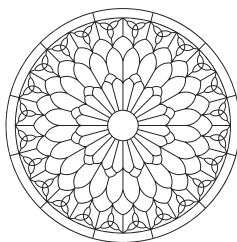


# PRINCESS OF SOULS



ALEXANDRA CHRISTO



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*For Mum & Dad,  
who have always brought magic into my life*



VASILIÁDES

THE FLOATING MOUNTAIN

THE SIX

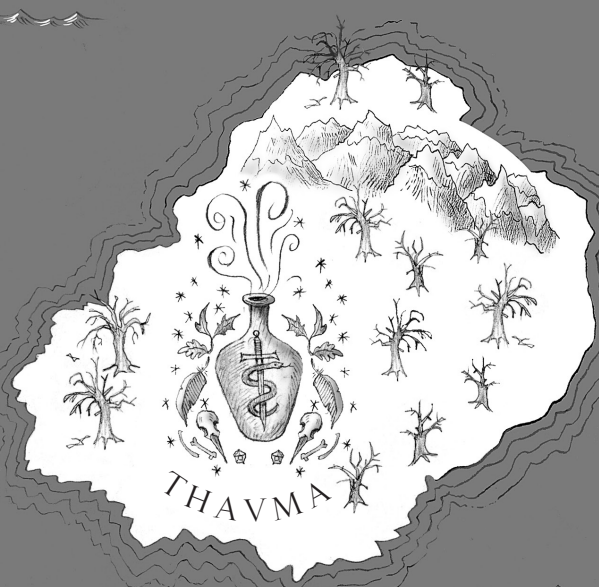
NEKRÓS

ARMONÍA

POLEMISTÉS



ISLES



THAVMA



FLÓGA



THE ENDLESS SEA



## SELESTRA

I can tell someone when they're going to die. All I need is a lock of hair and their soul.

Just in case.

That's the job of a Somniatis witch, tied to the king with magic steeped in death. It's all I was ever raised to be: a servant to the kingdom, an heir to my family's power.

A witch bound to the Six Isles.

And because of it, I've never glimpsed the world beyond the Floating Mountain this castle stands on.

Not that I'm a prisoner.

I'm King Seryth's ward and one day I'll be his most trusted adviser. The right hand to royalty, free to go wherever I want and do whatever I want, without having to ask for permission first.

Just as soon as my mother dies.

I stride through the stone halls, ivory gloves snaking to my shoulders where the shimmer of my dress begins. They're meant to be a safeguard for my visions, but sometimes they feel more like a leash to stop me from going wild.

To keep my magic at bay until the time is right.

*But I'm not a prisoner*, I tell myself.

I'm just not supposed to touch anyone.

Outside the Grand Hall, a line of people gathers in a stretch of soon-to-be corpses. Most are dressed in rags and dirt that cakes them



like a second skin, but a few are smothered in jewels. A mix of the poor, the wealthy, and those who fall in between.

All of them are desperate to cheat death.

The Festival of Predictions happens once a year, during the month of the Red Moon, where anyone from across the Six Isles can wait for a prediction from the king's witch.

The line rounds the corner opposite me, so I can't see how far it stretches, but I know how many people there are. It's the same each year: two hundred souls ready to be bargained.

I try to move past them as quickly as I can, like a shadow sweeping across the corner of their eyes. But they always see me.

Once they do, they look quickly away.

They can't stand the sight of my green hair and snake eyes. All the things that make me different from them. They stare at the floor, like the tiles are suddenly too interesting to miss.

Like I'm nothing but a witch to be feared.

I'm not sure why. It's not like I have that much magic in me yet. At sixteen, I'm still just an heir to my true power, waiting for the day I inherit my family's magic.

"Would you hang on for a second?" Irenya says.

The apprentice dressmaker—and the only friend I have in this castle—heaves in a series of quick breaths, running to catch up with me as I finally come to a stop outside the Grand Hall.

She smooths down my dress, making sure there are no wrinkles in sight. Irenya is a perfectionist when it comes to her gowns.

"Quit squirming, Selestra," she scolds.

"I'm not squirming," I say. "I'm *breathing*."

"Well, stop that too, then."

I poke out my tongue and start to fiddle with my gloves. Pulling

the fingertips up and then pushing them back down so the fabric rubs against my skin.

The repetition is soothing.

It stops me from overthinking everything that's about to happen.

I should be used to all of this by now. Grateful that I've been allowed to stand by King Seryth's side for two years, gathering hair and watching as people from across the islands filter in to seal their fates.

I should be excited for the Festival and all the souls we'll reap. To watch my mother tell death's secrets, as though it's an old friend.

I should not be thinking about all the people who are going to die.

"We don't want you coming loose during the first prediction," Irenya says. She pulls the strings tighter on my dress and I just *know* that she's smiling. "Imagine, you bend down to take a lock of hair and your chest falls out."

"Trust me." I gasp out a breath. "I'm not bending anywhere in this thing."

Irenya rolls her eyes. "Oh, be quiet," she says. "You look like a princess."

I almost laugh at that.

When I was young—before my mother became a stranger—she'd read me stories of princesses. Fairy tales of demure women, powerless, locked up in towers and waiting to be rescued by a handsome prince, who would whisk them away for love and adventure.

"I'm not a princess," I say to Irenya.

I'm something far more deadly than that. And nobody is rescuing me from my tower.

I push open the heavy iron doors of the Grand Hall. The room has been emptied.

Gone are the wooden tables that cluttered the center, rich with



wine and merciless laughter. The band has been dismissed and the room is drained to a hollow cavity.

To an outsider, it's impossible to tell that just a few hours ago, the wealthiest people in the kingdom celebrated the start of the Festival. I could hear the swells of music from my tower. Smell the brandy cakes and honey drifting in through the cracks of my window.

It still smells now. Cake and candle fire, charred wicks and sweet, smoky air.

I spy the king at the far end of the room on a large black throne carved from bones. A gift of love from my great-great-grandmother.

His gaze quickly meets mine, like he can sense me, and he beckons me over with a single finger.

I take in a breath and head toward him.

The cloak of my dress billows behind me.

It's a hideously sparkling thing that glitters under the candlelight like a river of plucked stars. It's a deep black blue, dark as the Endless Sea, that curls around my neck and drips down my pale skin like water. The back, tied by intricate ribbons, is covered in a long cape that flows to the floor.

It might be Irenya's creation, but it's the king's color.

When I wear it, I'm his trophy.

"My king," I say once I reach him.

"Selestra," he all but purrs. "Good of you to finally join us."

He leans back into his throne.

King Seryth is a warrior as much as a ruler, with long black hair and earrings of snake fangs. The tattooed serpents of his crest hiss across his face, and he's dressed in animal furs that break apart to reveal the ridged muscles of his chest.

All of it is meant to make him look menacing, but I've always

thought his eternally youthful face was far more beautiful than frightening.

The real danger is in his eyes, darker than night, which hold only death.

“You look glorious,” he says.

“Thank you.”

I tuck a lock of dark green hair behind my ears.

I’ve never been allowed to cut it, so like my mother’s it hangs well past my waist. Only unlike my mother’s it curls up at the ends, where hers is as straight as a cliff edge.

Everything about her is edges and points, designed to wound.

“Good evening, Mother,” I say, turning to bow to her.

Theola Somniatis, ever beautiful, sits beside the king on a throne that glitters with painted Chrim coins. A black lace gown clings to her body in a mix of swirls and skin.

She looks sharp and foreboding.

A knife the king keeps by his side.

And unlike me, she doesn’t need gloves to keep her in check.

She purses her lips. “You were nearly late.”

I frown. “I walked as fast as I could in these shoes,” I say, lifting the hem of my dress to show the perilous heels hidden under its length.

They’re already rubbing against my feet.

The king smirks at this. “Now you are here we can get started.”

He raises his hand, a signal to the guards by the door.

“Let the first one in.”

I take an unsteady breath.

And so it begins.

I wonder what curses death will show us today.

## SELESTRA

The guards open the doors to the Grand Hall and I see the first woman emerge.

She approaches the throne hesitantly, two guards flanking her closely on either side as she takes slow, shuffled footsteps toward us. She's dressed in a dark red skirt that's damp with mud at the ankles.

My skin pricks on the back of my neck the closer she gets.

There's death in the air.

I can practically taste it.

Smell it on the woman's bones.

As she steps forward, skirt the color of dried blood and decaying rose petals, I know somehow that she won't last the week.

I can *feel* it.

Then my mother will snatch up her soul and King Seryth will gobble it down, like he's done for over a century. Feeding his immortality.

"Your Highnesses," the woman says, once she reaches the steps that elevate the thrones.

She curtsies, low enough that her knees touch the floor and her ankles shake with the weight.

She glances at my mother and I see the flicker of panic in her eyes before she bows her head.

They fear us. They hate us.

And they're right to.

I lift my chin up, reminding myself that I should be pleased.

This is the one time a year when I'm surrounded by magic. When I can feel the thrum of it coating the castle, as the power of my ancestors drifts through the air like sweet wine.

When I don't have to stay locked in my tower.

I grab the scissors from the table and descend the stairs.

"With these scissors, I'll take a lock of your hair and seal your place in the Festival of Predictions," I tell the woman. "Death will mark you on its list for this month of the Red Moon. It will come for you once this first week, then twice the second, and the prediction we give you today will be your only help to survive."

I recite the lines easily, as I've done since I was fourteen.

"If you die, your soul becomes forfeit to the king. But if you live through the first half of this month, you'll be rewarded with a wish of your choice and be released from your bargain."

The woman nods eagerly.

The promise of a wish makes the Festival a celebration in the realm. I've heard that the townsfolk even make bets, gambling Chrim on who might make it, throwing parties and drinking into the early hours.

People only ever enter into this bargain for the wish.

For the poor and the desperate, it's a chance to ask for gold Chrim or healing elixirs. For the rich and the arrogant, it's a chance to curse their enemies and amass more fortune.

And all of them think it's worth risking their souls for.

*It's only three deaths*, they probably tell themselves. *I can live through that*. And some do. Each year a handful of people get to resume their lives with a wish granted, inspiring others to try it for themselves next year.

But each year at least one hundred people don't.

It's funny how they're less remembered.

"If you choose to continue beyond this halfway point, be warned," I say, voice foreboding. "As in place of death, the king himself will have earned the right to hunt you until the month's end. For if you survive past the Red Moon, his immortality will be yours."

I feel Seryth's smile on the back of my neck.

He's not afraid.

He doesn't worry that he could ever lose his throne to any of these people.

"This bargain may kill you or bring you unrivaled glory," I say.

It will be the former. It always is.

Death has a funny habit of getting its way, and so does the king. I've seen that firsthand.

Besides, nobody who survives ever even *tries* to go past the halfway mark. Having death hunt you is one thing, but the king himself? Even before he amassed the deadliest army to ever live, the king was the most skilled warrior in all of the Six Isles. He has survived centuries, blessed by cursed magic.

It would be madness to even try to kill him.

Best to just take your wish and run home to safety.

"Do you accept this bargain?" I ask.

The woman gulps loudly.

"Yes," she says, voice trembling. "Please just take it."

With hands as unsteady as her voice, she gestures toward her hair.

I reach out with my scissors and cut a piece. The woman sucks in a breath, eyes sharpening.

I wonder if she feels something. A fragment of her taken to be stored away, so her soul is tethered to this world when she dies.

Ready for my mother to collect in her ritual.

Ready to be bound to the king.

"It's done," I say.

I turn away from her and place the hair into one of two hundred glass jars that line the steps to the thrones.

"Step forward," Theola says. "And keep your arm out."

I hear the woman's breath stutter as she ascends the first two steps. She takes a knee.

Theola extends her hand and daintily strokes the woman's palm. She closes her eyes, smile slow and damning.

Somniatis witches are like siphons. We draw in energy and let it pass through us. Energy like death that we call into our veins and let wet our lips. It's what gives us our visions and allows us to take the souls of the doomed and pour them into the king.

It's cursed magic, but it's the only magic left in the Six Isles.

My family saw to that.

Theola bites her lip as she looks into the woman's future.

There's a part of me that wants desperately to see what she sees. I want to feel the power that comes from knowing the future, from telling fate's secrets and letting my magic free from its shackles.

From *touching* someone, for the first time in years.

But then I remember Asden, my old mentor. I remember what happened the last time I touched someone.

I remember how he screamed.

The mere thought of it knocks into me as hard as a fist. I quickly right myself, swallowing the memory before the king notices the slip in my smile.

My mother withdraws her hand and looks down at the kneeling woman, whose palm is newly branded by King Seryth's crest: a blackened serpent eating its tail.

It appears on all death seekers, marking them and the deal they've made.

"In the next week, your youngest daughter will succumb to illness," Theola says.

Her voice is like ice, cold and smooth, like she's talking about the weather instead of death.

It wasn't always like that.

Once it was warm.

"She will die," Theola says. "And days later when you go to pick her favorite flowers, you will be attacked by a creature of the woods. Left to rot among the trees."

The woman gasps and even her hands stop shaking, as though terror has frozen her in place.

"No, my daughter cannot die." She shakes her head, no regard for her own life and the death my mother foresaw for her. "There must be a way. If I survive until the halfway point, then I can wish for a healing elixir and—"

"She will not last long enough for that."

With a tight jaw, my mother closes her fist and then opens it to reveal a single gold coin of Chrim that wasn't there seconds before.

She drops it into the sobbing woman's hand.

"For your troubles," she says. "Spend time with your child while you can. If you live, perhaps we'll see you again for a new wish. If you die, remember what you owe us."

The woman blinks and opens her mouth, as if to scream or cry or try to fight her future. But all that comes out is a whimper, before her eyes shift to mine.

I can see the accusation in them as the guards pull her up and drag her from the hall. The notion that I should be ashamed of my monstrous family and the evil we let seep into the world.

But she doesn't know.

She doesn't understand what it means to be a Somniatis witch,



bound to the king by an ancient blood oath. Given the choice between prisoner or queen of magic, I doubt this woman would choose differently from me. She doesn't understand what could happen if I tried.

Still, once she's out of sight, I turn to my mother.

"Do you think she'll avoid the forest and forgo her daughter's flowers?" I ask.

It's a stupid question, and the moment I speak it, I wish I could take it back.

"What does it matter?" Theola's voice is scolding. "So long as we get the amount of souls we need, it's irrelevant which ones they are."

I know that she's right.

What's important is that we have at least one hundred souls by the end of the month. Enough so that the king can sustain his immortality and continue his rule forever.

"Don't you agree, Selestra?" my mother asks when I fall silent.

She looks at me with warning, telling me to nod, quickly.

"Of course," I say.

A practiced lie.

"My witches don't concern themselves with such questions."

The king stares at me tersely.

His eyes are black, black, black.

"You'll remember that, Selestra," he says. "If you ever manage to become one, rather than remain a simple heir."

I bow my head, but beneath the gesture my teeth grind together.

He calls me an heir like it's an insult, because it's all I'll be to him, to everyone, until I become the Somniatis witch.

Heirs to magic are useless until they reach their eighteenth birthday and are bound to the king by the blood oath, ready to be taught the true essence of magic and trained to take over once the old witch dies. Until then, I am irrelevant.

Sometimes I feel like a weed, pushing out from the roots of a strange garden, never quite able to blend in.

The rest of the evening goes the same way.

People are escorted in and out by the guards, kneeling as Theola recounts their new fates with little more than boredom. Betrayals from trusted friends, drowning in the local river, or stabbed in an alley outside the tavern they visit every night.

Each of them has the same horrified look as their deaths are revealed. They act as though it's a curse thrust upon them rather than something they sought out.

All the while I remain silent, only speaking to recite the rules of the Festival. I gather the hair dozens of times over, descending the stairs and watching as the king looks hungrily at each person who enters into his bargain.

Each potential new soul he'll use my family's magic to devour.

Only a handful of them will survive until the halfway point and be granted their wish.

And not a one of them could ever survive beyond that, even if they were reckless enough to try.

### 3

## NOX

I'm good at a lot of things, but best of all is surviving.

I've got a knack for it that comes almost too easy, with barely a scar to show for years of close calls. I know how to fight, sure, but it's more than that.

The greatest skill my father taught me was how to work a room. How to get inside someone's mind and convince them I'm worth keeping around.

That I've got something special in me.

A lot of things have limits, but charm is rarely one of them. And I'm going to need that charm more than ever now.

We approach the Floating Mountain, ready to make our way to the top.

"In the list of stupid ideas you've had, this one takes the lead," Micah says.

I look to my best friend and fellow Last Army soldier with a grin. He adjusts the blade on his back and keeps an eye on the crowd of people behind us.

Micah is always suspicious of anyone and everyone who isn't me.

"You're making a list of all my bad ideas?" I ask.

We step onto the enchanted platform, a thin sheet of elaborately crafted gold that backs onto a tree tall enough to reach the stars.

It's the fastest way up the mountain, where the king's castle lies.

Micah nods. "It's a long damn list."

I shrug. He's got a point.

"This can't be at the top," I tell him. "What about that time during initiations when we decided to sneak into the sergeant's cabin and steal his—"

"Okay, okay," Micah says quickly, not wanting me to repeat *that* story out loud. "This is the second-stupidest idea you've ever had."

He's not wrong, but just because something's dangerous, it doesn't mean it's not worth it. Sometimes, the riskiest things reap the greatest rewards.

"It's not too late to change your mind, you know," Micah says.

The enchanted platform begins to ascend, the sky flicking by us as it gains traction. I look out at the world below, at the people who seem so small and barely there.

At the island of Vasiliádes the king has built his empire around.

From up here it looks peaceful, almost beautiful in a way that might rival the Southern Isle of Polemistés.

But it's a lie.

I can still hear the Endless Sea, crashing against the boats and tufts of land, like an invader trying to force its way in. The black waters swarm, refusing to freeze over even in the dead of winter when snow coats the streets. They drink the ice, burning it back to liquid. And on summer days like today when the sun beats down, the waters still ripple and swell with all the cursed magic the king placed inside them.

"If you're scared, you don't have to come," I say to Micah.

The platform docks and I step quickly off, breezing past the entry guards.

The castle grounds are beautiful, surrounded by never-ending greenery and hedges ripe with the sweetest fruit. Even the rocks are such a bright silver that people say they're carved from shooting stars.

Such beauty to house such monsters.

Micah jogs to keep step with me.

"I'm not scared," he protests. "And I'm not leaving you to the wolves."

I roll my eyes. "Seryth isn't a wolf. He's just a man."

"What about the witches?" Micah counters in a hushed voice. "They're not men and they can't be killed as easily as you or I. Their magic protects them, even from death. The witches are as endless as the king himself."

"*Witch*," I correct, lowering my voice as we navigate the path, lined by guards.

This whole place is a fortress.

For an immortal, the king sure does worry about his enemies.

"There's only really one witch," I remind Micah. "Theola's daughter won't come into her true powers for years. She won't be any trouble."

Micah's eyes dart quickly to the castle guards, to make sure none of them heard me.

"You might try keeping your voice down when you talk about treason," he says. "Stealth, Nox. *Stealth*."

I shake my head and come to a stop. "You should really stay here."

Micah's a liability when he worries and that's the last thing I need right now.

He straightens and his hand drifts to his sword. "I said I'm not letting you go in there by yourself," he says stubbornly.

It's a nice sentiment, really, but it's not necessary.

I push his hand back down. "Relax, soldier," I say, my voice light enough to let him know I'm not worried. "Soak up the sun, woo a pretty guard. Wait for me here."

Micah's eyes crease as he tries to weigh up whether or not to listen to me.

“If you’re not back in ten minutes, I’m coming in after you,” he says.

I smirk. “If I’m not back in ten minutes, there’s nothing left of me to come after.”



Walking into the king’s castle is like stepping into a prison.

The walls are high and black, dark as the king’s eyes and tall as clouds, with intricate threads of gold whisking across them like strokes of wind.

The marble floors resemble the Endless Sea enough so that I half expect my feet to slip through the tiles and meet water.

Instead, when I walk across them, my footsteps sound like a clock.

Like the hands of my father’s pocket watch, which were just as loud.

*Ticktock.*

*Come on, Nox! Just a bit faster!*

*Ticktock.*

*That’s it! You’ll be top of your class come initiation, son!*

I haven’t looked at that watch in years. It sits in a drawer in the barracks now, gathering dust and cobwebs, hidden behind old papers and my favorite knife.

When my footsteps echo its chimes, I don’t hear my father’s cheering voice anymore. I only hear the king’s.

*Ticktock. Ticktock.*

*Ready to die, are we, Nox?*

I approach a group of guards outside the Grand Hall, readying to let the last seeker through.

Each year, only two hundred are allowed to enter into the bargain and risk their souls. I'm not sure why. Maybe Seryth and his witch bore if they see too many.

"I need to speak to the king," I say to the guard closest to the door.

He wears a uniform the same thunderstorm blue as mine. It hangs off him loosely, making him seem young, like he still needs to grow into it.

"Name?" he asks.

"Officer Nox Laederic," I say. "Of the Thánatos Regiment."

The moment my words register, the guard's lips part.

I guess we do have a bit of a reputation, but only part of it's my fault.

"You—you're—"

"Better looking in person, I know. Can I pass?"

"Is the king expecting you?" the guard asks, voice going up a pitch.

"Sure, I scheduled a meeting in his diary and put a little heart next to it," I say earnestly.

The guard doesn't return my grin, but instead fumbles with the large collar of his shirt. "I'm not supposed to . . ." He trails off. "We've still got one more prediction seeker left. Could you come back later?"

I can't help but laugh.

Years of preparation and all day convincing myself it's now or never, only to be turned away at the door.

If Micah were here, he'd get a kick out of it. Or think it was some kind of sign I should turn back and forget the whole thing.

But that isn't an option.

"I guess I'm that *one more*," I say to the guard.



I brush past him and place a hand on the door, pushing it open a crack.

Nobody is going to try to stop a member of the Last Army.

Especially one with a sword.

“Wish me luck,” I say.

The guard blinks, mouth agape as I saunter into the Grand Hall.

I don’t bother to count how many guards line the room. I’m trained to know, to always be prepared, but tonight I can only focus on one thing.

Or three things.

Seryth, king of the Six Isles, who my father served for years. Who my entire family served for generations. His lips turn up in a smile as he watches me from his stolen throne.

His witch, with her snake eyes and fingernails long enough to draw blood.

And the heir.

*Selestra Somniatis.*

I definitely can’t help but look at her.

Her skin is so pale that it’s almost aglow, with hair the color of clovers that slithers down her back and to her waist, reflecting the light of the windows outside like a river.

It almost looks long enough to climb towers with.

Her eyes, large and yellow, watch me with intrigue, and a half smile slips onto her bloodred lips.

She’s truly beautiful.

It’s a shame she has to die.

## SELESTRA

When the last prediction seeker enters the Grand Hall, the first thing I notice is that he isn't being escorted by guards.

Unlike the others, he's alone as he strides toward us. He doesn't look to the floor or fiddle nervously with his hands as he prepares to bargain his soul for magic or glory.

My heart thunders in my chest as he approaches, barely even blinking.

He isn't one of the desperate or the reckless, I know that.

He's a soldier. A warrior in King Seryth's army.

And he doesn't just walk—he *struts*.

The boy is a blade of handsomeness, with light brown skin and midnight hair that curls by his ears. His eyes are the color of winter leaves. They catch mine briefly and then seem to go right through me.

Theola and the king grin as he approaches, their postures newly alert and curious.

He's dressed in the uniform of the Last Army, covered by a long black cloak threaded with blue. His sword is sheathed by his hood, glimmering in the growing moonlight.

The way he moves, so quickly and gracefully, the way he doesn't flinch when he sees my eyes: It all reminds me of someone.

Of that last person I ever touched. Of Asden and his sad, sad eyes.

I pray this boy's fate won't be as tragic.

“My king,” the boy says when he reaches the steps.

He bows and turns to Theola.

“My lady. A pleasure as always.”

His smile almost looks genuine as he steps up to take her hand and place a kiss below her ring.

*Almost.*

I have practice in perfecting smiles and I can spot a fake from a mile off. But Theola and the king either don’t notice or don’t care. They’re both enamored with the young warrior, staring at him like he’s so special.

It’s been a long time since my mother looked at me that way. All the magic in the world ready to be inherited into my blood and some Last Army soldier gets the pleasure of her smile.

“Nox.” Theola’s voice is silk as she takes him in. “What in the name of souls are you doing here?”

“Is there word from the Southern Isle?” the king asks, sitting up straighter in his throne. “Do the rebels show signs of surrender?”

The boy—Nox—shakes his head. “Polemistés hasn’t fallen, my king,” he says. “The people’s resolve grows as steadily as their numbers.”

“They’re such fools.” The king is quiet, but his voice cuts through the empty hall. “Don’t they know to accept me as their leader? The Six Isles are *mine*.”

There is poison in his words.

He squeezes his hand slowly around a skull affixed to the black throne, and it splinters with his touch.

King Seryth has been trying to conquer the Southern Isle for as long as I’ve been alive. Before that. Ever since the True War, when he first deposed the witch queen of Thavma. Polemistés is the only isle left of the six that hasn’t bowed to him, even after he killed their king.

I know he wants it more than he wanted the others.

Polemistés is the land he once called home, and leaving it until last, long enough to amass rebels, is his greatest anger. His desire to defeat them has only grown stronger and more destructive over the years.

“What news does my little legacy bring, then?” The king looks at Nox, waiting.

“No news,” Nox says with an easy shrug. “I’m just here for a prediction.”

I gape.

I can’t help it.

The Festival is for *civilians*. For the desperate or the bored, but hardly ever for members of the Last Army, who are far too busy playing with their swords.

Yet the king doesn’t look angry.

He has his favorites and I can see clearly that Nox is right at the top. Now that I think of it, his name does ring a small bell. A splinter of a conversation overheard at court months before embeds into my mind: *A legacy. His father served before him. His whole family. One of the king’s best and brightest, I swear. The youngest soldier ever to be given his own regiment.*

I resist rolling my eyes. I’ll bet Nox has got more commendations threaded into the lining of his uniform than soldiers twice his age.

What an utter tryhard.

“Are you sure about this, Nox?” the king asks him. His low voice slices across the room as he leans forward, intrigued. “There’s no going back on such a bargain. You should remember who you are. How *valuable* you are to me.”

Nox smiles, and something about it gives me pause.

“I know who I am,” he says. He takes a knee. “And I’m ready.”

“Very well.” The king licks his lips. “Then we shall proceed.”

He waves a hand at me, gesturing for me to take a piece of Nox’s hair and seal his fate.

I grip my scissors.

It’s been a long time since I’ve been close to a boy my own age, or anyone my age who isn’t Irenya.

Children were banned from the castle when I grew up, because people can’t be trusted and the king worried they’d take advantage of me. Better I stayed beside him and my mother. Better I stayed in my tower, where I was protected.

*The heir to the Somniatis magic needs to be kept safe*, he always said. *At all costs.*

Even now, I’m not allowed to speak to people at court. When I’m permitted—rarely—to attend celebrations, I’m always kept at a distance. Forced to stand by the thrones, surrounded by guards. Untouchable.

Like a trophy on display.

Then when it’s over, I’m locked back away in my cage.

I can watch and listen in on their stories, but I’m never a part of them.

I step toward Nox.

“You’re lucky,” he says as I approach. “A lot of girls would love to keep my hair in a locket close to their hearts.”

I raise my eyebrows. “How unfortunate for them to have lost their minds so young.”

Nox’s lips curve upward. “I am known to drive women crazy.”

I roll my eyes.

Only a Last Army soldier could be so cavalier while selling his soul.

Seeking a prediction is all fun and games when the townsfolk toss the idea around a tavern in the bright glow of torchlight, but usually

stepping into this hall and handing over a piece of hair—a piece of their soul—makes things different.

Usually, the arrogance leaves them and their fear clogs the air.

Not this soldier. Nox doesn't look scared at all.

More fool him.

"With these scissors, I'll take a lock of your hair and seal your place in the Festival of Predictions," I say, reciting the words as I always do.

They come so easily to me now that I barely have to think at all before I say them. They're as familiar as my own name.

"Do you accept this bargain?" I ask, once I've finished.

"I accept," Nox says.

*Prat, I think.*

He's close enough that I don't need to move to take the hair from him. I simply crouch, dress flowing down the steps like water, and slip a lock of Nox's hair through my fingers.

When I cut it, a jolt goes through me.

It pushes me back and I stumble, nearly losing my footing.

It's small at first, like tiny needles scurrying up my arms and down the back of my neck, before butting violently into my heart.

I grip the cut hair tightly and still.

I've never felt something when cutting a person's hair, but it's like the part of Nox's soul I snipped away shot through me first.

*Did he feel it too?*

"I guess I really can sweep women off their feet," Nox says.

I stare at him, but if he experienced the same shock, nothing on his face portrays it.

I push away the strangeness that pierces into my chest and secure the lock of his hair in the last empty jar by my feet.

"Go on, then," the king says, once I've twisted the lid closed.

"I've collected the hair," I tell him, confused.

The king laughs, and though it's a beautiful sound, I know it means something awful is to come.

"No, Selestra," he says softly. "Give the soldier his prediction."

A panic sets through me.

"You want me to do it?" I ask. "Why?"

"Consider it my gift to you," he offers.

Only I know the king never gives gifts that aren't laced in poison.

"It's just one little prediction," he promises. "Your magic should be able to handle it and it'll be good practice."

I fumble with my gloves.

The idea of taking them off in front of someone for the first time in years makes my skin itch. It makes me think of Asden's screams.

I look to my mother.

"Go ahead," she says, encouraging. "Do as the king says, Selestra."

My heart pounds.

I lick my lips.

I've both feared this moment and craved it.

It is a chance to finally let loose the magic inside me I've never been allowed to explore. To *touch* someone and feel skin on skin for the first time in over two years.

To show my mother that I'm worthy of our family's power.

I slip off a glove and let it drop to my feet.

I crouch down and my dress pools onto the marble as I reach out a hand for Nox's cheek.

He flinches when I touch him. I suppose I am a little cold. Every inch of me is.

Magic is fire and I've never let mine burn.

My heart thunders furiously against my chest as we make



contact, like a beast in a cage. All these years and I haven't touched anyone.

It's like the sudden quelling of a hunger I've always ignored.

I'm sick with it, with the feel of him. Of another person, real and in my grasp, able to feel me as much as I feel him.

Nox is warm, with skin softer than I thought. There's a scar on his face that stretches in a smooth pink line from his eyebrow to his chin, and when my hand grazes it, his eyes flicker to mine.

Usually, people flinch when they see my eyes. Eyes of snakes, that all Somniatis women bear.

Nox barely blinks.

I don't either.

I don't want to blink or do anything but savor this moment.

I know I won't get another chance for a while—maybe years—and I want to have my fill while I can, but there isn't time.

Death comes quick.

My breath catches in my chest, pushing down on me, like I'm suffocating. Then my head flings back and I know my magic isn't ready.

It feels like being hit in the head, over and over with no reprieve.

I try to pull away, tear myself from Nox, but my bones are rigid and my hand stays glued to his cheek as the images burn into me.

Flashes of dark red floors and half-painted walls.

I can't make sense of it and my head feels like it's cracking with every new image.

*A crowd surrounds a moonlit Nox. Lanterns hiss like orbs around him, growing brighter and brighter until suddenly the world is on fire.*

*It catches across the floors and sizzles up the walls, turning everything to smoke.*

*I can smell the air, thick with sweat and salt. See the gaping hole in the ceiling as it crumbles down.*

*Nox bleeds out on the floor, surrounded by flames.*

*The wind howls in a mourning cry and an image sears across my mind, so painful that I scream. A handle in the ground, surrounded by broken bottles.*

*"This way," a voice whispers.*

*A hand reaches for the bloody Nox and I gasp as I catch sight of the bracelet on their wrist.*

*A small gold thing, with a single gem in the center. Like a watchful eye.*

*I know that bracelet.*

*I've worn it for years.*

*I choke in a breath and then I feel the fire on my own skin, licking up my arms and catching on the ends of my hair. It melts through my bracelet and down to the bone.*

With everything I have, I wrench away from Nox, pulling myself from the vision and back into the present.

It happens so suddenly that I lose my footing and tumble to the ground, knocking over a row of jars that crash down the stairs.

They scatter glass and hair across the floor.

"What is it?" Theola asks, yellow-green eyes widening. "What happened?"

*It can't be.*

I tremble and clutch at my wrist as the memory of the flames seeps onto my skin.

Burning and charring.

*It just can't be.*

"Selestra." My mother's voice grows louder.

The king holds up a hand to silence her, and the whole room falls quiet. The guards at the door even hold their breaths at his command.

Slowly, the king descends the steps toward me.

His face dawns with the kind of look that has destroyed worlds.

“Speak,” he commands.

I turn to Nox, and the deep brown of his eyes slices through me.

The brand of the serpent is on his palm and when I look down, I see it on my own too.

Quickly, I clench my hand into a fist and reach for my fallen glove, before anyone else notices.

“Well?” Nox asks.

His jaw pulses in anticipation of what I’ve seen.

I swallow. Look away.

I can’t tell him. I can never speak it.

Because I haven’t just seen Nox’s death, but my own as well.