

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

THIRTY-SIX

RUNE

RUNE WAITED THREE HOURS for Gideon to show up. When the sun set and there was still no sign of him, she rocked Meadow to sleep and put her in his bed. Then she found the closet where Gideon kept several spare weapons and boxes full of bullets. She loaded two guns and set them down on the table, in easy reach. In case the Blood Guard showed up.

This was a terrible idea. She drummed her fingers against her leg as she paced. What was he thinking?

What was *she* thinking?

I shouldn't have left him.

What if he didn't make it out alive?

When another half hour passed and the apartment grew dark, Rune lit several candles to see by. She considered leaving the sleeping Meadow with a neighbor so she could find out what happened to Gideon and rescue him if need be.

Footsteps on the stairs made her freeze. Rune picked up one of the loaded pistols and aimed it at the door, her body buzzing as she listened to the sound of a key turning in the latch.

Rune's grip tightened on the gun.

But when the door swung open, Gideon stood in the frame.

The sight of him undid every knot in her body. She let out a breath, glancing to the dried blood on his jacket.

Gideon's gaze swept down her, pausing at the pistol lowered to her side. "Are you all right?"

"Am *I* all right?" Rune started for him, drawn like a magnet. Wanting to fling her arms around him and hug him tight. "Are you hurt? How—"

A woman stepped out from behind him.

Rune halted.

The woman's clothes hung off her thin frame, as if she hadn't eaten in weeks, and her hair hung in limp strings down her back and shoulders. Beneath the grime, Rune guessed her hair was a deep shade of coppery red. Her sunken eyes frantically scanned the room.

"Where's Meadow?"

Oh.

This was Aurelia Kantor.

"She's sleeping," said Rune. "In the bedroom."

She pointed to Gideon's room. The sibyl swept past her, disappearing through the doorway beyond.

As Gideon shut the door, Rune went to him.

“How did you get out?”

“I surrendered to the guards.” He studied the long skirt and blouse she’d changed into—fit for riding long distances. In her anxious state, she’d forgotten to button the cuffs of her sleeves. Noticing, he tugged off his riding gloves, tucked them into his pocket, and buttoned them for her—first one wrist, then the other. “They brought me to Laila. After that, it was simply a matter of talking my way out.”

That’s it? But of course it was probably all part of his plan to betray her. Before she could press him, the floorboards creaked behind them.

Rune turned to find Aurelia cradling Meadow as she emerged from the bedroom.

“The captain says you wanted to see me,” said Aurelia.

Realizing how close she and Gideon stood, Rune quickly stepped back, turning away from him. But it was too late. The expression on the sibyl’s face said she’d noticed precisely what Rune hadn’t wanted her to.

Rune cleared her throat. “That’s right.” She set her pistol down on the table and paused. Hadn’t she loaded two? She scanned the room, looking for the second gun.

“Who are you?”

“My name is Rune Winters. Our enemies”—Rune glanced at Gideon—“call me the Crimson Moth.”

“*The Crimson Moth?*” Aurelia’s eyebrows arched. “Well, if we’re playing games, then I’m the witch queen herself.”

She didn’t believe Rune.

It wouldn’t have mattered, except Rune needed her trust. And her help. So she slid her casting knife from its sheath at her thigh beneath her skirt. Nicking her skin, Rune drew the symbol for *Torch* on her open palm. A flame ignited several inches above it, and a few seconds later, over Rune’s head, a casting mark appeared in the air, shaped like a blood-red moth.

“Proof enough for you?”

The skeptical look on Aurelia’s face vanished.

Rune fisted her hand, smudging the mark, and the flame extinguished.

“What do you want from me?” said Aurelia, glancing between her and Gideon.

“I need your help with a summoning spell.”

The spell was a Majora, which meant Rune needed the blood of someone else—given willingly—to cast it. Hers alone wouldn’t suffice.

“And why should I help you?” asked Aurelia, kissing Meadow’s cheek, holding on tight as the child clung to her.

“To make amends for all the deaths you’re responsible for?” suggested Rune.

The sibyl’s eyes flashed.

“And because if you help me, I can get you and Meadow safely off this island.”

She saw Aurelia silently making the calculation. It was too good an offer to refuse, and they both knew it.

“How soon?”

“That depends on you, I suppose. The spell can only be cast from one location, and it will take several hours to ride there.”

“I’m ready when you are,” said Aurelia.

Rune nodded. “Then let’s go.”

But as Aurelia turned for the door, clutching Meadow to her, Gideon stepped in front of it. His attention fixed on the sibyl. “You’re forgetting something.”

Aurelia glared at him. “And what’s that?”

“I promised to deliver your child safely to you. You promised me answers.”

“Don’t you think you’ve tormented me enough?” she said, trying to go around him.

Gideon crossed his arms over his chest, blocking her way. “We had a deal, Aurelia.”

Rune glanced from one to the other. *This* was why he had helped rescue Meadow? Not because it was the right thing to do, but because he’d been promised something in exchange?

Her mouth soured.

“If you think I owe you *anything*—”

“What deal?” interrupted Rune.

Gideon glanced at her. That’s all it took—a second’s distraction—for Aurelia to act. The witch drew the missing gun and pressed the barrel under Gideon’s chin.

He froze as she cocked it. Which was when Rune realized he was unarmed. All Aurelia had to do was pull the trigger—and from the look on her face, she would do it with relish.

“I’ll give you one minute to say your goodbyes, Captain.”

With the gun’s barrel still pressed beneath his chin, Gideon held Rune’s gaze, his jaw clenched.

Aurelia’s next move was plain on her face. She was going to shoot Gideon and leave him for dead. It was safest that way. If he was dead, he couldn’t follow them.

Rune agreed with Aurelia's logic. And if it were any other witch hunter barring the door, she might have done it herself.

But it was Gideon.

Even though he was plotting to betray her, even though he would try to follow them—she knew he would—Rune couldn't let him die.

He was Alex's brother.

He'd been tortured and cursed by a cruel witch queen.

More importantly: she loved him, despite a million reasons not to.

So before Aurelia fired, Rune reached for the second gun, still on the table, and aimed it straight at the witch.

Aurelia shot her a startled look. "Stupid girl!" Her eyes burned like green fire. "Whatever he's made you believe, it isn't true." Aurelia cradled Meadow with one arm, still holding the gun beneath Gideon's chin. "He's going to betray you. He has no other choice. If he lets you go, they'll execute him."

Execute him?

The words rippled through Rune.

She knew the laws had changed. There was no longer leniency for sympathizing with witches. But *execution*?

Aurelia pressed the gun harder, forcing Gideon's chin upward.

Rune lifted her second hand to her own gun, gripping it tightly. Keeping it trained on Aurelia. To Gideon, she said: "Step away from the door."

With his hands in the air, Gideon glanced at Aurelia, as if he suspected she'd shoot him anyway. But her child was in the line of fire; she wouldn't risk it. Or so Rune hoped.

Slowly he backed away from her.

To Aurelia, Rune said: "Take Meadow downstairs and wait for me outside."

Aurelia scowled her disapproval, pushed open the door with her hip, then stepped out, leaving Rune and Gideon alone.

Rune lowered the gun.

“I heard your conversation with William in the cargo hold,” she said. “I know what you’re planning. You’re going to follow me, kill the Roseblood heir, then arrest me so you can barter with Soren. Do you deny it?”

Gideon dragged his hands through his hair, turning it into a ragged mess.

“No,” he said, heaving a sigh. “I don’t deny it.”

“Is that still your plan?” she asked him. *After everything?*

He dropped his hands to his sides. “What would you have me do, Rune? Let you escape? If our positions were reversed, you’d be planning the same.”

She shook her head. “That’s not true.”

“No?” He stepped toward her. At his proximity, a tiny bell rang in alarm: *danger, danger*. “Then tell me, what *would* you do?”

Rune stepped back. “I already told you. I’m going to find the last living Roseblood and get them away from Cressida. Then I’m going to break off the engagement with Soren and sever the alliance.”

“And if it doesn’t work? If Soren decides he has a taste for war despite your broken promises? If Cressida hunts you and this Roseblood down and drags you both back?”

“I...”

His presence scrambled her thoughts.

“I ... don’t know.”

“Because you don’t *have* to know,” he growled at her. “All three witch queens back on their thrones would be a boon to you—not horror and misery. If it’s a Reign of Terror for everyone else, what’s that to you ... right, Rune?”

That wasn’t true or fair.

“What am I supposed to do? Side with *you*?” She raised the gun again, keeping it cocked and ready to fire. The way he’d shown her. “You want me dead, just like every other Blood Guard soldier.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but she cut him off.

“Not every witch is a monster, Gideon. Most of us aren’t.”

He took another step. Rune narrowed her eyes. If he came much closer, she’d be forced to shoot.

“And yet,” he growled, “you did nothing while people suffered under witches like Cressida. None of you did.”

Rune swallowed. This was true. She might not have known the kinds of cruelty suffered by people like Gideon and countless others at the hands of powerful witches. But her grandmother surely had, as had Nan’s friends, all of whom Rune had admired.

Too many witches had done nothing when they should have stood against it.

“Should I hand myself over in penance?” she asked him. “Give you the honor of marching me to the purging platform?”

Gideon looked away, as if remembering he'd done exactly that.

Aurelia was right. She still couldn't trust him. He was still planning to betray her.

He was in too deep not to.

If Gideon let Rune save the witches she'd come here to save, if he let Rune escape, he would betray everything he believed in—his friends and fellow soldiers, the citizens he'd sworn to protect, the Republic he'd fought so hard for.

Rune wasn't a fool. He wouldn't choose *her* over all of that.

If he did, they would kill him.

It didn't matter what he'd admitted in the yellow house. None of it mattered. Rune knew he would never choose her. He *couldn't*. Not even if he wanted to.

The thought sobered her. *Sharpened* her.

This is almost over.

All she needed to do was stay a few steps ahead. For a few hours longer.

Rune kept her gun aimed at his chest.

This is where we part ways.

“Don’t try to follow me,” she said.

Gideon said nothing. But Rune read him as easily as he read her, and the look in his eyes said: *I wish I could say that I won’t.*

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

THIRTY-SEVEN

RUNE

WHEN THEY ARRIVED AT the towering circle of stones, it was shortly after midnight.

Rune and Aurelia had stolen two horses from the city stables and cloaked them all in Rune's *Ghost Walker* spell, hoping to make it impossible for Gideon to follow.

The look in his eyes when she left haunted her the whole way.

The eerie stone silhouettes loomed over Rune like giants, blacking out the stars. The air here smelled like magic. Deep and primal. It made Rune's skin tingle. As if the Ancients had been here mere moments before. As if *this* was the doorway they'd used to exit the world.

Not that Rune believed such things.

But some people did. The Cult of the Ancients, for example— a group of religious fanatics—believed this summoning circle was once used to draw the Ancients forth, back when they *could* be summoned. According to them, the Ancients—or the Seven Sisters, as the cult sometimes referred to them—had been gone too long now, slumbering too deeply, to answer anyone's call.

It was a nice story to tell children at bedtime. But if the Ancients were real, if they'd ever walked in this world they'd created, Rune would have seen proof of their existence by now.

No. If these old stones made her feel things, it was because regular witches had been casting their powerful spells here for centuries. What Rune sensed in this place was merely the echo of their magic, not the lingering presence of deities.

On a nearby hill sat the ruins of a once magnificent temple belonging to the Cult of the Ancients. The temple had been destroyed during the revolution, and its priestesses and acolytes killed or chased into hiding. From where she stood among the summoning stones, all Rune could see of the temple ruins was a half-crumbled wall.

Rune and Aurelia wasted no time. They cast the summoning spell beneath the moonlight while Meadow slept on a bed of moss. Rune had learned the spell while studying under Seraphine, but had never put it to use.

Rune opened her locket and took out the bit of Cressida's hair, placing it in the circle's center. Aurelia took her casting knife and made a small cut in her shoulder, adding to the silvery pattern of casting scars there. Using the blood she supplied, Rune drew the symbols.

"Now what?" Aurelia asked afterward, scanning the deep shadows surrounding them.

Rune looked skyward, to the stars shining overhead.

"Now we wait."

It could take up to twelve hours for the summoned to arrive. And since there was nothing left to do except wait, they slept.

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

THIRTY-EIGHT

GIDEON

GIDEON CROUCHED AGAINST THE ruined temple wall, trying not to get drenched by the rain. From here, he had a clear view of the valley below. Or he would have, if the storm hadn't moved in. Now, to see anything inside the summoning stones, he had to squint through the gloom.

Yonder, the hunting hound who'd led him to this desecrated place, lay in the dirt nearby, lifting his head every once in a while to stare into the shadows, making Gideon hope this wasn't a trap set for *him*.

Yonder had tracked Rune to this valley using the scent of her blood, which was still smeared on Gideon's jacket from her protective spell.

Gideon had watched Aurelia and Rune cast the spell a few hours ago, then retreat to a small cave to wait. Ever since, the summoning circle had remained empty—except for the tiny crimson moth glowing at its center, declaring Rune's spell active.

A headache was starting in Gideon's temples, either from the storm's pressure or from straining so hard to see. He was just leaning back to give his eyes a rest when movement at the circle's edge jolted him forward.

If not for the white glow, he might have missed her.

Rune stepped into the circle. From her slow, lumbering steps, she seemed to be sleepwalking—or perhaps in some kind of trance. And all around her, in a protective, luminous circle, hundreds of white lights glowed like fireflies.

Gideon frowned, watching as she climbed onto the flat stone at the center of the summoning circle and lay down on its mossy surface. There, she curled onto her side and fell still, her hair fanning out around her.

One by one, the glimmering lights settled all over her body, glowing brighter and brighter. Until she was more glow than girl.

Her signature—the blood-red moth fluttering above her—flared like a simmering coal, and abruptly went out. Declaring the spell finished.

The white glow vanished, leaving Rune alone in the dark and rain.

All at once, a horrifying realization struck.

“Merciful Ancients,” Gideon whispered, his heart squeezing painfully.

Rune was the missing heir.

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

THIRTY-NINE

RUNE

RUNE WAS DREAMING OF Gideon again.

This dream, though, couldn’t have been more different from the first. Instead of in a hot, steamy boiler room, Rune stood in the rain, the damp cold seeping through her clothes.

Across from her stood Gideon. Water glistened in his dark hair and trickled down his face.

Rune was overcome with an urge to go to him. To press her cheek against his chest and listen to the beat of his heart while he held her.

Before she could, Gideon raised his gun.

Rune froze, her pulse pounding.

Surely he wouldn't. Not after everything they'd admitted to each other.

He cocked the gun, aiming it at her chest.

I'm sorry, his eyes seemed to say. *I wish it didn't have to end like this.*

But hadn't she always known it would?

There was nowhere to run. There was no escape. Nothing to do but accept this.

BANG!

RUNE GASPED, BOLTING UPRIGHT. Her chest heaved as she gulped down air. She glanced at her chest, pressing her hand to her thundering heart, where she'd felt the dream bullet go in.

There was nothing there. No blood. No pain.

She was fine.

Just ... soaking wet.

Glancing around, Rune found herself lying on a smooth, flat stone inside the summoning circle, the other stones towering around her. At some point, a storm had come through and drenched everything, but it was gone now, taking the night with it.

The sun was high in the sky.

Rune's shoulders sagged with relief.

It was only a dream.

She still saw his face, though. Full of apology. The *bang* still rang in her ears, and a strange heat burned in her chest where the bullet had lodged.

It felt like her vision of Gideon and the three children. Like a glimpse into the future.

Rune shivered.

Aurelia walked across the circle toward her. Only the hem of her skirt was wet; the rest of her was dry. From the sleepy look in her eyes, she'd just woken up.

Before falling asleep, they had all taken shelter in a dugout beneath some broken stones beyond the summoning circle. So what was Rune doing here, *inside* the circle?

"Bad dreams?" asked Aurelia, studying Rune's eyes, as if recognizing something in them.

"Something like that."

Rune wiped the rain off her face and got to her knees. How much time had passed? She glanced up, searching for her spell's signature overhead.

But the once bright-red moth had vanished.

Rune frowned.

“Looks like your spell faded,” said Aurelia.

“Maybe I didn’t cast it right?”

Should she have collected some of Cressida’s blood, instead? Would that have made for a stronger spell?

“It’s possible,” said Aurelia. “It’s also possible the ancient magic protecting this Roseblood from my Sight protects them from being summoned.”

They waited a few more hours.

When Meadow woke and started to cry, Aurelia tried to soothe her, pacing and rocking the girl in her arms.

“She’s hungry.”

But they had no food to give her.

We need to get back to the capital.

Rune glanced around the empty circle, trying to swallow her disappointment.

Why hadn't anyone come?

Aurelia's probably right, she thought, trying to console herself. And if I can't summon the Roseblood heir, neither can Cressida.

Or so she hoped.

Right now, Rune needed to focus on the tasks at hand: finding Meadow some food and getting them all off the island.

"Gideon is expecting us to escape aboard the *Arcadia*," explained Rune as she went to fetch their horses. "Which means the Blood Guard will be watching the main harbor—and the *Arcadia* in particular."

"What's your plan, then?"

“They won’t be looking for a smaller vessel. If there’s only three of us, a sailboat will work just fine.”

Aurelia looked skeptical. “It’ll take a week to cross the Barrow Strait in a sailboat.”

“Five days, actually,” Rune corrected her. “If the wind is with us.”

“And you have a boat?”

“Sort of.” *Dawn’s Aria* was sitting unused in the harbor. “It belongs to ... to a friend of mine. He won’t miss it.” She glanced at Meadow, yowling with hunger. “We’ll need to stock it with provisions first.”

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

FORTY

GIDEON

RUNE IS THE MISSING heir.

The adopted granddaughter of Kestrel Winters was a Roseblood princess. Daughter to Queen Winoa. Half sister to Cressida.

Heir to the Roseblood throne.

And no one knew.

Gideon's mind was a tempest as Comrade's hooves thundered down dirt roads, racing back to the capital.

If Cressida learns of this ...

But Gideon had a bigger problem.

I'm giving you two days to come through on your promises. Noah's voice echoed through his head. *If the Crimson Moth slips through your fingers once again, I'll have to assume it's intentional.*

Tomorrow was the deadline. Gideon had promised to hand over Rune *and* the heir. If he didn't come through ...

If you fail, you'll be accused of sympathizing with witches and put in a cell to await execution.

There was still time to arrest Rune before she left. He could tell Noah the truth: Rune and the Roseblood heir were the same person.

He could come through on every promise.

But if I tell the truth, Noah will kill her.

It's what Gideon himself had planned to do.

And if I don't tell the truth?

If he handed Rune over to Noah and kept her secret to himself ... would Noah kill *him*?

Gideon might still be able to talk himself out of a death sentence. Rune's arrest could be enough to satisfy the Commander. Especially if Soren eliminated Cressida and her witches in exchange for the safe delivery of his fiancée.

Laila would back him up, he was certain.

But Rune would never forgive him. Not for handing her back to Soren. Not for bartering with her to get more witches killed. It was betrayal, pure and simple.

And if I don't betray her?

The unthinkable would occur: Cressida would wage a war, win back her throne, and usher in a new reign of terror. One Gideon wouldn't even live to see, because Noah would execute him first.

And if Cressida ever learns who Rune is ... if she casts that summoning spell herself ...

Gideon's heels dug into Comrade, urging the horse to go faster.

There was only one choice he could possibly make.

Before he did, there was someone he needed to talk to.