

Kingdom of the Feared (Kingdom of the Wicked 3)

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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 freshwater 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...

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"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, biting back a moan as the soft fur quickly gave way to his cool silk sheets. It felt better than I'd imagined. Luxury and decadence mixed with something a bit wild and untamable.

Much like the master of this House of Sin.

Wrath unbuttoned his trousers, his gaze locked onto mine. A challenge in its own right to see if I was truly ready for what was to come. His pants hit the ground, and his hard length sprang free, intimidating and tantalizing, and just as eager to claim me.

I bit my lower lip, nearly overcome with want as I drank him in. Goddess above he was glorious. My attention slowly moved from his proud arousal and traveled along the rest of his body. Over six feet of pure muscle with bronze skin that seemed to glow with vitality filled my vision. He was a study of masculine power crossed with rugged beauty.

He stepped forward, and my focus shifted from the metallic snake inked onto his arm to the tattoo on his left thigh—a downward-facing dagger with roses etched onto its surface.

I couldn't quite make out the geometric designs on its hilt, and as Wrath took himself in his tattooed hand and slowly pumped his fist, my mind emptied. The demon gave me a smug look, like he knew exactly what his seductive taunting was doing. Goddess curse him. I wanted to replace his hand with my own. Better yet, I wanted to use my...

... A violent crack split the air like an angry god's whip, and Wrath's bedchamber—along with the demon who owned it—vanished, replaced by an empty, cold room without any light.

It was such a drastic shift, I didn't immediately grasp that it was real. I blinked rapidly, trying to adjust to the sudden dark. Shadows moved around what I sensed was a small space, almost writhing on top of one another in a frenzy.

Goose bumps rose along my arms as the chill in the air turned biting.

This had to be another strange illusion. I'd had a few before but none so vivid. They seemed to be triggered each time Wrath and I engaged in romantic acts, so that was probably the cause of this one now. I cursed the timing of this unwanted intrusion, loathing that someone else's past had taken me away from my delicious

present.

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I went to rub my temples but couldn't move my hands. My attention shot up, noticing a pair of manacles clamped tightly around my wrists. I tugged at them, but they were bolted high up in the ceiling. Chains clanked with each movement, the sound antagonizing my swiftly fraying nerves. Blood and bones. I glanced down. In this vision, I was just as nude as I was in my current reality. Wonderful. I'd left a dream only to enter a common nightmare.

I released a long sigh, my breath coming out in little white clouds, then tensed. How odd. Unlike other illusions, I also seemed to be in control of this one. It wasn't like stepping into a memory or seeing the past from someone else's perspective. My eyes narrowed.

If this wasn't an illusion or a memory...

"What in the seven hells is going on?" The unmistakable sound of a boot scraping over stone had my pulse pounding as a strong pang of fear shot through me. "Wrath?"

Somewhere close by, a match was struck, the hiss preceding the scent of sulfur as it wafted over. A small flame flickered on the far side of the room, though whoever had lit the candle was magically gone. I shook my chains again, yanking as hard as I could, but they didn't give an inch. Unless I ripped my hands off, I wasn't escaping until my abductor set me free.

To stave off rising panic, I squinted through the semidarkness, trying to find some clue of my location or my captor. It was a stone chamber, and I was chained in an alcove of sorts.

In the center of the main room sat an altar carved from the pale stone that made up the walls and floor. Straw and dried herbs littered the ground. It almost reminded me of the monastery back home where my friend Claudia worked on the dead, but not quite.

Thinking of those chambers brought on memories of the invisible mercenary spies who once haunted me there. It felt like forever since I'd encountered an Umbra demon, and I fought a shudder. If I never saw one of those ghastly demons again, I would have lived a good, happy life.

"Whoever's there, show yourself."

I rattled my chains. The echo of metal clanking was the only response I received, though I swore I heard the faint sound of someone breathing nearby. I didn't see any puffs of breath, but I knew that didn't mean I was alone. Wrath would never play this kind of trick on me, especially given what we'd been about to do, which ruled this out as any twisted demon foreplay.

I mustered false bravado. "Even chained you're afraid of speaking with me?"

"Not scared," a deep, accented voice said from the darkness.

My breath caught. I'd heard his voice before but couldn't place where. It wasn't Anir—Wrath's human second-in-command. Nor did it sound like any of the demon prince's brothers. This accent was from my island in the mortal realm. I was certain of that.

“If you’re not scared, then you have no reason to hide from me.”

“I’m awaiting further orders.”

“From whom?” Silence uncomfortably stretched between us. It was hard to feign authority while nude, chained, and speaking to a phantom kidnapper, but I tried anyway. “Whoever your master is will likely be here soon enough. There’s no need for secrecy.”

“You don’t need to worry about me.”

A phrase every murderer and criminal probably uttered to their victims right before they slit their throats, too. I swallowed hard. I needed him to keep talking to figure out who he was, and I’d found that annoying someone made them react, even if they didn’t want to. Wrath and I had used that same tactic on each other over the last few months, and I could kiss him now for the practice.

“Did your master order you to remain in the shadows?”

“No.”

“Hmm. I see.”

“What?”

“You’re simply a pervert who enjoys watching your victims, knowing they can’t see you in return. Tell me, are you touching yourself now? Imagining what my skin feels like while stroking your own? Why don’t you come closer?” And allow me to knee your groin into your lungs. The man materialized in front of me with a look of pure aggravation on his face. Definitely not a demon, but that wasn’t comforting. I drew in a sharp breath.
“Domenico Nucci.”

The young man who sold arancini with his family in Palermo stared at me with vehemence. Deadly looking claws shot out of his fingertips, then retracted, reminding me that he was no more human than I was. I’d almost forgotten that the man I’d thought my twin had been secretly courting was a shape-shifter. Werewolf, to be exact. Temperamental creatures at best, and based on what I remember his father telling me, I’d just provoked a newly shifted one. I had no idea how much control he had over his wolf, but I’d wager not much.

Domenico’s eyes—normally warm brown—glowed an unearthly pale purple as they narrowed on me, confirming my suspicion. He was close to shifting.

I held my breath, waiting for him to deliver a death blow. He seemed on the verge of stepping closer, his jaw clenched from restraint as anger radiated off him like a furious sun. The wolf took several deep breaths, then rolled his shoulders, breaking the mounting tension. With a wave of his half-clawed hand, a few of the shadows broke away from the frenzy and re-formed around me, creating a dressing gown of sorts.

“Where are we?” I asked, ignoring the strangeness of my robe as it settled over my skin. And the fact that the werewolf had magicked it without so much as a whispered spell.

“The Shadow Realm.”

I quietly absorbed the information. Growing up, Nonna Maria taught us about shape-shifters, along with a few other magical creatures. According to my grandmother’s stories, the wolves fought supernatural wars between themselves and demons in the spirit realm, which must be what he meant by Shadow Realm.

I’d always pictured the spirit realm with ghosts walking through walls, haunting and ethereal like they were

depicted in gothic novels. This was very different from my imagination. Domenico was fully corporeal. And I definitely felt the weight of the icy manacles as they bit into my skin. I also felt something I hadn't before—the slight buzz of magic in the metal. These were no ordinary shackles; they were spelled to keep my own powers locked away.

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I sent a subtle prod to my magic's source and, just as I'd suspected, hit a barrier that prevented me from summoning fire.

I had a terrible feeling I knew who his master was and did not want my magic bound for our encounter. I glanced at my captor. I'd never heard of wolves transporting anyone with them to the spirit realm, and until now, I wouldn't have believed it possible, especially for a newly shifted werewolf. Domenico must be immensely powerful. A future alpha in the making.

"Is my physical body still in the Seven Circles?" I asked.

Domenico ran his attention over me, his eyes losing some of that shifter glow. "Yes."

I wasn't sure how that was possible, and the werewolf's glare indicated he wouldn't answer another question about it. Knowing how dangerous he would be if he fully turned into a wolf, I left well enough alone. He'd given me the important information I needed anyway.

My body was still in Wrath's bedchamber, and the demon would undoubtedly be searching for a way to bring me back now. If I couldn't escape on my own, I simply needed to bide my time until he came for my soul and unleashed his power. Anyone foolish enough to attack his bride-to-be in his royal House deserved to feel his namesake sin. I almost grinned, imagining the carnage he'd wreak as he meted out justice, but caught myself.

"It's freezing here."

"Not for me."

I wanted to rub my hands over my arms, forcing warmth back into my nonbody, but couldn't with the chains. Domenico watched me closely, a menacing gleam entering his eyes. One wrong move would have his jaws clamped around my throat, no matter what his orders were. He was far more volatile than the first time I'd met him, though that was probably from the shift. I'd heard young wolves sometimes took years to fully mature.

Unable to tolerate his silent staring, I cleared my throat. "When I saw you in the monastery after Vittoria's 'murder,' I thought you were praying for her. I later discovered you were there because you'd shifted for the first time. Did you really not suspect what you were before then?"

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Do you know what you are, Emilia?"

It didn't escape me he'd saidwhatnotwho. I had my suspicions, but he didn't need to know what they were.

"I know I'm your prisoner. I know Wrath will hunt you down and rip you limb from limb if any harm comes to me." I smiled, a vicious, wicked curve of my lips. The wolf seemed to realize that he might have chained me and bound my magic, but he wasn't the only predator in the chamber. "And there isn't a single realm you can hide in before he finds you. That is, if I don't get to you first. He is the merciful one. Keep that in mind."

"Well, well, sister."

Even though I'd been half-expecting her, hearing my twin's voice caused my heart to clench painfully. My attention shot to the other end of the chamber, landing on Vittoria at once.

My sister glided around the small room like a ghost of the past, wearing a long white gown that flowed behind her as if caught on a phantom breeze. There was a dreamlike quality to her presence, but she was as real as me and Domenico. I carefully looked her over, searching for any injury, though I knew she was the one commanding the werewolf, not the other way around.

Tears pricked my eyes as it all sank in. Vittoria was truly here. Alive. It was hard to believe it had only been an hour or two since I'd learned she wasn't actually dead. Despite her treachery, I wanted to wrap her in my arms and never let go. This was a goddess-blessed miracle.

"Vittoria."

It was barely a whisper, but at the sound of my voice, my twin's lips twitched up in a familiar smirk. If I hadn't been chained, I'd have collapsed to my knees. Seeing her in the Triple Moon Mirror earlier was one thing; having her here, in front of me, was overwhelming. Words failed as my twin circled closer, watching me curiously.

"Let's unchain you and see what tricks you've learned." Her lavender eyes glittered, reminding me she had changed entirely. This wasn't the girl with brown eyes that matched mine. The young woman who'd loved to make her own drinks and perfumes. This stranger was something other. Something that made the fine hair along my arms stand on end. "Goddess knows I've got a few of my own to share. Shifter?"

Domenico moved with preternatural speed and fisted my hair, forcing my head to the side. He brought his nose to my neck and drew in a deep lungful of my scent, likely memorizing it to track me if I tried to escape. I cringed from the sudden pain but managed to bite back my yelp.

He snarled, the sound far from human as he brought his mouth to my ear. "Try anything stupid and I'll rip out more than just your mortal heart, Shadow Witch."

"Down, puppy." Vitoria tsked. "Don't play too rough. Yet."

Before I could absorb the hurt of that statement or wonder how much rougher things would get aside from being chained, Domenico shoved me away, and with another lazy wave of his hand, the locks on my manacles clicked open. My restraints clattered to the ground, the sound as foreboding as an executioner's blade coming down on the condemned.

This was it, the moment I'd been dreading, and I felt wholly unprepared.

Heart hammering, I turned my back on the raging werewolf and faced my undead twin, steeling myself as our gazes met and held.

For months Vittoria had let me believe she was dead. Murdered violently. Allowed me to discover her heartless body, broken and bloody in that tomb. Tearing my world apart and destroying who I was on the most basic level. Vittoria's deceit was a wound that would never properly heal; it would forever leave emotional scars on my soul and in my heart.

Even with her standing before me now, alive and well, there was no hope of ever returning to before. Too much had passed between us to simply forget and move on, and that, more than anything else, was

something I mourned. No matter how hard I wished otherwise, we'd both changed irrevocably. And I wasn't sure the pieces of our new lives fit together anymore.

To push past the growing ache in my chest, I thought about my betrothed. Of how my twin had ruined this night for me, too. Instead of sorrow, I focused on the fury, the wrath that had gotten me through my own personal hell. And all emotions, save one, disappeared.

If I'd been capable of feeling worry instead of pure wrath, perhaps my sister's triumphant grin would have caused a flicker of unease. As it stood, she was about to discover that she was not the only one capable of instilling apprehension. It was time Vittoria feared me.

❶ [Best Portable Exercise or Fitness Equipment](#)

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I dipped into my source of magic, relieved to feel the enormous well of power that crackled under my skin. If my sister wanted to see what I was capable of, I'd gladly show her.

"You have five minutes to explain yourself." When I spoke, my voice was colder than the air around us, colder than even the most wicked circle of Hell. I swore the shadows paused before skittering into nothingness, hiding from the great reckoning they sensed coming.

"And then?" Vittoria asked.

My smile was a beautiful nightmare. For the first time, Vittoria's brow creased as if she'd just realized there was one fatal flaw in her plan. Monsters could be created but never tamed.

"And then, dear sister, you'll meet the witch you forced me to become."

TWO

"Bite your tongue or I'll remove it." Domenico stepped forward, claws extending and quietly snarling at the threat I posed, but Vittoria raised her hand, stalling him. I was too furious to be surprised at how quickly he backed down from the simple, unspoken command.

"Have you not become more powerful? More... bold?" Vittoria asked, cocking a brow. "You've finally stepped out of the safe little hole you've been hiding in, only to live a life now worthy of a bard's pen. Do they sing ballads of boring witches, wiling away their time in hot kitchens, pining after equally boring holy men like Antonio? I would imagine a grand romance with the king of demons is something much more interesting. Especially in the bedchamber. For the sake of the Great Divine above, Emilia. The death of your former life is something you should thank me for. Antonio, Sea & Vine, you and I were always meant for bigger things."

"Boring?" Anger lanced through me. "I loved my life and our kitchen. Apologies if what I consider fun, or who I found attractive, is so repulsive to you. And since when do you hate Sea & Vine? You loved our family and our time cooking together, too. Or have you forgotten us? In your quest for... whatever it is you're after. How could you do that to us, to me?"

My voice broke on the last question, and I yanked hard on my fury again, centering myself. Vittoria watched me closely. "I did what had to be done for us. It might not seem like it, but I swear this has all been for you and me. The curse—"

She bit down on whatever she wished to say but couldn't.

"Oh, yes, the curse." I swatted the air as if the curse were a bothersome housefly. "The bloody, fucking curse that no one can speak of. I'm finished with this fickle magic and every hexed being involved! Why did you fake your murder? How was that in any way helpful to me?"

She seemed to choose her next words carefully. "Even the most volatile fuel requires a spark to cause flames."

Cryptic as always when the curse was at play. "Why could you possibly need so much fire?"

Her gaze turned into a hard, glittering gem of hatred. For a second, it wasn't lavender that flashed from her irises, but a deep ruby red. "To watch our enemies burn. To reclaim what is ours by might and birth. And to break the final chains that bind us once and for all."

"And our family? Are they your enemies? Did they deserve to bury you in that crypt? To believe you were rotting away with our ancestors?"

"Yes. Though I highly doubt they believed I was rotting away. That little lie was something I imagined they fed to you, their favored one. Or should I say, the most feared." Vittoria's admission fell between us, heavy under the weight of the truth she believed it to be. "And they aren't the only ones who will come to fear us. I have adopted one bit of advice from our dear family. Keep your acquaintances close, but your enemies closer."

I looked at the stranger who wore my sister's face. There was hardness in this Vittoria, darkness where light had once shined brightly. My sister had been playful, friendly. Capable of making friends and dancing for hours on end. A quality I'd always admired and wished to possess. This harsh version of her was difficult to reconcile. "What if I don't want to be feared?" I asked.

Vittoria's smile was a quick flash of teeth, razor-sharp and threatening. "A bird without wings is still a bird, sister mine."

"Have you been speaking to the Prince of Envy?" I heaved a sigh. "I swear you sound exactly like him after he's had too much truth-spelled demonberry wine."

"Envy?" Her gaze flickered inward with a memory. "I rode his pet vampire just to watch those green eyes flame with his favorite sin when he caught us. Vampires make exquisite lovers, being creatures of the night and all. They are masters of mixing pleasure with a bite of pain. Once you finish playing with your demon, you ought to visit the vampire court and give one or two a ride. I recently called upon their prince and was not at all disappointed. The things he could do with those fangs..."

Domenico growled, and my twin shot him a placating look. Clearly he hadn't known his—whatever my sister was to him—had cavorted with some of his mortal enemies. I was unaware there was a vampire court, and for the time being, it wasn't a priority to ask. Unless it suddenly became an issue, it was the least of my concerns now.

"I..." I wanted to purge the thought of my twin bedding that particular vampire from my mind. I'd had the misfortune of meeting him once, and Alexei had been frightening. And not in a forbidden, dark fantasy type of way. He'd looked ready to rip out a heart to drink it dry for sport. "Why are you here now? I thought we were supposed to meet tomorrow on the Shifting Isles."

Vittoria lifted a shoulder, suddenly not meeting my gaze. "I wanted to deliver the message myself in case you didn't get the skull."

I didn't believe her but didn't call her on the obvious lie. My sister was keeping another secret, and it likely

had something to do with the Shadow Realm since we were here. Perhaps it had been a test to see if Domenico could bring me here without any issues. Which meant our time was probably limited and I needed answers. “How did you fake removing your heart?”

“I didn’t.”

“I saw the blood. The gaping hole in your chest. Obviously, it was some magic or illusion, unless you no longer require a heart to live. Don’t stand here and keep lying to my face. You’ve done quite enough of that over the last several months. I deserve to know the truth, Vittoria.”

The temperature abruptly dropped, ice crystals snaking up the walls and crackling like frozen flames as they rapidly spread. The candle flickered in the sudden breeze before blowing out, leaving us in the dark. A thin ribbon of smoke curled through the air, the scent of sulfur permeating the coldness; an omen sent from a ferocious hell god. One I knew well.

Domenico stepped forward, wrapping a hand around my twin’s upper arm, and tugged her near. “Time to go. He’s breached the Shadow’s wards.”

My heart thrummed. I knew exactly who he was. Wrath had come for my soul, charging across the barrier of the spirit realm, his namesake sin powerful enough to make even the ground here tremble at his approach. I palpably felt his fury, and it did something peculiar to me in this realm. I suddenly wasn’t thinking of my twin’s betrayal or feeling hurt. Heat crept over me where the cold had previously sunk its teeth. Wrath’s sin made me feel alive, buzzing. It also made me want to shed civility and become an elemental force fueled by baser instincts.

❸ [Healthy Ways to Gain Weight Fast and Safely](#)

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Vittoria’s lips lifted in a half smirk. “Remember, sister. Enjoy the sausage all you like, but don’t purchase the pig. It’s the only warning I can offer.”

“Why should I listen to you?”

“I’m your blood.” Domenico half-dragged her across the chamber, then waved his hand until a glittering portal opened before them. Vittoria paused, glancing back at me. “Some bonds can never be broken, Emilia. And some choices have consequences akin to death. Take it from someone who knows all too well what that’s like.”

Chills danced down my spine from the first part of her warning. Wrath had said something similar to me on the night I discovered the truth of why he’d given me his royal Mark.

My fingers absently brushed against the nearly invisible Son my neck, the magic causing a slight, pleasant tingle that traveled down my nonbody.

“What does that mean?” I demanded. “No more games, Vittoria.”

“Choose him and you’ll give up part of yourself,” she said, offering an answer that only raised more questions. “See you tomorrow. Don’t be late.”

“Stop! Why must we meet on the Shifting Isles?” I asked. “Why not tell me what you need here?”

"You'll just have to wait and see." Vittoria blew me a kiss, then stepped through the portal with the werewolf on her heels. Apparently, Domenico, an alpha in his own right, knew a bigger threat had entered his territory. Retreat was the smart option. Or perhaps he'd only choked on his pride to save my twin. I wasn't sure how I felt after our encounter; too many emotions were warring against one another, but I was grateful she had a loyal ally. She needed one.

"Emilia."

Wrath strode into the chamber a moment later, his body humming with the threat of an impending war. A battle he was bringing to our enemies. He glared at the closing portal, then swept his attention over me, sharp as the blade in his fist and promising the same level of violence on anyone who'd hurt me. I glanced down, noticing the shadow robe had also abandoned its post at his arrival. Once again I stood nude, but not cowed.

"Did they harm you?" His voice was clipped, as if he were saving all his energy for the fight. Domenico might have escaped, but Wrath would hunt him down. The cold, unforgiving look on his face promised nothing but pain and torment.

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak the partial lie. Harm wasn't always inflicted physically. "It was my sister. She wanted to make sure I received her message about tomorrow. Where are the Shifting Isles?"

"Just outside the mainland." The demon's gaze methodically took in each inch of the chamber before coming to rest on the manacles. In a flash, his blade was gone and he was in front of me, gently bringing my wrists up for closer inspection. Red splotches that would turn into nasty bruises had Wrath's anger flaring impossibly higher. His voice was now laced with deadly promise, and the air turned so frigid my teeth began to chatter. "If anyone chains you again, I will become every nightmare mortals have ever had of me and then some."

Ice shot up the walls and coated the ceiling as the temperature continued to plummet. Chunks of stone cracked and fell to the ground. If he didn't rein in his temper soon, we'd both be encapsulated in ice or buried under stone.

"What if I ask you to tie me up?"

The harsh expression on Wrath's face faltered as he blinked down at me. He hadn't expected that. Good. Perhaps we'd make it out of this realm before we turned into ice sculptures. I disentangled myself from his light grasp and wrapped my arms around his middle, listening to his heart beat faster from the embrace. Almost immediately, I felt warmer.

"Simply saying 'I love you; I'm pleased you're all right' would have sufficed, too."

A beat of silence passed, and I could practically feel Wrath straining to leash himself. Only his iron will would cage the immense power struggling to break out, to attack. I couldn't imagine the discipline, the absolute control he had over his namesake sin, to finally wrangle his wrath into submission. The air warmed a fraction, though it was still deathly frigid.

He held me a little closer, as if comforting himself that I was safe and secure. "Torturing and disemboweling your enemies would be a act of love."

"No one can deny you are a demon of action." I snorted and drew back enough to see mirth entering his eyes in place of the icy rage, though there was still something haunted in his expression that wasn't as quick to disappear. "Take me home, please. It's been a long night. I need a warm bath and an entire bottle of demonberry wine."