

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

FORTY-ONE

RUNE

WHEN RUNE AND AURELIA arrived at the small harbor where Alex's sailboat was anchored, the harbor front was swarming with Blood Guard soldiers. So Aurelia and Meadow hid nearby while Rune went to check the boat.

Rune slipped into the cold water, careful to keep out of sight as she swam to *Dawn's Aria*. After pulling herself over the boat's side, Rune realized she'd forgotten to leave Gideon's pistol behind and had lost it somewhere in the water.

She'd never find it now. It was at the bottom of the sea.

Cursing her carelessness, Rune went belowdecks, careful not to slip on the wood plank floors with her wet feet. Inside, she found a barrel full of water and blew out a relieved breath, silently thanking Alex for keeping his boat stocked. If they had enough water for the voyage, all they needed was a bit of food—for Meadow, especially.

But where will I find food at this hour?

It was after dusk. No grocers or markets were open.

I don't have much food. Gideon's voice rushed through her head. *Just some apples and hardtack under the sink.*

The key to his tenement building was in her skirt pocket.

Fear flickered through her at the thought of sneaking into his apartment and stealing his food. But if they rationed it, apples and hardtack would be enough to sustain them for the five-day voyage.

Rune didn't have any better options.

Even if he's there, he won't turn me in. He'll wait. He'll want to capture as many witches as possible.

It did little to reassure her. But Rune had an obligation to Aurelia and Meadow. She needed to get them out *tonight*.

Steeling herself, Rune dove back into the sea.

If I'm lucky, she thought as she swam for the wharf, he won't even be home.

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FORTY-TWO

GIDEON

THE MOON WAS RISING as Gideon strode through the cemetery, its pale light making the gravestones around him gleam. Four white stones stood in a line, a little away from the rest, beckoning him.

Sun Sharpe. Beloved wife and mother.

Levi Sharpe. Doting husband and father.

Tessa Sharpe. A bright light extinguished too soon.

His fingers trailed the stones until he came to the fourth.

Alexander Sharpe. Dearest brother and friend.

Everyone he'd ever loved was right here. Several feet underground.

Dropping to his knees in the upturned soil, Gideon pressed his hand to the cold stone of Alex's grave. Despite having dug this grave himself only two months ago, it was still a shock finding his brother here.

"I know you're not happy with me," he said. "And I'm sorry about that. Everything I've done, I did because I thought it was the right choice."

Well, except for Rune. He'd been utterly selfish when it came to Rune.

Which was why he was here.

Gideon ran his free hand roughly over his stubbled jaw. His breath shuddered out of him. "I know you loved her, Alex."

Gideon closed his eyes.

“I hope you’ll forgive me.”

Behind him, the crunch of boots on pine needles broke the silence. Gideon tensed, listening. As his hand reached for his pistol—the last one left in his apartment after Rune and Aurelia stole the others—a voice spoke from behind him.

“Sorry to interrupt, Comrade.”

Harrow.

He stood and turned to face her. Light and shadow flickered across her as the wind blew through the graveyard, shaking the trees and scattering moonlight everywhere. “I got your telegram. Laila gave the order to double security along the waterfront. Nothing is getting out of Republic waters tonight.”

Gideon nodded. “Good. And the soldiers?”

“They’re waiting for you at the Crow’s Nest, per your request.”

“Perfect.”

He waited for her to leave so he could return to paying his respects, but Harrow only stood there. Her face was hard to read on any given day, but tonight, the shadows made her impenetrable.

Gideon arched a brow. “Is there something else?”

She kept silent a moment, as if deliberating.

“The Commander has, let’s say, a lack of affection for you, Comrade. He will happily kill you if she escapes again.”

He was well aware of Noah’s resentment. “Those were the terms I agreed to.”

More silence filled the gap between them. But still, she didn’t turn to leave.

Gideon studied her more closely until he figured out the problem.

Harrow—who barely spoke to him these days unless it was to snap, who barely looked at him unless it was to scowl—was *worried* about him.

“There was a slight hitch in my plans,” he told her. “But everything is on track. I’ll handle this. Don’t worry.”

Despite not looking reassured, she gave a quick nod and moved to leave, heading for the path. As she turned, the moonlight spotlighted the side of her head, illuminating the scar from her missing ear.

“Harrow? You’ve never told me your story.”

She glanced back. He nodded toward her missing ear.

“What happened?” he asked. “Before the revolution.”

“Maybe I’ll tell you one day.”

“You should tell me tonight, in case your fears come true and Noah has the reason he needs to dispose of me.”

This made her pause. Instead of walking away, she pulled herself up onto a bigger gravestone, perching there and letting her legs hang down, obscuring the name of the deceased.

“My parents were poor as dirt,” she said, gripping the edge. “They had too many debts, and too many children to feed. I was the youngest and most useless of seven, so they sold me.”

Gideon frowned, wanting to contradict this: Harrow was nothing if not resourceful. He stayed quiet, though, coming to lean against the gravestone next to her.

“They indentured me to a wealthy witch family, who treated me fine, I suppose. At least, at first.”

Harrow’s voice, which was only ever biting and sarcastic, suddenly softened.

“Their daughter, Juniper, taught me to read and write. She even shared her favorite books with me: novels, operas, plays. The more fanciful, the better.” A strange glow lit up her face as she spoke. Gideon had never seen her look like that. “She would read to me in the evenings, and sometimes in the afternoons, if the weather was nice and if I could abandon my chores without being noticed. We would sit in the trees and recite poetry and plays to each other.”

Isn't that the point of art—to tame the monsters in us?

It was something Harrow said to him not so long ago. He’d assumed she was quoting some book at him, to mock him, and hadn’t given it a second thought.

“You loved her,” he realized.

Harrow flinched, ashamed to be caught out. As if loving a witch was a criminal offense.

“When her family realized, they did *this*.” She pointed to the spot where an ear should be. “They hoped to make me unpalatable to her. Maybe I should be thankful they didn’t have the stomach to take my eyes, or my nose. That probably would have done the trick.”

Her jaw clenched, but she continued.

“They threw me in the cellar and locked the door. They probably hoped I’d bleed to death.” Her hands fidgeted in her lap as she picked at her fingernails, already bitten to the quick. “I thought Juniper would rescue me. She’d never spoken her feelings outright. Hadn’t made any declarations of love. But I’d *hoped*...”

She fisted her hands.

“I kept waiting for her to come, but the door never opened. I stayed alive by catching drops of water from a leaking pipe, waiting to die of starvation.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “When the door finally opened, I thought I was hallucinating. It wasn’t my mistress; it was a soldier in a red uniform. He said the Sister Queens were dead, and the Reign of Witches was over. He said I was free.”

Uncurling her fists, she stared down at her open palms. “Strange thing was, I didn’t feel free.”

Gideon touched her shoulder. “Harrow. I’m sorry.”

She shrugged, and his hand fell back to his side. “We all have our scars, Comrade.” Glancing up at him, she held his gaze. “But I don’t have to tell you that, do I?”

She slipped down from the gravestone and returned to the path.

“Don’t forget whose side you’re on tonight.” Her voice echoed back to him. “Or there will be worse scars to come.”

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FORTY-THREE

RUNE

GIDEON WASN'T HOME WHEN she arrived at his apartment. So Rune moved quickly. She needed to be long gone before he returned. The sooner she rejoined Aurelia and Meadow, the better.

Rune was still wet from her swim. Her ice-cold hands shook as she rummaged through his cupboards, stopping only when she found the sack of apples and the bag of hardtack. She'd hauled them out and was about to sling them over her shoulder when a creaking floorboard made her freeze.

"First, you steal my gun. Now, I find you breaking into my apartment and taking my food."

Rune shot to her feet, spinning to face him.

Gideon leaned against the door frame, still in uniform. Watching her. "Were you going to leave without saying goodbye?"

Her heart galloped in her chest.

Is this it? Would he arrest her now? Or would he wait to betray her, expecting a cargo hold full of witches, including the Roseblood heir?

Rune drew her casting knife, gripping it in front of her. Gideon's gaze flickered to the blade and back to her face.

Realizing her stolen gun was gone, he moved like a predator, descending on her. She slashed the air with her knife in warning. But he only grabbed her wrist, holding it away from himself.

“*You* are far worse than a thorn in my side,” he said, his dark eyes gleaming at her. “You are a knife in my heart.”

His voice was low and dangerous, making the hair on her arms rise. But at odds with his voice were his gloved fingers, which lifted to her throat. Rune let out a soft gasp as he gently traced the arc of her neck.

“And you’re a wolf I can’t outrun,” she whispered, closing her eyes against his touch. “Not even in my sleep.”

His hand went still, prompting her eyes to open.

“Dreaming about me again?” He cocked an eyebrow, as if this pleased him. With his grip still tight on her wrist, he leaned in, his breath warm against her cold lips, making her heart beat in triple time. “How often do you dream of me, Rune?”

The look in his eyes made her ache with longing.

More often than I'd like.

Seeing how she shivered, Gideon let go of her wrist. When Rune didn't lash out with her knife, he tugged off his jacket and dropped it over her shoulders.

Rune glared at him. How *dare* he be kind on the eve of his betrayal.

After pulling it snug around her, he tugged her toward him, doing up the top few buttons. Ensnaring her further.

Her fingers tightened around the hilt of her knife.

Are reinforcements on the way? Is that why he's delaying me?

Was his plan to seduce her until they arrived?

Rune was trapped. She couldn't get past him—not if he didn't want her to. The only way to escape was to lower his defenses. And to do that, she needed to play the same game he was playing. One last time.

Rune ran her free hand up his chest, resting her palm against the scar beneath his shirt. Gideon glanced down, watching her. To Rune's surprise, his gloved hand slid over hers, linking their fingers together and keeping her palm pressed to his heart.

Their intertwined fingers filled Rune with a strange and terrible yearning.

"Will you miss me, Crimson Moth?"

She swallowed. "How can you ask me that?"

"Is that a yes?"

Normally, Rune could tell when he was plotting something. Tonight, he was impossible to read.

"Where will you go?"

He was a fool if he expected her to answer that.

"Somewhere you'll never find me."

Gideon stepped closer, until there was less than an inch of space between them. The heat of him called to Rune's cold and trembling body. How easy it would be to step into his arms and let him warm her completely.

Rune mentally shook herself.

No.

If she walked down this path, she wouldn't be able to walk herself back. She'd walk herself straight into another one of his traps.

"I'll miss you the way a fox misses the wolf's snapping jaws," she said.

His mouth curved at her words. "I can't tell if you're insulting me, or flirting with me." He slid a gloved hand behind her neck, tipping her chin upward with his thumb so her mouth tilted to his.

She knew what he was about to do.

The worst thing was, she *wanted* him to do it.

Rune lifted her knife to his throat. Trying to stand firm against the snare of him. “Don’t you dare.”

Gideon leaned in anyway, calling her bluff as his mouth descended on hers. His free hand slid into her hair, pulling her closer, lips parting hers.

His kiss made her ache in all the usual places. But it also made her ache somewhere new.

What if this is really goodbye?

She dropped her knife and kissed him back.

Gideon’s mouth turned devouring. Rune untucked his shirt from his trousers and slid her hands up his bare chest. She pressed a palm to his scar, which was already heating against her touch. He shivered and grabbed hold of her thighs, lifting her onto his hips, pulling her securely against him.

Rune’s blood hummed.

This is a trick, she reminded herself, meant to keep me here until the Blood Guard show up.

She forced herself to remember Aurelia and Meadow down at the harbor. The two people she'd sworn to get safely across the Barrow Strait. They were waiting for her. She couldn't fail them. Not when she was so close.

He's trying to delay me. This is a distraction. The prelude to a trap waiting to spring closed.

But not even this was enough to snap her out of her madness.

It was Gideon who did that. Trembling a little from the pain of his curse, he lowered her from his hips. Taking her hand in his, he drew the pistol from his holster and pressed it against her palm.

"Promise me you won't lose this one," he whispered, his cheek rough against hers.

Rune glanced up at him.

What?

But he was already stepping away. Leaving his gun in her hand.

“And if someone tries to hurt you,” he said, “and there’s no other way to stop them, don’t think twice. Just shoot. Got it?”

She frowned, watching him pick up her casting knife from the floor, then sheath it in his belt. As if they’d made a trade. He didn’t close the gap again. Just stood to the side, leaving her path to the door wide open.

He wasn’t even trying to stop her.

Because he has soldiers on the way. They’re probably already here.

“I’ll give you a twenty-minute head start.” His expression was inscrutable. But his unspoken words were clear: *And then I’m coming for you.*

Twenty minutes. Rune wouldn’t even get to the harbor in twenty minutes.

Still, it was something.

She grabbed the bag of food she’d stolen from his cupboards and strode toward the open door of his apartment. She needed to get as far away from him as she could. Needed to start over somewhere he would never find her.

What would that be like—a life apart from him?

Her footsteps slowed, pausing in the door frame. She turned to glance back at him.

“Gideon?”

The sight of him blurred.

“I wish—”

“*Don’t.*” His voice was ragged. “Just go, Rune.”

She nodded, swallowing back tears. The only safe thing to do was run.

So that’s what she did.

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FORTY-FOUR

RUNE

SHE EXPECTED A LEGION of soldiers to ambush her from the shadows. But no one was waiting for Rune in the darkness. The clouds had moved on, leaving the stars burning brightly overhead.

Rune kept glancing behind her, searching the streets for any sign of Gideon on her trail. But there was no trace of him. So Rune pulled his jacket closer around her and rode her stolen horse faster.

When she arrived, she found Blood Guard soldiers encircling the waterfront. Quietly, she loosed the horse and entered the wooded park where she'd left Aurelia and Meadow.

"They doubled the security after you left," Aurelia whispered when Rune found her hiding place in the trees. "There are hounds everywhere."

The dogs would smell Rune and Aurelia long before they even got to the wharf.

But that wasn't their most pressing problem: Meadow was crying.

“Hush,” Aurelia whispered, hugging the child. “Shhhh, my love. We need to be very quiet.”

But it was too late. Before Rune could pull one of Gideon’s apples out to soothe her, a shout came from nearby, followed by footsteps. Rune dragged Aurelia deeper into the trees.

If there were witch-hunting hounds, they were done for.

Three soldiers entered the park. Rune glanced at Meadow, whose cries had quieted to a whimper.

“Over here,” said one, stepping into a patch of moonlight three paces from Rune. “Do you hear that? Sounds like—”

Something *clicked* beside her. Rune looked to see that Aurelia had drawn her pistol. Hearing the *click*, the soldier turned, squinting into the darkness.

If she fired, the sound would draw every Blood Guard soldier in hearing distance right to them.

And if she didn’t, in a few seconds, the soldier would find them.

Aurelia raised her gun.

Rune held her breath, her hand going to Gideon's gun, tucked into her belt.

"Wheatley!"

Rune backed up a step as a puffing soldier ran into view, stopping to catch his breath.
"We're needed on the other side of town. Captain's orders. All hands. Make haste!"

The soldiers looked at each other and ran.

Silence flooded the park.

Rune looked to the waterfront, and further out, to Alex's boat waiting patiently in the water.

The way was clear.

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FORTY-FIVE

GIDEON

HALF AN HOUR AFTER Rune left his apartment, Gideon stood in the supply room of the new Blood Guard headquarters. He'd ridden straight here and given the order to move most soldiers to the main harbor, where the Crimson Moth would make her escape.

Or so he'd led them to believe.

But Rune wouldn't be smuggling witches aboard the *Arcadia* tonight. The moment Gideon had first accused her of it, she would have abandoned the idea. No, Rune would avoid the main harbor, expecting Gideon to double the security.

But his soldiers didn't know that.

And Gideon intended to buy Rune as much time as possible.

Grabbing an old, rolled-up map of Cascadia—from before the revolution, when this fort had been abandoned—he spread it out across the table. To lay it flat, he pinned one edge with his lamp and the other with Rune's knife, lodging the tip into the wood beneath.

“If I were Cressida,” he murmured, scanning its lines in the lamplight, “where would I hide my sisters?” Close to the capital, where she could easily replenish the spell preserving them? Or as far from the Blood Guard as she could get?

It was only a matter of time before Cressida figured out who Rune was. So long as Elowyn and Analise’s corpses were out there, fully preserved, Rune’s life was in danger. No matter where she ran, she would be hunted.

But if he found the bodies and destroyed them?

Rune would be safe.

Gideon’s gaze traced the map, following the roads leaving the capital and pausing at Thornwood Hall, Cressida’s former summer home.

Would she hide them inside Thornwood?

After growing up there, Cress would know the house and its grounds intimately.

It was a place to start. If he found no trace, he’d move outward from there.

Leaving the map, Gideon went to the supply room. Grabbing an empty rucksack, he started filling it with sticks of dynamite. He couldn't disable whatever spells preserved the sister queens, but with any luck, the spells would have weakened considerably in Cressida's absence. A few sticks of dynamite might be enough to blow them to bits.

He had no idea if it would work, but he had to try.

And if he couldn't destroy them, he would hide them somewhere else. Somewhere Cress would never find them.

Gideon looked to the windows, where the moonlight poured in. The sea was a black expanse in the distance.

He hoped Rune was on it. Hoped she was safely away.

Slinging the pack over his shoulder, Gideon grabbed the lamp and Rune's knife—the only remnant of her he had left—and turned for the door.

A silhouette stood in the frame, blocking his way.

Gideon frowned into the shadows, trying to make out who it was.

“I *trusted* you.”

The voice sparked like a fuse.

Laila.

“You said you knew her exact plans. That it would be tonight. That she would use the *Arcadia*!”

She stepped into the room and the orange glow of his lamp.

Gideon stepped back. “Laila, I—”

“The hounds couldn’t pick up a scent,” she said, staring at him like he was a stranger. “We checked every cargo hold on every ship in the harbor. There’s no trace of any witch.”

Here, at the end, this was all he was sorry for: the look on Laila’s face.

She was his friend, and he’d betrayed her trust.

“Why would you lie to me?”

Gideon remembered Rune’s knife pressed to his throat. Remembered the tears in her eyes as she fled.

Because I love her.

Gideon dropped his sack full of dynamite to the floor.

“Laila, listen—”

“No, Gideon. I will *never* listen to you again.”

“If you let me explain...”

Several soldiers filed in behind her. With them came Harrow. Even from the shadows, he felt the fury of her gaze burning him up.

No explanation would convince them, and he knew it.

Harrow stepped into the light. “All Rune has ever done is deceive you, Comrade. Witches are all the same. You should have learned this lesson by now.”

Looking at Harrow was like looking into a mirror. They both had been hurt by the witches they loved, and had let those wounds poison them.

“Aren’t you tired of this bitterness?” he asked her. “Aren’t you sick of the hate? Those are easy, Harrow. What’s difficult is refusing to harden your heart despite having every reason to. Despite knowing the odds are against you.”

Rune had taught him that.

“Live in the darkness too long, and eventually you won’t recognize the light,” he told her. “You’ll become like the monsters you hate.”

She scowled, her face shuttering. Closing herself off. “You’re lost, Comrade.”

No. Gideon was the opposite of lost.

“You and I are free, Harrow. We’ve always been free. They can torture us, lock us up, leave us to rot—but our souls are still our own. *We* decide what we become. Not them.”

Harrow’s gaze darkened. As if she couldn’t stand to be in Gideon’s presence a second longer, she turned and strode from the room.

When she was gone, Laila said, “You know where Rune is, don’t you?”

Gideon said nothing.

“You can still turn this around. You can tell me, and we can stop her. Before Noah finds out.”

He studied his friend, whose eyes pleaded with him. Laila had a good, brave heart. He loved her like a sister. He didn’t want to force her hand.

But neither would he give Rune up.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Truly, I am.”

He watched her face fall. Watched her glance away and call for the soldiers behind her. Seconds later, half a dozen officers surrounded Gideon. When Laila gave the command, the men looked at each other, clearly reluctant to arrest their captain.

“Do as she says,” Gideon told them. “I intentionally deceived you to help a fugitive escape. Take me into custody.”

So they locked his wrists in irons and marched him to the palace.

PAIN EXPLODED IN GIDEON’S cheek. It was the third time Noah hit him across the face with the butt of a revolver, and his ears rang from the pain of the blows.

In his black uniform, the Good Commander towered over Gideon, who knelt on the floor before him.

“You deceived your soldiers to aid the Crimson Moth’s escape. I therefore convict you of sympathizing with witches.” Noah set the revolver on his desk. “As a revolution hero, it’s only fitting to execute you publicly. I’ll make an official announcement tomorrow. We’ll use you as an example.”

He stared down at Gideon, the derision plain on his face.

There had always been friction between them. Gideon guessed it was because of his close relationship with Nicolas Creed, Noah's father. Gideon had always suspected Noah was jealous, but the suspicion had never been confirmed.

"I almost feel bad for you. Abandoned to your death by the girl you love."

Noah nodded for two soldiers to take him to a cell. As they shoved Gideon forward, the Commander's voice echoed behind him: "She was always out of your league, Sharpe."

"I'm well aware," he whispered as they led him away.