

TWENTY-ONE

GIDEON

“TELL US, SHARPE: HOW’D you convince that poor, sweet girl to marry you?”

They were below deck, in the Crew Alleyway—a long hallway meant for employee use, in the ship’s second-lowest level. Around them, stewards, servers, and restaurant staff rushed past.

Poor and *sweet* were not words Gideon would have chosen to describe Rune.

“Actually,” he said, thinking of the pistol pointed at his head while Rune dictated her terms in the wedding shop’s fitting room. “She convinced me.”

“Ha!” laughed Ash. “Good one.”

They were so close to the engine here, Gideon felt the vibrations beneath his feet. The sound of its thumping echoed through the Alleyway like a giant heartbeat.

“I swear it’s true.” *She coerced me.*

Gideon was still thinking about the way Rune fit against his chest: soft and warm and small. He didn’t know why he’d asked about her dream, because the way she’d called his name in the dark last night was best forgotten. She’d never said it like that before—half cry, half moan.

What exactly had they been doing in her dream?

He glanced back to where Rune trailed far behind, with William at her side.

Gideon had been reluctant to leave her with that boy—whose hungry look betrayed him, even if Rune was determined not to see it. But he needed to know if Abbie was Harrow’s spy. Even if she wasn’t, she might know who was. The only way to find out was to engage her.

He needed to be careful, though. If Abbie was a New Republic spy, and there were witch sympathizers among them—Ash had all but admitted to being one earlier—Gideon didn’t want to get her reported.

“You used to despise aristos,” said Abbie from beside him. “You used to reject their invitations and avoid their parties.”

Gideon still did that. He’d rather get his ribs broken in the boxing ring than make polite conversation in a ballroom.

“She’s not your type in other ways, too.”

He raised a brow. For someone he hadn’t seen in a year, she was being very forward.

“I didn’t realize I had a type.”

“The Gideon I knew liked to be challenged.” Her brown eyes met his, as if daring him to contradict her. “He enjoyed being kept on his toes. The Gideon I knew had stared into the darkness, and carried it with him.”

Two crew members rushed by, forcing Abbie out of their way and closer to Gideon.

She lowered her voice so only he would hear her. “He would never be happy with someone who couldn’t stare into the darkness, too.”

“And Kestrel can’t?”

She shot him a look. “She’s sweet. But she’s not your equal. She’s the kind of girl who cares more about a muddy hem than whether she can hit a moving target.”

Gideon coughed to disguise a laugh, trying to imagine the Crimson Moth worrying about dirt on her clothes.

“I used to think that, too.” He knew better now. There were depths to Rune he might never reach.

He glanced back again to find Rune’s eyes on him. Their gazes snagged. What was William telling her?

He didn’t like leaving her alone with that guy. He should go retrieve her.

Except this was why he’d come: to suss out Abbie and tell her what he was planning, so if she was Harrow’s spy, he could convince her not to report him.

“The last time we spoke, you were working for the Tribunal. What happened? How did you end up”—he glanced around at the Crew Alleyway’s cramped quarters—“here?”

A different beat echoed through the hall now, competing with the engine's sound. Something more melodic and wild.

Music.

"I got annoyed with the bureaucracy."

As they drew closer to the sounds of revelry, Abbie led him through a door and into a dark, warm, boisterous room full of people. Some stood at the edges sipping drinks, others played cards at tables, and still others danced in the center. Abbie had to shout to be heard over the music.

"It was Harrow who suggested working on ships. If you get on the right ship, you can wake up in a different port every morning. I started on the *Arcadia*, to get experience. But at the end of this week, my contract will be up, and I can transfer to a bigger ship."

Gideon studied her. Had she intentionally dropped Harrow's name? Or was that coincidence?

"When was the last time you and Harrow spoke?" he asked as their group descended on an empty card table.

"The last time we docked in the capital." Which would have been roughly a week ago.

Are you working for her? he wanted to ask, but he didn't dare in such mixed company. *Are you her spy?*

Abbie took a seat at the table. If he joined her, he wouldn't be able to ask. And he needed to, because if she was the spy, he needed to tell her what he was planning before she reported him, or—if she had kill orders—before she hurt Rune.

Gideon looked to the whirling, stomping dancers.

“Abbie?”

She turned back around.

He held out his hand to her. “Dance with me?”

The corner of her mouth turned up as she took his hand.

As he led her into the dancers, Gideon looked to make sure Rune was still in view. She and William weren't at the card table with the rest of Abbie's friends. Gideon scanned the room, but there was no sign of her. Realizing he didn't even know if Rune had followed them in, he stopped walking.

“Is everything all right?” asked Abbie.

“I...” He turned in a circle, scanning the walls, the tables, the dancers. “Have you seen my wife?”

“She seemed friendly with William,” said Abbie. “I’m sure he’s taking care of her.”

There was an edge in her voice. Like she meant something else.

Gideon frowned, remembering the way William had tried to insert himself in Rune’s booth last night, plying her with wine. She was a beautiful girl, sitting alone. Gideon had been under no illusions about what he wanted, even if Rune had.

But Rune was a master of seduction herself. Surely she could see his game.

Right?

Gideon hesitated.

If he was wrong, if Abbie wasn't working for Harrow, then the spy was still at large while Rune wandered through the ship, oblivious to the danger.

He let go of Abbie's hand.

"I'm sorry. I need to find her..."

Before someone else does.

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

TWENTY-TWO

RUNE

"I TOLD YOU IT was warm down here!" William yelled to be heard above the engine's noise. He stepped off the steel catwalk and descended the spiral staircase, leading Rune deeper into the boiler room. The steam from the boilers wafted up to them, moistening Rune's skin as the *SHUNK SHUNK SHUNK* of the engine beat loudly. "Careful not to slip!"

Rune gripped the rail, wanting to put as much distance between herself and Gideon as possible. She and William had left the room where the ship's staff were having an after-work party, and where she had found Gideon taking Abbie's hand and leading her into the dancers.

The sight was like a fist squeezing her heart.

Gideon had called Abbie *an old friend*. So why did it seem like more?

And why did it bother Rune so much?

And why hadn't he asked *her* to dance?

A girl like you wouldn't be caught dead dancing with riffraff, he'd once told her.

How can he know if he never asks me?

Sighing, she turned her attention to William.

"Did you fight alongside them at the New Dawn?" She raised her voice to be heard as they descended. "Ash and Abbie and Gideon, I mean."

He shook his head, helping her down the steps. “I grew up on the Continent. I only met Ash and Abbie here, aboard the *Arcadia*. Though, from all the stories they tell, I sometimes feel like I was there.”

Another question hung from the tip of her tongue, though Rune was afraid to ask it.

She forced it out: “Gideon and Abbie weren’t just friends back then, were they.”

William paused for a second, halfway down, and glanced up into her face. He shook his head.

Rune nodded, lowering her gaze to the next stair, and continued down.

Why would he lie?

But Gideon had lied from the start: pretending to be in love with her to catch the Crimson Moth.

At the bottom, Rune stepped off the staircase to find herself facing a row of black boilers, their glowing red mouths opening and closing as stokers shoveled coal into them.

“Try to stay out of the way,” William said as he pressed his hand to the small of Rune’s back, guiding her past the sweaty, coal-stained men keeping the fires aglow.

The alley between the bulkhead and the boilers was piled with coal at the edges, and overhead ran the steel catwalk they’d walked down only moments ago.

How many levels down are we? she wondered, staring up through the maze of ladders and pipework.

Rune was no stranger to ships—she’d inherited her grandmother’s shipping business. But Nan’s ships were wind powered. Nothing compared to this.

For a moment, she forgot about Gideon and Abbie and the knot in her chest, marveling instead at the activity teeming around her. Here she was, walking through the heart of a massive machine kept afloat by hundreds of thousands of parts, all of which were kept running by people who worked around the clock.

She’d never felt so small and insignificant.

“Incredible, isn’t it?” William yelled as they walked.

She gave him a smile, even as she began to worry. Because beneath her silk gloves, Rune’s hands had started to sweat.

She needed to be careful. There was a spellmark drawn in blood on her thigh, keeping her disguised. If her skin grew too damp, the mark could smudge and the illusion would evaporate, leaving her exposed.

Rune couldn't stay down here long.

"What else is down here?" she asked.

"There's a cargo hold on this level," said William, ducking out of the way of the fire stokers. "It's on the far side of the boilers."

A cargo hold.

Rune tried to contain her excitement.

It was exactly what she was hoping for. If she could look inside—a long shot, since the ship's holds were likely locked—she could determine if there was room to smuggle a few witches.

“Is it the only one? Or are there others?” Worried that her questions might arouse suspicion, she added: “My grandmother used to own a shipping company. I’m *fascinated* by ships.”

He smiled, indulging her. “There are other holds, but they can only be accessed from outside.”

At the end of the row of boilers, they turned to enter a small walkway leading to the next stokehold.

A trickle of sweat ran down Rune’s spine. She needed to get out of here, and soon.

“When do they load them?” It was one thing she’d need to know: when staff entered and exited the holds.

“A few hours before departure. They seal them after the witch-hunting hounds check the luggage.”

Rune frowned. “Seal them as in ... lock them? With a key?”

“Seal them with hatches,” he said. “Which are bolted and caulked.”

Well. *That* was unfortunate. Rune could unlock a door with magic, but she couldn't unbolt a hatch without people noticing.

"The hold on this level is only used for coal and ship supplies, though. So it isn't bolted." To Rune's surprise, he took her hand and tucked it into the crook of his elbow. "Should we investigate? Or would you rather return to your husband?"

His thumb grazed her knuckles. Surprised by the intimate gesture, Rune glanced up to find his eyes asking a wordless question.

Trust me. Gideon's voice echoed in her mind. *I'm a man. I know what he wants.*

Was Gideon right? Had William brought her down here to seduce her?

Rune stared at his hand on hers, feeling uneasy.

But if it got her into the cargo hold ...

I might not get another chance to investigate.

What other choice did she have? If she wanted to smuggle witches aboard the *Arcadia*, she needed to see inside that cargo hold. To do that, she needed to play along.

It wouldn't be hard; this was a game she excelled at.

Rune looked up at him through her eyelashes. "I'm sure my husband doesn't even know I'm gone."

The corner of William's mouth lifted. "Then let's—"

Behind them, a voice roared like thunder. Louder than the engine's noise.

"What the *hell* do you think you're doing with my wife?"

William flinched.

Rune spun to find Gideon materializing from the steam, storming toward them. His massive frame filled the narrow alley, and his eyes were black with rage.

Gideon lunged for William, grabbing the lapels of his jacket and shoving him up against the bulkhead wall. William winced at the impact.

“Stop!” Rune grabbed Gideon’s arm before he did further damage. “He was only—”

“And *you*.” Without letting go of William, Gideon threw her a dark look. “What were you thinking? Coming down here alone? With *him*?”

I warned you about this guy was the furious accusation.

But what right did he have to be angry? Rune wasn’t his actual wife. He’d made it clear the very idea of being married to her appalled him.

And he’d been flirting with Abbie all evening.

The latter made her hands clench.

“Do you have to be such a brute?” Rune took William’s arm and pulled him from Gideon’s grasp. “What’s wrong with you? He’s just giving me a tour.”

“It’s true,” said William, innocently lifting his hands. “I’ll bring her right back when we’re done. I promise.”

“You’re not bringing her anywhere.” Gideon’s hands were fists at his sides, mirroring Rune’s. “She’s coming back with me.”

Rune crossed her arms. “I’m not going anywhere with a man who behaves as abhorrently as you do.”

“As your *husband*, I insist.” He prowled toward her, reaching for her.

“Insist all you like,” said Rune, twirling out of his grip. “I’m refusing.”

He was standing over her now. Head bent. Inches away. His gaze bored into hers as they seethed at each other. “Listen, you demon: I will carry you out of here if I have to, and you know it.”

“That’s precisely my point!”

William cleared his throat. “I really don’t think this is—”

Gideon tore his gaze from Rune to glare at the man beside them. “Get the fuck out of here. Before I throw you into something worse than a wall.”

Rune rolled her eyes.

But she looked to William. “Go. I’ll be up in a minute.”

Gideon watched him leave. Only when William disappeared into the steam did he turn his rage back on Rune.

The heat of it burned her.

“Are you out of your magic-addled mind? What are you doing down here?” He glanced around them, taking in their surroundings as if for the first time. “I told you not to trust that...”

His eyes narrowed as some realization dawned on him.

“Merciful Ancients. This is part of your plan, isn’t it? You’re going to use the *Arcadia* to smuggle your witches out of the Republic. *That’s* why you’re down here.”

Rune’s heart fell. Was she so transparent?

To him? Apparently yes.

“You’re unbelievable.” Gideon stepped back, running a hand roughly through his hair. “Here I was, thinking he was trying to take advantage of you. But it’s the other way around, isn’t it? *You* lured him here to use for your own purposes.”

Okay, *that* was too far.

Rune hugged herself, trying to shield herself from his anger. “Yes, Gideon. That’s me: a *grand seductress*.”

She’d had quite enough of this conversation. Moving to go around him, Rune started to follow William back to the party.

He stepped in front of her, blocking her way through the narrow alley. “You say that as if it isn’t true.”

A wave of anger swept through her. She wanted to shove him, but any amount of force she used wouldn’t budge him. It would only make her look pathetic.

“Let me pass!”

This time when he reached for her, Rune wasn't fast enough to evade. He pulled her in close, his grip firm on her wrist. "I was *worried* about you. Afraid you were falling prey to some cad, when I should have known better." His gaze flickered over her face. "The Crimson Moth only ever pretends to be prey. In truth, she's the predator."

The words stung. But of course this was how he viewed her. Rune wasn't someone doing whatever she needed to do to survive people like him. To Gideon, Rune was a cruel witch. A dangerous temptress. A master manipulator.

Just like Cressida.

His voice was low. Rough. "You've made a fool of me yet again."

Caught in his grip, Rune gave up trying to pull free and glanced away, no longer able to meet his gaze. It didn't matter that it wasn't true—that it was William who brought her down here. Gideon would see what he wanted to see.

He stepped closer, taking up all the air. Raising her already sweltering temperature.

"Do you have nothing to say for yourself, Rune?"

Why did something so simple—him saying her name—threaten to shatter her into a million pieces? She hated his effect on her. She wished she could reverse it. Wished he felt half as agonized as she did.

“Did I wound your pride, Captain Sharpe?” she said, hoping to sting him the way he had stung her. “It wasn’t personal. As you said: I use everyone.”

She tried to tug her wrist free. But his grip held her fast.

“Sometimes I think I could forgive you for that—using me, to save your precious witches. I could understand it. But the thing I can’t forgive, the thing I will never understand, is how you could make me fall for you when all along you were in love with my brother.”

Rune glanced up into his eyes. His gaze was intense. A tempest of feeling. It wasn’t the first time he’d accused her of such a thing. This time, trapped as she was with him, Rune couldn’t let it go unchallenged.

“It wasn’t like that.”

“You’re still wearing his ring!”

The anger radiated off him. It surprised Rune, who felt him holding the worst of it back. And deeper than the anger: hurt. *Real* hurt.

Rune frowned, confused by it. You couldn't hurt someone who didn't care about you ... right? And Gideon didn't care about Rune—not the real Rune. Not the witch.

His free hand lifted, as if to touch her, then clenched instead, returning to his side. “I hate your damned lies.”

Her lies? What about *his* lies?

“You want the truth?” Her own hurt bubbled up, like steam from a volcano ready to erupt. “*This* is the truth: I would have married you in a heartbeat, had you asked me. I would have married you *knowing* you would hand me over to my killers—or kill me yourself—the moment you found out what I was. That’s how pathetic I am, Gideon! That’s how desperately I wanted to be yours!”

His brow creased as his eyes searched her face. “Then why say yes to my brother?”

“Because he loved me! Because he didn’t want me dead! It was the best offer I was ever going to get!”

This time, when she tried to yank herself free, Gideon let go. She stumbled back several steps, glancing down at her gloved hand. The one bearing Alex’s ring.

She'd been afraid to take it off. As if removing it would dishonor him.

I wish it was yours, she wanted to say to Gideon. *I wish you'd given it to me.*

But saying so would be a profound betrayal of Alex.

"I loved your brother," she said instead. "But only as a friend. A dear friend. Maybe it could have become more, eventually. And maybe that wasn't fair to him. But..."

She felt guilty for thinking it, but sometimes she wondered if Alex had been in love with a version of Rune that didn't exist.

I know the Crimson Moth. And she is no caged thing.

That's what Alex had gotten wrong: he wanted to give Rune a quiet, comfortable life. And for a moment, Rune had thought she wanted that. But deep down, she knew the peaceful future she might have had with Alex would never have satisfied. Not completely.

There was a part of Rune's soul—most of it, maybe—that yearned for adventure. That craved a challenge. That liked a little danger.

For better or worse, Rune needed these things to feel alive. In wanting her to live a safe, easy life, Alex was—without realizing it—wanting Rune to be *less herself*.

She tugged off her glove. Sliding the ring from her finger, she walked toward Gideon, grabbed his hand, and pressed the silver band into his palm. The moment his fingers closed around it, relief flooded her. Like a burden lifted.

“I was just a girl to Alex.” She stepped away, pulling her glove back on. “Someone to be loved and cherished and fought for. That’s why I said yes to him.”

The nerve in Gideon’s jaw ticked.

“I’m not a girl to you, am I? I’m a witch, and always will be. Something to be hated and hunted down. Not cherished or protected. Not *loved*.”

Rune waited for him to deny it. To contradict her.

But he only stood there, silent and stoic. Confirming what she already knew.

I am such a fool.

Stepping around him, Rune ran for the stairs.

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TWENTY-THREE

GIDEON

RUNE WAS RIGHT ABOUT one thing: she wasn't just a girl. Not to him.

She was so much more than that.

Rune was a sparring partner. Someone to fight with, and admire. Someone to *match*.

Rune was a force. One Gideon could barely keep up with.

He wanted to go after her and tell her as much. The problem was ... well. There were a lot of problems.

Gideon lifted his fist, opening it to reveal the ring lying on his palm. His mother's wedding band.

I would have married you in a heartbeat, had you asked me.

Ancients help him.

He wanted it to be true, but it didn't make sense. Even if he weren't a witch hunter, even if they weren't sworn enemies, Gideon had nothing to offer Rune. He was a soldier; she was an heiress. She was *nobility*.

And she's deceived me in the past.

Rune could easily be deceiving him now. The last time he'd believed her, her lies had burned him badly.

And if she isn't lying?

He ran a hand across his forehead.

Did it change anything?

Did it change *everything*?

In the heat of the boilers, Gideon loosened his collar and rolled back his sleeves, trying to think. Going through all the reasons he had to mistrust her. Hate her, even.

She deceived me by hiding her identity as the Crimson Moth.

But Gideon could hardly fault her for it. He would have done the same, if their positions were reversed.

And Gideon had deceived her right back.

She betrothed herself to Alex.

Because Alex didn't hate what she was. Because being with Gideon would have been a death sentence. He had made that clear the moment he handed her over to be purged.

She helped Cressida rise.

Except, according to Rune, she hadn't known her friend Verity was really the witch queen in disguise. Was she lying? Possibly. But Gideon knew Cressida all too well—and she was certainly more than capable of this.

The evidence he'd held against her was toppling like a house of cards.

So, what was left?

Even if Rune loathes Cressida, she has reasons for supporting her.

Cressida would restore a world where witches like Rune would no longer be hunted. She had every reason to want a new Reign of Witches. She could be secretly working for Cressida and lying to Gideon through her teeth.

What if Rune and Cress had struck a deal? What if, once Cressida had her throne, her resurrected sisters, and the island under her control, she disposed of Soren, eliminating Rune's need to marry him? This whole thing might be an elaborate ruse.

I would have married you in a heartbeat, had you asked me. That's how desperately I wanted to be yours.

He thought of Rune in the steam, eyes bright, face flushed, hair coming undone. He'd wanted nothing more than to take her in his arms and kiss her. To tell her with his mouth and hands what he couldn't say with his words.

Gideon gritted his teeth. Pressed his fists against the wall.

No.

Loving Rune was what had allowed her to dupe him the first time. If he didn't eradicate this naive desire to believe her—to believe she loved him, to believe he could ever be worthy of her—he would never stop Cressida from bringing evil back to power in the New Republic.

He and Rune were enemies at war. Rune was the key to destroying Cressida, and Cressida had to be destroyed. He needed her as a hostage, to bargain with. He needed to stick to his plan. Nothing more.

He couldn't let Rune weaken him again.

Even if he wanted her to.

ANNOYANCE PRICKLED GIDEON AS he neared the party. The fiddlers' joyful, driving beat and the rowdy, grinning dancers were at odds with his dark mood. They made his teeth clench. For a second, Gideon contemplated returning to their cabin instead of rejoining the revelry.

But there was still a spy running loose. And he needed to find them before they found him—or, worse, Rune.

So he stepped into the room.

Gideon saw her immediately. Like a compass that would always find north. The moment his eyes landed on Rune, she glanced up from the center of the crowd, where she danced with a young man in suspenders.

In a flash, Gideon remembered her drunk and weeping in the powder room, a hollow look haunting her gray eyes. She was neither drunk nor weeping now, yet the look in her eyes was the same.

Gideon was caught in the snare of her gaze. Rune's eyes always reminded him of a storm. Like thunder and lightning, mingled together.

Except ...

Wait.

A moment ago, her eyes had been blue, her hair the color of wheat.

Now her eyes were gray, and her hair was returning to its natural strawberry blonde.

Her spell was wearing off. And she had no idea.

Gideon recalled the police officers knocking on doors, showing every passenger aboard this ship a locket with Rune's likeness.

Anyone in this room could recognize her.

Gideon surged toward her, cutting through the dancers, getting jostled and bumped and sworn at.

"Excuse me," he said when he arrived, cutting in. "I need to borrow my girl."

The young man started to protest, took one look at Gideon, and stepped away with a gesture that said, *All yours*.

"What are you doing?" said Rune.

Gideon ran his fingers through her hair.

“Your illusion...”

Rune glanced at his hand, where the rose-gold strands sifted across his palm. Her face paled.

He slid his fingers through her gloved ones. They needed to get her out of here before someone noticed.

Unless someone already has ...

Gideon glanced around the room, spotting Ash and William and the rest of Abbie’s friends engrossed in a game around a card table. Abbie wasn’t with them.

Where is she?

He kept scanning, tugging Rune toward the exit. But when his attention fixed on the door, his steps halted.

Rune froze behind him.

The same officers who'd interrogated every passenger on the ship, asking if they recognized Rune's face, were currently stepping into the room.

Shit.

Gideon turned to Rune, cutting her off from their view.

"I can't recast it with so many people around." Rune's grip tightened on his hand as she pulled him back into the chaos of whirling dancers.

He nodded, his thoughts buzzing, trying to come up with a plan. He scanned the room again, searching for a different exit and finding none.

"They've split up," said Rune, staring over his shoulder.

Not good.

Gideon couldn't keep himself positioned between them both and Rune. His gaze snagged on a dark corner across the room. If he could get her to it, she could recast the spell there.

The song ended.

Breathless and laughing, the dancers stopped dancing and their swirling skirts came to a standstill. They began to scatter and disperse, leaving Rune and Gideon exposed.

They had seconds before she was seen and recognized by the officers. Once that happened, Gideon would be arrested. The ship would turn around. He'd be delivered straight to a Caelisian prison—or, more likely, to Cressida.

More importantly, Rune would be exposed to the spy sent to kill her. A spy she didn't even know was hunting her.

Somehow, Gideon needed to make everyone in this room believe they weren't seeing Rune Winters, the kidnapped witch from Caelis, and her captor—a witch hunter who wanted her dead. He needed to make them see nothing but a couple of newlyweds.

Rune's head turned, her gaze flickering between the officers. "Gideon..."

Fuck it.

Taking Rune's face in his hands, drawing her gaze to his, Gideon did what he'd wanted to do for days now. Ever since he found her crying in that powder room.

He slid his hands into her hair and kissed her.

Rune tensed, like a deer in a hunter's crosshairs.

Don't fight me, baby.

He ran his thumb along her jaw to soothe her. He needed her to help him make this look real. At least until the next song started and they could escape to the shadows.

Either his stroking worked, or Rune figured it out, because she relaxed. Then kissed back, her lips parting beneath his.

It was as if the betrayal of the past few months never happened.

Gideon suddenly couldn't understand why they'd stopped doing this.

He missed her hair in his hands. Missed her warm, sweet mouth. Missed the way she melted like butter beneath his touch. His entire being ached for her. Every touch of her

lips, every press of her body, sent him closer to a deadly fire. One that had burned him before, and, he suspected, would burn him again.

Hooking her arms around his neck, Rune arched against him. Telling him how very mutual this feeling was. That he wasn't alone in his wanting.

If this was weakness, he wanted to be weak.

If this was sin, let him be damned to hell.

Kissing Rune was like a realignment. There was before, when everything was off its axis. And there was after, when everything was steady and *right*.

When the next song started, Gideon used the crowd as cover to guide her backward, kissing her as he moved through the dancers, toward that dark corner, and pressing her up against the wall.

She was hidden here, in the darkness. He needed to step away and let her recast the spell.

Instead, he tipped her head back and kissed her harder.

Is this real? his mouth asked. *Can I trust you?*

But if Rune's mouth had an answer, he couldn't decipher it.

Their fervent hands slid over each other, as if they'd both completely lost control. The things that he wanted to do with her ...

He wanted to take her back to their cabin.

Wanted to lay her down in their bed.

Wanted to ...

PAIN exploded inside him. Hot and sharp and excruciating. Starting in his scar, it ricocheted outward like a detonated bomb.

Gideon gasped for air.

I need to ensure you're mine. Cressida's voice echoed, like a nightmare shattering a dream. *Mine alone.*

TWENTY-FOUR

GIDEON

THE SCENT OF CRESSIDA'S magic burned in the air. Vividly, he remembered her pulling the brand from the fire and searing his flesh with it; remembered her activating the curse hidden inside his skin.

Gideon's eyes flew open.

It wasn't Rune pushed up against the wall beneath his palms; it was Cressida. Cressida's lips swollen from his kisses; Cressida's hair a mess from his hands.

He recoiled, yanking himself away from her. His heart pounded in his throat as he shuddered. He nearly reached for the gun tucked into his belt but stopped himself just in time.

Because the moment he severed contact, the pain receded, and with it, the girl who'd abused him.

He blinked, and it was Rune standing before him again, her illusion entirely gone. Her lips parted in shock. Her gray eyes filled with hurt.

But was it true? For a second, he didn't know. *Could* it be Cressida standing before him? It wouldn't be the first time she'd stolen a girl's identity.

Rune pushed past him, disappearing into the crowd.

No. He ran a shaky hand through his hair, coming to his senses. Cressida and Rune were impossible to confuse. They were as different as poison and its antidote.

Gideon would *know*. Of that, he was certain.

Remembering the spy in their midst, he went after Rune, but quickly lost her in the fray. When he came out the other side, he scanned the room. The only sign of her was the faintest whiff of magic. It was a scent he recognized now: like a breeze rolling in off the sea.

Rune's magic.

He made for the hall, but it was empty.

His brand throbbed. His whole body trembled from the shock of pain. He rubbed at the aching scar through his shirt, trying to remember Cressida's words.

I left something here, the day I branded you. A spell I intended to activate long before now, but never got the chance.

Gideon recalled the times he'd touched Rune since then. Grabbing her gloved hand. Unlacing her dress. Taking off her shoes.

It was never skin-to-skin contact ... until tonight.

Tonight, he'd cupped her face. Run his fingers over her jaw. Kissed her mouth.

Suddenly he knew what Cressida's curse did.

And he'd never hated her more.

Rebel Witch: The Crimson Moth: Book 2

TWENTY-FIVE

RUNE

RUNE CROUCHED UNDER AN abandoned card table across the room, her heart pounding wildly, her face glowing with heat. A crimson moth signature fluttered in the air next to her head, the only trace of her *Ghost Walker* spell.

She watched Gideon push through dancers and card players, searching for her. She couldn't see the police officers but assumed they were still in the room. So long as no one looked under the tables, she was safe. She only hoped her spell wouldn't fade before the staff put them away at the end of the night.

That kiss ...

It had started as a way to shore up their facade, but quickly descended into more. Rune had lost control of herself, overcome.

The things he did to her, just by touching her ...

Briefly, she'd thought it was the same for Gideon. That he craved her the way she craved him. But then something changed. While Rune softened, Gideon stiffened. It was unmistakable. *Undeniable*. Gideon had pulled away in disgust—she'd seen it plain on his face.

Because I'm a witch.

And though he might be attracted to her, the moment he'd remembered what she was, he couldn't override his revulsion. It didn't matter how much he might like kissing her; she repulsed him.

Of all the boys in the world, why did she have to fall in love with the one who could never, ever love her back?

Why couldn't she shoot these feelings dead?

From her hiding spot, she watched Gideon stride into the hall. The moment he was gone, she breathed a little easier.

Until Abbie followed him out.

Rune's eyes tracked the girl. Knowing now the two old friends had been anything but, her chest tightened. From their inability to stay away from each other, she concluded that one or both wanted to be more than friends again.

Rune closed her eyes. She might not be able to kill off these feelings. But she could run from them.

So that's what she did.

Crawling out from beneath the card table, she crept through the boisterous room, unseen. She would head for the boiler rooms and finish what she'd started. This time without Gideon stopping her.