

Poison Forest

Lauri Starling

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Lauri Starling's *Poison Forest* recasts the epic high fantasy quest with queer teenagers in love, mixing dark violence with a tempestuous cocktail of hormones, high drama, and happy endings.

It's Princess Thedramora's death day, when she'll become a priestess of the death goddess Zori. Although the ceremony is shrouded in mystery, it's Thedra's first chance to reclaim the life she'd expected, one that dissolved when her mother was murdered and her betrothal to Crown Princess Dette was called off. When Dette arrives as part of the high queen's entourage, Thedra's celebration turns into a bitter stew of unresolved feelings. Before Thedra can get a handle on herself, Dette disappears; the event shows all the signs of being a kidnapping that could take another person whom Thedra loves from her forever.

The cohort that assembles to find Dette is a motley crew: Thedra, who's disobeyed royal orders; Neev, a handmaiden who's blackmailed Thedra into going along; and Agate, an ambitious soldier who's tricked into joining. As they journey through increasingly dangerous territory, they're forced to rely on each other. Their nascent bonds create complex relationship configurations and allow for more of the world's queerness, mythology, and magic to come into play.

The world building is intriguing but complex enough to be unruly. The action is informed by multiple interdependent countries' political, geographic, and religious differences in addition to the social complexity of people with elemental magic, people with learned sorcery, and magical, non-human races mixing. Some of the world's unique elements aren't sufficiently unpacked.

Largely about the rocky transition between first love and something with the potential to last much longer, *Poison Forest* navigates relationships as thorny as a curse and as cherished as a rose.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (November / December 2022)

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