

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

Thirteen

GIDEON

“GET IN,” SAID RUNE, her finger pressed to the trigger. “And keep your hands where I can see them.”

She’d been expecting him.

Rune wore a wedding dress with tapered lace sleeves that covered her arms from shoulder to wrist. The sight of it was a perfect reminder: she was meant to be someone else’s bride.

Gideon swallowed.

Not wanting to get shot—or seen by the shop matron—he did as Rune said. Stepping into the cramped fitting room, he pulled the curtain across the entrance behind him, shielding them from view. Then faced Rune with his hands in the air.

Her strawberry blonde hair was in ringlets. Gideon had never seen it like that. It made her look doll-like.

A lethal doll.

He glanced at the gun in her hands. It was a gentleman's revolver. Used for dueling and little else.

"You sure it's loaded this time?"

Rune took off the safety. "Soren loaded it for me."

Gideon bristled. What kind of man gave a girl a loaded gun without teaching her how to use it?

Unless he did teach her.

The girl in front of you isn't a girl, he reminded himself. She's a manipulative witch.

And the prince caught in her spell was clearly in on this scheme. Soren and a handful of guards were probably waiting at both exits.

Gideon had walked himself into a trap.

“You’ve gotten rusty,” said Rune. “You thought I’d parade myself through the streets of Caelis *knowing* you were here, waiting to kill me?”

“Could we skip the gloating,” said Gideon, “and move on to the part where you put me out of my misery?”

“I’m not going to kill you.”

“No, you’re going to call your fiancé’s bodyguard to do it for you.”

To his surprise, Rune lowered her gun. “I’m here to propose a truce.”

“A *what?*” Gideon lowered his hands.

Was this a trick?

“A *temporary* truce,” she amended. “If you help me, I’ll break off my engagement to Soren, nullifying his alliance with Cressida. That’s what you want, right? It’s why you came to kill me.”

She’d snagged a hook in his chest and was reeling him in. Because yes, that was why he came to kill her.

“Why would you break off your engagement?”

She glanced away. “You were right. I don’t want to be his wife.”

The real Rune would never admit to Gideon being right. Was she lying?

Two nights ago, she was fully committed to her role in Cressida’s alliance. Clearly, she had some surprise up her sleeve.

He studied her, wary. “What kind of *help* do you want from me?”

Rune sat on a small bench leaning against the wall. Setting the gun down beside her within easy reach, she grabbed a set of shoes off the floor and pulled the first one on. By keeping her hands occupied, she demonstrated the risk she was willing to take for this truce.

After all, Gideon also had a gun.

But he was intrigued, and she knew it.

“I want you to get me safely into the New Republic, and I want you to give me the sibyl you’re holding hostage.” She glanced up at him, pulling on the second shoe. “If you kill me, Soren will simply wage a war against the Republic to avenge me. So it’s in your best interest to help me.”

She’s bluffing.

Unless she wasn’t.

Gideon ran a hand through his hair, thinking. Soren was an Umbrian prince: possessive, entitled, used to getting his way. Men like him didn’t take their losses lightly. If Gideon executed Rune, Soren might do exactly as she said: give Cressida an army anyway, to avenge his fiancée—and his wounded pride.

Gideon would prove his loyalty by killing the Crimson Moth. But if Rune wasn’t bluffing, her death wouldn’t prevent a war; it would *incite* one.

He couldn't risk that.

But a truce with the very witch who betrayed me?

He couldn't risk that, either.

Unless I betray her first.

An idea sparked in Gideon's mind.

What if there's a way to use her to my advantage?

"I need some assurance that you won't betray me again," he said.

"I betrayed *you*?" On her feet now, Rune scowled at him. "It was the other way around."

"We'll have to agree to disagree."

Her nostrils flared. “Can you give *me* assurances? I’m risking my safety. Cressida already suspects I helped you escape! What are you risking?”

“By helping you get into the Republic? My job. My dignity. Possibly my life.”

Sympathizing with witches was now an offense punished by death in the Republic. She must have known that, because she glanced away, biting her lip.

Gideon couldn’t trust her. Not ever. But once they were on the island, he wouldn’t have to. It wouldn’t even matter if Rune was lying to him.

She can’t betray me if I betray her first.

Gideon knew what he had to do.

He would accept Rune’s terms. He’d smuggle her into the New Republic. And the moment they made port, he’d arrest her himself.

Once Rune was in Blood Guard custody, alive and unharmed, Gideon could barter with Soren. *He* would define the terms: Soren could have his precious fiancée back—if and when Cressida was eliminated.

Gideon didn't care how Soren accomplished it, so long as Cressida and her witch army were all dead before she tore the New Republic apart. Once Soren complied, Gideon would hand Rune over. The Blood Guard wouldn't have to lift a finger. All they'd have to do was hold Rune hostage until their terms were met.

If he pulled this off, Gideon would crush two threats at once. He'd get everything he wanted: Cressida dead, his reputation restored, and peace reestablished on the island.

The only wild card was Rune.

This could be an elaborate plot to bring him—and the Republic—down. But if she was lying, all he had to do was get ahead of her.

"Once I get you onto the island, what will you do?" he asked, playing along now.

Rune raised her gun to his chest.

"If you think I'm going to tell you my exact plans so you can sabotage them, you're dumber than you look."

He glanced at the revolver, noticing the hammer wasn't drawn back. He considered staying silent. Waiting to see how far she'd take this, if she'd really pull the trigger, and then overcome her when she realized her error.

But he couldn't resist.

"You need to cock it before you fire."

Her cheeks reddened. "Curse you," she muttered, then cocked the gun and kept aiming.

But her form was still wrong. It was obvious she had little to no experience with firearms. He marveled at Soren's lack of prudence. If she'd been *his* fiancée, the first thing Gideon would have done would've been to teach her how to properly hold, aim, and shoot a gun.

And then she'd kill me with it.

But she hadn't killed him yet.

He studied her.

Not only was her hair perfect, but so was her makeup. Kohl lined her eyes. Rouge reddened her lips and cheeks. Even her lashes looked darker than usual.

He wanted to smear it all off. To unravel those curls. To strip her down to the Rune underneath.

“What really changed your mind?” he asked. “Because I don’t think it’s Soren.”

Her eyes flashed with some turbulent emotion, like a ship on a stormy sea. It made him even more curious.

“I’m done answering questions. Do you accept my terms or not?”

“You’re asking me to go against my orders. What’s to stop you from cutting and running the moment I deliver on my end of the bargain? You’ve betrayed me before, remember?”

“You’re not exactly the most trustworthy person, either,” she shot back. “You handed me over to be killed the moment you found out what I was.”

And I’ll do it again.

“*You* made me believe you were in love with me.” He stepped so close, the barrel of her gun pushed into the center of his chest. “*You* used me for intel. The entire time you were toying with me, you were recruiting witches for Cress’s army!”

“I didn’t know she was Cressida!”

Rune winced, probably realizing how loud she’d spoken. She glanced at the curtain hiding them from the rest of the shop.

“I thought she was Verity,” she said, quietly. “I thought she was my friend. I didn’t *know*.”

This girl was so damn hard to read.

“I can’t tell the truth from a lie with you,” he said.

Rune said nothing. Just lowered her gun to her side.

Trusting her was impossible. What she was asking of him would require going against everything he’d committed himself to, everyone who *trusted* him. He would be betraying them all if he made this deal with Rune.

Unless I betray her first, he reminded himself.

Rune was certainly plotting the same. He didn’t for a second think she would be loyal to this truce. Of course she had some trick up her sleeve. Once he came through on his part

of this deal, she would disappear without delivering what she promised—or betray him in some worse way.

I need to be three steps ahead of her this time.

“Well?” asked Rune.

“Fine,” he said. “I agree to a *temporary* truce.”

She lowered the gun, her shoulders relaxing. As if she’d been tense this whole time, certain he’d refuse. She put the safety back on her pistol. “Good. Here’s the plan: there’s a back door past the fitting area. If—”

“Darling?” Soren’s voice called from outside the fitting room. “How are you faring?”

Gideon froze. Rune’s eyes widened.

Clearly she hadn’t expected her fiancé to return so soon.

She pushed past Gideon. With her pistol hidden behind her back, she peeked out from behind the fitting room curtain. “I’m not dressed yet, my love. Why don’t you wait outside? I’ll meet you in a minute.”

“There’s no need to be shy.” Soren sounded much closer. Less than five paces away. “I’ll see you undressed soon enough...”

Gideon didn’t like the way Rune tensed at those words.

In a few seconds, Soren would pull back this curtain, hoping to sneak inside. And when he did, he’d find Gideon already in here.

“Soren,” Rune tried again. “You know it’s bad luck to—”

The prince grabbed the curtain.

Gideon seized Rune’s pistol and pressed it to her head. She stiffened against him.

Soren flung back the curtain. At the sight inside the fitting room, the cocky smile on his face melted into shock.

“Do exactly as I say,” Gideon snarled. “Or I’ll put a bullet in your *darling’s* tiny head.”