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KINGDOM OF THE FEARED

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HODDER &
STOUGHTON



TWENTY YEARS BEFORE

Coven elders seldom agreed on anything, save for two matters considered to be their highest of laws: The devil should never be summoned. And, under no circumstance, were black mirrors ever to be used for scrying.

As one of the best seers on the island, Sofia Santorini believed some rules were meant to be broken, especially when her newest visions kept whispering troubling tales in her ear. It was those insistent murmurs about the dangerous prophecy connected to their curse that finally convinced Sofia to steal the first book of spells: the only grimoire that outlined how to scry with dark magic. The fate of the coven might very well depend on her actions, sanctioned or not.

Though, at the last meeting, the council hadn't sounded *quite* so grim. They didn't need to. Sofia had sensed the shift of magic the way birds felt the turning of the season, listening to that innate warning to fly away, to survive. A violent storm was

gathering on the horizon. She had no wings, and even if she did, Sofia refused to flee without her family.

Breaking two rules to potentially save dozens of witches seemed like the right thing to do. Any information Sofia could gather about the curse before either the Wicked or the Feared took their revenge would only benefit their coven. Surely the elders would understand.

Placing the black mirror on the floor in Death's temple along with the foil-stamped spell book, she gathered her skirts and knelt before the objects. A shudder went through her that had nothing to do with the cold stone seeping through her thin muslin layers. She stared into the forbidden mirror, its inky surface reminding her of the still waters of a lake she'd once visited to collect fresh-water stones for her spells.

Except this surface didn't have any soothing moonlight shining overhead, blessing her path. In fact, it seemed to devour any light that dared to touch it. Any manner of demon might be lurking below the unknown depths, waiting to strike.

She exhaled the fear away. It was time to do what she'd come to do, then go home to her family. Removing the slim dagger from her skirt pocket, she held the point to her fingertip and pressed until a bead of blood welled up, red as the devil's eyes.

Rising back to her feet, Sofia walked to the altar in the center of the room. One didn't perform magic in a goddess's temple without first paying tribute.

On either side of the altar, fire crackled in the offering bowls she'd lit earlier, the tendrils of smoke curling through the air, as if beckoning her to step into the underworld. She swore she felt eyes on her, watching from the shadows, waiting to see if she was bold enough to cross that forbidden boundary. Sofia's gaze swept around the quiet

chamber, falling on the two human skulls she'd stolen from the monastery. Dark days called for even darker deeds. She'd not falter now.

Holding her pricked finger over the first of the two offering bowls, she watched blood droplets sizzle then steam as they met the flames. Sofia quickly moved to the other side of the altar and repeated the gesture with the second bowl.

Satisfied she'd paid enough for the goddess to grant protection, she turned and retrieved the skulls, ignoring the bloody fingerprint she left on the bone. Kneeling once again, skulls placed on the north and south points of the mirror, she opened the spell book and began chanting.

For a few tense beats, the mirror remained unchanged. Then smoke started swirling within its surface. Slowly at first, then picking up speed like the hell winds she'd heard gusted through some demon circles, confusing the poor souls unlucky enough to find themselves there.

"Goddess, protect me."

Sofia leaned closer to the mirror, anxious to learn all she could about their enemies. Any information might prove valuable, especially since all their memories were slowly being consumed by the curse with each passing full moon. While she stared at the mirror, a window to the underworld cracked open, giving Sofia her first glimpse of the demon realm.

"Show me how to break our curse."

The mirror pulsed as if the magic acknowledged her request and agreed to grant her wish. In place of the smoke, strange images began flickering over the darkened glass, and Sofia quickly realized she was being shown a story through a series of still pictures. She let out a quiet breath. Thus far, despite the forbidden magic she'd used, it was similar to her usual visions.

The magic propelled the images to leave the mirror and swirl around her as if she were standing there the moment they happened. She saw a dark throne room, a furious demon.

Bits and pieces of the familiar appeared, but the magic must not have been working. Certain images weren't aligning with their history or what Sofia knew of the prophecy. She watched as a witch, who must be the First Witch, cursed that demon. Her vengeance and hate were so powerful Sofia could practically *feel* it through the illusion.

Next she saw a strange well with crystals—memory stones, thousands of them. The scene abruptly shifted again, this time to a small cottage overlooking the sea. A young witch—one she knew well—gripped a memory stone in one hand and a dagger in the other. The First Witch had been there, too, handing the witch the stone that would take away whatever she wished to forget. The images faded, needing more magic to fuel them.

"Wait!" Sofia cried out.

Desperate to learn more, she gripped the skull resting on the south point and whispered a spell that made it shatter, scattering bone shards across the dark surface, hoping the mirror would use them to fuel more images. And it did. Except once more they weren't quite what she'd expected. Sophia saw her island, then flickers of other unfamiliar cities and times bleeding in and taking over. The images had to be wrong.

Yet...if they weren't, then everything the coven elders had told them had been a lie. Including where they were from.

It was so preposterous; there was no way that could be true. Determined to figure out the mystery, she reached for the last skull. This one had rubies in its eyes, an added gift for the goddess who ruled over the dead. Sofia shattered the skull and was

immediately thrust into another time, one where that same young witch from earlier appeared to be... a rough hand came down on Sophia's shoulder, shaking her from the vision.

Heart thundering, Sofia blinked until Death's temple came back into focus. Fearful of what—or who—had torn her from the vision, she snatched her dagger and shot to her feet, her attention landing on the person who'd interrupted. The robed figure tossed back the hood on her cloak, revealing a familiar, stern face.

Sofia's shoulders slumped forward as she lowered the blade. For one frightening moment, she thought she'd summoned an enemy. "Thank the goddess it's you. I've learned something incredible about our curse and our city. I know who the First Witch's daughter is, at least I think I do. You'll never believe this discovery."

Sofia was too full of dark magic, too shaken by the truth she'd learned, to notice the dangerous gleam entering the other witch's eyes. "Neither will you."

"I don't understand—"

With a flick of her wrist and a harsh curse, the witch cast a spell that knocked Sofia backward. Her skull cracked against the altar, causing her to see a bright flash of stars that left her momentarily stunned. Before she could gather her wits and utter a protection spell of her own, Sofia's mind fragmented just like the mirror the other witch stomped on, destroying the truth still playing across its dark surface.

Sofia opened her mouth to scream but found herself unable to do more than speak in tongues. Soon all she could see were those strange images the mirror had shown her.

If she'd been about to call for help again, Sofia couldn't remember why.

She stared, not truly seeing, as the other witch retrieved the first book of spells and slowly made her way through the temple, never once glancing back at her friend. All the while Sofia quietly repeated one phrase, a chant, a benediction, a plea.

Or perhaps it was the key to unlocking everything...

"As above, so below."



ONE

All at once, candles flared to life around the Prince of Wrath's bedchamber.

Despite my best efforts to not grin at the demon, my traitorous lips curved upward on their own. Tracking the small action from where he stood on the balcony, the prince's attention moved to my mouth and remained there a beat longer than necessary.

His heated stare coaxed a different kind of warmth to spread over me just as gold-tipped flames erupted in the fireplace, sizzling and crackling like mad.

It was a welcome feeling, especially after the coldness that had swept in earlier and settled in my bones. Seeing my sister in the Triple Moon Mirror broke something vital in me.

Something I refused to examine at the moment.

Lingering near Wrath's bed, tunic now discarded at my feet, I knew it wasn't his namesake sin that had the fires blazing in his private chamber. It was the desire he was struggling to control; the passion I'd ignited when I chose him—knowing *exactly* who

he was—and still agreed to become his wicked queen. Since he'd already stolen my soul, I was now offering him my body. Without games or magical bonds urging us together. Without focusing on Vittoria and the way my heart ached each time I thought of my twin's deception.

My eyes prickled with unshed tears just thinking of my sister now, and I tried desperately to rein in my emotions. Wrath would sense my hurt, and it was a conversation I didn't wish to have. That sorrow could wait until I met my twin on the mysterious Shifting Isles tomorrow and heard what she had to say.

Until then, I didn't want to spend another minute wondering why she'd faked her death. Or how she could hurt me so horribly for so long. I'd already given Vittoria months of my tears and fury while on my path to avenge her.

Tonight I simply wanted Wrath. Samael. King of demons. Most feared of the seven immortal princes of Hell. General of War and the literal devil. Temptation and sin made flesh. A nightmare to some, but to me he currently looked like a dream. And if the cursed demon didn't crawl between the sheets with me this instant, I'd unleash a bit of hell myself.

"Are you going to stand out there all night, your majesty?" I arched a brow, but Wrath's solitary response was a slight narrowing of his golden-eyed gaze. Stubborn, untrusting creature. Only he would question why I stood in a state of undress before his bed and not simply unleash his baser, carnal urges like I desired. "If you require further proof of my decision..."

"Emilia."

The way he said only my name made me brace myself for disappointment. His tone indicated we needed to talk, and talking was the absolute worst thing I could imagine right now. Talking

would lead to tears, and that would force me to confront just how deeply seeing Vittoria earlier had affected me. I'd much rather lose myself in Wrath's addictive kisses.

"Please don't," I said, quietly. "I'm fine. Truly."

The demon looked apprehensive, unconvinced. He'd once told me to want but never need, but tonight I felt both strongly, and I didn't care if that made me weak. I prayed he wouldn't send me to my own bedroom suite alone. I couldn't bear the solitude. I needed comfort, a connection. Some bit of peace only he could give me right now.

Just then, the sheer curtains separating his bedchamber from the balcony fluttered in the wintry breeze, enticing him to join his half-naked queen. It was as if the realm itself wanted us to finally be united. With softly flickering candles and midnight fabrics, the bedchamber exuded quiet sensuality. It was a room made for all sorts of whispers: the ones where words were spoken tenderly, reverently against lips, and the whispers of clothing sliding slowly over skin.

Two things I wished to experience with this prince at once.

By his own admission, Wrath believed in the power of actions over words. And with that reminder, I made my move. He remained motionless outside, watching me bend over and shuck off my boots. I couldn't tell if he'd picked up on my emotions about Vittoria and misinterpreted them or if he still didn't trust that I wanted to complete the next step in accepting our marriage.

Sleeping together was one of the two final acts needed for us to become husband and wife. We could certainly have sex and not be married, but I *wanted* to complete our bond.

Given how we'd first met—my summoning of him in Palermo, then accidentally binding him to me for eternity—and how we'd both vowed to hate each other and never so much as kiss, I understood if that was the source of his trepidation.

Several months ago, I would have claimed tonight an improbability, too. That was before I acknowledged there was more to our story. That I burned for him as fiercely as the fiery rose-gold flowers I could summon from my fingertips at will. Another thing I would have thought impossible, and one more mystery for me to solve along with the truth of who I actually was. But all that could wait. The only thing I wanted to think of now was claiming my demon king.

Snowflakes started falling around him, lightly dusting his dark hair and broad shoulders, yet he didn't appear to notice. The harsh elements of this winter realm never seemed to bother him, though that was probably because he was a force of nature to be reckoned with himself.

I held his intense gaze as I shimmied the tight breeches over my hips and stepped out of them, tossing them on top of the tunic. Wrath's breathing all but stopped when he noticed I hadn't been wearing undergarments. Fists clenched at his sides, his knuckles went bone white from the strain. Not exactly the reaction I'd hoped for upon disrobing.

Brow furrowed, I silently replayed our exchange, carefully recalling each word. After tricking me into a blood bargain with him—to ensure none of his brothers took advantage of me when I first crossed into the underworld—I'd asked if he still considered me his.

Now, while rigidly standing outside in the snow, not making a move to follow me into his very warm and inviting bedchamber, I worried I'd misunderstood him. He'd said only that he didn't require time to think it over. Which, technically, didn't mean he considered me *his*.

“Have you changed your mind?” I asked.

Wrath scanned my face, his own expression closed off. "You willingly choose me. Knowing who I am. What I'm capable of."

They weren't questions, but I nodded in affirmation. "Yes."

"And this decision has nothing to do with your sister?"

He watched me carefully, and I knew he was trying to sense even the slightest shift in my emotions. Wrath would not take me to his bed if he believed any force aside from my own desire was driving me there. For one of the first times since we'd met, I offered him nothing but truth. If we had any hope of moving forward together, the games between us needed to end.

"I wanted you that night at Gluttony's party. And before that... do you remember when you magically removed the intoxication from me while we trained against his sin? I wanted you to take me then, too. Those times were both well before I saw Vittoria." I forced myself to hold his gaze, to prove to him how serious I was. "And I realized tonight that throughout everything, you've always been there for me. Your methods might not have always been ideal by mortal standards, but everything you've done has been to help me. I want *you*, and it has nothing to do with anyone else."

After a long pause that had me tensing for rejection, he finally prowled from the balcony into his bedchamber, slowly closing the distance between us. His attention meandered from my eyes to my lips before it dipped lower to take in my body.

A knee-clenching savagery entered his gaze while he mentally devoured me inch by brutal inch, pausing on that throbbing place between my thighs that suddenly ached for him. A low growl rumbled in his chest, confirming he sensed my desire.

I sincerely hoped he allowed whatever beast *that* was to break free tonight. I wanted to experience every wicked and deviant thing he'd just dreamed up.

He flashed a grin born of sinful promise, indicating he was more than willing to deliver.

Even with the chill clinging to him from the storm, I felt anything but cold as he neared. Between his scorching stare and the way he silently traced each of my curves as if plotting all the things he was about to do . . . it was almost enough to melt me right then and there.

“Tell me every dark desire, Emilia”—he tilted my face up—“every fantasy you wish to come true.” His fingers lightly stroked the pulse point at my throat before he brought his mouth to mine, the kiss a mere brush of his lips that left me breathless and wanting. He pulled back and slowly ran his hands down my silhouette. “And I vow to make every one of them happen.”

My focus roved over the expanse of fine clothes and the hard body hidden underneath them. “I have quite a few ideas.”

The new look he gave me indicated he had some interesting ideas of his own.

We might argue elsewhere, but in this we were blessedly united. I pulled him in for another kiss, wanting to cherish this moment for eternity. Soon the sweet kiss turned ravenous, neither one of us content with being slow or delicate anymore. We were beings fueled by rage, by passion. And I wanted our first joining to be as explosive as our tempers.

If Wrath wished to give me every dark desire I’d ever had, I hoped he was prepared to keep up. I nipped his lower lip, and with a growl of approval, he responded in kind.

Wrath quickly deemed war on my mouth and battled like the general he was, taking no prisoners. There was ownership in this kiss, possession. And I gave it right back. He was *mine*. Every

inch of his wicked soul, every steady thump of his heart, belonged to me.

His hands caressed my body, and a honeyed heat pooled low in my belly, spreading with each glorious pass of his calloused fingers. Of all the times for him to be fully dressed...

I yanked his suit jacket off, then tugged at the edge of his shirt before ripping it apart, needing to see him, *feel* him, skin to skin.

He broke away from our kiss, his mouth lifting in amusement. "Boring as virtues normally are, patience might prove worthwhile right now."

"In this instance, I hoped you were more skilled with sin. If I recall, you once asked if I'd like to see how very wicked you could be." I ran my attention over him, hiding my smile as his eyes flashed. "Is this truly your best?"

"Are you challenging me?"

I lifted a shoulder, knowing exactly what I was doing and enjoying the reaction it sparked in him. Given the bulge in his trousers, he didn't appear to mind, either. Twisted demon. "And if I am, what will you do then?" I asked.

"Get on the bed, my lady."

His voice was soft, but there was nothing meek in the command. I boldly stepped backward until I reached the bed and leaned against it, fingers sinking into the ebony throw placed tastefully on its edge. Once, I'd imagined what the fur would feel like on my bare skin.

I was about to find out.

Wrath jerked his chin, indicating he wanted me *all* the way on the bed, not simply perched against it. Heart thumping in anticipation, I lifted myself up and slid across the oversized mattress,