

THE  
POISON  
DAUGHTER

SHEILA MASTERSON

# **THE POISON DAUGHTER**

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**SHEILA MASTERSON**

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**THE  
POISON  
DAUGHTER**

SHEILA MASTERSON

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# CONTENTS

## [A Note From the Author](#)

1. [Harlow](#)
2. [Harlow](#)
3. [Harlow](#)
4. [Harlow](#)
5. [Henry](#)
6. [Harlow](#)
7. [Henry](#)
8. [Harlow](#)
9. [Henry](#)
10. [Harlow](#)
11. [Henry](#)
12. [Harlow](#)
13. [Harlow](#)
14. [Henry](#)
15. [Harlow](#)
16. [Henry](#)
17. [Henry](#)
18. [Harlow](#)
19. [Harlow](#)
20. [Henry](#)
21. [Harlow](#)
22. [Harlow](#)
23. [Henry](#)
24. [Harlow](#)
25. [Henry](#)
26. [Harlow](#)
27. [Harlow](#)
28. [Harlow](#)
29. [Henry](#)
30. [Henry](#)

31. Harlow
32. Henry
33. Harlow
34. Henry
35. Henry
36. Harlow
37. Harlow
38. Henry
39. Harlow
40. Harlow
41. Harlow
42. Harlow
43. Harlow
44. Henry
45. Harlow
46. Henry
47. Henry
48. Harlow
49. Harlow
50. Henry
51. Henry
52. Harlow
53. Harlow
54. Henry
55. Henry
56. Henry
57. Harlow
58. Henry
59. Harlow
60. Harlow
61. Harlow
62. Harlow
63. Henry
64. Harlow
65. Harlow
66. Harlow

[Review it ebook](#)

[Looking for something...](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

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*To all the versions of myself I've buried and mourned.  
And to the one that survived.*

*I wrote this one for me.*

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## **A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR**

Dear Reader,

THE POISON DAUGHTER deals with some difficult subjects including ableism, violence, murder, blood, references to sexual assault, poisoning, death, references to domestic violence, child abuse and neglect (historical), grief, depression, PTSD, brief suicide ideation (historical), primal play, voyeurism, and explicit consensual sex.

I've attempted to treat all sensitive topics with the utmost care, but this content might still be challenging for some readers. Please take care of yourself.

-Sheila

# THE SEVEN DIVINE



Kennymyra - Divine of Pleasure  
Blessings of Vitality & Lust  
Red Auras

Harvain - Divine of Fortune  
Blessings of Chance & Circumstance  
Gold Auras

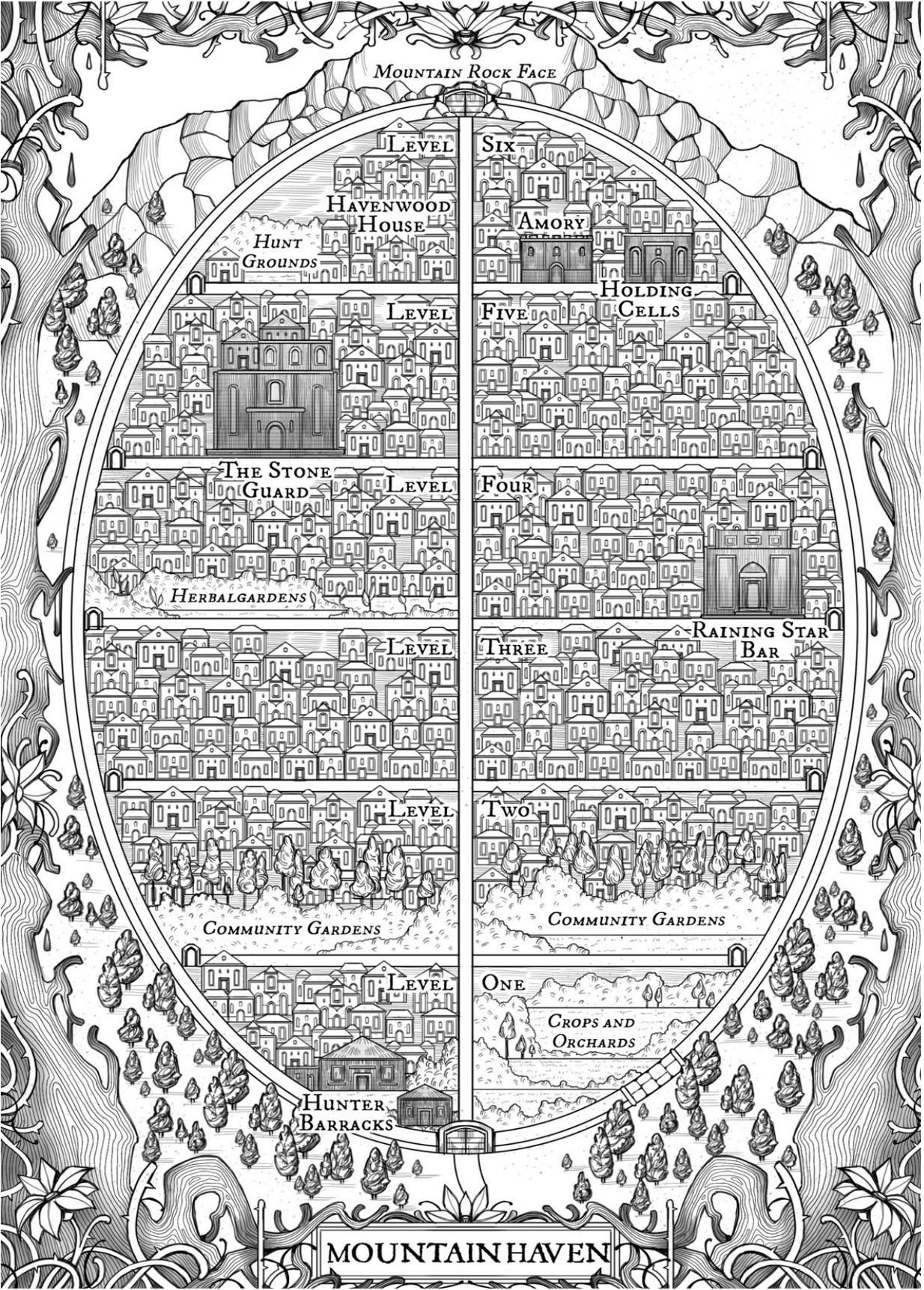
Stellaria - Divine of Stars & Darkness  
Blessings of Light & Illusion  
Silver Auras

Asher - Divine of Endings  
Blessings of Death & Transitions  
Charcoal Auras

Polm - Divine of Malice  
Blessings of Fear & Manipulation  
Orange Auras

Vardek - Divine of Protection  
Blessings of Holy Fire & Shielding  
Blue Auras

Elvodeen - Divine of Strength  
Blessings of Healing  
Purple Auras



MOUNTAIN ROCK FACE

LEVEL SIX

SIX

HAVENWOOD HOUSE

AMORY

HUNT GROUNDS

LEVEL FIVE

FIVE

HOLDING CELLS

THE STONE GUARD

LEVEL FOUR

FOUR

HERBALGARDENS

RAINING STAR BAR

LEVEL THREE

THREE

LEVEL TWO

TWO

COMMUNITY GARDENS

COMMUNITY GARDENS

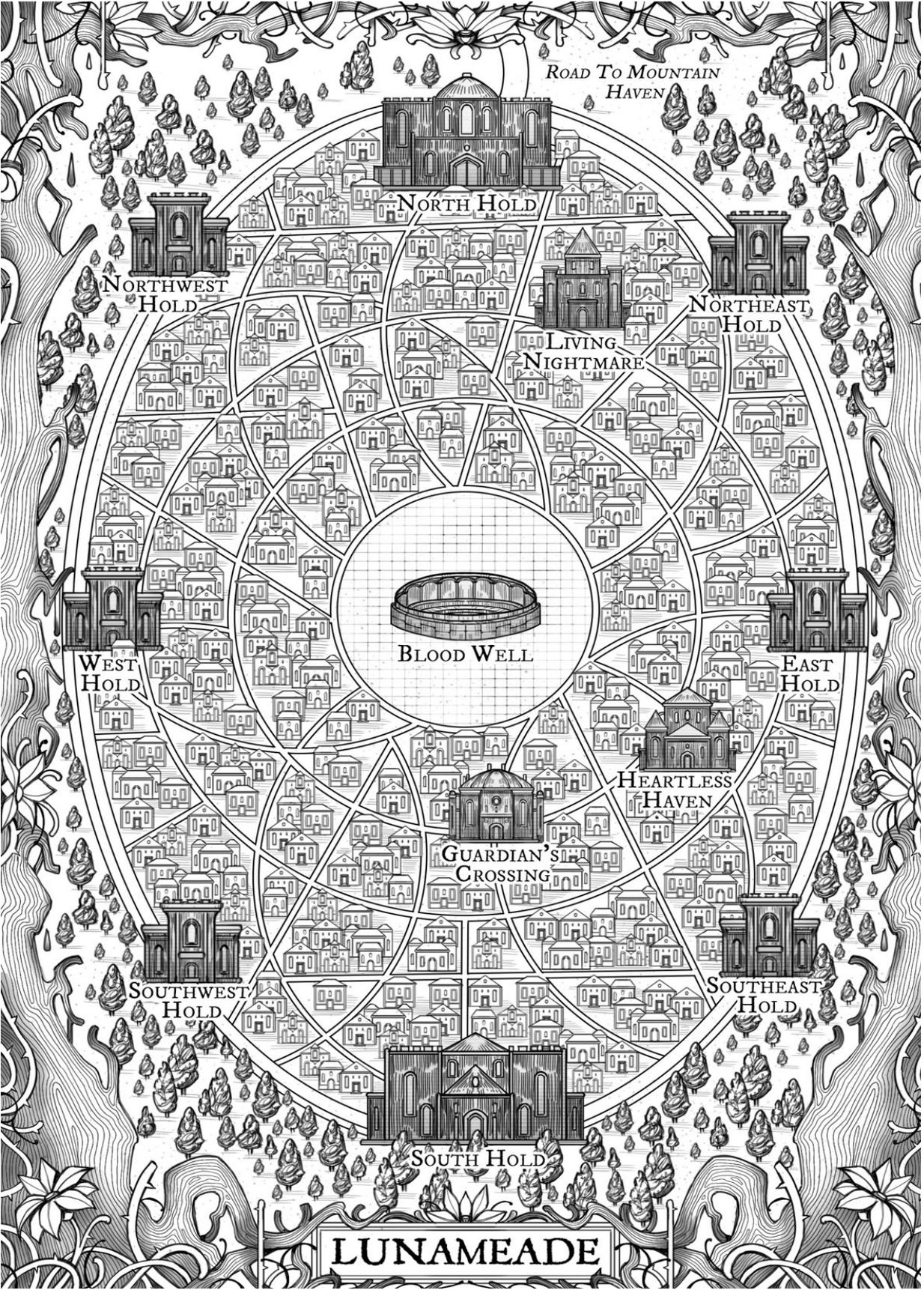
LEVEL ONE

ONE

CROPS AND ORCHARDS

HUNTER BARRACKS

MOUNTAIN HAVEN



ROAD TO MOUNTAIN  
HAVEN

NORTH HOLD

NORTHWEST  
HOLD

NORTHEAST  
HOLD

LIVING  
NIGHTMARE

WEST  
HOLD

BLOOD WELL

EAST  
HOLD

HEARTLESS  
HAVEN

GUARDIAN'S  
CROSSING

SOUTHWEST  
HOLD

SOUTHEAST  
HOLD

SOUTH HOLD

LUNAMEADE

## HARLOW

The Drained are at the city gates again. I can't hear their claws scraping the metal bars or see their ghastly pale faces, but the distant bells ring loud enough to warn the citizens of Lunameade to take shelter.

It's disconcerting that the Drained are out so soon after sunset. While the sun doesn't hurt them, they usually prefer to wait until the deepest part of the night to come looking for blood.

I lean farther out the manor window, squinting into the night to spot any breaks in the blue holy fire that covers the top of the city walls, straining to listen to figure out which gate they're storming.

They come to South Hold most often, so I'm used to hearing the havoc in my backyard along with the low-pitched ring of the bell at the South Gate. But tonight, they're farther west—Southwest Hold, from the sound of the slightly higher-pitched vibration.

Lunameade was designed for siege. Everyone in the city lives and dies by the pattern of those bells. The solid, steady signal clang means the bloodthirsty are at the gates. It's the first in a series of signals to indicate how serious the attack is. Two clangs in a row would indicate a breach, signaling that every civilian in that quadrant of the city should fall back to the first set of safety doors. Three would signal that the safety doors are breached and they must fall back to the second set of safety doors.

One loud clang and then the warning bells go silent. I wait.

The first survival skill we learn is how to run. The second is how to listen. These bell patterns are burned into the brains of everyone in Lunameade because knowing the slightest variance could be the difference between life and death.

The rapid, high-pitched tinkling of the safety bells sounds.

I blow out a breath of relief. The threat has been dealt with—for the third time this week. The city is safe, or at least safer. For now.

Most people won't wander tonight. They'll stay tucked in their homes, unless, of course, they're my family members, or any of the other high magical houses forced to attend this wretched dinner.

I grab my flask and dash out into the hallway. I don't want to be late, but I also don't want to be there any longer than I have to be. I take a swig from the flask and pause at the end of the long hallway.

Alcohol normally blunts the sharp edges of my moods, but tonight the burn of booze in my chest does little more than send my already fluttering heart into a more frenzied rhythm. I tuck the flask into a large plant next to the hall table and stare at my reflection, giving my pale cheeks a pinch.

"That's as good as it's going to get. Pinch all you like. You'll never be quite as lovely as your older sister."

I jump, my breath catching in my chest as I turn and behold Aidia.

"Nonsense," I say. "I look just like you."

She stands so that half her body is shadowed by the corner of the wall that leads to the back stairwell, the rest in chandelier light that cascades over her left cheek and shines on her sleek black hair. The relief and joy of seeing her for the first time in a month is dampened by the fact that she won't turn toward the light so I can see her full face. She's always hiding it from me. Ever since our parents married her off to that monster. Ever since the beatings started.

"I didn't know you would be here," I say, finally regaining my senses.

"Mother insisted this was an all-hands-on-deck dinner. Couldn't do it without all her children." Aidia waves her hand down the hallway toward the sound of glass clinking so casually—like she hasn't been sequestered to North Hold for the past year—like her husband has allowed her to attend more than a handful of events.

The chandeliers cast an elaborate mandala of light on the dark wood floor, and Aidia traces the pattern with the silk toe of her shoe.

“Any chance you know what this unscheduled dinner is about?” I ask. “I’ve enjoyed getting to avoid so many of them lately.”

“Ah, yes, on account of your broken heart.”

I fake a pout. “I can’t believe you would doubt how much I miss my beloved...”

Aidia’s lips twitch into a smirk at my long pause. “Marc.”

I snap. “Marc! It was on the tip of my tongue. I’m so bereft I nearly forgot his name.”

“May the Divine Asher deliver his soul safely beyond the veil,” Aidia says sarcastically.

“As long as he’s delivered far from me,” I counter.

Aidia glances down the hallway again, and I know she’s dreading this performance as much as I am. It’s the burden of being a Carrenwell.

Part of the reason our family stays in power is because we act as a unit. We only display magic when we’re all together, so it’s impossible for anyone to tell who is doing what. My father will not abide someone spotting our weaknesses. I used to think my parents were paranoid, but the sheer number of attempts on our lives over the last few years has made it clear that their fears are warranted.

“Can’t you do something to make me look less exhausted?” I ask, looking in the hall mirror again.

Dark circles shadow my eyes, making my irises look even more violet than they already are. I push my bottom lip into a pout as I turn to glance at Aidia. The baby-sister face usually works on her, but today, she frowns.

“You know I can’t.” Her half-shadowed expression looks almost like concern. There’s something unspoken in her eyes that turns my stomach.

I swallow hard. “Aidy, step into the light.”

“You can’t confront Rafe. It will only make it worse,” she whispers.

Aidia’s magic is weaving glamour, not mind-reading, but there are times when her foresight makes me wonder. She has an uncanny ability to read my emotions the way a huntsman can read the forest, a deep intuitive knowing that senses an unnatural shift with ease.

“Step into the light and let me see you, and I swear I’ll be on my best behavior,” I say.

She steps forward, confirming what I already knew. A mottled bruise colors her right cheekbone. It’s a regular occurrence, but every time I see her hurt, it robs me of breath.

Despite my parents' careful rules and meticulous planning to have their children almost exactly two years apart, Aidia and I broke the mold with only eleven months between us. Maybe that's the reason we've always been so close, but at times it feels like all the Carrenwell ambition was spent on our older siblings and none was left for us. Of course, I have long suspected that they never planned for a ninth. I think they wanted to stop at eight children—one to marry into each gatehouse family to secure Carrenwell control in every powerful magic household.

Aidia has always felt like a mirror for me—like part of my heart living outside my body. It doesn't matter that she's older. It doesn't matter that she can take care of herself. She's my sister, and when someone puts their hands on her, I want to kill them in the slowest, most painful way possible.

"I know you're worried, but you don't need to be," Aidia says. "I've always been able to take care of myself."

Something about those words rings false. Unpleasant memories scratch at the back of my mind, but I don't want to go to that dark place before this dinner.

"You've always had a big mouth that gets you in trouble," I counter.

She shrugs a shoulder.

I lower my voice. "Aidy, no one would know. I would make it look like an accident. I could just—"

She holds up a hand to brace against my concern as she has so many times before. As if *she* would allow *me* to live with a monster. As if she wouldn't be the first in line to claw his eyes out if I showed up with a black eye or angry fingerprints pressed into my pale neck.

Panic swells in my chest, threatening to cut off all my oxygen. My heartbeat crescendos in my ears and I run a hand down the silk of my dress. *This is smooth, soft. My dress is red.*

I've done this same exercise so many times, trying to remind myself that I'm safe. My body cannot always tell the difference when my mind tries to drag me into the memories of when I wasn't.

When I meet Aidia's gaze, there's a crease in her brow. "Say it," she whispers.

I press a clammy hand to my breastbone. "My heart."

She mimics my pose. "My bones."

"Our blood," we say together.

Weakness is a punishable offense in our family. We can never outright say when we're struggling. So those words have been our secret check-in with each other for years. Those words say, *You're never alone in your pain.*

I turn to the mirror and press my hands to my cheeks.

"If you're really worried about how you look, you can always use your pendant," Aidia says.

Running my fingers over the star pendant imbued with her magic, I turn to face her. "That would be a waste."

She rolls her eyes. "Of course. You need to save it for your *secret missions.*"

Aidia doesn't approve of my double life, not because she doesn't like to see men put in their place, but because she worries about my safety.

"It only has limited uses. I don't like to waste your gift," I say.

"What will you do when it runs out?" she asks.

I don't like to think about that. It has at least another month of uses. Replenishing it is a problem for future Harlow.

Her violet eyes light up and she grins. "I like to imagine you'll resort to disguising yourself with a fake mustache and wig."

"Either way, there's nothing to be done for my dark circles now, but I thought you'd glamour—" I wave at my eye.

"Why should I fade it? So everyone else can feel comfortable?" She laughs bitterly. "If our parents are happy to abandon me with that monster, the least they can do is look at the damage. Everyone else stares at us no matter what. May as well give them a show."

As much as we have in common, this has always been where Aidia and I differ. She wants to make her problems everyone's problems by dragging them out into the light. I've always been content to take care of injustice in the dark.

"Whatever this dinner is about, I hope it doesn't drag on. I have better things to do than hear who is newly engaged or what tragedy befell the most recent group of scouts who ventured beyond the city walls," I say.

Aidia grins and her eyes sparkle. For a moment, she looks like her old self. "I know you're an old, wizened widow, but the young bachelorettes fuss over this sort of thing. It's just one dinner with the most powerful families in Lunameade."

I walk to the window and look out at the carriages lined up in front of the manor. "I suppose you're right. Maybe there's been a new baby blessed

with some rare magic or—”

Movement in the reflection in the glass catches my eye.

“Miss Carrenwell.”

I turn as Gaven steps around the corner and stands at rigid attention, his arm extended to act as my escort.

“Gaven, must you always *lurk*?” I snap. “Call me by my Divine-damned name when we’re alone. I can’t stand the ceremony.”

He frowns, the movement accentuating the deep groove in his brow. “Who were you talking to?”

I don’t even need to look to know Aidia has managed to disappear. It has nothing to do with magic, and everything to do with years of practice. She’s always been good at slipping away unnoticed, thanks as much to her ability to bend light and cast illusions as her knowledge of every passageway and hiding place in this mansion—knowledge she’s been gracious enough to share with me.

“Myself,” I mutter.

Gaven’s pale green eyes dart down the hallway as if looking for some unseen danger. When I was young, I’d never seen someone with such strange pale eyes, and I believed it when Aidia told me that they gave him the magical ability to see danger. Now I know that he’s just well-trained and used to my tricks, as any bodyguard should be.

All Carrenwells have a bodyguard. When I was young, I thought it was ridiculous. We’re the most powerful family in the city, both politically and magically. But when there was a particularly swift and deadly breach eleven years ago, it was Gaven’s vigilance and fearsome fighting that protected me when South Hold was overrun with Drained.

Looking at him tonight—his hair, once a deep ashen brown, gone almost entirely gray, and the faint lines of his face shadowed by the chandelier light—it occurs to me that he looks old. Not in his posture, which is still the perfect rigid stance of a soldier, or in his build, which is as broad and muscular as it’s always been, but in the look in his eye that is more wary and, perhaps, more weary than it’s ever been. He was handsome once—he still is for an older man—but something has shifted in him over the last few months, and it’s bothering me that I can’t put my finger on it.

“Did you hear the bells earlier? Southwest Hold isn’t very far. You should stay in tonight,” Gaven says. “You know how quickly things can

shift. It's been eleven years, but the attacks are more frequent than ever now."

He's always quick to remind me of that attack when he suspects I'm preparing for one of my nightly excursions around the city. Just like he's always quick to bring up the fall of Mountain Haven.

The fort along the only trading route for Lunameade was supposed to be impenetrable. But one night ten years ago, their sturdy granite wall fell, and the Drained killed every last man, woman, and child inside. Seemingly overnight, the only stronghold we had outside our city walls became Fallen Hold, and Lunameade was cut off from the world. We became more isolated than we had been since my ancestors founded the city.

I know Gaven is hoping the fear will be a sobering reminder to keep him close, but I refuse to be a prisoner in my own house.

I'm well aware that the bloodsuckers outside the city walls aren't the only threat. There are plenty of bloodthirsty people safe inside our city who would love to get a crack at one of the Carrenwells. Once a year, some overzealous rebel storms our gardens and Gaven proves his worth.

The rest of the time, he makes himself an unrelenting pain in my ass.

I weave my arm through his. "Do you know what this dinner is about?"

Out of the corner of my eye, the tight line of his mouth momentarily dips into a frown. He knows something.

"Care to share with me?"

"Perhaps if you share how you manage to sneak out at night?" he counters. "Or what you're doing out there?"

I bat my lashes at him. "Oh, are we going to gossip? So eager for news of my latest love affair? I'll tell you mine if you tell me what I'm walking into."

He ignores my taunting.

*Fair enough.* I guess I'll just have to wait to find out with everyone else.

He pauses in the hallway just before the dining room doors. No matter how many times we have done this, it still hits me in the chest that Gaven grants me this moment to brace myself. It's a kindness my own parents have never offered.

"How's your head?" he asks.

"It's fine," I say.

"If that changes—"

"Just give you the look. I know."

It's not like he can actually get me out of a family event, but the few times I've had an attack in public, he's caused enough of a diversion for me to sneak away.

He pushes the door open, and an overwhelming surge of magic in the room hits me like a blow. The room smells like beeswax candles and wine, but it looks like bright fireworks of magic bursting around the table. I close my eyes as we step inside. I can still see the auras behind my lids.

Every magical family in Lunameade in one room, the rainbow of their magic a bright swirl of color. This is what separates our family from all the others and what has kept us in power all this time.

Every guest at this dinner can wield magic, but only the Carrenwells can see it.

That means no one can try to use magic on us without us noticing, and it means that even if we meet a stranger, we'll know immediately what kind of blessing they have and how to counteract it.

Blinking my eyes open, I take in the smiling faces and expensive clothes.

My mother's dark violet gaze sweeps over me, and she purses her lips. That's as close to approval as I'll get. I'm sure there's something displeasing about my appearance. There always is. It took years of desperate striving to learn, but I've abandoned the notion that I can possibly please her. There's freedom in being a disappointment.

Gaven leads me past my usual spot toward the end of the head table, and my hackles rise. I dig my fingernails into his arm, but he doesn't slow as he guides me past my sisters, Electra, Carianne, and Sophie. I expect him to stop at the chair beside Sophie. Instead, he leads me on past my brothers, Frederick and Thomas, to the seat beside my older brother Kellan and his wife Libby.

I smile and sit, placing the golden napkin in my lap.

Before I can ask, Kellan leans over and fills my glass with sparkling wine. "What did you do?" His tone is teasing, but I can see the hint of concern in his eyes at this sudden shift in the usual seating order.

He runs a hand over his jaw, the movement a disturbing echo of our father. Then, his lips tip up, and that smirk is just like mine and Aidia's.

"I don't know what you mean," I whisper. "Clearly we're celebrating." I tilt my glass back and the fizzy liquid tingles over my tongue.

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about,” Kellan says, draining his glass. He cocks his head to the side, his lilac eyes scanning me for any hint of a lie.

Kellan is the only sibling besides Aidia that I have a relationship with. Before he took over as captain of the city watch at eighteen, he spent all of his free time with Aidia and me, and he did his best to protect us from our father’s wrath.

I turn to face him. “You mean, you don’t even know what this is about? Getting rusty in your old age?”

He refills his glass, looking at our parents and then back at me. “I’m serious.”

“So am I. I haven’t done anything.”

One of Kellan’s brows arches, disappearing beneath the dark hair falling over his forehead, the expression so startlingly like Aidia’s that it makes my chest hurt. “Perhaps the problem isn’t doing anything but doing *anyone*?”

I smirk. “Perhaps.”

I don’t like lying to him, but what he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. It’s his job as captain of the city watch to spot any threats to city security or the magical families, so I’ve been meticulous at covering my tracks. He knows that I sneak out most nights, but he assumes I’ve been sleeping my way through the city, and that’s how I like it.

“How are Jack and Kate?” I ask, leaning over to grin at his wife.

“Trouble as always, just like their father,” Libby says.

If my niece and nephew were here, I could be entertained, but children are treated like a nuisance in our family—at least until they master their magical abilities.

Libby wrings her hands. “It’s good to see you out of mourning black and looking so well, Harlow. Red suits you better.”

I smooth my dress. “If I have to be unlucky in love, at least I can look good doing it, right?”

Kellan purses his lips. He knows my late husband’s untimely death was less a lack of luck than an abundance of poison magic at the request of my parents.

I offer Libby a sincere smile. “I’m kidding. Six months in mourning seems to have ruined my social skills, but surely you have better things to worry about than one of your sisters-in-law.”

“Yes, well, I only like one of them,” Libby says, tucking her red hair behind her ear. “And Kel refuses to let me worry about him, no matter how wild the rebels get in town.”

I eye Kellan. “Has it been dangerous of late?”

Before he can answer, a servant places plates of bright orange zucchini blossoms in front of us, and I’m forced from the moment of personal connection into my usual role of playing a part of the untouchable Carrenwell Family.

I try to ignore the fact that I am sitting across from the man I loathe, but Rafe Mattingly’s orange aura is a vortex that pulls on everyone in the room.

Blessings from Polm, the Divine of Malice, tend to feel like that because manipulation magic relies on the wielder’s ability to attach to other people.

My oldest brother, Able, leans a conspiratorial arm on the back of Rafe’s chair and whispers to him. Rafe tips his head back and laughs. That bastard has the audacity to laugh in our house—to bare the long column of his throat like he’s certain no one would try to slit it.

With his dark golden hair falling over his forehead and the laugh lines crinkling around his eyes, it would be easy to mistake him for someone harmless. But if you pay attention, it’s impossible to miss the cunning in his bright blue eyes.

He rests an arm on the empty chair to his left and smiles lazily at Able to his right. That’s what happens when men act up. They don’t get punished. They get rewarded with a place of honor next to the heir.

I could end him so quickly, and his little whisper of magic would do nothing to save him. I could poison his wine, or sneak him into a dark room and press my lips to his, and as sick as that would make me, it would be worth it to trick him into a swift death.

But that’s just a daydream. Rafe managed to wrestle the title of mayor away from my father four years ago. Though it’s a role designed to represent the unblessed, magicless people of Lunameade, my father held it for years, as did every ancestor in his line right up to the founder of the city—until Rafe.

Rafe has managed to convince the unblessed that he understands their plight and wants to make the city more equitable for those who lack magical gifts. It would be a more compelling notion if I didn’t know what a self-serving monster he is.

For now, he is untouchable, but he won't be forever.

Rafe catches me staring and lifts his glass of wine in a mocking toast. I've wished for a long-distance magic—something swift and violent—all my life, but never as much as at this moment. He looks so smug as he licks his lips and savors our expensive wine.

He should be terrified of our family. He has lesser magic, but his ability to charm and persuade is only a glimmer of the magic my parents or eight siblings possess. But Rafe doesn't even look concerned. He's busy acting chummy with Able, who returns his attention like they're the best of friends.

Aidia sneaks in the side door of the dining room, but everyone is too focused on the first course to pay her any mind. She leans against the wall by the window, staring out at the city.

My parents don't even glance at her. I wish I could say that I'm surprised. While they're happy to benefit from the loyalty afforded by marrying off their children to lesser magical houses, they don't like to witness the cost of their ambition.

For a long time, I waited for my mother to show some semblance of guilt. But whenever Aidia shows up with a black eye, our mother suggests she glamour it away. As always, Liza Carrenwell is more concerned about what other people think than her daughter's pain.

Rafe also ignores Aidia's colorful presence, pouring himself another glass of wine as she finally crosses the dining room and sits down in the chair beside him. Of course, he doesn't bother to pull it out for her. Instead, he holds my gaze and cracks his knuckles as if to show off the fists that have been beating my sister.

Aidia stills, the futile animal stillness of prey trying to outwit a predator.

My mouth starts to burn. I can feel my lips turning a deep, poisonous purple beneath the bright red stain I applied earlier. It takes all my restraint not to launch myself across the table and drive my steak knife into his throat.

My wrath is incendiary, a swelling, explosive thing that demands action. But a reckless swing at him now won't help anything. I need to bide my time.

The poison turns my mouth sweet as I sip my wine and glare at his smug grin.

This is how it always is—him getting away with his violence and me waiting for my opportunity to do the same.

I cannot make him sorry, but I can make him suffer. And that will have to be enough.

The shrill tap of a knife against glass startles me from my seething.

My father stands, and a hush comes over the room. “We have some exciting and surprising news. After the many years we believed Mountain Haven to be completely annihilated, we’ve received a communication from them.”

The murmurs of the crowd swell into a frenzy.

I can feel Gaven’s gaze on me as the words register. Aidia shifts but doesn’t speak. She doesn’t need to. I can practically read her thoughts. My father sent multiple scouting parties beyond the walls to try to find survivors at Fallen Hold, but in all these years, they haven’t found any.

“For so long, we’d thought they were lost to us, but Fallen Hold is now Mountain Haven once again. Now we can rejoice in their safe return,” my father continues.

“Where have they been all these years?” Rafe asks.

My father’s smile pinches a hint. He hates when Rafe chips away at his authority. While I love seeing my father taken down a peg or two, I hate that it’s Rafe benefiting from it.

“Underground, and then rebuilding. Apparently, it took them until now to have the infrastructure in place to reach us without risk of losing lives in the journey through the Drained Wood.” Murmurs rise around the table. My father pauses until they hush again. “Not only are the Havenwoods still ruling the hold, but they have a son and heir.”

The guests descend into pandemonium—chairs scrape as several men push back from the table as if preparing to riot. They won’t actually do it, because anyone Divine-blessed who lives inside these city walls is loyal to my family out of necessity. Still, they get a thrill from believing for a moment they might be able to hit back.

I can relate.

Animated conversations break out all around me, including between Kellan and Libby. Even before the attack on Mountain Haven, city folk considered the people of the fort savages. Aidia and I used to sneak out to pubs, hoping to hear stories about the only world we knew outside the city walls. We listened intently as tradesmen told tales of their huntsmen

offering bloody rituals to Asher, the Divine of Endings, or wild sex rituals to Kennymyra, the Divine of Pleasure. We were sheltered and inexperienced and fascinated. Their world seemed so much more mysterious and feral, so very much in contrast to our structured, bustling city.

I catch Aidia's gaze, and she lifts a brow as if to say she sees where our father's speech is going. They're going to marry off some poor young woman from one of the lower magical families to the Fallen Hold heir. If they survived this long out in the wild, the Havenwoods either have more powerful magic than our parents realized—or a more valuable secret. If there's one thing they can't resist, it's the possibility of more power.

Aidia nods to several young, unmarried women at the far end of the table. They wring their hands and stare wide-eyed at the plates of untouched stuffed zucchini blossoms in front of them. A young woman from a lesser family is a small price to pay for whatever helped them survive.

I lean back in my chair. Thank Divine I'm a widow. I haven't been this happy that Marc's dead since the day I killed him. I served my time, and now my reward is largely being ignored.

My father smiles indulgently at the whispering crowd, as if we are all just a bunch of naive children. Finally, he holds up both hands and the room quiets.

“Liza and I are delighted to accept their request to come back into the fold after thinking they were lost to us for so long. They arrive tomorrow.” He looks at my mother, who rises and takes his hand, lifting her wine glass with the other. She nods, and my father continues. “We'd also like to offer a toast. After much misfortune, this is a moment of hope.”

The guilt placates everyone, and a wave of solemn nods goes through the crowd, all eyes shifting to me. I refuse to meet any of their gazes. It's so hard to fake grief over my horrible, dead husband. I do my best impression of a weary widow.

My father clears his throat, indicating the end of his performance of solemnity. “We are certain that whatever has allowed them to thrive in such dire circumstances makes them a great asset to strengthening our resolve against the Drained. We are pleased to announce that we've agreed to a preliminary marriage contract between their son and our youngest daughter, Harlow.”

Kellan tenses beside me and Aidia's jaw drops across the table, but it's not until every gaze in the room shifts to me that I register that my father said my name.

I choke on my wine, sputtering into my napkin. I stare at my father, trying to master my expression. All the years of practice and gritting it out through pain fail me; I can only manage a tight smile.

There's a challenge in his eye, as if he's daring me to argue in front of everyone, knowing I would never break the first rule of the Carrenwell Family—present a united front in public and save dissent for behind closed doors.

I force a smile to my face and nod.

My father holds up his glass. "Now we'd like to offer a toast to our daughter for solidifying this alliance and ensuring a stronger future for all of Lunameade. To Harlow."

The crowd repeats after him, and glasses clink. I knock back the stinging bubbles and enjoy the sharp burn that slides down my throat.

My parents want to trade me to some savage from beyond the walls, but I have every intention of getting something for my trouble.