

Author of *Anna Dressed in Blood*
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THREE

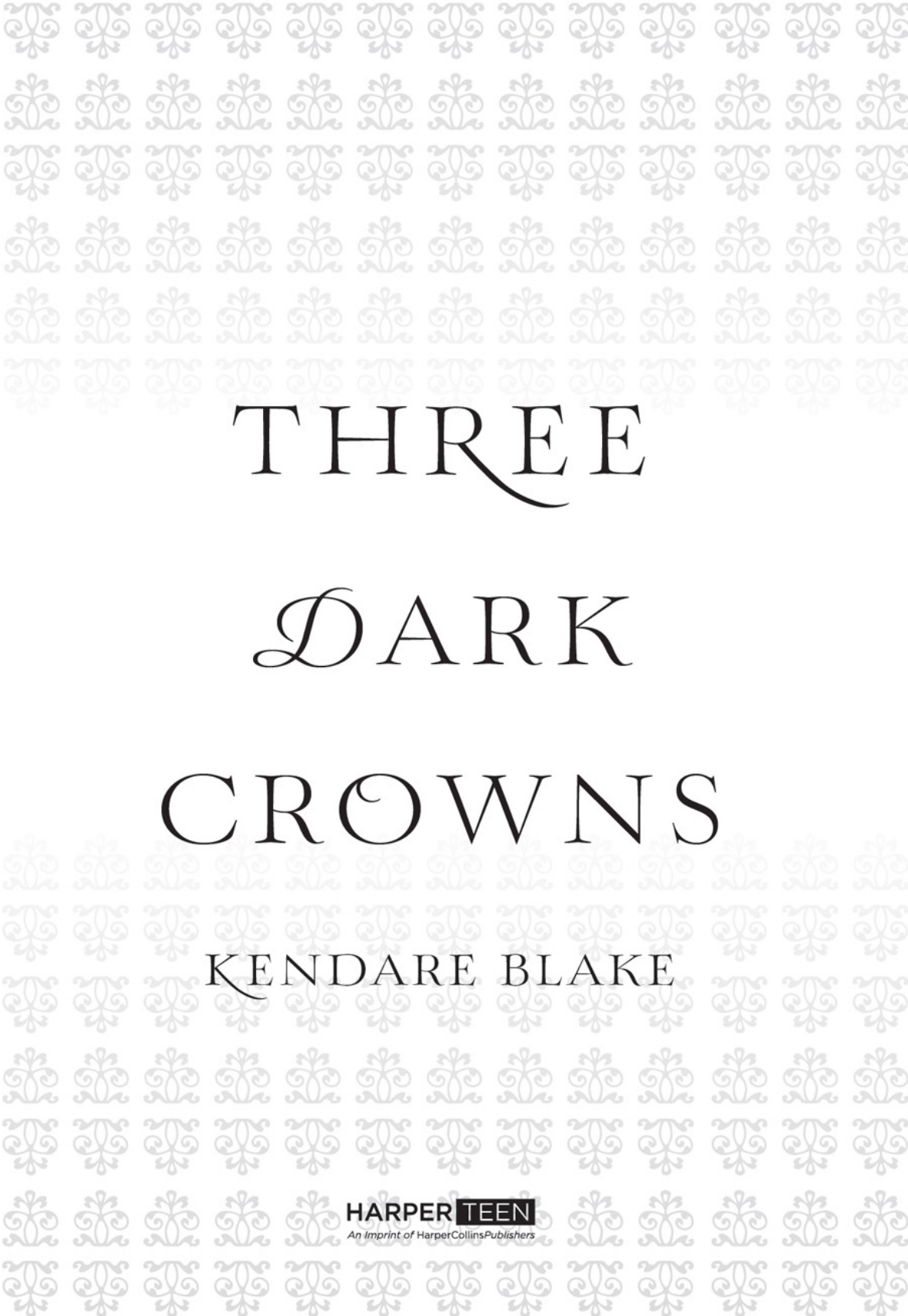


DARK



CROWNS

WHEN KINGDOM COME, THERE WILL BE ONE.



THREE

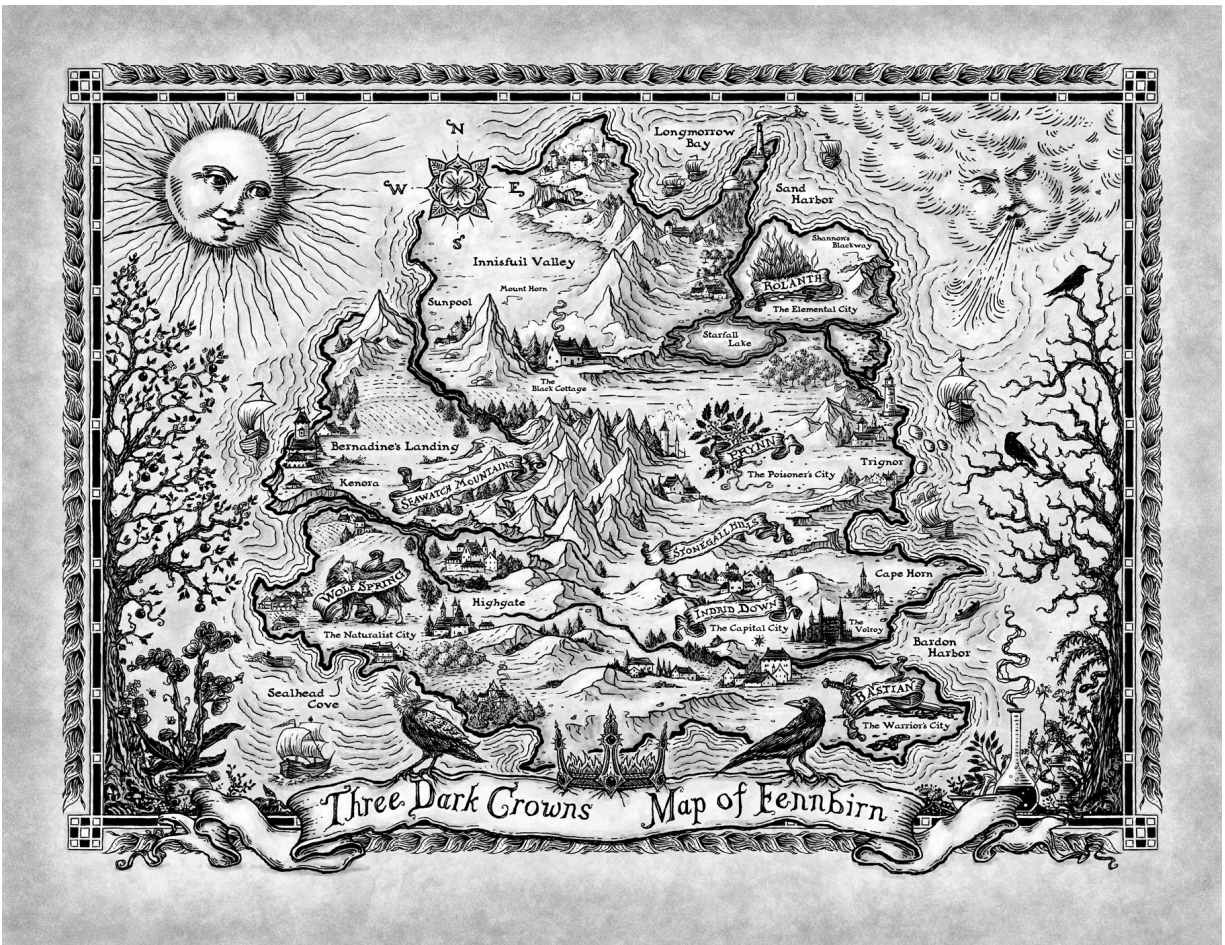
DARK

CROWNS

KENDARE BLAKE

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MAP



EPIGRAPH



*Three dark queens
are born in a glen,
sweet little triplets
will never be friends*

—

*Three dark sisters
all fair to be seen,
two to devour
and one to be Queen*



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THE QUEENS' SIXTEENTH BIRTHDAY



December 21

Four months until Beltane

GREAVESDRAKE MANOR



A young queen stands barefoot on a wooden block with her arms outstretched. She has only her scant underclothes and the long, black hair that hangs down her back to fend off the drafts. Every ounce of strength in her slight frame is needed to keep her chin high and her shoulders square.

Two tall women circle the wooden block. Their fingertips drum against crossed arms, and their footsteps echo across the cold hardwood floor.

“She is thin to the ribs,” Genevieve says, and smacks them lightly, as if it might scare the bones farther under the skin. “And still so small. Small queens do not inspire much confidence. The others on the council cannot stop whispering about it.”

She studies the queen with distaste, her eyes dragging across every imperfection: her hollow cheeks, her pallid skin. The scabs from a rubbing of poison oak that still mar her right hand. But no scars. They are always careful about that.

“Put your arms down,” Genevieve says, and turns on her heel.

Queen Katharine glances at Natalia, the taller and elder of the two Arron sisters, before she does. Natalia nods, and the blood rushes back to Katharine’s fingertips.

“She will have to wear gloves tonight,” Genevieve says. Her tone is unmistakably critical. But it is Natalia who determines the queen’s training, and if Natalia wants to rub Katharine’s hands with poison oak one week before her birthday, then she will.

Genevieve lifts a lock of Katharine’s hair. Then she pulls it hard.

Katharine blinks. She has been prodded back and forth by Genevieve's hands since she stepped onto the block. Jerked so roughly at times that it seems Genevieve wants her to fall so she can scold her for the bruises.

Genevieve pulls her hair again.

"At least it is not falling out. But how can black hair be so dull? And she is still so, so small."

"She is the smallest and the youngest of the triplets," Natalia says in her deep, calm voice. "Some things, Sister, you cannot change."

When Natalia steps forward, it is difficult for Katharine to keep her eyes from following her. Natalia Arron is as close to a mother as she will ever know. It was her silk skirt that Katharine burrowed in at the age of six, all that long way from the Black Cottage to her new home at Greavesdrake Manor, sobbing after being parted from her sisters. There was nothing queenly about Katharine that day. But Natalia indulged her. She let Katharine weep and ruin her dress. She stroked her hair. It is Katharine's earliest memory. The one and only time Natalia ever allowed her to act like a child.

In the slanting, indirect light of the parlor, Natalia's ice-blond bun appears almost silver. But she is not old. Natalia will never be old. She has far too much work and far too many responsibilities to allow it. She is the head of the Arron family of poisoners, and the strongest member of the Black Council. She is raising their new queen.

Genevieve grasps Katharine's poisoned hand. Her thumb traces the pattern of scabs until she finds a large one and picks it until it bleeds.

"Genevieve," Natalia cautions. "That is enough."

"Gloves are fine, I suppose," Genevieve says, though she still seems cross. "Gloves over the elbows will give shape to her arms."

She releases Katharine's hand, and it bounces against her hip. Katharine has been on the block for over an hour, and there is much day still ahead. All the way to nightfall, her party, and the *Gave Noir*. The poisoner's feast. Just thinking of it makes her stomach clench, and she winces slightly.

Natalia frowns.

“You have been resting?” she asks.

“Yes, Natalia,” says Katharine.

“Nothing but water and thinned porridge?”

“Nothing.”

Nothing to eat but that for days, and it may still not be enough. The poison she will have to consume, the sheer amounts of it, may still overcome Natalia’s training. Of course, it would be nothing at all if Katharine’s poisoner gift were strong.

Standing on the block, the walls of the darkened parlor feel heavy. They press in, given weight by the sheer number of Arrons inside. They have come from all across the island for this. The queens’ sixteenth birthday. Greavesdrake usually feels like a great, silent cavern, empty save for Natalia and the servants; her siblings, Genevieve and Antonin; and Natalia’s cousins Lucian and Allegra when they are not at their houses in town. Today it is busy and decked with finery. It is packed to purpose with poisons and poisoners. If a house could smile, Greavesdrake would be grinning.

“She has to be ready,” Genevieve says. “Every corner of the island will hear about what happens tonight.”

Natalia cocks her head at her sister. The gesture manages to convey at once how sympathetic Natalia is to Genevieve’s worries and how tired she is of hearing about them.

Natalia turns to look out the window, down the hills to the capital city of Indrid Down. The twin black spires of the Volroy, the palace where the queen resides during her reign, and where the Black Council resides permanently, rises above the chimney smoke.

“Genevieve. You are too nervous.”

“Too nervous?” Genevieve asks. “We are entering the Ascension Year with a weak queen. If we lose . . . I will not go back to Prynn!”

Her sister’s voice is so shrill that Natalia chuckles. Prynn. It was once the poisoners’ city but now only the weakest reside there. The entire capital of Indrid Down is theirs now. It has been for over a hundred years.

“Genevieve, you have never even been to Prynn.”

“Do not laugh at me.”

“Then do not be funny. I do not know what you are about sometimes.”

She looks again out the window, toward the Volroy’s black spires. Five Arrons sit on the Black Council. No less than five have sat on it for three generations, placed there by the ruling poisoner queen.

“I am only telling you what you may have missed, being so often away from council business, coaching and coddling our queen.”

“I do not miss anything,” says Natalia, and Genevieve lowers her eyes.

“Of course. I am sorry, Sister. It is only that the council grows wary, with the temple openly backing the elemental.”

“The temple is for festival days and for praying over sick children.” Natalia turns and taps Katharine beneath the chin. “For everything else, the people look to the council.

“Why do you not go out to the stables and ride, Genevieve?” she suggests. “It will settle your nerves. Or return to the Volroy. Some business there is sure to require attention.”

Genevieve closes her mouth. For a moment, it seems that she might disobey or reach up toward the block and slap Katharine across the face, just to relieve her tension.

“That is a good idea,” Genevieve says. “I will see you tonight, then, Sister.”

After Genevieve has gone, Natalia nods to Katharine. “You may get down.”

The skinny girl’s knees shake as she climbs off the block, careful not to stumble.

“Go to your rooms,” Natalia says, and turns away to study a sheaf of papers on a table. “I will send Giselle with a bowl of porridge. Then nothing else besides a few sips of water.”

Katharine bows her head and drops half a curtsy for Natalia to catch from the corner of her eye. But she lingers.

“Is it . . . ?” Katharine asks. “Is it really as bad as Genevieve says?”

Natalia regards her a moment, as though deciding whether she will bother to answer.

“Genevieve worries,” she says finally. “She has been that way since we were children. No, Kat. It is not so bad as all that.” She reaches out to tuck some strands of hair behind the girl’s ear. Natalia often does that when she is pleased. “Poisoner queens have sat the throne since long before I was born. They will sit it long after you and I are both dead.” She rests her hands on Katharine’s shoulders. Tall, coldly beautiful Natalia. The words from her mouth leave no room for arguments, no space for doubt. If Katharine were more like her, the Arrons would have nothing to fear.

“Tonight is a party,” says Natalia. “For you, on your birthday. Enjoy it, Queen Katharine. And let me worry about the rest.”

Seated before her dressing mirror, Queen Katharine studies her reflection as Giselle brushes out her black hair in long, even strokes. Katharine is still in her robe and underclothes and is still cold. Greavesdrake is a drafty place that clings to its shadows. Sometimes, it seems that she has spent most of her life in the dark and chilled to the bone.

On the right side of her tableau is a glass-sided cage. In it, her coral snake rests, fat with crickets. Katharine has had her since she was a hatchling, and she is the only venomed creature Katharine does not fear. She knows the vibrations of Katharine’s voice and the scent of her skin. She has never bitten her, even once.

Katharine will wear her to the party tonight, coiled around her wrist like a warm, muscular bracelet. Natalia will wear a black mamba. A small snake bracelet is not as fancy as one draped across one’s shoulders, but Katharine prefers her little adornment. She is prettier; red and yellow and black. Toxic colors, they say. The perfect accessory for a poisoner queen.

Katharine touches the glass, and the snake lifts her rounded head. Katharine was instructed to never give her a name, told over and over that she was not a pet. But in Katharine’s head, she calls the snake “Sweetheart.”

“Don’t drink too much champagne,” Giselle says as she gathers Katharine’s hair into sections. “It is sure to be envenomed, or stained with poisoned juice. I heard talk in the kitchen of pink mistletoe berries.”

“I will have to drink some of it,” says Katharine. “They are toasting my birthday, after all.”

Her birthday and her sisters’ birthdays. All across the island the people are celebrating the sixteenth birthday of the newest generation of triplet queens.

“Wet your lips, then,” says Giselle. “Nothing more. It is not only the poison to be mindful of, but the drink itself. You are too slight to handle much without turning sloppy.”

Giselle weaves Katharine’s hair into braids, and twists them high upon the back of her head, wrapping them around and around into a bun. Her touch is gentle. She does not tug. She knows that the years of poisoning have weakened the scalp.

Katharine reaches for more makeup, but Giselle clucks her tongue. The queen is already powdered too white, an attempt to hide the bones that jut from her shoulders and to disguise the hollows in her cheeks. She has been poisoned thin. Nights of sweating and vomiting have made her skin fragile and translucent as wet paper.

“You are pretty enough already,” Giselle says, and smiles into the mirror. “With those big, dark doll’s eyes.”

Giselle is kind. Her favorite of Greavesdrake’s maids. But even the maid is more beautiful than the queen in many ways, with full hips, and color in her face, blond hair that shines even though she has to dye it to the ice blond that Natalia prefers.

“Doll’s eyes,” Katharine repeats.

Perhaps. But they are not lovely. They are big, black orbs in a sickly visage. Looking into the mirror, she imagines her body in pieces. Bones. Skin. Not enough blood. It would not take much to break her down to nothing, to strip away scant muscles and pull the organs out to dry in the sun. She wonders often whether her sisters would break down similarly. If

underneath their skin they are all the same. Not one poisoner, one naturalist, and one elemental.

“Genevieve thinks that I will fail,” Katharine says. “She says I am too small and weak.”

“You are a poisoner queen,” says Giselle. “What else matters but that? Besides, you are not so small. Not so weak. I have seen both weaker and smaller.”

Natalia sweeps into the room in a tight black sheath. They should have heard her coming; heels clicking against the floors and ringing off the high ceilings. They were too distracted.

“Is she ready?” Natalia asks, and Katharine stands. Being dressed by the head of the Arron household is an honor, reserved for festival days. And the most important of birthdays.

Giselle fetches Katharine’s gown. It is black and full-skirted. Heavy. There are no sleeves, but black satin gloves to cover the poison-oak scabs have already been laid out.

Katharine steps into the gown, and Natalia begins to fasten it. Katharine’s stomach quivers. Sounds of the party assembling have begun to trickle up the stairs. Natalia and Giselle slide the gloves onto her hands. Giselle opens the snake’s cage. Katharine fishes out Sweetheart, and the snake coils obediently around her wrist.

“Is it drugged?” Natalia asks. “Perhaps it should be.”

“She will be fine,” Katharine says, and strokes Sweetheart’s scales. “She is well-mannered.”

“As you say.” Natalia turns Katharine to the mirror and places her hands on her shoulders.

Never before have three queens of the same gift ruled in succession. Sylvia, Nicola, and Camille were the last three. All were poisoners, raised by Arrons. One more, and perhaps it will become a dynasty; perhaps only the poisoner queen will be allowed to grow up and her sisters will be drowned at birth.

“There will be nothing too surprising in the *Gave Noir*,” Natalia says. “Nothing that you have not seen before. But just the same, do not eat too much. Use your tricks. Do as we practiced.”

“It would be a good omen,” Katharine says softly, “if my gift were to come tonight. On my birthday. Like Queen Hadly’s did.”

“You have been lingering in the library histories again.” Natalia sprays a bit of jasmine perfume onto Katharine’s neck and then touches the braids piled onto the back of her head. Natalia’s ice-blond hair is fashioned in a similar style, perhaps as a show of solidarity. “Queen Hadly was not a poisoner. She had the war gift. It is different.”

Katharine nods as she is turned left and right, less a person than a mannequin, rough clay upon which Natalia can work her poison craft.

“You are a little skinny,” Natalia says. “Camille was never skinny. She was almost plump. She looked forward to the *Gave Noir* as a child to a festival feast.”

Katharine’s ears prick at the mention of Queen Camille. Despite being raised as Camille’s foster sister, Natalia almost never talks about the previous queen. Katharine’s mother, though Katharine does not think of her that way. Temple doctrine decrees that queens have no mother or father. They are daughters of the Goddess only. Besides, Queen Camille departed the island with her king-consort as soon as she recovered from giving birth, as all queens do. The Goddess sent the new queens, and the old queen’s reign was ended.

Still, Katharine enjoys hearing stories about those who came before. The only story about Camille that Natalia tells is the story of how Camille took her crown. How she poisoned her sisters so slyly and quietly that it took them days to die. How when it was over they looked so peaceful that had it not been for the froth on their lips, you would have thought they had died in their sleep.

Natalia saw those peaceful, poisoned faces for herself. If Katharine is successful, she will see two more.

“You are like Camille, though, in other ways,” Natalia says, and sighs. “She loved those dusty books in the library too. And she always seemed so young. She *was* so young. She only ruled for sixteen years after she was crowned. The Goddess sent her triplets early.”

Queen Camille’s triplets were sent early because she was weak. That is what the people whisper. Katharine wonders sometimes how long she will have. How many years she will guide her people, before the Goddess sees fit to replace her. She supposes that the Arrons do not care. The Black Council rules the island in the interim, and as long as she is crowned, they will still control it.

“Camille was like a little sister to me, I suppose,” Natalia says.

“Does that make me your niece?”

Natalia grips her chin.

“Do not be so sentimental,” she says, and lets Katharine go. “For seeming so young, Camille killed her sisters with poise. She was always a very good poisoner. Her gift showed early.”

Katharine frowns. One of her own triplets had showed an early gift as well. Mirabella. The great elemental.

“I will kill my sisters just as easily, Natalia,” Katharine says. “I promise. Though perhaps when I am finished, they will not look like they are sleeping.”

The north ballroom is filled to the brim with poisoners. It seems that anyone with any claim to Arron blood, and many other poisoners from Prynn besides, has made the journey to Indrid Down. Katharine studies the party from the top of the main stairs. Everything is crystal and silver and gems, right down to glistening towers of purple belladonna berries wrapped in nets of spun sugar.

The guests are almost too refined; the women in black pearls and black diamond chokers, the men in their black silk ties. And they have too much flesh on their bones. Too much strength in their arms. They will judge her and find her lacking. They will laugh.

As she watches, a woman with dark red hair throws her head back. For a moment her molars—as well her throat, as if her jaw has come unhinged—are visible. In Katharine's ears polite chatter turns to wails, and the ballroom is filled with glittering monsters.

"I cannot do this, Giselle," she whispers, and the maid stops straightening the gown's voluminous skirts and grasps her shoulders from behind.

"Yes you can," she says.

"There are more stairs than there were before."

"There are not," Giselle says, and laughs. "Queen Katharine. You will be perfect."

In the ballroom below, the music stops. Natalia has put up her hand.

"You're ready," Giselle says, and checks the fall of the dress one more time.

"Thank you all," Natalia says to her guests in her deep, rolling voice, "for being with us tonight on such an important date. An important date in any year. But this year is more important than most. This year our Katharine is sixteen!" The guests applaud. "And when the spring comes, and it is the time for the Beltane Festival, it will be more than just a festival. It will be the beginning of the Year of Ascension. During Beltane, the island will see the strength of the poisoners during the Quickening Ceremony! And after Beltane is over, we will have the pleasure of watching our queen deliciously poison her sisters."

Natalia gestures toward the stairs.

"This year's festival to begin, and next year's festival for the crown." More applause. Laughter and shouts of agreement. They think it will be so easy. One year to poison two queens. A strong queen could do it in a month, but Katharine is not strong.

"For tonight, however," Natalia says, "you simply get to enjoy her company."

Natalia turns toward the steep, burgundy-carpeted stairs. A shining black runner has been added for the occasion. Or perhaps just to make Katharine slip.