

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

EIGHTEEN

GIDEON

IT TOOK A MOMENT for Gideon to pull himself out of Rune's intoxicating spell and look up.

A familiar young woman stood before their booth. Her auburn curls were pulled back into a tidy bun, and her cheeks dimpled as she smiled down at him. The last time he'd seen her, she'd been wearing a red uniform with a gun at her hip.

Abigail Redfern.

Abbie was a patriot Gideon had met at revolutionary meetings. They'd learned how to load and shoot a gun together. They'd fought alongside each other at the New Dawn. Abbie believed in the New Republic as much as Gideon did.

Maybe more.

After the revolution, they grew closer still. Like two people stumbling out of the darkness together, reaching for each other to make sure they were, in fact, alive. It had been easy with Abbie. *Nice*. Falling into her bed after a long shift, or bringing her back to his. Soothing each other's wounds with kisses. Holding each other to fend off the nightmares.

But it wasn't meant to last. And when Abbie went to work for the Tribunal—a job that came with much higher pay—Gideon fell out of touch with her. He hadn't seen or spoken to her since.

"Abbie? What ... what are you doing here?"

She'd traded in her Tribunal uniform for the navy outfit worn by the *Arcadia's* staff, and in her hand were a paper pad and a pen. Which gave him some idea.

He slid out of the booth and stood up.

"I work here," said Abbie, throwing her arms around him and squeezing him in a hug. "In the kitchens, mostly. But sometimes I help wait tables."

Gideon hugged her back. She smelled like cinnamon and bread.

"I can't believe it's you!" Abbie pulled away, then grabbed his shoulders. Unlike with Rune, he didn't have to bend to look into her eyes. "I haven't seen you in ... what? Over a

year?” When her gaze dropped to the rest of him, she stepped back, cocking her head.
“You got fancy.”

Gideon glanced down at Soren’s suit.

“Trust me, I feel like a peacock.”

Abbie laughed. “Yeah. Emerald is *not* your color.”

“I agree. He looks best in red or black.”

Gideon froze at Rune’s voice. Abbie turned to face her, then glanced quickly back at him.

He rubbed the nape of his neck. “This is...” For some reason, he couldn’t get the words out. “Abbie, meet...”

“I’m Kestrel,” said Rune, smiling brightly up at Abbie.

A little too brightly.

He recalled the three glasses of wine she'd had.

"Kestrel Sharpe."

Gideon winced at the sound of his last name attached to her fake one.

Abbie's smile faltered. "Oh. Oh, you two are..." She looked at Gideon, who was staring at a dark knot in the table's grain.

"Married," said Rune. "Just recently, in fact."

Is she slurring her words?

"Oh! Well. Congratulations." Abbie's smile returned, but it was no longer so enthusiastic. She turned to Gideon. "Are you busy at sundown tomorrow? Some friends are playing a few rounds of Poor Man's Trap on Deck C. You should join us. There's ... a lot to catch up on." She looked to Rune. "Apparently."

Catching up with Abbie, a girl he'd once courted, while playing husband to Rune?

No, thank you.

“I don’t think—”

“We’d be delighted,” said Rune.

Gideon frowned at his fake wife, who was *definitely* slurring her words.

“Is Poor Man’s Trap a card game?” asked Rune. “I’ve never played it.”

Abbie arched an eyebrow at Gideon, then patted his chest. “I’ll let you explain it to her.”

Someone called her name, and Abbie glanced across the saloon. “I should get back to work.” She backed away, her brown eyes on Gideon. “Six o’clock. Deck C. Don’t forget.” The corner of her mouth curved. “Hope you’ve been practicing.”

And then she was gone.

“She seems nice.”

Gideon glared at Rune as he slid into the booth. “What are you doing?”

“*Being friendly*,” she said. “I know it’s difficult for you.” She turned to watch Abbie wade back into the diners. “Who is she?”

“An old friend,” he said.

Rune threw him a skeptical look. “Old friends don’t give hugs like that.”

Gideon frowned. “What are you talking about?”

With her elbows on the table, Rune dropped her cheeks into her hands. “She barely kept her hands off you.”

He shook his head. “You’re drunk.”

Gideon glanced at Abbie’s retreating form.

Why is she working on the Arcadia?

The money couldn't be *that* good.

Gideon recalled the conversation he'd overheard above deck, and the pieces clicked into place.

Is she the spy?

He glanced from Abbie, who stood at the bar giving the bartender an order, to Rune, who was in the middle of pouring her fourth glass of wine.

"Whoa," he said, stopping the bottle and grabbing the glass.

He'd watched her gulp down three glasses already. And Rune was *tiny*. They were walking a very fine line as it was. Gideon couldn't let her drunkenly say or do something that would give them away.

"Hey!" She reached for the glass. "That's mine."

Gideon held it and the bottle out of reach. “I think you’ve had enough.”

She wrinkled her nose at him.

He’d only seen Rune tipsy once before—when she first tried, and failed, to seduce him in her bedroom. But this second time only proved what he’d thought then: Rune was horribly cute under the influence of alcohol.

“You don’t want to do something you’ll regret,” he told her.

She narrowed her eyes. “Like *what?*”

Like give our entire pretense away, he wanted to say.

“We’re sharing a bed, remember?”

A blush swept up her throat. “If you think I’d try to take advantage of you—”

Gideon barked a laugh.

Oh, Rune. If you had any idea ...

Her face got redder. “What’s so funny?”

“You. Taking advantage of me.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Because I’m so repulsive, you wouldn’t even be tempted?”

Gideon laughed harder. “You *are* drunk. Come on, sugarplum. We’re leaving.”

Reaching for her gloved wrist, he slid from the booth and pulled her after him.

“But I haven’t ordered dinner...”

“I’ll have them deliver it to our cabin.”

Threading her fingers through his, he glanced over at the police officers seated near the windows, only to find their seats empty. Gideon scanned the dining saloon, but they were nowhere in sight. Hoping he and Rune had thrown them off with that display of wanton lust, Gideon led her away, glancing back only once to find Abbie watching them.

He waved to her, remembering what Rune had gotten them into. The last thing he wanted was to fully commit to this charade under the watchful eyes of Abbie. *Especially* if she was a spy. But it would seem suspicious to back out now.

Once they were inside their cabin, Gideon locked the door behind them. Rune sat down on the bed. The moon was full and shining through the window, casting a glow over her.

“Everything is spinning,” she whispered.

“You need to drink some water.” He crouched in front of her and pulled off her shoes.
“Food will also help.”

Rune lay back on the comforter. “Too bad you whisked us away from the food.”

“Yes. Too bad we didn’t stay longer so you could out us to everyone on board.”

“Gideon?” She propped herself up onto her elbows and scrunched her eyebrows together.
“What are you doing?”

Gideon, who'd pushed up her dress and was pulling down her stockings, stopped in his tracks.

What was he doing?

Helping her undress. Like he would if she were his actual inebriated wife. So he could put her to bed.

He shot to his feet and stepped back.

Snap out of it.

This was *Rune*. The Crimson Moth. The witch who was plotting to betray him as certainly as he was plotting to betray her.

He reached for the door. "I'll get you some water."

"And food!" said Rune, flopping back down. "I'm starving."

FIFTEEN MINUTES LATER, GIDEON had a pitcher of water and an empty glass. Their food was being prepared and would be delivered within the hour.

“Bad news,” he said, stepping into their cabin. “Dinner won’t be...”

The sound of soft snoring made him fall quiet.

Rune was asleep on top of the covers, bathed in white moonlight. Her illusion had worn off, giving him a perfect view of her rust-gold hair spilling across the pillow. Her dress lay in a heap on the floor, and covering everything but her legs was his shirt, which she was wearing.

The sight made his chest squeeze.

Didn’t she have a proper nightgown?

Rune’s mouth lay partly open, and her breath stirred a strand of hair stuck to her cheek. She seemed like just a girl, lying there. Innocent. Vulnerable.

His gaze slid down her pale legs, snagging on the silvery scars etched into her calf. Drawn like a magnet, he set down the water he’d brought and sat on the small bed’s edge. The

scars formed a pattern of moths in flight. The delicate things started at the base of her ankle and fluttered up her calf, stopping below the back of her knee.

He wanted to hate them.

But he didn't.

Instead, he had the strangest urge to take her leg in his hands and trace the silver lines. Memorize them with his fingers.

Or his mouth.

Gideon shut his eyes. *What is wrong with me?*

This girl had betrayed him in the worst way. And she'd betray him again—he'd be a fool to think she wouldn't.

And she's still wearing Alex's ring.

Guilt stabbed at him.

He hated himself for the thoughts in his head, for flirting with her at dinner, for *touching* her like he had. As if she belonged to him. He vividly recalled Rune pulling his hand up her leg, and the molten desire that had flooded him. This was the girl his brother had loved. The girl who'd be married to Alex right now if Gideon hadn't failed to protect him.

It should be Alex sharing her bed. Now Alex was gone, and Gideon, who'd always tried to be a good older brother, had moved right in. Even if it was pretend.

Gideon let out a ragged sigh. Stepping back. Watching her sleep. Forcing himself to remember she wasn't some innocent girl.

She was the Crimson Moth.

A rebel witch.

Gideon remembered their conversation in the saloon.

You told me there's a missing Roseblood heir. If that's true, I'm going to find them. All I want is a chance to warn them of Cressida's plans.

She might be lying to him. She might secretly be planning to aid Cressida from inside the Republic.

But Gideon didn't care about that so much. He cared that she'd thrown a wrench into his plans. Now he needed to decide between arresting Rune once the *Arcadia* made port—or waiting for something better.

It was Rune who'd given him the idea.

If I give you the location, you'll have your witch hunters lying in wait to ambush us.

If Gideon did as he'd promised—smuggling Rune past the Blood Guard and their hounds, handing the sibyl over—there might be a way to eradicate not only Cressida and her army, but this missing Roseblood heir. Because even if Cressida was destroyed, there would still be other witches ready to take up her cause.

Her sisters could still be resurrected by someone else.

Rune didn't need to give him the location. She just needed to unwittingly lead him to it. And once she summoned the missing Roseblood and Gideon eliminated them, he'd resume his plan of taking Rune hostage and using her to barter with Soren.

There was just one problem:

The witch-hunting hounds.

Gideon had no idea how he was going to get her past them.