

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

FOURTEEN

GIDEON

“YOU.” SOREN’S LIP CURLED at the sight of Gideon. But he was all teeth and no bite. Gideon had what Soren wanted; Gideon, therefore, was the one with all the power here.

“That’s right.” Gideon slid his arm around Rune’s waist, pulling her tight against him. An eerie calmness settled like a blanket over him. “Unless you’d like your bride-to-be’s brains splattered against the wall, you’ll do as I say.”

The stunned prince looked from Gideon to Rune to the gun.

“Lock the front door,” said Gideon.

The words sank in. Soren snapped out of his shock and did as Gideon commanded, striding toward the front door and locking it. Making no move to alert the guards out front.

Gideon nudged Rune from the fitting room, keeping the revolver pressed to her head.

“All of you.” He nodded to Soren, the shop matron, and the gaggle of customers—who now looked like a flock of frightened birds. “Get behind the front counter.”

As they obeyed, Gideon backed toward the rear of the shop, taking Rune with him.

Under her breath, Rune whispered: “*Left*. The door is to your *left*.”

She hadn’t struggled when he took her hostage. As if she sensed his plan the moment he put it in motion. As if she were handing him the reins, letting him steer them out of this.

Gideon found the door. He pressed his shoulders against it.

“If you come after us,” he called to Soren, “I’ll kill her.”

Pushing the door open, Gideon dragged Rune out. It slammed shut behind them.

The sun beat down, blinding him for a second.

“I have a hotel room,” he said, letting Rune go. Pulling the fedora off his head, he chucked it in the nearby refuse bin. “We can go there until I figure out a plan.”

“I already have a plan.”

Rune pulled out of his grip and turned toward the bin. Two suitcases were hidden behind it.

“Give me my gun back,” she said. “You’ll need both hands to carry these.”

Gideon frowned as she dragged them out. Had she packed these and planted them here? But that would mean ...

“Now, Gideon. They’ll be on us in seconds.”

“Is that the *prince’s* luggage?”

“I’ll explain everything on the way.”

Rune swiped the gun out of his hand and tucked it down her bodice. How there was room for it in there, he had no idea. Next, she pulled out a dove gray cloak and threw it over her shoulders, concealing the bright white wedding dress. After drawing the hood over her head to hide her rose-gold hair, she started to run.

“Come on!”

A high-pitched whistle sounded. One used by the Caelisian police to signify an imminent arrest.

There was no time to think. Gideon grabbed the suitcases—hoisting one under each arm—and ran after Rune.

Perhaps it was the suitcases weighing him down, but Rune was surprisingly swift, even in a cumbersome gown. It took him a minute to catch up with her as they wove through the back alleys and away from the shopping district. Heading toward the water.

Almost as if she’d mapped out and memorized this route beforehand.

“Pick up the pace!” she called. “Or we’ll be late!”

“If you hadn’t made me your pack mule,” Gideon panted, his grip on the suitcases tightening, “I’d be—”

Wait.

“Late for what?”

A sudden shot rang out. They both ducked. Gideon glanced behind them, sighting a soldier two streets back who was taking aim again. With both arms full, he couldn't draw his gun. He was about to drop the suitcases when a shot rang out. Loud and very close to his head.

He ducked out of the way, but the heat of the blast was warm on his face. When he looked up, he saw Rune aiming her revolver at the officers behind them.

Grabbing her gun, he pushed it down, aiming it at the ground.

“You nearly shot me,” he hissed.

“*Sorry.*” Her tone suggested she was sorrier she'd missed him.

More shots rang out behind them, followed by threatening shouts. This time, they both ducked behind a refuse bin.

“We need to find a crowded street,” he said, listening to the bullets bounce off metal and brick.

They could more easily lose their pursuers in a crowd.

Rune nodded her agreement. “This way.”

She led them further toward the water. Fire burned in Gideon’s biceps as he tried not to drop Rune’s luggage while also trying to keep pace with her.

Soon the alley opened into the harbor front, where the entertainment district drew locals and tourists alike. On the busy sidewalk, passing art galleries and cafés, Rune slowed, blending in with the crowd. Gideon set down the luggage to give his arms a reprieve, then lifted each bag by its handles.

Now he and Rune looked like any other tourists newly arrived in the city and searching for their hotel.

“Where are we going?” he asked, scanning the crowd. Looking for uniforms.

“The *Arcadia*.”

Gideon knew it by reputation: the only passenger ship that barred witch hunters and their hounds from boarding.

“I bought us passage. It departs at one o’clock.”

Gideon spluttered. “One o’clock?”

That was *right now*.

“Otherwise, we’ll have to wait until it returns next week. The entire Caelisian police force—not to mention Cressida—will be looking for us by nightfall. We can’t afford to wait that long.”

Mercy. *She* was three steps ahead of *him*.

She predicted I would agree to this before I even showed up.

Gideon was rusty.

“That’s a three-day voyage.” Not far behind them, he saw police officers pushing through the crowd. “All of my things are back at the hotel.”

“I’ve taken care of everything.” Rune nodded toward the lighter suitcase. “That’s Soren’s. You’ll have to make do with his wardrobe.”

He’d have to wear the prince’s clothes? For the next three days?

“Absolutely not.”

“Oh, are silk and brocade too fancy for you?” Beneath her gray hood, Rune rolled her eyes.

“They won’t fit me!” he spluttered.

“Men with guns are chasing us, Gideon. Well-fitting clothes are the least of your concerns.”

She was right.

His mood darkened.

Caught behind a group of tourists gawking at the architecture, Gideon dodged around them and into the street so he and Rune didn't lose ground to the police behind them. Up ahead, the *Arcadia* loomed. It was a passenger steamship, and its long gangplank rose from the quay to the upper deck, where a few stragglers stood waiting in line to board.

Beyond the *Arcadia*, out in the harbor, a fleet of Soren's warships were emerging through the morning mist. Gray plumes from the vessels' smokestacks choked the sky.

The prince's navy must be getting ready to sail for the New Republic.

"You better be right about this," Gideon said as he glanced behind them. Officers were searching civilians only twenty paces away, asking questions.

His body was a coiled spring. How was Rune so calm?

"What if someone recognizes your name? Or your face?"

"The tickets are in your name," she said as they reached the gangplank and started up it. A group of four stood in line ahead of them. From their fashionable clothing, Gideon guessed they were in Caelis as tourists, or here on business. "And I plan to change my face."

Gideon didn't like the sound of that.

"Next!" a loud voice called, piercing the silence.

They both glanced up as the passengers ahead stepped off the gangway and onto the ship. The ticket taker stood in a crisp navy uniform. When his bored gaze fell on them, he paused, glancing from Rune's dress to Gideon's suit.

"Well, isn't this a sight. It's so refreshing to see a young couple settling down instead of sowing their wild oats all over the place! Congratulations on your nuptials."

Gideon was about to correct the mistake when Rune slipped her arm through his and stepped in closer. The press of her body surprised him.

"It was a lovely ceremony," she said to the ticket taker, beaming up at him. "We eloped."

Oh. No.

No no no.

Gideon glanced from Rune's lace wedding dress to his vintage suit, realizing this was *exactly* how it looked: like they had just been married.

"I've dreamed of a wedding in the Umbrian Mountains ever since I was a little girl." Rune smiled sweetly up at Gideon. So sweet, it was making his stomach ache.

What have I agreed to?

This wasn't the plan. It couldn't be. But the Caelisian police were down below, looking to arrest the witch hunter who'd kidnapped Prince Soren's fiancée. One wrong move and it was all over. If they spotted Gideon, if they cornered him and Rune, she would throw him to the wolves. She'd walk free while they hauled him off to prison, and then find another way to smuggle herself into the New Republic.

Gideon needed to avoid arrest. The Caelisian authorities would not be sympathetic to a witch hunter. And once they put him in a cell, Cressida would know exactly where to find him.

"Welcome aboard the *Arcadia*, Mr. and Mrs. Sharpe."

The words were like a lightning strike, zapping Gideon to alertness. Rune flinched beside him, equally jolted.

"Thanks," they whispered.

Handing over their ticket stubs, Rune stepped onto the ship. Gideon followed behind, hauling their luggage across the promenade deck.

“This is not what I agreed to,” he said under his breath, scanning the deck for any familiar faces. Staff scurried back and forth, readying to set sail, while passengers strolled or waved to their loved ones.

He’d recognized no one on his voyage here. He hoped the same would hold true on the voyage back.

“You promised to get me safely into the New Republic,” said Rune, untucking her arm from his. “You should be thanking me for helping you make that happen.”

“Thanking you?”

The gall.

As he followed her to the stairs leading down to the lower levels, Gideon glanced back to the quay, where police were still stopping and searching civilians. At least they’d made it onto the ship. He hoped the *Arcadia* left port before they thought to search it, too.

“We need to find our cabin,” said Rune, stepping into the stairwell, a few steps ahead of him.

Gideon slowed.

“Cabin?” His hands tightened on the suitcases’ leather handles as he dodged other passengers and their luggage, many of them smiling at the sight of Rune’s gown and congratulating Gideon. “As in *one* cabin? Shared between the two of us?”

“I bought our tickets at the last minute,” she called over her shoulder. “There was only one left, in third class.”

Gideon halted in the stairwell doorway, lightheaded.

Third-class cabins were tiny, cramped things. They barely fit one small bed.

He doubted Rune knew this. She’d likely never traveled third class in her life.

And their charade was fully entrenched. Having declared themselves newly married, they had to act the part. For three straight days.

“Hurry!” Rune’s voice echoed up to him. “You’re falling behind!”

An understatement if he’d ever heard one.

Had he forgotten how clever she was? Not only was Gideon woefully unprepared—at this rate, he’d never catch up to her.