

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

FIFTY-ONE

GIDEON

TODAY, GIDEON WOULD DIE.

It's what they told him when they woke him up.

Gideon sat on the floor with his back pressed to the cold stone wall, the prison cell pitch-black around him. He didn't know how much time had passed since the guard came at dawn to say he'd be executed in a matter of hours. It was hard to tell the passing of time in this place. Gideon had been here a week, and had learned to count days by the opening of his cell door, when the guards brought water and bread—first at dawn and then at dusk. But minutes? Hours? It was impossible to keep track of those.

All he knew was that he wouldn't be in here much longer. A firing squad awaited him.

Gideon was that abominable thing the Republic could not abide: a witch sympathizer. No, it was worse: he was a witch *lover*.

Soon, he'd pay the price for it.

When a key turned in the lock, Gideon's heart jumped into his throat.

This is it.

The door opened and light flooded in, temporarily blinding him. Before he could see which guard it was, a hood came down over his head.

"Time to go."

Gideon reminded himself that his entire family was dead, and that he was simply joining them.

I'm not afraid to die.

But if that was true, why was his heart hammering like a war drum?

He didn't struggle. Didn't try to fight off the guard. Ten more would only rush in to replace this one. They would overcome him, one way or another.

Gideon let himself be hauled to his feet.

The guard led him from his cell in manacles. With the hood over his head, Gideon couldn't see a thing. Fear pitted his stomach, growing more intense with every step.

As the prison gates rattled open, he tried to distract himself from thoughts of his impending death. The crowd outside—how big would it be? Would the entire city come to witness the execution of a revolution hero? How many people would cheer as Gideon Sharpe, defender of the Republic, died at that Republic's hands?

Most of all: Was this worth it?

Was *Rune* worth it?

The thought of her only brought resolve.

Rune is worth everything.

BOOM!

The ground shook beneath Gideon's feet.

He paused, steadying himself.

BOOM!

BOOM!

BOOM!

What the ...

The entire prison trembled around him.

"What was that?"

No one answered. His guard quickened their steps, dragging him forward amidst shouts of rising alarm and rushing footsteps.

Outside, the guard turned him down what seemed like a quiet alleyway and shoved him against a wall. As Gideon's back hit the bricks, he realized there was no public demonstration.

This would be a quick back-alley execution.

His pulse pounded in his ears as he waited for the gun to fire.

But no gunshot rang out. Instead, the hood came up over his head and sunlight flooded his eyes. Gideon blinked, trying to clear it.

"Laila?"

She was in uniform, looking like she hadn't slept—or changed—in days. In her hand was a ring of iron keys.

"What's going on?"

"You owe me one." She stepped closer and slid a key into the lock of his manacles. After a quick turn and a *click*, the chains dropped to the ground.

BOOM!

They both jumped and looked to the street. Laila had led them away from the palace, where a large crowd was now dispersing amidst the chaos. Soldiers ran back and forth, panicked, as the blasts continued.

“What is that?”

“Cannon fire.” Laila pressed a pistol into his hand. “We’re under attack.”

“From who?” Gideon checked the gun and found it loaded. “Soren?”

Laila glanced over her shoulder, toward the mayhem. “We don’t know. It just started.”

Rune was supposed to break the alliance. If Soren was here, and those were his cannons firing on the city, it meant Rune hadn’t come through on her part of their bargain.

She hadn’t called off her engagement to the prince.

As more tremors shook the buildings around them, Gideon headed toward the cannon fire, grip tightening on the gun Laila had given him. “Let’s go find out.”

The cannons boomed, growing louder the closer they came to the harbor. Soon, gunfire joined them. When Gideon and Laila drew near enough to see the fray, they found the wharf on fire, smoke choking the sky, and buildings crushed by cannonballs.

Instead of heading toward the harbor front, the Republic’s soldiers were running away from it.

Gideon grabbed one. “What are you doing?” He hauled the man in front of him by his jacket. “Your duty is to defend the city.”

“It-it’s a ghost army, sir.” The man’s face was white with shock as he fought against Gideon’s grip. “Th-they’re slaughtering us!”

He ripped himself free and kept running.

Laila stopped another man in uniform. “What’s happening? How outnumbered are we?”

The soldier gripped his arm where blood soaked through his coat. He’d clearly been shot. “Hard to say.” His breathing came in shallow gasps. “You can’t see them. You only feel their bullets. They’re cloaked by witches’ spells. We don’t even know where to shoot.”

He too stumbled away, calling back to them: “You should run. We were all told to retreat.”

Laila glanced at Gideon.

Where did you retreat if your enemy was invisible?

“We need to tell Noah.”

Gideon scowled. “*You* warn your brother. I’m going to get a closer look.”

He needed to see this for himself.

“Gideon, I don’t think—”

Another round of gunfire drowned out Laila’s voice. Reluctantly, she followed.

Soon they were in the thick of it, weaving through back alleys where the city’s edge met the harbor. The air was smoky, and the smell of ash mingled with magic and gunpowder.

Some soldiers had stayed behind and were still firing. But they seemed to be firing on empty air.

And the air was firing in return, felling them one by one.

Fall back, you idiots.

Using the wall of a fish merchant's shop as cover, Gideon shifted to look further out. Beside him, Laila drew her gun.

He now had a wider view of the burning wharf. Through the smoke, a massive fleet of ships appeared offshore, each one bearing Soren Nord's emblem. In between those ships and the harbor front were hundreds of rowboats full of soldiers, each one carrying a witch.

With the Republic's army in retreat, it seemed there was no longer a need to keep them veiled beneath spells of invisibility. Instead, magical shields protected them, repelling their enemies' bullets.

Gideon's gaze snagged on one boat in particular. Cressida seemed to hold court even there, in that scuffed little dory. She wore a black lace dress, and a circlet of roses crowned her pale head. Her eyes stared hungrily at the city. As if she were about to swallow it whole.

How is this possible?

Rune was supposed to break the alliance by refusing to marry the prince.

“Gideon ... we need to go.” Laila grabbed his arm, tugging. But Gideon couldn’t tear his eyes away from Soren’s army advancing on them, with Cressida at its helm.

Rune was supposed to stop this from happening. She’d *promised* him. This alliance was predicated on Soren marrying Rune. If Soren’s army was here, blitzing the hell out of them, Rune hadn’t called off the wedding after all.

Or worse: she’s already married to him.

It was a blow to Gideon’s heart.

Was he an idiot? Had this been Rune’s plan all along?

No. Gideon scattered his doubts. *She wouldn’t do this.*

He believed that.

But if Rune had kept her part of their bargain—or worse, been *forced* to keep it ...

“*Gideon!*” whispered Laila. “We need to go *now*.”

Laila was right. After Soren’s army took the harbor front—which was seconds from happening—they would sweep outward, into the city.

Gideon let her drag him away. Together, they ran.

Behind them, smoke choked the sky as the harbor burned.