

Veritas

An Adolescent Novel in a Biblical Worldview Context

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Abstract

The secular world of literature is saturated with books sending adolescents a host of mixed signals. Contemporary young readers would benefit from literature that in some way reflects biblical truth and conveys a message that glorifies God. Such notions led to the writing of a young adult fantasy novel that introduces themes and plots that do not conflict with a Christian worldview. The protagonist does not simply react to situations around her, but is driven by specific desires that are not so easily obtained. Unlike many modern adolescent fantasies, the world is fully developed and populated by a variety of people from different cultures and ways of life. The characters found in this novel are not perfect, but their flaws are not glorified and their mistakes clearly result in consequences.

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Introduction

The secular world of literature is saturated with books sending adolescents a host of mixed signals. The fantasy genre alone includes such series as the *Inheritance Cycle* by Christopher Paolini, *Dragonriders of Pern* by Anne McCaffrey, *Song of the Lioness* by Tamora Pierce, *The Belgariad* by David Eddings, and *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin. These series portray a vast array of themes, many of which are compatible with a Christian worldview. However, it is clear that a majority of these stories also convey messages that are incompatible with biblical teachings. For example, the elves in Paolini's world of Alagaesia, beings of supposed wisdom and supreme understanding of nature, are atheists who change the form of their bodies to suit their mood (391, 461). The heroes of McCaffrey's novels are constantly swayed by the violent and often lustful emotions of their dragons and for the most part have no bonds of marriage or long-lasting commitment (111, 221, 345). However, it is not the mere presence of such elements that results in an unbiblical message—it is the fact that the writing praises the characters' sin.

According to Bushman and Haas, “[r]eading books helps young adults in their journey...into adulthood” (28). Given just how significantly this precarious stage of a young adult's development will impact the rest of his life, it is all the more important for modern readers to have literature that presents a clear message that helps rather than hinders them along that path to adulthood—one that in some way reflects biblical truth and sends a message that glorifies God. The beginning chapters of a fantasy novel were written with this goal in mind.

Target Audience

The target audience of this novel is young adults from the ages of twelve to twenty-four. According to Reinking and von der Osten, “different readers call for different approaches” (8). However, when evaluating any piece of literature, one must always ask if the novel in some way reflects “universal values and human conditions” (Bushman and Hass 36). For example, a major theme of this fantasy novel is the concept of good versus evil. The main protagonist of the story, a fifteen-year-old named Saera, is the daughter of a powerful emperor. Sheltered by her life from within the confines of a palace, she has known nothing of the world outside—that is, until the words of an ancient creature open her eyes to the atrocities done in her father’s name.

In this way, the story is also one of searching for an identity apart from one’s parents. According to Bushman and Haas, the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson suggested that “the major task of adolescence is the formulation, or reformulation, of personal identity” (8). Saera begins a quest for the truth and eventually realizes that she must make a decision between honoring the one she loves and doing what she believes is right. Adolescents can relate to the protagonist in this novel because they are struggling to obtain the same thing—their identity. By having a character who struggles with the same problems as adolescents, young adults can relate to the story and hopefully learn alongside her.

Writing Style

Several stylistic elements are also used to cater to an adolescent audience. According to Friedlander and Lee, the opening of any story “must intrigue the reader, set the tone for the story, and move the reader to the body of the story in a logical manner”

(162). With this in mind, the novel begins with an interesting hook to bring the readers into the action of the story. Since well-written openings enable the audience to feel as if they are “there, in the infield, and involved in the action” (Cheney 14), the first chapter places the reader inside the mind of the protagonist as she experiences the initial shock of awakening from a half-remembered nightmare.

Point of view is also an important aspect of a novel. Although books are traditionally written in third person, the perspective “has less immediacy than first person, and always has an impersonal voice” (Cheney 118). According to Bushman and Haas, however, “the first-person narrative point of view tends to connect more personally with the young adult reader. A bonding occurs between the young adult character and the reader” (37). As stated previously, the protagonist is fifteen years of age. The story is told in first person, from her perspective, allowing the readers to interact with a character resembling their own age.

Narrative Techniques

The novel also contains the necessary elements of story arc: conflict, crisis, and resolution. According to Burroway and Stuckey-French, “[c]onflict is a fundamental element of fiction” (249). Without conflict, the protagonist has nothing blocking her from obtaining that which she desires. If nothing impedes her progress, then there is no story to be told. According to Reinking and von der Osten, “[a]ction plays a central role in any narrative.” (82). If the characters are not striving for something, there is nothing propelling them to action—and characters are the source of action. “In fiction, in order to engage our attention and sympathy, the protagonist must *want*, and want intensely” (Burroway and Stuckey-French 251). For example, the protagonist of this book is

characterized by her desire to catch a glimpse of the world outside. However, she is confined by the thick walls of the castle, a firmly shut gate, and an overprotective father.

On the other hand, the conflict does not end when she finally gets out into the “real” world because she is driven by multiple desires. “The events in our lives and our world are often shaped by conflict that needs to be resolved. It should not be surprising then that conflict and its resolution, if any, are crucial to a narrative since they motivate and often structure the action” (Reinking and von der Osten 83). Throughout the course of the story, the reader learns that the protagonist is ultimately driven by her desire to discover the truth about the past. This desire propels her through the conflict and will eventually culminate in a crisis that results in a change—the “resolution” of the story (Burroway and Stuckey-French 257).

Narrative Strategy

In order to appeal to an adolescent audience, the novel must be realistic in some sense of the word, especially since “young adults usually comment that they like novels that are realistic” (Bushman and Haas 31). Without the atmosphere provided by a setting, “characters are unable to breathe” (Burroway and Stuckey-French 167). Rather than have the story take place in a vacuum, as many modern fantasies regrettably seem to, this novel occurs in a specific time and place. Saera is the heir to the Ista’an throne, an empire comprised of a large portion of the continent of Denthia. A large mass of land exists to the west of the empire, torn apart by constant war and famine. Across the ocean lies the second most powerful continent in the world, Ponthia. Here, a group of city-states banded together and broke away from the Ista’an Empire half a century before the novel begins.

Most of the action occurs on these two main continents and the small island that lies between them.

The story is also made more realistic through descriptions of the variations of culture, weather, and other such elements. According to Burroway and Stuckey-French, fiction is made more realistic through “[s]pecific, definite, concrete, particular details” (22). Though it may seem more to the point to simply tell someone something, showing them is much more effective. Through these details, the reader can develop a mental image of the characters as well as the setting of a novel or a specific event. Instead of simply relying on the plot to carry a story and draw the readers in, authors must provide “people, places, sounds, colors, smells, scenes, and sensations” (Friedlander and Lee 265). Such descriptions often add to the overall credibility of the piece and allow readers to suspend their disbelief. When readers can glimpse the world of the characters, they experience the action along with them.

The story is set in a quasi-medieval era, and the protagonist initially lives in a stone castle, allowing adolescent readers to come across “unique people and situations—characters, settings, and story lines that are different from them and their lives but with which they can still make some connections” (Bushman and Haas 49). The book also contains well-developed characters with which the readers can identify and connect. According to Bushman and Haas, “well-developed characters allow readers to feel that they are experiencing the conflict” (233). Furthermore, a large majority of the ages of the characters fall within the range of twelve to twenty-four. For the most part, these characters are seen solely through the eyes of the protagonist, giving some room for misconception and adding a layer of depth to their characterization. “A writer can also

give readers insight into a person's character by showing the person in action" (Friedlander and Lee 267). Any observations made by the protagonist are supplemented by physical description and dialogue that move the story forward and reveal key information about the personality and motivations of each character.

Another way to heighten the realism of a novel is to have "characters respond realistically to each other and to the events that confront them" (Bushman and Haas 33). For instance, the setting of the novel plays a significant role in the development of the plot and in how the characters interact with one another. Dialogue is used alongside description in order to provide another layer of realism that adolescents can relate to. In dialogue, the various characters "use language appropriate for their ages and educational levels" (Bushman and Haas 38). The protagonist speaks a fairly formal and elevated language, but her servants all possess varying levels of education, and so their words are often less polished. The sense of realism is also heightened through the use of "sentence fragment, slang expression, pause, and the like" (Reinking and von der Osten 86) when the situation calls for it. However, a final layer of realism is added with the incorporation of nonverbal communication, which especially comes into effect as Saera attempts to obtain information from people who are wary of speaking honestly with the daughter of the emperor.

Brief Summary of Novel

Saera thinks life is perfect until she hears rumors of riots in her precious city of Ista'an. Sheltered within the confines of the palace, the princess has known nothing of the world outside. Driven by a mysterious voice in her head, Saera ventures into the streets and meets a young boy named Leto. Perturbed by the condition of her subjects and a new,

darker side of her father, Saera begins a quest for the truth. Through the foresight of prophecy, the emperor's only daughter was also bestowed with the honorary title of dragonslayer. Dragons are the sworn enemies of the empire, as are their riders—the Kal□mein. The words of an ancient creature open her eyes to the atrocities done in her father's name, and Saera eventually journeys to find the rumored keep of the dragonriders of old. Little does she know that the hands of fate are closed tightly around her, and that her search will take her further than she possibly could have imagined. She will make a choice—a choice between honoring the one she loves and doing what she believes is right.

Sample Chapters

Chapter One: Fairy Tales

I woke, gasping.

Perspiration coated my skin, my sheets a tangled mess at the foot of my bed. I sat up, hooking a wet strand of hair behind my ear and taking a few shallow breaths. The curtains were drawn, but the warm rays pouring through the window did nothing to alleviate the terrors of the night. I crumpled the silk sheets between my hands and found my knuckles pale and slightly trembling. It was the fifth nightmare in as many nights, and yet no matter how I strained my mind, its conclusion eluded me.

Where was she? Every fiber of my being called to her, to hear her soft voice. But this was a just a dream, a nightmare. There was no need to seek her comfort. Forcing a deep breath, I closed my eyes and lay my head down on the soft pillows. *Calm yourself*, I thought, willing my limbs to grow heavy and my thoughts to wander.

Whose hand was it that had touched my shoulder?

I tensed, gripping my sheets tightly. *Sleep!* I told myself. *Just sleep!* But my limbs did not obey—they were too conscious, too alert. There was danger here, my body was certain of it.

The chamber door creaked, and I heard the scraping of metal against stone as a drudge bent down to stoke the fire. Swallowing to muffle the sound of my quickened breaths, I debated whether to feign sleep. Father would not be joining me for breakfast this morning; he had already sent an apology for his absence the previous evening. However, I still had my lessons with the high priest, and I would require every spare moment to prepare for the outing, modest though it was. Sighing, I sat up and watched as my simple servant tugged sharply at the heavy fabric covering the window. I flinched

when the force of the rays hit my eyes, but they soon adjusted. Slipping down from the large bed, my feet curled into the soft crimson rug covering the stone floor. The feeling of the thick wool calmed me, and I turned to face my maid as she held out a cream-colored dress for my morning attire.

After I had dressed and eaten, an escort came to take me to my lessons with the palace priests. I followed him down the hallway until he paused to talk to one of the servants about some matter of import. Glancing down the long empty corridor, I noticed that the door to my father's chambers was slightly ajar. Sunlight shot a thin line across the stone floor, and as I drew near, I could hear the faint sound of voices raised in a debate.

"My lord, matters have grown worse," one voice began. The soft yet urgent tone belonged to my father's advisor, Lord Kiron Tambar. I leaned against the doorframe, smiling absent-mindedly as I listened to the young lord's passionate voice.

"What is there to report?" came the calm voice of Father, full of ultimate authority.

"There have been reports of riots, open riots in the trading district. If something is not done, the whole city could be thrown into disorder."

Riots? In Ista'an? I wondered, peering through the gap to see Father's reaction. The door suddenly shut, and I glanced up to see the impassive face of the high priest.

"Your lessons, my lady," he reminded me in a dry sort of voice, the slightest trace of incense drifting down to me. It was not exactly an unpleasant smell, but I sighed, resigned to my afternoon of pure boredom.

I trailed behind my tutor with a rather unladylike pout gracing my features and wondered at how tedious my lessons could be. At birth, I had been chosen amongst all of the noble heirs of our great empire to become the next Híjshak—a minor controversy, given that I was both a girl and the sole heir to the Ista'an throne. One would think the slayer of dragons would be taught lessons far more exciting than never-ending lectures from an ancient priest. The beasts were nearly extinct, my role hardly more than a ceremonial one. Oh, but how I longed to hear of the dragons themselves, of their history rich in mystery and magic.

A small breeze stirred as we stepped into the courtyard that lead to the palace temple, and my hand swiftly reached up to my hair. Satisfied that every blonde lock remained in place, I let my arm fall and glanced over to the wall standing to our left.

A castle can sometimes be a prison, I thought for a brief moment before turning to follow him into the temple.

* * *

Once the lesson finally ended, I sought the company of Shirinna for my midday meal.

The servants' staircase was the only way to enter the kitchen without going through the great hall, and so it was with cautious steps that I continued. I lifted the soft, slick train of my dress, slippers masking the sound of my movement as I walked down the shallow steps. At a turn in the stairs, a window opened to the courtyard below, lush grass waving absentmindedly in the wind. A covered cart was being unloaded, servants lifting heavy packages before disappearing from sight in the barracks across the lawn.

The main temple and the castle barracks stood on either side of the portcullis separating the courtyard from the inner city. Not for the first time, I wondered at what lay beyond the sturdy wooden gate.

Tantalizing smells of freshly baking bread caused me to turn from the opening and hurry down the remaining steps. The kitchen was required to feed the entire court at any given time, but the size was more evident today since only the high court would dine with the emperor tonight. Maids hurried about their tasks, already making preparations for the evening meal. A short woman stood before a table in the middle of the room, dressing the centerpiece, a roasted boar. The other cooks gave me a respectful distance as I stepped across the room. Shirinna paused in her work, wiping a hand across her tanned brow. She glanced up as she heard the chatter of the kitchen lower perceptively, a smile lighting her face when she saw me drawing near.

I came forward to embrace her, my head resting on her shoulder.

“Good day, Saera,” she murmured. She smelled of nuts and wild flowers.

When I was younger, I wandered from the negligent gaze of my nurse and got hopelessly lost. The long stone corridors of the castle were frightening to me as a child, and I was drawn to the warmth of the kitchen. The head cook found me there, and later I would bring my dolls and play in the kitchen, watching Shirinna as she worked.

She could have been my mother if Mother had not died when I was born.

Stepping back, I clasped my hands in front of me as she wiped hers liberally on her apron before removing it.

“Finish with this, would you?” she asked a passing maid, who nodded and quickly went to work.

I glanced down at my hands as the servants cleared away a nearby table and laid a light meal of cold meats and thin slices of freshly baked bread for Shirinna and me to share.

“What troubles you, child?” she questioned, and I looked up to see her concerned brown eyes on me.

We sat down at the table, and I turned my gaze to the rough wood, tracing the lines with a finger. “Why are there riots in the streets?” I questioned finally, glancing up at her once again.

There was no obvious reaction to my words, but there was a distinct tightness to her mouth. “I do not know, my lady,” the cook responded, and I flinched at the use of formal address.

“But you have heard of their occurrence,” I pressed, eager for any information on the topic.

“’Tis not for me to say,” was her only reply, and she leaned back ever so slightly from the table.

There is only one way to discover the truth for yourself, a voice came unbidden to my thoughts, and I jolted in my seat.

There were times when I grew lonely in the castle. Father was often busy, and even the company of my dolls was not enough to overcome the fact I had no true friends. One night in my desperation and need, I lay alone in my dark, drafty room and cried out silently for anyone or anything. I was young, in need of comfort. The most beautiful voice came to me, telling me that I was not alone. No words were spoken, yet they came to me as if they were my own thoughts. Suddenly the floodgates opened, and I found

myself immersed in a range of emotions that were not my own. It was glorious, exhilarating, and yet frightening all at once.

The feminine voice returned whenever loneliness reached its peak, but this was the first time she spoke without being so called. I tilted my head to the side, oblivious to the clatter of the hot ovens opening and closing around me, as I listened to her words.

Know this, child: there will be no turning back.

Shirinna set down her cup sharply against the table, and I found her curious gaze resting upon me. I felt as if I had missed something important.

“Your food, Saera,” she mentioned lightly, indicating the tray with a nod of her head. “Are you not going to eat?”

“I believe I have lost my appetite,” I said, rising gracefully from the chair. My heart was beating frantically in my chest, but I made every effort to appear calm and collected, the perfect image of a princess. “I am going for a stroll in the courtyard, for I feel the fresh air will do me much good.” I paused, looking up at her for approval, for when I elected to dine with Shirinna, she had sole responsibility for my wellbeing.

“Very well, princess. But do not stray too far!” she called to me, for I was already hastening to the back door of the kitchen.

A heavy travelling cloak lay unused across an empty table near the door. I folded the cloak over my arm and left through the open back door at a normal pace. The cloak would not be missed, and in any event, I would be returning it soon enough.

“Do not stray far,” I mimicked in a rebellious mutter. “I am *not* a child!”

You are about to stray very far indeed, fifteen-year-old or not, came that voice once again. I smiled, for despite my initial surprise whenever she chose to speak, I quite enjoyed her warm presence in my mind.

I wrapped the cloak around my shoulders, pulling the hood over my head and cringing a little as my flawless hair was crushed beneath the heavy cloth. Glancing down, I saw the fabric run past my feet and huddle in layers near the grassy ground. I took a few steps forward, determined to ignore the inconvenience.

The covered cart I had seen from the window was still there, the last of its contents being removed by several servants clad in travel-worn attire similar to the cloak I wore. I stood back, keeping very still and desperately hoping that I blended in with the rest. When the workers had all disappeared for a moment inside the barracks, I darted forward. The cart was rather far from the ground, and so it was with some difficulty that I lifted my skirts—along with the long lengths of the cloak—and clambered awkwardly through the parted cloth opening and into the wooden bed.

The horses whickered at the movement, the cloth falling back into place, and I froze as I heard the sound of voices drawing near.

“That’s the last of it,” came the sound of an unfamiliar male voice.

“Very well,” was the terse reply of an Ista’an soldier—I believe it was Commander Marcus. “For your services,” he added gruffly, and I heard the faint clinking of coins as they passed from one purse to another.

I managed to come to my senses and ducked down just before a servant came to the back of the cart. He stood there for a few agonizing moments as I held my breath. He finally closed the cloth opening, and the inside of the cart grew considerably darker.

Sunlight came in weak beams through the covering, but it was dark enough for me to grow frightened in the semi-enclosed space. Empty barrels lined the inside of the cart, jostling as the driver urged the pair of horses forward. Edging forward, I slowly lifted the fabric back and glimpsed the portcullis gate closing behind us. Numbing fear suddenly pierced through my chest like a sharp blade. How would I ever return?

The wooden gate gradually faded out of sight, the castle looming up behind it as the wagon clattered down the road. My shoulders sank a little, seeing stone after grey stone. But then there was the sky—blue and white and open, just as it looked when I glanced up at it from the courtyard. This time, however, it went on and on without being cut off by the wall. The sight of the sky sent a bubbling wave of energy through me, and I scooted forward, just barely catching sight of the Ista'an soldiers lining up before the gate as the cart traveled down the hill to the lower city. Looking at the cobbled stones rushing beneath, I took a large breath and pushed off the edge of the cart.

Air escaped my lungs through clenched teeth as my knees scraped painfully against the rough stone road. No doubt the fabric of my dress was torn beneath the cloak, but I was given no chance to wonder at my glorious escape. A loaded cart passed by, one of its wheels coming into a puddle of water and sending a spray of the dirty liquid toward me. Scrambling away, I bumped into a maid carrying stacks of folded cloth.

“Watch it, lad,” she called, briskly moving along without even a fleeting look in my direction.

I frowned, glancing down to observe my appearance. I looked like a boy?

Shaking my head, I hastily rose, tripping on my dress and the long train of the cloak. No one gave me a second glance as they hurried through the busy streets, focused

upon their respective tasks. Following the flow of the crowd, I was swept past the gate and into the unknown streets of the inner city. The first rows of houses were those of prosperous merchants and young lords—I saw them clearly enough from the confines of the castle. But row after row grew increasingly less grand, in far worse condition than the one before.

At last I came to an open place and almost paused in awe and wonder at the sight of it. The bright banners and the gaily painted stalls were enough to bring a smile to my face, but it was the variety of everything that was truly astounding to me. In the palace, I had only seen people of light skin. Here, it seemed as if there was every shade—black and white and everything in between. And the merchandise they sold! Fruits and vegetables of every hue imaginable, coarse cotton fabric and fine silk and other material my hand, brushing over it, could not discern. The darkest man I had ever seen stood behind a stall. An assortment of jewels, necklaces, armlets, and earrings were laid out before him, all bright and sparkling in the sun. He would grin, his white teeth contrasting sharply against his skin, as women came to the stall and wondered at his breathtaking wares.

I walked toward a far less crowded stall, holding up a handful of fabric so as not to trip on the long cloak. The sun beat down upon me, my dress sticking, and I began to wonder if such heavy material was truly ideal. This stall also offered an assortment of jewelry, but it was of a kind I had never seen before. Instead of gems and precious metal, the necklaces seemed to be made out of colorful, circular little balls. Curious, I reached for one to admire in the sunlight.

A grimy hand closed around my wrist, and I glanced up into the dark eyes of the merchant. The overwhelming smell of sweat and putrid lard made me fight the urge to gag. “You have coin for that?” he demanded, his grip tightening.

“I—you are hurting me!”

“A girl?” he exclaimed, releasing hold of me in surprise.

I fell to the ground, heavily, and suddenly found it difficult to breathe. I was still taking a few uneven breaths when a boy suddenly crouched down next to me.

“Time to run,” his voice murmured next to my ear, yanking me to my feet.

“Wait, I need to—” I began, reaching my arm out to return the necklace.

“No time for that,” he boy replied, and before I knew it I was being pulled through the crowded marketplace at a breathtaking pace.

“Stop right there! Thief!” the vendor called behind us, but his voice was soon drowned out by the sounds of the other merchants calling their wares, the playful shrieks of the children as they ran underfoot, and the occasional clatter of hooves as a rider cantered by on some errand.

It was when we had gone some distance and turned into a narrow street between the low buildings that we finally slowed, and I was able to catch a glimpse of my rescuer. He was just a lad—my age, or perhaps a year or two younger. His boots were worn, and his green tunic was torn at the sleeve, but his clothes were not ill-made. My gaze turned up to his face for a moment: brown hair falling across light brown eyes, and a smirk I wanted to wipe off his face. I quickly glanced down, shuffling from one foot to the other, the necklace held loosely in my right hand.

“Okay, I may be new to this city,” he said sharply, “but you can’t just go around stealing things in broad daylight.”

I clenched my fist, the hard balls pressing into my soft skin. “I did not mean to steal it! I would have left it had you not intervened.”

“If I hadn’t ‘intervened,’ you’d be in serious trouble. Do you know what the punishment is for stealing?” I shook my head, still looking down. “It’s a capital offense—which means you’re lucky to be alive right now. The emperor’s crazy,” the boy muttered under his breath. “He’d kill a kid just because he couldn’t afford a decent meal for himself.”

“My—he is not crazy!” I snapped, finally glancing up.

His mouth turned to a thin line. He was about to reply, but suddenly he paused, his mouth opening slightly. I shifted uncomfortably under his gaze before he shook his head slightly. “You have a seer’s eyes,” he said finally.

I glanced down again, my traitorous cheeks reddening. It had not taken long to discover that most people found violet eyes unnerving. The court and the castle staff had all grown accustomed to the oddity which I had inherited from Mother, but every once in a while a newcomer would stop and stare. Rumor had it that only those blessed with the Sight had eyes the color of light purple, as indeed it was the case for my mother. But it seemed the gift—or rather, curse—had not fallen to me.

“So?” I replied defiantly, lifting up my chin and glaring fiercely at the boy. “*You* have brown eyes.”

“They’re hazel, actually.” That obnoxious smirk was plastered on his face yet again. “I kinda like you, princess,” he said flippantly. I tensed before realizing that his

words were only in jest. “My name’s Leto, by the way,” the boy added, holding out his hand.

I opened my mouth to reply when suddenly I was pulled roughly from behind. My hood fell, revealing the intricate yet slightly flattened mass of golden curls. “Saera Ista,” hissed a familiar voice, and a chill ran through my body as I glanced into the cold eyes of Commander Marcus.

* * *

I have never been more terrified in my life. The commander practically dragged me back to the castle, dropping me unceremoniously upon the stone kitchen floor. All activity ceased as the occupants turned to catch a glimpse of their princess, disheveled and more than a little dirty.

Sent straight to my father, I stood with my head bowed as he paced furiously around the throne room. Commander Marcus stood to one side with his hands locked in front of him and his legs a shoulder-length apart—at rest. Shirinna, who had been charged with my safety during the whole affair, stood to my left. One hand rested comfortingly on my shoulder while the other crumpled the fabric on the side of her dress, knuckles white. She had been frantic when Marcus brought me in, rushing to scold her princess for the fright I had caused her. I pursed my lips a little at the memory, glancing briefly at Shirinna before looking down once more.

“Whatever were you thinking, Saera?” my father finally burst out. “To go past the protection of the wall with no one to accompany you—”

“Would I have been permitted otherwise?” I interjected, glancing up. I wished I had not. My father’s face was alien to me—jaw stiff and smooth lines contorted. How

could anger distort such a beloved face so completely? I gasped slightly, taking a step back. Shirinna's grasp tightened around my shoulder.

"That is not the point! What gave you the insane notion to leave the security of your escort?" he demanded, glancing over at Shirinna before returning his gaze to me. His eyes were a dark green rather than the dancing light shade they usually were.

"I...I heard you talking to Lord Tambar. Concerning riots in the streets."

"You were privy to a confidential discussion between my personal advisor and me?"

"I was curious. I...I did not know I was not permitted to hear it."

Tears formed under my eyes, but I held them back, determined not to cry. I felt slightly detached from the moment, blinking dazedly as if everything was not truly happening. Never before had I seen such rage in my father's eyes—my kind, kind father's eyes—as he drew back his hand to strike me.

"Lekam."

Father stopped short, glancing over at Shirinna, and I wondered at her gall in the use of informal address. But his eyes seemed to find reason, and he glanced down at me with regret in his eyes. "Saera," he said softly, reaching out a hand to me.

I flinched away.

* * *

The door to my chambers opened, and I glanced from my dolls to see the maid come in to take away the chilled water from my bath. I took a few slow breaths to compose myself and then rose from my vanity, my feet touching the rug that looked more the color of blood than crimson.

“Are you feeling well, m’lady?” the servant questioned.

“Yes, I am fine,” I replied distractedly, moving behind the dressing screen to prepare for the evening meal.

Drawing the smooth silk over my skin, I finally decided to seek the counsel of the only one I now believed I could trust. The strange voice that echoed in my head required some source of origin, and I was determined to locate it. Escaping the watchful eyes of yet another escort, I followed that lingering sense of otherness in my mind until suddenly I came to a part of the palace I had never set foot to before. Of course, I had been schooled in the architecture of the building and therefore knew of the towers and the bridge running between the two, but it was quite another matter to see them with my own eyes.

Ascending the turnpike stairs of the first tower, I passed through the threshold to the bridge. My slippers trailed across stone as I stepped into the sunlight. A breeze whipped my hair about, the causeway open to the heavens. The bright splash of colored sky reminded me of my trip to the marketplace. I glanced down, delighted to find the market square in my line of vision. The smile disappeared when I saw the gallows that had been constructed there. The distance was too far for me to hear the beating of the drums, the crack of their necks as their bodies fell, the swinging of the rope as they hung—but I could see it. Suddenly I remembered the end of my dream.

A hand came to rest upon my shoulder, and I tensed before looking up into the light green eyes of my father. “Father...what, what is—”

“Little one,” he interjected, wrapping his arms around me. “I am so sorry you had to witness that. But you do know that we must punish those who break the law. How else are we to maintain order?”

I breathed in the smell of him, resting my head on his chest to rid myself of the shivers running down my back. All I saw when I looked upon those gallows was the figure of a boy with a smirk on his face, too poor to buy his own food. A soothing touch came to my mind, and I pulled away from my father and moved toward the source of the voice.

“Saera!” he called as I ran the remaining distance to the second tower, slipping slightly on the smooth stone. I stopped short once I passed through the entrance, gazing up at the wonder before me.

The tower housed a dragon.

Chapter Two: Caution

She was golden scaled, her wings lying flat against her sides and her tail trailing behind her into the shadows of the far reaches of the tower. Spikes rose from her back, and her claws seemed both sharp and deadly as they scratched against hard stone. Her face was smooth and appeared to be hammered metal rather than overlapping scales. Two horns rose from a crest on her head, and her jaws were open to reveal a set of large, curved teeth. But as I gazed into her deep amber eyes I found reason there, as well as kindness. She was not a menacing monster, but the source of the voice I had been hearing most of my life.

Welcome, dear one, she crooned, inclining her head in greeting. Long have I been awaiting this moment. As her head dipped, my attention was drawn to the thick bronze band encircling her neck. It seemed rude to question her about it, but I could not prevent my thoughts from dwelling upon the subject. *Yes, I am a slave,* the creature said, pulling her head to the side so that I might see the chain holding her captive. *I am the emperor's pet, a warning to those who dare to stand against the threat of Ista'an tyranny.*

"Why do you not speak aloud?" I questioned, gazing up at the great expanse of her body, glittering in the sunlight streaming in from the windows.

We once spoke as you, forming sounds with tongue and jaw. At the heart of our words lies the source of your magic. Now we have all grown silent, for it is the humans, and not the Kalíma, who shall inherit the earth.

"Kalíma?" I questioned, saying the strange word slowly as I attempted to pronounce it.

I believe humans use the word “dragons.” It is not a term we created for ourselves. But this is not why you have come, little princess, she added softly. A deep rumbling came from her chest, and I sensed she was amused.

“But I do not know why I came here,” I protested, biting my lip.

That is a falsehood, child, but one you have fooled yourself into believing, the female replied. *You came here because you have begun to see the atrocities done in your father’s name, and they bother you. The true question is, what will you do about it?*

“Saera, step away from her,” came Father’s voice, and I could have sworn the dragon gave a faint growl.

But my eyes still remained on the creature, mesmerized by her golden scales.

“She will not hurt me,” I murmured, taking another step forward.

“She has every right to,” he replied softly, and something in his tone made me turn to face him. There was real fear in his eyes, and also another emotion I could not quite place. Shame?

I glanced back at her, confused. “What have I ever done?” The question was more for her than for my father, but her glorious voice was absent from my mind. I frowned slightly, wondering why.

“It is not what *you* have done.”

I turned back to my father, and he held out his hand to me. With a fleeting glance at my friend, I took his hand and allowed him to pull me close. As he wrapped his arms around me yet again, I was reminded of the dragon’s words just a few moments before.

“She is wrong,” I murmured softly, returning the embrace. “You are not a tyrant.”

I felt Father stiffen, and I looked up to see his eyes focused upon the chained creature. “*She* said this?” he questioned, glancing down at me swiftly. “She spoke to you?”

There was a lump in my throat, but I still managed to find the strength to nod.

Oh, Saera... came her soft voice in my head. I shrank back from her gaze as she turned those amber eyes to me, disappointment evident although no further words were spoken.

“Saera, would you mind attending to your lessons? I am certain Brother Thom is eagerly awaiting your presence.”

Cringing slightly at the blatant dismissal, I took a moment to look up at Father as I turned to leave. His eyes remained fixed upon the dragon. There was something cold and calculating in those eyes that I had never seen before, and with it a strange hint of hunger. I stepped away, thoughts churning as I opened the heavy door leading from the tower. What could she possibly possess that my father did not?

I had already shut the door halfway when I paused, peering back inside. Father was smiling, but the expression was not at all amiable. There was a twist to his mouth that could have been cruel. “Not mute at all, are you?” he mocked, sneering.

Turning away from the image, I stumbled when my body came into contact with something very solid. I glanced up just as the advisor’s arms reached down to my shoulders in order to steady me.

“Are you all right?” he questioned, and I caught a flash of white as he smiled down at me. At five and twenty years, he had every right to be over a head and a half taller than me.

Lord Kiron Tambar was a man of immaculate taste, of this fact I was certain. Sturdy, dark leather boots covered his legs to the middle of his calves and complemented the pale fabric of his breeches. His tunic was a stark blue trimmed in crimson and belted at the waist. Most young noblemen tended to carry a sword at their side, but Lord Kiron sought to impress solely with wit and clarity of expression.

“My lady?” His voice jolted me from my impromptu assessment, and I quickly wiped the dazed look from my face to give Kiron what I hoped was a winsome smile. I am afraid it resembled a ditzzy grin more than anything else. When the silence stretched between the two of us, the advisor gave a small bow before glancing behind me. “If you would excuse me, I have been summoned by the emperor.”

He turned to leave, but I had finally found my voice, and I did not wish for him to leave before I could ask him.

“Lord Tambar,” I began quietly, glancing down at my hands for a moment before finally finding the courage to meet his curious gaze.

A smile touched his lips, and he inclined his head slightly. “Kiron will suffice, at least for informal affairs. My lady.”

“And Saera will suffice as well,” I managed to reply, finding myself unable to provide a smile of my own in return.

“Is there something you needed?” he questioned, raising an eyebrow slightly.

“Why is there a dragon in the tower?”

“Do you not know?” the lord replied, his grey eyes showing signs of what appeared to be genuine surprise.

“Apparently there is much I do not know.” I pursed my lips, turning my gaze from his and leaning onto the side of the bridge for support. I could have simply stopped there. Perhaps I should have. This was the first real conversation I had had with the advisor, at least in private. Perhaps it was the fact I was so desperate for someone to listen to me, or perhaps it was this innate feeling that told me I could trust him. “I feel as if I am in the dark,” I continued, placing a hand to my temple. I could not recall when the headache had begun, but I could feel it now, pulsating behind my eyes in painful waves.

It was quiet for what seemed like such a long time that I thought he had left, but then his soft words finally pierced the silence. “You should ask Shirinna about the dragon. She is, after all, her rider.”

* * *

Unfortunately, I accidentally bumped into the high priest on my way to the kitchens. Most likely he was headed to my own chambers to retrieve me from the embroidery instructor I had escaped from earlier. Raising his eyebrows at me, he turned without a comment, assuming I would follow. My slippers slid uneasily as we came to the marble entrance of Tara’s temple. The priest bowed reverently to the stone statue of the goddess, and I paused to dip into a graceful curtsy. Tara, the Mother of us all. I often wondered if the statues in the various Ista’an temples truly depicted the faces of the gods, if deity could be captured in cold, unmoving stone.

As the lesson went on, I decided that I would confront Shirinna some time before the evening meal. If the priest would ever stop talking, that is.

“Am I boring you, princess?”

I lifted my face from the cup formed by my hand, blinking rapidly as I attempted to determine what he had been saying for the past hour and a half, let alone what he had asked at this moment. “Pardon?” I finally questioned.

I was slightly shocked when the priest smiled thinly in response, not knowing him for a man of any type of humor. “You usually manage to *appear* more attentive.”

“I beg your pardon...” I began automatically, but when the priest raised his eyebrows I realized he wanted an explanation rather than an apology. “Well, these history lessons are all very fascinating—” the bland look he gave me assured that he was not fooled—“but I would like to hear more about the dragons themselves.”

He did not seem surprised with the request, but one would have been hard-pressed to detect even a flicker of emotion behind that passive mask that served as his countenance. “What would you know?”

“First of all, why are we to slay them?”

“It is the holy order—” He broke off at my furrowed brow, which I hastily attempted to smooth over. “But you have already learned this, have you not?”

I had. It was the holy order that had been passed down by the high priest of Tara since the time of the first outbreak of the war. A holy order with only one purpose: the destruction of any dragon in direct opposition to the Ista’an Empire. “Yes, but what makes it a *holy* order? Why would the Goddess demand the destruction of such creatures?”

“They challenged the authority of the emperor, who ruled by divine right,” the priest replied matter-of-factly, but the pointed look in his eyes made me wonder if there was more to his mild words.

“So, the order was not the reason behind the war...” I trailed off, thinking of the dragon housed in the tower.

“Perhaps,” was the priest’s careful response. “Which brings us to the plight of Ser Ulrich Dragonsbane....”

Just when things were becoming slightly more interesting, I mused, leaning my head on my hand once more as the priest went on.

* * *

The priest’s long-winded yet slightly more interesting than usual lecture made it impossible for me to take a trip to the kitchen to discover what secrets the cook had been hiding from me. I could not help but feel betrayed by her decision to keep me in the dark. It seemed as if that was all anyone did these days. I suddenly thought of Kiron and the priest and decided this was not entirely the case. Entering the privacy of my chambers, I sighed as I remembered their careful replies to my inquiries. Perhaps, like them, Shirinna had to be careful about what she said to me.

My maid came in to assist me, and I found myself distracted as she prepared me for the evening meal. I sat before the mirror and silently observed as the drudge coaxed my golden hair into reluctant obedience with deft hands. The beauty of her skill once brought me to awe and wonder. Now the weight of the tresses seemed to bear down on me. The tight cloth of my evening gown constricted my waist, and the rich fabric seemed heavy on my shoulders. Would I ever escape from the burden of it all?

I shook my head slightly, smiling a little at the sudden whimsy of my thoughts.

“M’lady?” my servant questioned, and I glanced up to see the reflection of her hands hovering over my hair. Her expression was polite, but it was clear she desired me to remain motionless.

“My apologies,” I murmured. “I just realized how melodramatic my thoughts had turned.”

“Yes, m’lady,” she finally stammered, giving a quick sort of curtsy before moving to finish my hair. Her reaction was understandable, given that I had hardly spoken a word to her apart from the occasional command. When she had completed her task, she took a step backward and bowed her head, awaiting further instructions.

The silence stretched on for a few moments before I finally found the courage to address her. “What is your name?” I murmured, twirling a curl nervously around my finger. My eyes were downcast, but out of the corner of my vision, I saw the servant throw me a swift, wary glance.

“Liana, m’lady,” she replied after a moment’s pause.

“Thank you, Liana,” I responded with a small smile. “I think I can manage from here.”

“Are you certain, m’lady?”

“Quite so,” I replied as I rose, smoothing out the fabric of my dress.

She left with a parting curtsy, and I made my way unaccompanied to the dining hall. As I passed through the nearly empty hallways toward the main staircase, I realized I must have been running late. Not wishing to insult Ista’an’s guests with a tardy entrance, I veered away from my present course and stopped just outside a set of narrow hallways. I paused to glance in both directions before entering the servants’ quarters. As I

traveled along the long corridors, I heard the faint sound of voices coming from further down the hallway. The narrow passages running through the servants' quarters led to a small staircase near the grand hall and would cut my time nearly in half, but somehow I doubted anyone would care the reason for my intruding on the staff's right to privacy.

I swallowed against the frantic beating of my heart as I inched toward the room. The wooden door denied me a glimpse of whosoever was conversing, but something in the tone of the conversation itself made me pause despite the furious beating of my heart. They spoke in such a hushed manner, as if they did not care for anyone to overhear, that I could not help but listen in. Pressing myself against the wall—thin, compared to the walls near my own chambers—I strained my ears to catch the actual words.

“Have you finally managed to enter his confidence?” one male voice questioned, something in his tone making me shiver though I felt no chill.

“Yes. I even managed to retrieve his daughter after a foolish excursion into the streets.”

“And what of the recently vacated position?”

“Apparently, it can only be filled by one of noble blood. There's no way around the law, and no reason for him to change it. But don't worry; I've managed to instate a young fool, easily manipulated.”

Footsteps echoed down the hallway, and my breath caught in my throat as the two men paused in their conversation. Deciding I would much rather enter dinner late than be found lurking around the staff's corridors, I thanked the goddess for the slippers that masked the sound of my feet falling against the stone as I traced my steps back to my chambers.

I made it down the grand staircase with no further distractions, holding up the heavy length of fabric with one hand so as not to trip over the hem of my dress. When I finally came to the great hall, my heart sank as I saw that the doors had been firmly closed. I hovered anxiously for a moment, my hand raised slightly as I debated whether I should push open the heavy door and risk causing major disruption or embarrassment on my part.

“Saera!” a voice whispered to my right, and I turned in response. Shirinna beckoned to me with urgent gestures.

I followed the cook down the servant’s staircase to the kitchen below and was promptly bombarded by delicious scents and a whirl of activity. The maids hurried from one side of the room to the other as they made the finishing touches to each dish before it was rushed out in great quantities on large trays balanced evenly on their skilled hands. Pages came in with polished metal pitchers, waiting impatiently as a young lass filled each one to the brim. I barely managed to take this all in before Shirinna took hold of my arm and pulled me along with her as she waded through the chaos. The servants were all too busy to actually cease in their tasks, but my presence did cause a few of them to stare for a brief moment before continuing with their duties. Shirinna brought us to a halt when we reached the stairs leading up to the hall and lightly touched the arm of a servant girl as she passed by. She turned, revealing a right arm laden with a large silver tray filled with delicacies and sweetmeats common to my father’s table.

“Alacia, would you enter with the princess?” Shirinna questioned, indicating me with a rather superfluous nod of her head.

“Certainly,” the girl replied with a wry smile and a slight raise of an eyebrow. I instantly decided I liked her. “Stay behind me, m’lady. We’ll make sure you come in without a fuss.”

Without another word, Alacia turned to the stairs with knowing, confident steps. Wondering how I could possibly not cause a stir yet trusting in Shirinna nonetheless, I gathered my courage and trailed behind the girl. I was almost unprepared for the rush of people entering the kitchen through the door ahead of us, artfully darting to one side or the other in order to pass by without an incident. When we actually came through the door, I realized what exactly Shirinna had asked Alacia to do. The entrance from the kitchen was behind the head of the table—to the left of it, if looked at from the doors of the great hall. Those of noble blood often paid no heed to the flow of commoners coming in and out of the door, and the added barrier of the servant and her rather impressive tray decreased the likelihood of anyone identifying me.

When I finally came to my seat, I realized I would have to move out from the protection of Alacia’s tray. I could still avoid detection from most of those seated, but I would be in full view of whoever had been seated to my right. Holding my breath, I broke away from my shield, pulled back the chair as quietly as possible, and then seated myself at the table with as much grace as I could muster. Alacia paused for a moment, leaning over to offer some choice delicacy and thoroughly blocking me from the sight of those on the other end of the table. She carried on once I was comfortably seated, and I even managed to survey the room without feeling too terribly flustered. That is, until I happened to glance to my right.

“That was quite the entrance, Princess,” Kiron said, a smile playing at the edge of his lips as he glanced down at me. The height difference was not too great with the two of us seated, but I still had to tilt my head up slightly in order to look at him directly.

“Did anyone notice?” I asked, forgetting in my anxiety to address him by his title.

“Relax.” He laughed lightly, and I had to take a few deep breaths to quiet my racing heart. “No one noticed. I think they’re too preoccupied with the rebellions in the north.”

“Rebellions?”

“Listen,” he murmured in reply, nodding across the table.

Duke Narakin sat across from Kiron, his manners stiff and his movements precise. The highborn lords and ladies seemed to be taking in his words with something bordering on reverence. In his turn, Duke Narakin seemed unaffected by the attention of his peers.

“Yes, I am having quite a bit of trouble with the peasants,” he was saying to the man to his left, but almost everyone at the high table had an ear to the conversation.

“What seems to be the problem?” the lord of Crotoan questioned in response. The man had paused his eating and now brought a napkin to his mouth and daintily pat it clean.

“I hear they were making a little fuss over their wages,” his lady commented frostily. They were quite the pair when it came to sparring with words, or so rumor had it.

“Wages?” Lord Icha demanded, his eyes widening. “You pay the common folk to live off your land?”

“They argue that I am paying them to cut my timber,” Duke Narakin replied with a disgusted shake of his head. “Damn peasants. They think they own themselves.”

In the laughter that followed, I think I surprised everyone—including myself—when I interjected. “Well, do they not?”

Silence welcomed my statement, and I felt the gaze of everyone seated at the high table. Duke Narakin simply raised his eyebrows, appraising me for a moment before responding.

“I should think not!” Lord Icha muttered to his companion, but I remained fixated under the duke’s unflinching gaze.

When he finally spoke, his words were calm and precise, but I could not suppress a shiver at the cold look in his eyes.

“I provide them with a place to live, give them leave to cultivate my land. In return, everything they produce is mine.” He paused to take a drink from his goblet, holding it out to a passing servant to refill. “*They* are mine. And if I demand they cut and ship lumber as payment for my generosity, then I am fully within my rights to do so.”

There were murmurs of assent from our audience, and the conversation soon turned to another subject. I glanced down at the lower tables, relieved that no one seemed to have noticed the few tense moments which had just passed. My gaze then turned to my right, where Father stood on the other side of Kiron. He was speaking with the ambassador from the Ponthian states, but he caught my eye for a moment. His gaze was questioning, and I looked down at my hands rather than face him. I had never spoken out of turn before, and so there was no doubt my father desired an explanation.

“My lady?” I looked up from my hands to find Kiron glancing down at me. A frown was upon his face, and I wondered if he was disappointed in me. “Something bothered you about their conversation?”

Concerned, I realized. It surprised me so much that I had to pause to gather my thoughts before responding. “It seemed as if they were talking about slaves,” I said, lowering my voice so that the loud talk and heavy clatter of utensils nearly drowned it out. “There are no slaves in Ista’an,” I added almost anxiously.

“No, there aren’t,” he replied automatically, his mouth twisted into a rueful smile. “But there are serfs, those who live off the land of their ‘betters.’”

I had heard of the word serf, of course. I also knew that most of the commoners in the Ista’an Empire apart from those in the main cities and towns fell under that title. However, I had only a vague sense of the actual meaning of the word, and nothing more. “What is the difference between the two?”

“To men like Duke Narakin, I’m afraid it is a distinction without a difference.”

* * *

When the evening meal drew to a close, I managed to catch Shirinna as she came up the servant’s staircase. The nobles had all gone in the opposite direction to retire in their chambers, but I had paused just outside the door in hopes of meeting her. She shook her head when she saw me waiting for her, but there was a smile on her face when she came forward to embrace me.

“Thank you,” I murmured into her shoulder. She tightened her arms around me in response and then broke away. “Wait,” I added hastily as she turned to leave. The cook paused, looking back at me questioningly. “Do you think I could share your midday meal tomorrow?”

“Of course,” she replied, smiling again. “Just come by the kitchen when you’re hungry.”

“Alone?” I added hesitantly, my voice catching slightly. I pursed my lips firmly, hoping Shirinna had not noticed. I was not so fortunate.

She frowned, giving me her full attention. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I replied firmly, but her knowing look assured me that she did not believe a word. “I-I need to talk to you. About Kalíma,” I added in a whisper.

Her eyes widened.

“Saera, there you are,” came a familiar voice, and Shirinna stiffened slightly when my father strode toward us from the open doors. His green eyes were warm as he glanced down at me, and I could tell he was attempting to hide a smile. “I saw that you managed to come to dinner late—with no undue disruption, I might add. I suppose I have you to thank for that, madam?” he continued, glancing over at Shirinna.

“Indeed, that is the case, milord,” she answered with a smile and a shake of her head. “Though I had quite the task ahead of me.”

“Shirinna!” I protested. She was unfazed by my outburst, which only made matters worse when Father chuckled lightly in response.

“Again, you have my thanks,” he said, “and my compliments on such a fine meal. You must dine at the lower tables sometime in the near future so that we might show you the proper gratitude.”

“Perhaps when court is not quite so full,” Shirinna replied with a half smile. “Room might then be made for me without putting another to shame.” She turned away, but paused when my father lifted his hand as if to stop her.

“Shirinna,” he began, and I glanced at him sharply, surprised at his easy address with someone so low in station. It came as second nature to address Shirinna as an equal,

even as somewhat of an authority figure, but to see Father lower himself in such a manner was more than a little disconcerting.

“I know,” she replied, sparing him a brief glance before turning to me. “We’ll see each other tomorrow, Princess.” With those parting words, she dipped into a curtsy and left.

* * *

By the time Father had taken me to my chambers, I had thought of an adequate excuse for my behavior at the evening meal.

“I was flustered because I was late and I forgot myself,” I said in a rush once he had us seated on the sofa in the room where I entertained visitors. Glancing up, I caught his pointed look and finally found the courage to speak the words that had been floating in my mind since the moment I had stepped foot on the bridge, gazing down at the horrible spectacle below. “I feel as if I have been left in the dark concerning. In less than three years, I will come of age. I need to be prepared for all that that entails, and I believe that includes taking on some responsibilities now.”

Something hard glittered in my father’s eyes at my outburst, and I leaned back slightly from him. It was gone in a moment, and I reasoned that I could have imaged it. “You are correct—you *do* need to become more involved in matters concerning the noble houses,” he said after a moment. “Granted, I would prefer you not speak against such a severely guarded issue as serfdom, but the fact remains that I will not always be the one to solve these problems. One day, this will be your task to bear—amongst others.”

It took me a moment to realize the full impact of his words. “I did not mean—”

“I know,” Father replied, smiling down at me fondly. “I have been distinctly leaving you out of certain matters in order to protect you, but now I see that this may have been a disservice. What if I were to leave you without the knowledge of how to run this kingdom for yourself? That, I feel, would be the greatest disservice of all.”

“Kingdom?” I questioned, leaning against him to conceal my growing sense of fatigue. He automatically wrapped his arm around my shoulders, bringing me close.

Father smiled down at me again, but this time the expression was tinged with sadness. “There is no more empire, not really. The Ponthian states banded together and broke away long ago. All of that vast territory to the west has been torn apart by war and bloodshed, and now rebellions are rising in the north.”

“And riots in Ista’an,” I pointed out, fighting to keep my eyes open.

“And also the riots,” my father conceded. “All matters that have to be dealt with if there is to be peace during your reign.”

“I would like that,” I murmured as I lost the battle I had been waging, and my eyes closed.

“As would I.” I felt the curious sensation of weightlessness as Father lifted me and carried me across the room. Soft silk pressed against my skin as he gently placed me on my bed. “Good night, Saera,” he murmured, and I felt his lips brush my forehead.

“Mmm,” was the only response I could manage. The last thing I heard as sleep came over me was the sound of his light chuckle.

Chapter Three: Fayna

A rush of colors flew past my vision as I ran—browns, greens, and the occasional blue. Sharp pains pierced my chest; I was short on breath. Swallowing to slow my erratic breathing, I glanced behind me. Panic flared for a brief moment as my pursuers closed in behind me. Something whizzed by the side of my head. I turned back just as an arrow lodged itself into a tree directly in front of my line of sight, and I bit back a scream.

“M’lady?”

I opened my eyes, taking in my surroundings as the fog muddling my senses gradually lifted. My covers were their usual tangled mess, and for some reason my abdomen felt extremely sore. Looking down, I frowned at the sight of my wrinkled dress.

“Are you all right, m’lady?”

I glanced up to find my maid standing before the curtain, pulling it open with one hand. Her head was turned so that her concerned gaze was upon me. I blinked, shielding my eyes as they adjusted to the sunlight streaming in. “’Twas only a dream...Liana. I shall be fine.”

“What were you dreaming about, m’lady? If you don’t mind me asking,” she added hastily as she came to the side of my bed.

“I do not mind,” I replied with a smile. “Do you think you could—” I broke off, indicating my gown with a downward motion of my hand.

“You’re dressed! Why—never mind. Turn around, please.”

I obliged, lifting my hair out of the way so that she might have full access to the laces running down my back. She was almost halfway done when I finally answered her

question. “I am not entirely certain what ‘twas all about. The dream was so very confusing,” I murmured, rubbing my hand across my forehead.

“Well, what do you remember?” she questioned calmly, deftly pulling apart the remaining strings.

I flashed a glance in her direction but saw only compassion in her gaze. She really did wish to help me, despite the fact I had hardly spoken a kind word to her in my life. “I remember...trees. There were so many of them—so green and vibrant. And there was blue,” I added slowly, glancing out of the open window. “That must have been the sky. But...it was not always there.”

“A forest, perhaps?”

“Yes, that sounds right.... I was running through a forest, and someone was chasing me,” I added as she helped me stand.

“Do you know who was chasing you?”

I was given a moment to think as she pulled the dress down and set it upon the bed. When I heard her swift intake of breath, I glanced down at my stomach. It was covered in great patches of purple around the tight piece of cloth encircling my abdomen. “There’s a reason you’re not to sleep with a corset on,” she muttered to herself, swiftly unlacing the strings holding the heinous contraption together in the back.

“Yes, well apparently my father was not aware of this fact when he put me to bed last night.” I sighed happily once the burning pressure lessened, but I was surprised to find Liana practically immobile. She stood stricken, her hands clutching the cloth that had been cutting off my circulation. “What is wrong?” I questioned, placing a hand on her arm.

“Nothing.” The maid turned from me, shaking her head and blinking rapidly.

“Your dream,” she said abruptly, glancing back. “Who was chasing you?”

I pressed my lips together firmly before finally responding. “I think they were soldiers. Imperial soldiers. But that does not make any sense,” I added, shaking my head.

“Why would they be chasing me?”

“It’s your dream, m’lady,” Liana replied with a shrug, and I suddenly realized she had not heard a single word I had just spoken. Her own unspoken fear seemed to have taken precedence over the small seed of friendship that had grown between us. At least, for the moment.

As she filled a large basin with hot water from the kitchens, my thoughts turned again to my dream. What I had said to Liana had been true, but it was not the details of the dream that I found to be so confusing—although they were fairly perplexing in their own right—but rather the fact I was almost certain the dream would come true. And, although I was not quite so certain of this fact, it seemed as if the soldiers were pursuing someone other than me.

* * *

The rest of the morning consisted of tedious lessons and long-winded lectures, but at least I had something to look forward to. When midday finally drew near, I managed to convince my escort to allow me to walk to the kitchen unsupervised. I believe he was so surprised I did not simply slip away that he would have agreed to anything. In any case, I found myself stepping onto the servants’ staircase quite a bit early. Raised voices greeted me halfway down, and I stumbled slightly in surprise. I pressed my hand against the wall to steady myself before hurrying down the rest of the shallow steps. The kitchen,

normally a flurry of activity during this time of the day, had come to a standstill. All eyes were fixed upon a small cluster of people standing just inside the open back door.

“You can’t just bring anyone through the gates!” Shirinna stood facing Alacia, hands on her hips, and somehow managed to glare down at the girl despite the fact the cook was a head shorter.

“He was helping me carry linens. Besides, he’s a decent lad. Looks out for the younger ones, see?”

Shirinna was shaking her head, but I had turned my attention to the boy standing between them. He had a smug expression on his face that was more than a little familiar. “Leto,” I murmured to myself. The boy glanced in my direction, and I could have sworn the corners of his mouth went up in the smallest of smirks.

“That’s not relevant. Someone has to vouch for him.”

“I just did.”

“You don’t count,” Shirinna replied, although she was attempting to hide a smile. She glanced down at the boy, appraising him. “What’s your name, lad?” she questioned, not unkindly.

“Leto, ma’am,” he replied, perfectly polite. I fought the urge to scoff. It would have been unladylike. “Sorry to cause such a fuss. I’m just trying to make some coin, see? Thought maybe I’d get a decent bite to eat tonight...”

He’s manipulating you, I thought, watching Shirinna’s expression soften.

“Well, I suppose there’s no harm done...this time.” Her eyes flicked over to Alacia, who was trying her best to appear unconcerned. “But it had best not happen

again,” she added, turning away. As if some unspoken order had been given, everyone resumed their work, and it was with some difficulty that I made it to the cook’s side.

“You’re here early, Princess!” Shirinna exclaimed, glancing over at the sight of Leto conversing with the stable hands as they had their midday meal. “I apologize for the commotion. It was just—”

“Commotion?” I interjected, raising my eyebrows and trying to appear as unconcerned as Alacia. “I am certain I do not know what you mean.”

“Of course, m’lady,” she replied with a smile. “Do you mind waiting for a moment? I’ve a few things to finish before we can enjoy our meal.”

“By all means.” The cook laid her hand affectionately on my arm as she passed, and I stood back to let her work.

“So, I take it necklaces were in short supply?”

I jumped at the sound of Leto’s voice, turning to find him leaning comfortably against one of the tables. He nodded to me, indicating the finery adorning my person. I gave him a smirk of my own before replying.

“Yes, but I am afraid we are stock full of obnoxious boys. You shall have to try another castle.”

“Cute,” Leto replied. I tried not to be too pleased when his smirk widened into a grin. “The stable master would beg to differ, though. He just offered me a job.”

“What are you doing here, Leto?” I questioned, ignoring his jibe.

“What were you doing at the marketplace, Princess?” he asked instead, a hard edge coming to his voice.

I looked away from his accusing eyes. “There were riots in the streets...”

“There’s always riots in the streets.”

“Well, ‘tis the first time I have heard of them!” I replied hotly. He leaned back slightly—violet eyes afire are quite a sight to behold, or so I have heard.

“Are you ready, Saera?” I glanced to my right to find Shirinna removing her apron. I managed to nod, releasing my breath slowly. “Are you feeling well, Princess?” she asked, observing my face with a concerned frown. Most people redden when they become angry, but my face grows pale.

“I am fine.” Turning my head, I noticed Leto was conveniently absent.

Shirinna gave me a smile, holding her hand out to me. “Let’s go to the storeroom to eat our meal. We should have some semblance of privacy there.”

She led me to the cellar door to the left of the servant’s staircase. Lifting a key from a chain around her neck, she unlocked the door and pulled back. It came open with a groan of protest, but the noise of the cooks at work nearly drowned out the sound. I had seen the cellar before, of course, but the neatness of the room always struck me. Everything had its place in Shirinna’s storeroom. Herbs hung from the low rafters, filling the air with a mix of sweet and sharp scents. Crates were stacked along two of the walls, and sacks of flour and grain were piled carefully atop the wooden boxes. Light streamed in weakly through the open door behind us as well as from the small grated window near the other end of the room, but the far reaches of the cellar remained in shadow.

Shirinna took me to the window and leaned against the table that stood underneath it. A platter of cold sweetmeats and warm bread lay to her left, two goblets placed on either side. I glanced back at Shirinna to find her smiling at me. My traitorous cheeks reddened, and I responded instantly when she patted the open space next to her. I

lifted myself onto the table and glanced down at my hands to find them clenched in my lap.

Secrets. This castle was full of secrets. It did not even seem like my home anymore. Shirinna's eyes were on me, but though I tried I could not bring myself to speak. The air was thick, heavy with that which had been left untold—that which had been left untold for years.

“Saera, who told you that word?” she asked quietly, no accusation in her tone.

“I believe you will have to assist me with that question,” I replied, catching the open curiosity in her steady gaze. I looked away, my legs rocking back and forth. “She has been a part of my life since I was little, but I do not know her name. I have not even heard her voice.” I glanced back at the cook. “Not audibly, at least.”

Her face paled, downcast and withdrawn—even wistful. “Fayna,” she whispered to herself, so quietly I was surprised I even heard her.

“You are a dragonrider, are you not?” I pressed gently, placing my hand upon her arm.

“Once, perhaps.” She turned away, busying herself with the tray of food that lay on her other side.

“What happened?”

“War,” she replied with a bitter laugh, handing me a full plate yet still managing to avoid my eyes. I remained silent, afraid that any interruption might silence her forever. “The first war lasted for over a century. It was a part of us, ingrained into our very beings.”

“What caused the war?” I asked, remembering a similar question I had asked the high priest the morn before.

“We were the first to strike against the empire,” Shirinna replied, finally turning to me. I noticed that her own plate remained empty. “Ista’an sprawled across vast plains and reached across great continents, but still she lusted for power. Anyone who dared to put forth any resistance was put to the sword. When innocent blood soaked freely to the ground, the Kalímein decided to take action.”

“And once they resisted, the dragonriders were declared enemies of the gods,” I interjected, finally understanding the true source of my title as Híjshak.

We ate our meal in silence, but something about our conversation bothered me for the rest of the day. As I was walking back from the evening meal, I finally realized what it was: If Shirinna had been a dragonrider, why had she not been killed the moment she had entered the palace?

I pulled open the door to my chambers and began to unlace the back of my gown. Stepping into the bedroom, I half expected to see Liana stoking the fire to ward off the evening chill. What I most certainly did not expect was to see Leto sitting on my bed, dressed in the faded cotton dress of a maid’s attire.

Conclusion

Marketability

Modern adolescent fiction is not in short supply, and countless new authors are trying their hand at the fantasy genre. However, this book will stand out from its peers because it reflects biblical truth and is actually well-written. The protagonist does not simply react to events as they occur—she is realistic, having multiple desires that propel her through the action of the novel. Unlike many modern adolescent fantasies, the world in which the protagonist lives is also fully developed and populated by a variety of people from different cultures and ways of life. The characters found in this novel are not perfect, but their flaws are not glorified and their mistakes clearly result in consequences.

Meaning

According to Reinking and von der Osten, “[a] narrative, like any other kind of writing, makes a point or has a purpose. The point can either be stated or left unstated, but it always shapes the writing” (2007, p. 81). The main meaning behind the book is that adolescents should not blindly follow the beliefs of their parents. They should listen to the advice of their elders, but they should also seek the truth for themselves. Like Saera, they also might find it necessary to make the hard choice to do what is right—no matter the personal cost.

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