

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

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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.

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