

The Dubious Gift of Dragon Blood

J. Marshall Freeman

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In J. Marshall Freeman's fantasy novel, Crispin wants to leave the shadow of his sophomore year, when he was outed and lost his first boyfriend, behind him. He takes comfort in starting his junior year as part of the popular clique, even if their ringleader treats him as a filler.

Then Crispin finds out that he is one of twenty not quite humans living on Earth who have dragon blood. The five ruling dragons, and the society built around them, reside in the Realm of Fire, and they want Crispin back. A prophecy has predicted that one of the five will die, and Crispin has been chosen to mate with the queen and produce an heir. Overwhelmed, Crispin spends the night with a friend; after his popularity bubble bursts the next day, he flees to the Realm of Fire to escape his embarrassment and grief.

In Cliffside, the home of the humans who serve the five, Crispin is revered, though not everyone is welcoming. Under the leadership of the Prime Magistrate, the prophecy has become heresy, and Crispin struggles to earn allies. He forms an unlikely alliance with a young acolyte, Davix, and they investigate strange events plaguing Cliffside, including a series of suspicious deaths.

The story includes many perspectives, but Crispin and Davix dominate. Davix provides insight into the culture of Cliffside; his struggle to abandon lifelong loyalties and beliefs in order to do what is right is palpable and moving. Crispin's charming awkwardness is a balm; he enlivens austere Cliffside with his rambling speeches and draws parallels to pop culture that are lost on his compatriots.

Most concerned with a boy who has always felt out of place, *The Dubious Gift of Dragon Blood* is a young adult fantasy that's primed for a sequel.

DANIELLE BALLANTYNE (November / December 2020)

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