

TRUTHFUL ROOTS



Victoria M. Steinsøy

Book One of The Seeds of Ascension Series

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For my dear father who read to me before bed till I was eleven and who always bought me books for my birthday (even when I had specified that all I wanted was a dog). You seeded the love I have for books and fiction. Thank you.

About the Author

Born (and later raised) in Norway in 1996, Victoria Steinsøy has restlessly been exploring the world ever since. She's always had a love for writing and storytelling, and it was during her last semester at the University, that a spark of inspiration made her turn away from Academia and immerse herself in the world of fiction.

Her intention was simple; bringing what she'd learned from her travels, her history bachelor, philosophy courses and perhaps most importantly; her self studies in subjects like spirituality and psychology, and write a layered and multi-dimensional fantasy novel. Seeds of Ascension initially started as an idea for a singular book, but was then rapidly channeled into a much vaster, fictional world with plot lines that keep on evolving and expanding.

As a writer, who's been hit quite hard by the "muses", Victoria mostly spends her days word-vomiting over her keyboard, way too many notebooks, manuals and any other defenseless sheets of paper. As a human she is now stationed in Egypt and navigating through the author's journey, at least half gracefully, in a combination of gratitude and overwhelm, as an ascending universe unfolds itself from the touch of her fingertips.

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* * *



PROLOGUE

“Araktéa’s nature is changing. The new rivers are coming soon. Stay, and you will see it with your own eye.” These had been the last words Wind had spoken as The Dark Loon had left him for the second and the last time. Though not a predictor, he mostly trusted their foresight, and now, looking down the valley between the unnamed mountains, he thought he could see their vague silhouette down there. Three decades had perhaps changed either of them, but despite of having similar visions, they continued to be creatures of different directions – different roots and slightly different truths. Though again tempted to see it all to an end, The Dark Loon had decided not to stay to watch the ground change. No, from now on, his direction was north.

There were certainly things to be done before he could retire from his many roles – things and strings that needed to be tied, executed, or weaved together. Not every game needed to be played out – this was something the land had forced him to learn. Lives were much too short in this realm and seeds grew much too slowly, but prophecies, he believed, would always come true in due time. “Perhaps even false ones,” he thought. Brushing off this seductive intrigue with a squeaking roll of his stiffening neck. Whatever sinister truths were lurking under the surface, he would see it all ascend from afar. Turning towards the rising sun, he saw a crow diving playfully in the lower lands, and at last, he felt a readiness to go back home. “Now, I will be an observer,” he said, stating a loose vow of a sort as he took his first descending step down the slope.

CHAPTER ONE

THE HARVEST

ENTERING the small piece of land that bore the closest resemblance to the outside forest, Isaiah saw the sun rising behind the taller pine trees, surrounding both the insides and outsides of the rusty-colored, northwest wall. He stared at the ground where he had planted his seed a year earlier. Certain it had been exactly a year, for it was day three, which happened to be his eighteenth birthday. With no major seasonal changes in central Araktéa, these were things you had to keep close track of, if of any interest to you. He'd personally done so by carving the wall underneath his bed every morning since coming to the Huxley fortress. Not because he thought the third to be any more special than the other days making up a year. It seemed every day was somebody's birthday after all, and seen away from the lords, the sirs, patrons, and other *great men* – celebrating theirs as if they'd been miraculous godly events – Isaiah thought all of them quite similar. It was rather due to his seeding he bothered keeping track. This, as well as his wall carvings, he'd kept to himself of course, for although it was nothing like the pagan rituals that'd been banned from the fortress, the line between what was permitted and not, seemed to be in an ever-changing flux.

The ritual itself was a simple one. Last year's seed had been given to him by Lady Huxley's gardener, and whether he'd been kind enough to spare or smuggle it out for him, Isaiah was not certain of. In normal circumstances, his grandfather would have gifted him one on the

morning of his birthday. They would go to their garden and he would ask a question as he planted it. It was a good training of his patience, as he'd then need to wait a whole year before observing its response. He'd always considered it an intelligent way of celebrating, having been taught there were few things more precious than having your questions answered. It was for this reason that the art of asking the right ones was something every person should strive for – a skill that saddened him to see, most people did not acquire in the slightest.

In his life, he'd never had any doubt about the accuracy of a plants' answer. He was of course well aware a plant could not talk – such nonsense was a thing of village lore. Instead, there were ways to interpret them, ways they could tell you things that only nature itself could know with certainty. Leaving behind his expectations while going through the process was perhaps the most challenging part. Because of his grandfather's botany book he normally knew what kind of plant the seed would grow up to be – sometimes making him overly hopeful. The Lady's gardener had no books of the sort and had only given him a strange, foreign name he'd never heard of and had forgotten soon after. And so, he had not imagined anything during last year's seeding or expected it to blossom into some lush, colorful flower. It wasn't about a plant's beauty after all, but how it grew according to its own nature. Just as his grandfather always said, "*A rose is no more precious than a corpse flower. Both have their place, and both have their says.*" Thus far their '*says*', or perhaps his interpretations of them, had never turned out to be untrue. No seed had ever failed to respond, and yet, there he was, now a grown man, standing on the very same ground he had a year before and it was no less flat.

The climate was different and more unpredictable in the Nahbí region, and so he'd suspected that quite possibly, whatever it was, wouldn't fully blossom within a year like seeds did at home. He'd thought he'd need to give it a few more weeks for a clear answer, but the fact that the seed had not left as much as the tiniest of sprouts for him, was something he had not prepared for. For a moment he considered if he'd gone to the wrong place, or that someone had perhaps seen it from afar and foolishly gifted it to some woman they fancied. After digging his fingers into the cold dirt, both hopes were

soon disconfirmed. The seed was exactly where he'd left it – two inches underground, three steps away from the surrounding oaks that'd been shedding orange and yellow leaves around themselves, making the area almost look pretty for once.

"There will be no answers this year." Isaiah thought, observing it as it laid heavy in his palm. On any other birthday, this would have been a disappointment. An annoyance that might have left him muttering in the garden for half a day, before finally coming to terms with reality, and choosing a new and more relevant question to ask for their next seeding. But last year's question had been the most important one he'd ever asked and not one he'd made out of curiosity (a luxurious and juvenile emotion he could no longer afford). "I need to know!" He moaned. Giving the ground a childlike kick. Crisp leaves lazily lifted, then fell back down whilst some crow mocked him from afar. Slightly embarrassed by his tantrum, he looked around to reassure himself nobody was watching.

Studying the seed more closely, he wondered if it was dead but found no signs of damage to it. It was bigger than any other seed he'd planted, and so he'd had a hope it would perhaps grow up to be something he'd never seen before. For a moment he considered planting it elsewhere that might be slightly sunnier, but quickly concluded it pointless. The earth was perhaps not fertile enough to nurture it, and besides, he had not taken the time to think of a new question for this year's seeding. His plan had been to be gone long before. By then he would want to be home - home in Delta, where everything grew effortlessly and where you didn't need to worry about anyone stealing your plants, or for the soil not to do what soil was meant to do. And so, still hassled, he threw the seed away and marched over to the fields, where more reliable things grew.

It was as silent as ever and slightly chiller than it'd been for the past weeks. Still, he pulled off his woolen sweater, as its itch seemed particularly eager to torment him. The only wind meeting his arms was the one made by his own movement, and he noticed his temperature rising strangely. Finally, he stopped somewhere right in the middle of the fields for no particular reason. Squatting down, the smell of smoke from the clay oven placed on the courtyard right next

to the main building, and the steep ladder that led to its bell tower reached his nostrils. Some two hundred yards east he could see there was still an hour left before it would ring, signaling the time for breakfast. For now, it was only him out there, and seven gray-clothed women flocking around the oven, with huge pots to serve the late risers. As usual, he'd been the first to have his breakfast. It'd been the same porridge they'd been serving for the past moon span or so. A little too sweet for his taste, but edible still, and enough to keep him fueled for a few hours of labor.

For his daily chore, he'd brought his smallest spade with him, as well as three, hessian sacks that were to be filled within the day. More than usual, he wanted it done quickly, but before even having pulled the first potato out of its obscure misery, he heard the sound of panting. Looking up, he noticed two, large dogs standing a couple of feet away and lurched backwards. One light and one dark, both gray and fiercely yellow eyed. He'd seen them many times – walking around unbound – and he'd been very relieved that they'd never paid him much attention. Now, they were glaring straight at him, and he was about to panic, although their gazes flickered with something more resembling expectation than blood thirst.

"Good morning." A man's voice said, and once again he was startled, until he noticed Archilai's slender figure approaching. His shadow laid long behind his impressive height, making him easier than most to recognize from afar. Isaiah had previously estimated that he had to be sixty or older, though his large, silver beard and bushy eyebrows did well in concealing what might either be signs of age or youth.

"Hello." He responded, his voice thin and revealing. The two of them usually didn't converse, and so, even if they were the only ones in the fields just then, it seemed strange he would greet him. Had it not been for the dogs he needed rescue from, interacting with anyone would have seemed especially troublesome just then.

"Hope these fine beasts didn't startle you, boy. Violet, Dusk, come on here!" His panic dissolving, Isaiah realized he shouldn't be surprised as the dogs often seem to be following Archilai around. He'd warned the children about them numerous times and on many occasions had to stop them from pulling their tails, ears, and

whatever limbs they could grab a hold of. The children in the fortress, he'd decided, were often very foolish and their parents seemingly incompetent in changing this fact.

"They weren't." He assured him, relieved as Violet and Dusk obeyed and turned their vicious eyes towards a stick that Archilai waved around. He threw it across the field with an impressive range for someone so scrawny looking. Grinned as they ran, before looking down at him under the wide, stray hat (covering an otherwise bald head).

"I guess it's me then. You'd prefer to be alone, lad?" He was quick to say, grinning even wider as he noticed the boy's rosy cheeks flaring red. A tendency he'd observed on more than one occasion already. "No... that's alright. There is more than enough space here." Isaiah tried, surprised by his bluntness.

"Worry not, I won't bother you for long. Tomorrow you'll have all these roots for yourself – well, at least for the early hours." Isaiah glimpsed at him, wondering if he'd sincerely come with the intention of bothering him, or if he'd attempted to make a joke.

"I am not bothered." He said and started digging again as Archilai took a step closer.

"No? Well, don't you wish to break free, lad?" He asked, glaring straight at the sun that had started rising higher behind the boy's back. Where the dogs chased each other in giant, joyous circles. There was still some beauty left in this place.

"Don't we all..." Isaiah responded absentmindedly as he placed the first potatoes in his sack.

"Oh, I doubt that. But I'm asking *you*." The young boy sighed and Archilai noticed the tension in his arms and shoulders that seemed to have grown much wider and harder this past year.

"Of course I do." He said. Escaping, he'd noticed, was a topic spoken of quite consistently and attempted quite rarely. Yet, there was a certain edge in Archilai's tone, almost suggesting he was being serious.

"It appears to me, you're a clever and strong young man. Why don't you?"

"For all you know, I might be planning to."

"Oh. So, you *do* have a plan? That's terrific!" he said, with an enthusiasm that made his accent more evident than usual.

"Quite possibly." Isaiah answered as plainly as he could, pulling another potato from the ground. Placing it in the sack. "Leave me alone." He thought, suddenly grossly aware of how his undershirt had already started clinging to his back.

"Well lad, won't you tell me about it, then?"

"For obvious reasons, I cannot, but I assume you will know soon enough – once I'm gone." It was the first time he'd even indicated that he had an escape plan, and he instantly felt himself regretting it. Not knowing Archilai very well, and still preoccupied with the unsuccessful seeding, he was in no mood to contemplate on his crumbling agenda.

"If I was the one assuming here..." the bearded man began, cleansing his throat and leaning towards a tall spade that looked like it would be of no good use out there, "I'd say you're waiting for the event that is to happen in ten days' time. If this were the case, I'd tell you getting through the northern gates won't be a good option unless you've come up with a very clever scheme, as they've planned on having more guards this year." Isaiah paused for a moment, his stomach twisting even tighter than it had whilst facing the dogs. He then resumed, trying his best to keep up the same, casual disengagement, as he asked, "Has anyone attempted this before?"

"Of course. Quite a few actually, which I guess is why they're being more cautious this time." Had he made a greater effort to look for a bright side that day, it would've been the fact that he'd just received the answer to his question – a loud, and terribly clear, *no*. It was after overhearing how drunk and sloppy the guards tended to be during this particular event, he'd decided to ask the seed if he'd be able to escape that night - without getting caught. Asking this, he'd almost sensed his grandfather sighing and shaking his head at him. "Limiting questions will bring you nothing but limiting answers." He knew it was true, but with the limitations of his particular circumstances it had seemed inevitable. Simply asking if it was possible for him to escape wouldn't tell him when, and he already knew some captives succeeded on occasion, just to be taken by the Kadoshi and brought back shortly after. He guessed he should feel happy for the ones who'd gotten out before him, but he wasn't. Not even in the slightest, and even less so for the ones who'd been sluggish.

* * *

There was a lot more to escaping than just getting through the gates. The woods surrounding the fortress were thick, and the path through them leading north was crooked as a sorceress' nose. He would need food and supplies for the journey, as well as a horse he at least felt somewhat comfortable with. He'd made sure all of this would be at his disposal just in time for the event – which now, for some reason – would be happening earlier than planned. All he'd been waiting for was his seeds' final approval to go through with it. That wasn't to say he hadn't prepared that it might signal him to stay put, but in any scenario, the message would come as it always did – from a plant that had the certainty of nature at its core, and not a man that was practically a stranger.

"You would've known this earlier had you consulted with someone. Nearly *anyone* in fact – there's been plenty of discussions in the Cave. You're hardly the first one to think of this." Archilai broke the silence, noticing the gloom look on the boy's face. It was a handsome, angular face, though the way he carried it gave him the impression nobody had ever told him anything of the sort. Framed and often hidden by a dark mane of hair, it was only now, in the early rays of sunlight, he saw its subtle, golden touch. His almond eyes were shy, but the few times they'd met his, he'd seen they were a rare, deep blue, reminding him all too much of similar ones he'd once known. His strong jaw seemed particularly tense as he said, "*This isn't something that should be spoken of so openly here.*" His voice was low even to his own ears, though Isaiah knew well that both Lord and Lady Huxley were still asleep and would continue to be so for some hours more. He assumed Archilai knew this too, yet he felt desperate to make an end to their conversation without being ruder than necessary.

"Many things shouldn't, but you see, complete silence can just as well lead to the death of a man." Now, Isaiah stood up to look at him, discovering that the old man's expression had turned serious in a way that didn't quite suit his face or character. His oval eyes, like light, blue ponds, stared so intensely at him that he instinctively lowered his own.

"Thank you for informing me, I will not attempt to leave during the event. Worry not." Even if he didn't know exactly how Archilai had guessed his plan so accurately, he knew he should in fact feel grateful about the warning. Yet, being in an unusually sour mood, he had to

force the words from his mouth, leaving an odd cling to them that sounded anything but genuine.

“You might have saved my life...” he tried, knowing it was a little overdramatized, and once again Archilai’s face turned cheerful.

“Oh, don’t flatter me too much, lad. They wouldn’t have killed you – you are much too good of a worker for that. But they might have sent you to the chambers for a few days, and I wouldn’t wish that upon you.” Just the mentioning of the place, made a cold, unease spread down Isaiah’s spine. Like everyone else in there, he’d heard of the chambers a few times too many – and more importantly, what happened to the troublemakers that were sent there.

The stories were usually told by the triplets, who always made the biggest riots, not to say, encouraged and engaged in foolish behaviors of many variables. Isaiah didn’t quite understand *why*, for by now, they should be more than well aware of the consequences. More often than not, their rebellions sprung out of insignificant matters and minor disagreements. Nobody ever seemed bothered with asking why, and instead listened to their stories wide-eyed and petrified. Stories of the sort, nobody should want to hear but couldn’t resist listening to. As for the chambers, they claimed the pain was unbearable, and much more than any common man would endure. Before the actual beating started, they would have no food, and sometimes no water, for three whole days. Then, they would meet with the torturer, which they’d explained was a terrifying, masked man from the Zura tribe. What happened next was different each time, but the captive would always receive a devilish beating until finally losing consciousness. Isaiah had seen their deep scars as proof of this, and though making their broad backs uglier each time, all three seemed to consider them symbols of their manhood, and so, soon after one had gone, another went.

These were stories that made it easy for him to get up early and to consistently make sure he was among the most hard-working people in the fields. He’d never heard of anyone being sent to the chambers for insignificant matters, but he still wanted the Patron’s grace if he – accidentally – should end up in any trouble. This was also the reason he needed absolute certainty he wouldn’t get caught escaping.

"Don't look so frightened, lad. The chambers are not really as bad as they make them sound." Archilai said, seeing his expression bore the same grimness he'd seen in too many young faces before, as the roughness of reality washed away their hopes of simple solutions. It was a rough time to be an Araktéan and it seemed he himself had always known this. Even back when things had appeared to be simple – and that was a very long time ago.

"I'm not *afraid*." Isaiah frowned, as Archilai pulled up the sleeve of his own gray, loose sweater. Parts of his arms (covering his hand and halfway up his wrist) had a strange purple-like color. The rest is marked by thick, blue veins shimmering through his skin like tiny rivers.

"These are just a few injuries from working." He explained, "For now, I think it's better if I don't show you the ones from the chambers."

"Oh." Isaiah said, somewhat relieved by this fact. Then he kept on digging again, making an effort not to look at him. He'd never seen scarring like that in his life, and he did not want to know exactly what had caused it.

"It might be unnecessary to say, lad, but I want to encourage you to escape soon, so that your *immaculate* skin can stay smooth for a little longer."

"I would have to wait for a new opportunity, but I will get out soon enough."

"So," Archilai leaned on his spade again, "Your solution is to wait *even* longer?"

"I'll be patient, and eventually I'm sure I will come up with something." If he had looked up on his companion at this moment, he would have seen an expression so soundlessly condescending, it'd bring about an argument between anyone with the slightest of a temper. Perhaps fortunately, Isaiah still pretended to focus on the stubborn roots.

"Boy, opportunities don't just show up out of the blue around here, you need to make them yourself – use your creativity."

"*I am* using my creativity."

"Wouldn't it perhaps be better for you to pursue your writing outside these walls?" With this, Isaiah couldn't help but stand back up again. It was no secret he had a book with him, but for someone who'd

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