead. The hallway was empty; a corridor of white. “But you can barter with me: the answers I need in exchange for your freedom.”

She sharpened like a freshly honed knife. Her green eyes blazed at him.

“I’m not going anywhere without Meadow. And I’m not telling you anything more until she’s safely in my arms.”

Turning on her heel, she headed toward the palace prison.

“You want answers? Free my daughter first. Then, we’ll talk.”

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THIRTY-TWO

RUNE

RUNE WAITED FOR GIDEON on the crest of his tenement’s roof, perched between two chimney stacks, the sunbaked tiles warming her bare feet as she stared over Old Town. Smoke plumed from the factory district into the blue sky overhead, while the smell of coal mingled with the salt of the nearby sea.

Rune watched the comings and goings of people in the street, some pushing carts, others pulling livestock, others running messages or out on errands.

Before the revolution, Nan forbade Rune from ever visiting this side of town. It was dirty and rough, she said. Not for people like *them*.

Rune drew her knees up and rested her chin on her arms, watching the city below. What would it have been like to grow up in a place like this, instead of Wintersea? Would she have become someone different, or would she be the exact same Rune?

And who is that?

Who was she, deep down? Beneath the witch. Beneath the aristocrat. What made her *her*?

Did a person change depending on their circumstances? Or was there something permanent about everyone? Something steadfast and true, *despite* their circumstances?

Rune didn't know the answer, and it bothered her.

Her stomach growled, reminding her she'd eaten nothing since yesterday.

There's a day market a few streets over where you can buy food to cook, Gideon had told her. Rune looked for it from where she sat.

She could learn to cook. How difficult could it be?

Rune reached for her shoes and was about to make her way down to the roof's edge when she turned to find a Blood Guard soldier climbing up from the window below.

Rune sucked in a breath.

The young man looked up.

"Gideon," she said, her breath rushing out. She'd been so busy daydreaming, she hadn't seen him come up the street.

Rune looked him over as he clambered up to the perch where she sat. He'd traded Soren's clothes for his scarlet uniform, and the shackles they'd taken him away in were gone.

In fact, he seemed completely unharmed—not to mention unfazed.

What did they want?

And what did he give them in exchange for being released?

But Rune already knew. She'd overheard every word of his plan down in that cargo hold.

Beneath his arm was a folded Blood Guard uniform. He held it out to her.

“What’s this?” she asked, taking the jacket and pants.

“For you.” He came to sit on her perch. Their hips touched as he sat down, but he didn’t move away. “I need your help.”

Rune cocked a brow. “Yeah?”

“The sibyl has a child. A little girl named Meadow. We’ve been using her as leverage to make the witch talk.”

Rune’s stomach clenched. A *child*.

She had assumed the Blood Guard must be doing something horrible to Aurelia Kantor to get information. Otherwise, why would a witch give away the location of other witches, knowing they’d be hunted down?

This was why.

They had her child.

“She refuses to leave the prison unless I free Meadow first.”

A heist?

Gideon wanted to do a heist. With *Rune*.

It shouldn't have, but it thrilled her.

“I suppose I could help.” She ran her hands down her dress, trying not to sound pleased about being needed.

“Good,” he said, already rising and making his way to the roof's edge. “Then put on that uniform and let's go. I have boots for you inside.”

“Wait ... *now?*” said Rune, grabbing her shoes and following him down on bare feet, the stolen uniform tucked under her arm. “Could we at least eat something first? I'm starving.”

GIDEON BOUGHT THEM DINNER from a street vendor. It would have scandalized Nan to see Rune gobbling up chicken pie with her fingers and licking off the grease. But Rune was so hungry, she didn't care.

Gideon tried not to laugh as he offered her the rest of his.

Afterward they fetched his horse, Comrade, from the stable and rode to the city's east side, where most of the aristocracy lived in residential neighborhoods along the water, away from downtown's hustle and bustle.

Rune illusioned herself before coming, because she knew the area well. Many of Nan's friends had lived there before the Blood Guard purged them and redistributed their homes to revolutionaries. The neighborhood butted up against a quiet port where the wealthy docked their boats. Alex had kept one here before he died.

As Gideon went to tie up Comrade, Rune waited. The house they needed to infiltrate backed onto the promenade, and Rune wanted to inspect it before they went in.

She looked out over the calm water, where several sailboats were anchored. Nan had taught Rune how to sail when she was a child. Since her birth parents had died at sea, Nan was determined that Rune would never be afraid of it. Rune had even sailed Alex's two-person sailboat on occasion.

As she waited for Gideon to return, she read the names painted on each boat, until one that was painfully familiar made her breath catch.

Dawn's Aria.

What was Alex's sailboat still doing here?

"Here," said Gideon, interrupting her thoughts.

Rune tore her gaze away from the boat to find him holding out two ice cream cones.
"What's this?"

"I didn't know what flavor you'd like. All of them are good, honestly."

"You bought them ... for me?"

"One's for you. The other's mine. I'll take whichever one you don't want."

Rune eyed the ice cream cones—one chocolate, the other vanilla—then glanced to Gideon in his blood-red uniform. She'd gotten used to him in regular clothes—if you could call a prince's clothes *regular*. In uniform, it was harder to forget what he was.

A soldier.

A witch hunter.

Her enemy.

Yet here he was, buying her ice cream.

Is he trying to lower my guard again?

Rune reached for the chocolate ice cream. He relinquished it.

“What were you staring at out there?” He nodded toward the water. “You seemed deep in thought.”

“Oh, um...” She looked back to *Dawn’s Aria*. “Is that Alex’s boat?”

Now that Gideon knew she planned to smuggle witches aboard the *Arcadia*—and intended to stop her—Rune needed a new escape plan.

Would a sailboat work?

It wasn't her first choice. The Barrow Strait was known for its rough waters, and Rune alone could only handle a small boat. Something easily tossed about—or capsized—in a bad storm.

But if she didn't have another option ...

Gideon followed her gaze to the water.

"It's Alex's boat, yes." His voice softened. "I couldn't part with it after..." He trailed off, shaking his head. "I suppose it can't sit out there forever. I'll have to sell it eventually. Ancients know *I* can't sail it."

Rune, who was plotting out her new escape plan, distractedly said, "I could teach you."

Gideon glanced at her. "Teach me to sail?"

Their gazes met.

Why had she said that? They weren't friends. If she managed to pull this off and escape with her life, she'd never see him again.

And that was the *best-case* scenario.

"Forget it. It's silly." Desperate to change the subject, she motioned to her ice cream. "Thank you for the treat."

Gideon hesitated, as if he wasn't ready to let the topic go.

Not wanting to linger on Alex's boat, in case it made him suspicious, Rune forced a change of subject: "So, is this your standard romance routine? You take whatever girl you're courting for ice cream and a promenade?"

His mouth quirked. "Are we courting? I wasn't aware."

What? Heat rushed into Rune's cheeks. "That's not ... no. I didn't mean—"

He glanced back over his shoulder, toward the ice cream parlor.

“Actually,” he said, interrupting her spluttering. “I come here whenever I miss my family.”

Oh.

“My parents first took us here for Tessa’s tenth birthday,” he said, nodding at her to walk with him, leaving the view of Alex’s boat in the distance. “It was the first time we had ever eaten ice cream. My mother’s designs were getting popular, and there was suddenly extra money to splurge on things we didn’t absolutely need.”

They walked side by side along the waterfront path, eating their ice cream. When groups of women or other couples strolled past, taking in the sea air and sunlight, Gideon would step off the path to give them room, then rejoin Rune.

“Tessa loved chocolate best, and Alex loved vanilla. My mother’s favorite was pistachio.”

“And your father?”

“He didn’t like sugar.”

Didn't like sugar? Rune licked her cone. Cold and sweet. *Mmm.* "I can't imagine not liking sugar. Or spending my childhood without eating ice cream..."

The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Why had she said that?

What an insensitive thing to say!

But Gideon didn't notice—or, if he did, he didn't seem to mind. Only glanced at the row of houses ahead, each one facing the waterfront. Which one was keeping the sibyl's child captive?

"It never bothered me, how we lived. I had nothing better to compare it to. Not until..." He glanced at her. A small smile tugged at his mouth. "You have ice cream on your face."

Mortified, Rune swiped at her chin.

Gideon shook his head. "No, it's..."

Pulling off his riding glove, he brushed his thumb across her lip. When he drew his hand away, the pad of his thumb was smeared with chocolate. Gideon studied it, as if he didn't know what to do.

He offered it back to her.

Rune didn't hesitate. It was chocolate, after all.

She took his thumb in her mouth, sucking off the ice cream. As her teeth grazed his skin, she heard Gideon swallow. The sound made her glance up to find him staring at her, eyes going dark. The last time he'd looked at her like that was right before he kissed her on the *Arcadia*.

Right before he remembered that what she was repulsed him.

Rune pulled away, releasing his thumb. Her heart thundered in her ears as she quickly turned and kept walking. "Which house is it?"

Her voice sounded shaky.

Gideon cleared his throat. "The yellow one." Up ahead stood a lemony three-story house. It was gated on all sides, and dark green ivy climbed the iron bars, obscuring their view of the yard.

Rune slowed her pace, taking it in. With the gate leading to the waterfront locked, they couldn't get in or out this way. Which left the front door as their only entrance and exit.

Through the ivy, Rune counted four uniformed guards in the back gardens. There would be more security out front and inside.

She glanced at the pistol at Gideon's hip, her hand going to the revolver Soren had given her, holstered at her own. Two guns would run out of bullets fast if they ran into trouble.

"I'll need your jacket," she told Gideon, turning away from the house and starting back in the direction they'd come.

"What for?"

"You'll see."

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THIRTY-THREE

RUNE

“YOU CAN NEVER BE too prepared,” said Rune as they emerged from the wooded park. Gideon had kept watch while she hid in the trees, enchanting their jackets with a reversal spell called *Witch’s Armor*.

It’s for repelling harm, she’d told him, quoting the spell book she’d learned it from. Like armor, the spellmarks will deflect a knife aimed at your chest, or make bullets bounce off you.

What Gideon *didn’t* know was that Rune had also drawn the marks for a beguiling spell on the inside of her wrist, hidden by the sleeve of her uniform.

Beguile wasn’t as coercive as *Truth Teller*. It was a simple Mirage spell, one Cressida had shown her when Rune still believed her to be Verity. According to Seraphine, Nan had used *Beguile*, too, often during business dealings to help with persuasion. It couldn’t force someone to do what she asked, but it nudged them in that direction. Essentially: it made the wearer difficult to resist, though not impossible.

It wouldn’t work on someone like Gideon, for example, who delighted in opposing Rune. But young guards wanting to impress a pretty girl? It might work on them.

They approached the yellow house. The front gates were open, revealing statues of two Ancients flanking the front steps: Patience and Justice. Patience held an hourglass in her hands; Justice bore a bandolier across her chest.

Only a single guard stood outside the front door. Rune guessed him to be about nineteen or twenty. It was dinnertime, and Gideon knew that half the staff were on their breaks. This was part of their strategy: the amount of security would be diminished for the next half hour or so, increasing their odds of not just getting in but getting out.

At the sight of Rune and Gideon, the guard stood straighter. Possibly because of their red uniforms, or because he recognized the Blood Guard captain.

Gideon nodded a silent greeting.

“Hi,” said Rune, turning up the brightness of her smile like the flame in a lamp.

The guard was tall and broad, though not as tall and broad as Gideon, and his light brown hair shone with hints of red where the sunlight hit.

His gaze fixed on Rune, running down her uniform. It fit her perfectly, because Gideon knew her measurements. He’d taken them himself, not so long ago.

“Can I help you with something?” asked the guard, his attention still wandering over Rune.

“We’re here to collect the witch’s child,” Gideon said, interrupting the guard’s perusal. “The Commander needs her at the palace.”

The guard tore his gaze from Rune and straightened at Gideon's commanding tone. "The child was already at the palace this morning. Do you have papers?"

Rune shot Gideon a look. *Papers?* He might have mentioned needing papers.

"There wasn't time to draft them," she said. "It's a last-minute request from the Commander's office."

"I'm afraid I need to see papers before I can let you in."

Time to improvise.

"I told you this would happen, Captain." Rune pivoted, as if to leave. "We should have insisted on—Ow!" Rune winced, grabbing her ankle as if it pained her. "I think I—" Pretending to lose her balance, she stumbled backward and fell right into the guard. "Oof!"

He caught her around the waist, steadying her. "Are you all right?"

From this close, she could smell the shaving soap on his skin. Rune leaned into him, still holding her ankle as she balanced on one leg. “I’m so sorry ... it’s my bad ankle. It acts up sometimes.”

She glanced at Gideon, whose eyes were narrowing.

Well, it’s not like you were getting us anywhere helpful.

“Don’t put any weight on it,” said the soldier, who scooped an arm under both her legs, lifting her. “I’ll take you to the parlor. You can rest there while I find someone to call for a physician.”

She looped her arms around his neck. “That’s so kind of you, but I don’t want to be a bother...”

The *Beguile* spellmark grew warm against her wrist as Rune ran a finger along the collar of his jacket. The guard watched her movements, entranced.

Swallowing, he said, “It’s no bother.”

Rune gazed up at him through her eyelashes. “What’s your name?”

He carried her through the doors and into a small parlor room. “Ed.” He shook his head. “I mean, *Edmund*. My friends call me Ed.”

“Edmund,” she purred.

Over the guard’s shoulder, Gideon glowered at her.

“I’ll ask the housekeeper to fetch the physician.” Edmund put her down on the settee. “Stay here.”

“Of course.” Rune turned her glowing smile on him again. “I won’t budge from this spot.”

The moment he was gone, Rune rose from the settee. Gideon stood like a thundercloud by the door, still glaring at her.

Ignoring him, she peeked her head out into the hall, watching Edmund disappear around a corner. “Let’s find the nursery before he realizes we’re missing.”

When all was clear, Rune stepped into the empty hall.

Gideon followed.

Even the walls here were yellow. Like butter melting in the sun.

They passed household staff going about their duties: a woman hauling a basket full of laundry; a man bringing in fresh-cut wood from outside. Rune smiled at each one, acting like she belonged here. Hoping *Beguile* would work on them, too.

When they were finally alone, Gideon growled: “Was that really necessary?”

“Was what necessary?”

She found a set of stairs and climbed them. The nursery was on the third floor. Rune had noticed it from the boardwalk: an open window facing the harbor front, where a mobile of twirling clouds hung above a crib.

That room was their destination.

“You didn’t need to flirt with him.”

Rune bristled. *Really?* “My flirting got us inside. You should be thanking me.”

But Gideon was the opposite of thankful. He was surlier than ever.

“That guy doesn’t have a chance with you,” he said as they hit the second floor, where the stairs ended. “You know it. And I know it. But *he* doesn’t know it. Encouraging him to think otherwise is cruel.”

“*Cruel?*” Rune threw him a look, prickling as she strode down a hall with freshly washed floors and daffodil wallpaper. She looked around, searching for the stairs to the third level. “That’s rich, coming from you—a boy who hunts girls for a living.”

“*Witches,*” he corrected. “I hunt witches.”

A door opened further down. At the voice issuing out, they hesitated, glancing toward it.

“I left her in the front parlor,” said Edmund, the soldier she’d duped, as he stepped into the hall. “She couldn’t walk. I think it may be broken...”

Edmund was about to turn and spot them when Gideon grabbed the sleeve of Rune’s uniform and yanked her into an empty room, shutting the door behind them.

Rune blew out a breath, grateful despite herself for his quick thinking.

She glanced around. They were in some kind of personal library, with shelves full of books, a writing desk, and windows overlooking the water.

Luckily, the room was empty.

Rune cracked the door open to peer out. Edmund still stood at the end of the hall, speaking with the other staff member. Blocking their way forward.

They were stuck here until he left.

Gideon leaned against the wall, listening to the muffled conversation. His words from a moment ago needled at her.

“This may be hard for you to believe,” she whispered, watching the guard outside, “but not everyone is repulsed by me.”

Gideon glanced at her. “What?”

“Just because you’re disgusted at the thought of me doesn’t mean everyone else is,” she said, keeping her voice down. “Some people *like* it when I flirt with them.”

“What are you talking about?”

Annoyed that Edmund was still speaking to the staff, she shut the door and turned to Gideon, who stood facing her. “That night on the ship, when we kissed. You pulled away like I was...”

She glanced away, remembering the appalled look in his eyes. As if he couldn’t believe what he’d done.

Rune wished she didn’t care. But she did.

“Like you were *what?*” he growled, keeping his voice down.

She fixed her gaze on the polished floorboards beneath her feet. “Like I was a horrifying monster.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “That’s not...”

Gideon fell silent, watching her. As if considering something.

He unbuttoned his jacket.

She stared as he tugged it off, then untucked his shirt. “What are you doing?”

“Putting this to rest. Right now.”

Watching him undress was making her temperature rise.

“Putting *what* to rest?”

“This ludicrous idea that you repulse me.”

“I *do* repulse you.” Her eyes met his dark ones. “You said so yourself.”

“*What?*” His fingers paused at the uppermost button of his shirt. “When?”

Rune cracked the door open and peered out. Edmund was heading back in their direction.

She shut the door.

Grabbing Gideon's arm, she tugged him through the bookshelves and across the library, where their conversation was less likely to reach the hall.

"The day you handed me over to be purged," she whispered as she pulled him down the aisle between shelves. "You said you weren't sure what disgusted you more—the fact that I was a witch, or that you fell for my act."

"Rune."

He halted, forcing her to stop walking. She glanced back to find him staring at the ceiling, as if praying for patience.

She let go of his arm.

"You'd betrayed me in the worst possible way." His gaze dropped to her face. "I'd just discovered you were the criminal I'd spent two years hunting—not to mention secretly betrothed to my brother. I was heartbroken! You told me Alex was twice the man I'd ever be!"

“Because you were handing me over to die!” she whisper-hissed, turning fully toward him.

Gideon ran a palm over his face and sighed. “Fair enough.” Dropping his hand, he fell silent, considering her. “Since we’re airing our grievances: it kills me watching you seduce other men.”

“Because it’s cruel. Got it.” She turned away, heading toward the writing desk, which was the furthest point away from the hall.

He grabbed her wrist, stopping her. “Not because of that.”

Rune glanced back at him.

“Watching you flirt with them makes me...” He made a sound low in his throat. “It makes want to go to the shooting range and fire off a hundred rounds, imagining I’m firing at *them*.”

Rune stared at him. What was he saying? That he was *jealous*?

“I hated watching you flirt with Abbie.” The words were out of her mouth before she could stop them. “I hate that you lied to me about her.”

He let go of her and drew back.

“I lied?”

Voices in the hall made them both go quiet, glancing to the door. When it didn’t open and the voices passed, she dropped her voice to a whisper again. “You told me Abbie was an old friend. But she’s not. She’s more than that.”

His entire demeanor darkened. Like a coming storm.

“Did William tell you this?”

William the spy? she wanted to shout. But Gideon didn’t know she’d overheard his conversation, and she intended to keep it that way.

“William saw you and Abbie go to our cabin together. *Alone*. Why would you do that, unless it was to...” She bit down on the rest of that sentence.

Why was she asking him this? Did she really want to know?

“To do *what*?” he growled.

She fisted her hands and glared up at him. “*You tell me.*”

He stepped toward her. Rune stepped back.

“To kiss her?” His voice rumbled through the aisle as he continued walking, and she continued backing away. “To rekindle some old romance? Is *that* what you want to hear?” This seemed to enrage him. Why it would, she had no idea. Why did he get to be angry about her romantic entanglements, but she couldn’t question his?

Rune bumped into the desk directly behind her. He’d backed her right up against it.

“You want to know? Fine.” He moved in close, taking up all her air. “Yes. *I kissed her.*”

The thought of it—his mouth on Abbie’s—felt like a bullet in her heart.

Which made no sense.

He was planning to kill every single witch she'd come here to save. He was plotting against her even now. He was a coldhearted brute. Abbie could have him!

But Rune's heart and her head refused to align. They were two ships on different courses.

Her heart had gone rogue a long time ago.

Gideon seemed to be waiting for her next barb. As if they were in a boxing ring, and he wanted her to throw another punch. But any response was pointless. He'd won the match by admitting to that kiss.

She nodded curtly, letting him know she wanted out of the ring. She was done with this conversation. Rune tried to step out from between him and the desk. If Edmund was finally gone, they needed to look for the child.

"We are *not* finished." Gideon pressed his hands flat on the desk, one on either side of her, preventing her from leaving. "I had to watch you kiss that stupid prince. Do you think that was fun for me?"

Soren?

That wasn't at all the same!

Rune didn't even bother trying to break the cage of his arms. "You think I enjoyed kissing *Soren*?"

He towered over her, his face inches from hers. "It's hard to tell, with you."

Did he think Soren Nord was what she wanted?

Fool.

"I hated it." The words were ash in her mouth. "I kissed him because I had to."

Wasn't that obvious?

But no. To Gideon, Rune wasn't a girl fighting to stay alive. She was an aristocrat used to getting what she wanted. She was a witch who bent people to her will.

"You have no idea the kinds of things I've had to do to stay alive," she said.

His eyes hardened. “I have some idea.”

Because of Cressida, she realized. Gideon had been at the witch queen’s mercy for a long time. He too had done things he didn’t want to in order to survive.

“I know a lie lived over and over will destroy a person,” he said.

Rune’s eyes burned. She glanced away, but evidently not before he saw the tears in them. Because he lifted his gloved hands to her cheeks, turning her face back to him. It took all of her willpower not to lean into his touch.

His thumb brushed across her jaw, tracing the line of it. It was so unfair, the way a single touch from him made her ache for more.

“Rune, the truth is—” He swallowed. “—the entire time I was kissing Abbie ... I wanted her to be you.”

What?

Rune frowned up at him.

“Then why were you so horrified when you *did* kiss me?”

He dropped his hand to her belt and curled a finger through one of the loops. As he pulled her closer and leaned in, his breath feathered against her throat. “Mind if I demonstrate?”

Rune’s pulse kicked. She glanced at the door across the room.

I should check the hall.

But she didn’t.

This was the truly terrible thing about Gideon: he made her feel invincible. Like there was no danger she couldn’t get out of. Rune first felt it as the Crimson Moth, spending her nights outwitting him. She felt it again now, in a brand new way.

Soon enough, Edmund would discover the parlor room empty and come looking for them. But it didn’t matter, because so long as Gideon was on her side, so long as they were a team, there was nothing she couldn’t do.

It was irrational. Mad, even.

It scared her as much as it thrilled her.

She glanced at his mouth. “Show me.”

Suddenly, Gideon’s lips were seeking hers, and hers were answering. Their mouths clashed. Her blood heated. His hand pressed against her lower back, pulling her closer. Burning a hungry fire through her. He captured her mouth again and again, making it clear how *not* repulsed he was.

Their kisses turned desperate. Like their lives depended on never coming up for air. Rune’s pulse hammered as his palms settled firmly around her waist and he lifted her onto the desk. When he stepped between her legs, pulling her flush against him, Rune hummed deep in her throat.

She was prepared to give this boy whatever he wanted so long as he promised to *never stop*.

I’m doomed, she realized. Gideon Sharpe will be the end of me.

With his mouth still devouring her, he drew her hand under his untucked shirt. Sliding her palm up his chest, he pressed it to his scar. Rune felt the raised skin beneath hers. Cressida had branded him years ago, like he was nothing more than an animal, and now the brand was warm beneath her palm and growing warmer.

Hot.

The hotter it grew, the more Gideon stiffened, his muscles growing taut. Just like when he'd kissed her on the *Arcadia*.

Only this time, Rune recognized it for what it was.

Pain.

Rune tried to pull away, but he had her pinned to the desk. And even though something was wrong—that was clear to her—Gideon wrapped his hands around her thighs and pulled her closer, tighter, as if he didn't want to let her go.

Or perhaps he didn't want *her* to let *him* go.

"Rune..." He leaned her back, lowering her down to the desk. Rune wanted nothing more than for them to continue this horizontally. Except his whole body was trembling, as if he was trying to hold off something excruciating.

"Gideon. Wait." She pressed both hands to his chest. "What's wrong? I feel like I'm ... hurting you?"

Her words seemed to break the spell. Either that, or he couldn't take the pain any longer. Gideon wrenched himself out of her embrace and stumbled back, his brand glowing ember-red through the white of his shirt. As if a scorching-hot iron were searing his skin.

Rune's breath trembled out of her.

What had Cressida *done*?

Gideon bumped into the end of a bookshelf. He grabbed hold of it, using it to steady himself while his whole body shook.

Rune pushed herself down from the desk. Wanting to go to him; unsure if she should.

"It's a curse," he said. "It's why I kissed Abbie. To find out if anyone can trigger it or just ... you."

Rune's lips parted, but no words came out. *Me*.

"It happens when I touch you. Skin to skin."

Her blood roared in her ears. "Just me?"

He nodded.

Feeling lightheaded, she pressed a hand to the desk, letting it bear her up. “So you and I, we could never...”

He shook his head.

Never.

The word was like an echo in an empty cavern.

Rune pushed off the desk. Pacing. Her hands tightened into fists as a tempest welled inside her.

Gideon watched her, a conflicted expression creasing his brow.

She wanted to kill Cressida with her bare hands. How could she do this? It was so *cruel*.

More selfishly: it meant Rune could never have him.

Not that she could have him anyway. Being with Gideon was an impossibility.

But I don't repulse him.

And he hated her flirting with other people.

And he'd clung to her just now like she was a life raft in a maelstrom.

Rune stopped pacing. Lifting her chin, she drew in a deep, steady breath. Resolved.

If there's a way to break his curse, I'll find it.

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

THIRTY-FOUR

RUNE

“ARE YOU ALL RIGHT?” Gideon’s voice echoed behind her.

All right?

She was livid.

They were on the third floor, glancing into open doorways, looking for the nursery. Edmund was long gone, and had likely found them missing by now. They needed to hurry.

Gideon caught up to her, his long strides keeping pace with her furious ones.

“Does it upset you?” he asked.

“Does what upset me?”

“That a curse makes it impossible for us to be together?”

Be together.

As if, just maybe, he wanted that.

The thought was a spark. One flaring into a fire, warming Rune from the inside out.

“Why should it upset me?” She kept her gaze straight ahead, not wanting him to see the truth in her eyes. “We could never have been together even if you weren’t cursed.” She kept walking. There were only three more doorways before this hall ended. “You hunt my kind, remember?”

You’re hunting us even now. You’re only pretending to help me so you can kill Cressida, her army, and the Roseblood heir.

Gideon reached for her arm, coaxing her to a stop and turning her to face him. “On the *Arcadia*,” he said, watching her closely, “you said you would have married me, had I asked.”

She saw the unspoken question in his eyes: *Is that still true?*

Rune clenched her fists. She never should have admitted that. The only thing saving her from the humiliation of that admission was that he didn’t seem to believe her.

Do not tell him the truth. Do the opposite of that. The truth will only get you killed.

Rune had already made the mistake of letting down her guard with Gideon—and as a result, she'd ended up on the purging platform. She couldn't do it again. Just because she didn't repulse Gideon didn't mean he loved her.

He might be in *lust* with her, but that wasn't love. People who loved you didn't plot to betray you. Didn't try to hunt you down or wipe out your kind.

She removed his hand from her arm.

"I think we should focus on—"

Somewhere down the hall, a child started crying. Rune and Gideon glanced toward the sound: the last door on the right. Rune doubled her pace, with Gideon close behind her. When she found the door open, she stepped into the room.

A young woman stood near the window overlooking the harbor. She swayed back and forth, trying to calm the red-haired toddler in her arms. *Meadow*, Gideon had told her.

The moment the nursemaid sighted Rune, she stopped swaying.

“Who are you?” The woman drew the child closer. The crying increased.

“This is Captain Sharpe.” Rune began to close the distance between them. “And I’m ... it doesn’t matter. We have orders to bring the child to the palace.”

The nursemaid stepped back, increasing the distance between herself and Rune. “You’ll have to take that up with my mistress. She’s the child’s legal guardian.”

Rune cocked her head. *Legal guardian?*

It was a practice started after the revolution: taking children away from witches and giving them to non-witches to raise. Usually forever, in cases where the mothers were dead or in hiding.

Rune had burned with anger when it was first put into effect.

She burned with that same anger now.

“Our orders come from the Commander himself,” said Rune, continuing forward.

The woman backed up again, straight into the windowsill. The crib stood beside her, its cloud mobile dancing softly in the breeze.

“I-I can’t give her to you without permission.”

Rune, who knew they were running out of time, drew her gun. “That child doesn’t belong to you.”

She almost heard Gideon’s scowl. She was totally blowing their cover.

Rune didn’t care.

“Your mistress is a thief, and that child belongs with her mother.”

The servant’s eyes widened at the gun, then flicked to Gideon as he moved to Rune’s side.

“Better do as she says.” Gideon held out his hands, stepping forward to take the child, who was watching them all with fearful blue eyes, her cries getting louder. “She’s unpredictable with that thing.”

Rune threw him a glare before cocking the gun, her gaze returning to the woman.

“You have three seconds before I shoot,” said Rune.

Reluctantly, she handed Meadow to Gideon, who tucked her inside his coat so *Witch’s Armor* could protect her. As he retreated behind Rune, she heard him make small shushing noises.

The moment Rune followed him into the hall, the servant screamed for help.

“Intruders!” Her voice shattered the silence. “Help! HELP!”

Rune winced.

Soon, this floor would be swarming with guards.

Instead of returning the way they came, Gideon made for the servants’ stairs. Rune followed, glancing over her shoulder before they descended.

Men in uniforms were heading straight for them.

“Go!” she said, pushing him faster.

He flew down the steps. The stairwell ended in the basement, near the kitchens—or so Rune assumed, judging by the sound of clattering pots and the smell of cooking onions.

Hoping Gideon knew where he was going, Rune ran after him, passing startled staff while guards thundered down the steps behind them. Gideon burst through a set of doors and together they stumbled into a massive dining room. Sunlight streamed in through the tall windows, illuminating dozens of tables set with white tablecloths. Two servants pushing dish-laden carts halted at the sight of them.

“There,” said Rune, nodding to a door that led toward the front of the house.

But as they raced toward it, ignoring the servants, the doors ahead opened and several guards flooded in. Gideon halted. Rune turned back only to find more pursuers entering the doors they’d just come through.

Gideon and Rune looked to the windows. But even if they reached them, opened them, they’d be picked off before they climbed out. Already, bullets were flying. Whizzing past their heads.

One hit her shoulder. The force of it knocked her back a step. The bullet bounced off, leaving only a sting—and likely a bruise—where it hit.

At least *Witch's Armor* was holding.

Rune fired back, but couldn't tell if she hit them. She was too busy following Gideon toward the windows.

While cradling the child hidden inside his jacket with one hand, he used the other to flip a table on its side, sending a glass vase full of flowers shattering to the floor and shielding them from the guards on one side. He did the same with a second table, angling it toward the other set of guards.

Grabbing Rune's arm, he pulled her down to the floor, protecting her from the gunfire. They were safe, temporarily. But trapped. With armed guards at both exits, they couldn't run for the windows.

"Here," he said calmly, untucking Meadow from his coat and giving her to Rune. "Give me your gun."

Rune handed him her revolver and pulled the child into her lap, holding her close and softly shushing her the way Gideon had beneath the flying bullets.

When the gunfire stopped, Gideon got up from his knees to look, then raised his gun and fired in both directions, ducking down immediately after.

The return fire came fast and furious. Frightened, Meadow trembled. Rune hugged her tightly, humming a song—one of Alex’s—while Gideon used his body to shield them. Rune shut her eyes, listening to the sounds of bullets splintering wood and ricocheting off walls. Trying to think of a spell to get them out of this.

But her mind was a sheet of ice. Blank with fear.

With the arrival of reinforcements, the gunfire intensified. Gideon’s gloved hand cupped Rune’s head, pressing her face into his shoulder. He kept her head down and out of danger as they sheltered the child between their two bodies.

“You’ll be with your mother soon,” he told Meadow, whose little arms were locked around Rune’s neck. Gideon’s voice was warm and steady despite everything falling apart around them. As if he knew precisely how to soothe frightened children even if he was also frightened. As the eldest of three, he probably did. “I won’t let you get hurt. That’s a promise.”

But how could he promise such a thing? They were sitting ducks. If they got out of here at all, it would be in shackles.

But the warmth of his voice, the *certainty* of his words, thawed Rune’s fear.

Why does he have to be so damn heroic?

It made her wonder, just for a second, what he would be like with his own children.

At that thought, a strange thing happened. An image flared before her eyes, like a waking dream. She saw a much older Gideon, playing with children. She saw it so clearly, it stole her breath.

In her vision, Gideon was maybe ten years older and chasing three children. She knew the children were his, because two had his eyes, and the third his stern mouth. The children fled through a field full of wildflowers, shrieking and laughing, trying to evade him, while Gideon pretended to let them.

The way this future Gideon beamed made Rune's heart ache. The infectious sound of his laugh made her throat prickle. She'd seen him this happy only once before, for the briefest of moments, on the night they spent together in his bed.

Whether the vision was her own imagining or she was seeing into the future the way some witches could, she didn't know. It had never happened before.

Who was he married to? Who was the mother of those children?

If there was a wife, Rune didn't see her.

The vision vanished like a sudden gale moving on to fill the sails of other ships, leaving Rune disoriented and stranded in the dining hall, the *bang! bang! bang!* of bullets hurting

her ears, the acrid smell of gunpowder burning her nose as enemy shouts surrounded them on both sides.

“This is what it would be like,” she realized aloud, her fist clutching the lapel of Gideon’s jacket as her forehead pressed against his shoulder.

He tilted his head toward her. “What?”

“You and me. A witch and a witch hunter.” She pulled away to search his face, still holding Meadow tight. “If you and I were together, they’d hunt us to the ends of the earth.” She glanced down at the defenseless child in her lap. More quietly, she said, “Along with any children we might have.”

As the bullets whizzed overhead, Gideon fell silent, staring at her. His hand still cupped the back of her head.

“Do you want children?” His voice was strangely quiet, at odds with the ruckus.

Rune’s stomach tumbled over itself.

Why did I say that?

In truth, she'd never given much thought to her future. Never really believed she would have one. Rune had always expected to be caught and purged, if not today, then tomorrow. And if not tomorrow, at some point thereafter.

She still expected it.

But his question clanged through her.

What kind of future *did* she want? Would it involve children? A family?

It seemed preposterous to consider. She was too young. Not to mention hunted at every turn. The world was too deadly a place.

But if it wasn't?

If she were older, and the world was different?

"I—"

Gideon reached for her chin suddenly, drawing her gaze to his. He frowned, searching her eyes. "Rune ... did you See something?"

“What?”

“Your eyes—”

A bullet whizzed past and sank into the wooden table behind them. Gideon pulled away as if he'd been hit, hissing in pain.

Rune looked up to find blood seeping through his shirt near his shoulder.

“Gideon!”

He touched the blood with his glove, his jaw clenching. “It’s just a graze. I’ll be fine.”

Rune was about to say it didn’t look like a graze when movement made her glance over his shoulder. Edmund—the soldier she’d flirted with earlier—stood a few paces behind Gideon, his gun raised.

Rune lifted her pistol and fired first, sending a bullet into Edmund’s leg. He grunted and grabbed for the wound. She fired again, forcing him out of sight.

“There’s too many of them.”

Gideon nodded. “Can you use that invisibility spell to get Meadow out of here?”

“What about you?” Rune frowned at the blood spreading across his shirt, hoping he was telling the truth: that it wasn’t serious.

“I’ll hold them off while you escape. If we all disappear, they’ll know we’re still in the room and shoot widely. But if I don’t let them get close enough to see I’m alone, they’ll think my gunfire is covering you. They’ll focus their aim on me while you escape out the windows.”

He was telling her to go without him.

“But how will you get out?”

He pulled a small leather satchel out of his pocket. “Don’t worry about that.” After digging his hand into it, his fist emerged full of bullets. They clinked and rolled as he dumped them on the floor, making them easier to grab and load. “Take Comrade and ride for Old Town. Wait for me there.”

“But—”

“The key to my tenement is in my breast pocket,” he said, loading his gun as enemy fire whizzed past overhead.

There was no way he’d be able to get past all those guards alone.

“I can’t just leave you here!”

“Rune.” Her name pulled her gaze to his. “For once in your damn life, don’t fight me.”

The steely look in his eyes brooked no argument. Rune glared back, knowing he was right—this was the only way to get Meadow out.

But ...

Rune threw her arms around his neck, hugging him hard. “Promise me you’ll stay alive.”

When she released him, Gideon blinked in surprise.

“I’ll be fine.”

It was the best she was going to get. So Rune retrieved the key from his pocket and dropped it into her own. She’d have to trust him. He was a Blood Guard captain. They wouldn’t kill him.

Right?

The sound of splintering wood burst in her ears. Soon the bullets would be coming through the tables shielding them.

Balancing Meadow against her chest, Rune grabbed her casting knife and made two small cuts near the back of her ankle. Using the blood beading on her skin, she drew the symbols for *Ghost Walker*, first on the back of Meadow’s neck, then on her own wrist.

“Go,” said Gideon when the spell took effect.

He stood up and started shooting with both guns.

Rune hugged Meadow close as she moved for the windows, staying low to the ground. Arriving at the nearest one, she waited for Gideon to reload and start firing before unlatching and swinging it open.

With all attention in the room fixed on the Blood Guard captain, she lifted Meadow into the window frame, then followed her up.

After dropping down into the gardens below, Rune carried Meadow right through the front gates, slipping unseen past the house guards now on high alert as the sound of gunfire echoed in the house beyond them.

She headed for the water, where Gideon's horse waited, glancing back only once at the yellow house.

You better know what you're doing.

Untying Comrade from his post, she mounted, then kicked the horse into a canter, leaving her heart behind in that dining room, with the boy risking his life so she and a child could escape.

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

THIRTY-FIVE

GIDEON

GIDEON FIRED, RELOADED, AND fired again. Over and over. Trying to buy Rune as much time as she needed while he dodged enemy bullets.

The air was clouded with smoke from the gunfire, choking out the smell of Rune's magic.

Before knowing she was a witch, Gideon hadn't been able to detect the scent. Unlike Cressida's magic—which smelled strongly of blood and roses—the scent of Rune's blended into the island. It smelled like sea salt and woodsmoke and fresh-cut juniper.

For some reason, the thought of Rune's magic made Gideon think of her mouth. The way it yielded to his in that library. The things it nearly admitted.

He was thinking about how, now that he wasn't allowed to have her, she was all he wanted. Maybe he was destined to want things forever out of his reach.

And her eyes just now ...

When she'd looked up at him a moment ago, her eyes had reminded him of Aurelia's after she'd just had a vision. Clouded and pale.

But that can't be right. Can it?

He was still thinking about Rune as he ran out of bullets. With no more ammunition, Gideon threw down the guns and raised his hands high, rising from the barricade he'd made.

"I surrender," he called into the smoke-filled room.

The gunfire stopped. He heard someone give an order, and seconds later, several guards emerged from the gloom.

"Where's your comrade?" one asked, keeping his gun trained on Gideon as he glanced behind the barricade. "And the child?"

Gideon shrugged. "No idea."

He didn't struggle as they arrested him.

THEY BROUGHT HIM STRAIGHT to Blood Guard headquarters, which had been relocated after Cressida blew up the original building two months ago. They were now situated in an old stone citadel on the cliffs overlooking the harbor.

As the guards led Gideon through the darkened walkways, the torch flames flickered, fighting against the wind and the damp from the sea.

They marched him into the old war room, with its stained-glass windows running down the length of both sides. A young woman in uniform stood across the long stone table.

Laila Creed.

She was acting captain in Gideon's absence.

Harrow stood beside her. The spymaster planted her hands on the table, staring down at whatever Laila was looking at.

At Gideon's entrance, they glanced up.

"Sharpe?" Seeing Gideon's shackled hands, Laila's dark brows creased. She looked at the guard who escorted him in. "What is this?"

"He was caught trespassing, kidnapping, and firing on security. A second Blood Guard officer was with him. She escaped with the hostage."

Even from halfway across the room, Gideon saw the nerve in Laila's jaw jump.

"What hostage?"

"Meadow Kantor. The sibyl's child."

"Thank you," said Laila, her face darkening.

"Do you want us to take him to—"

"No. Leave him, along with the keys to those manacles. Then you may go."

One guard stepped forward, sliding the keys down the stone table to Laila. She waited until their footsteps disappeared down the hall before turning her full attention to Gideon.

"What the hell, Sharpe. *Again?*"

"I need to speak with Noah."

“Noah’s at Wintersea. You’ll have to deal with me.”

An awkward tension filled the room. It had always been Gideon who gave the orders, and Laila who obeyed them. Now things were reversed, and her stiff posture said she felt weirder about it than he did.

“Then I need you to take these off,” he said, lifting his shackled wrists, “and let me go.”

“*Gideon*,” Laila said through gritted teeth. “They said you broke into someone’s house! And helped steal a baby! Who was with you? Or do I even need to ask?”

Gideon evaded the question. “What you need to do is trust me.”

She pressed her lips together and crossed her arms. “Why should any of us trust you ever again?”

Gideon flinched. It was because of him that Laila’s father, the previous Good Commander, had been killed by Cressida. He was the reason the witch queen was back and threatening them with war. The reason they were all in danger. If he hadn’t let Rune trick him, if he hadn’t let himself fall for her, he could have eliminated Cressida long before now.

“I bear the blame for it all,” he said. “And that’s why I have to make it right. But I can’t do that in chains—or with you set against me.”

“The Crimson Moth was with you, wasn’t she?”

This came from Harrow. Gideon forced himself to look at her. If trust was strained between him and Laila, it was nonexistent between him and Harrow.

“The soldier who escaped with the hostage,” she pressed. “It was Rune, wasn’t it?”

He looked away.

After a moment, Laila said: “Answer the question, Sharpe.”

“Yes,” he breathed. “It was Rune.”

Laila pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes. “*Gideon*. Why do you have such a weakness for that girl? Rune Winters is bad news! If she manipulated you once, you can bet—”

“I’m well aware.”

No matter how badly he wanted to, he'd be a fool to trust Rune again, just as she'd be a fool to trust him. "I was using her to get the child."

Laila glared at him from across the stone table, clearly skeptical. But she said nothing. So Gideon continued.

"Noah promised not to interfere with my plans."

"Yes, well, Noah didn't watch you fall for the charms of a manipulative witch only a few months ago. He doesn't realize—"

"I promised the Commander I would deliver Rune to the Blood Guard," he said, interrupting, "*after* I kill the Roseblood heir. The only way to do that is to learn Rune's plans. I need Rune to believe I'm on her side. I need her to trust me."

"And if you're playing right into her hands?" This came from Harrow, who stood with her fists on her hips, looking utterly unconvinced. "She's the one who told you she's here to find the heir. What if it's a lie? What if Cressida sent her to recruit more witches to their cause and attack us from the inside?"

Laila glanced at Gideon, awaiting his answer. But Gideon had none. He himself had wondered this.

“If you have a better plan,” said Gideon, “I’d love to hear it.”

Judging by their silence, they didn’t.

“Cressida killed my entire family,” he said. “I have no sympathy for her cause. I want her stopped. I want her *dead*.” He strained against his manacles. “By standing here arguing with me, you’re only preventing me from accomplishing that. I promised Noah I’d deliver the dead heir *and* Rune Winters into Blood Guard hands. Now release me, so I can make good on that promise.”

Laila chewed her lip. “And if Harrow’s right, and Rune’s playing you? If you get caught in her trap?”

“If I’m caught,” he said, smiling at her, “you’ll rescue me.”

She slit her eyes at him. For several moments, they stared each other down.

Laila glanced away first. Sighing, she grabbed the keys off the table.

“Fine. But keep me abreast of your plans. You want out of those manacles? Tell us what you’re planning, so we can assist you—or at the very least, prevent you from getting arrested next time.”

So Gideon did.