



The Last Lion of Karkov

Dale Griffin

Books Fluent (Feb 14, 2023)

(606pp)

978-1-953865-60-1

In the fantasy novel The Last Lion of Karkov, princesses bolster rebellions and topple monarchies, all in the name of sisterly love.

In Dale Griffin's epic historical novel *The Last Lion of Karkov*, twin princesses come of age within an oppressive regime.

At fifteen years old, pugnacious Jillian, the probable next leader of Karkov, is sent to command an invasion of neighboring Passan. Meanwhile, her beautiful, compelling sister, Natalia, prepares herself for a royal marriage to a handsome Mediterranean prince. But while she's in Passan, Jillian learns the truth about her father and the traditions of Karkov's medieval aristocracy. She laments, "Now that I've seen what we are, I want no part of it." Her ensuing rebellion loses her the chance for the Lion's role; she shifts her focus to saving her sister from a repugnant fate.

War, love, and family ties play out across five distinct nations as the princesses move their societies toward a new era. Even though they were trained as mighty warriors, their combined circumstances threaten to defeat them both. Marriage arrangements are rearranged, Natalia begins having dark visions, and a rogue general launches attacks on the Karkov region.

The resulting drama is riveting if somewhat formulaic. Two monarchs lose their heads; neither victim is predictable. The story plays out in countries whose cultures mirror sixteenth-century European cultures—an impression that is strengthened by the languages chosen to announce each of the book's twelve parts, which include French, Portuguese, Croatian, and Italian.

In this character-driven story, Jillian is stubborn and quick to anger, and Natalia is concerned only with her own welfare. Jillian is first to change, learning vulnerability thanks to an unexpected love interest. Natalia's metamorphosis is much more grandiose. Along the way, stories told to new friends unveil their father's stunning abuse of them, done in the name of preparing them for their roles; the late arrival of these stark facts results in a unique afterglow, adding heft to the already captivating heroines.

Aside from the sisters, though, only Prince Francis is developed enough to experience true maturation. The rest of the secondary cast is more rigid in their construction, given to double crosses and dualities. Meanwhile, Jillian and Natalia's father is developed in shallow terms and is left out of the book's central events.

Death-defying action scenes move the novel forward. Natalia jumps from a window while surrounded by enemies; it's an exciting if improbable escape. In battle, clever strategic maneuvers command attention, as when a force baits their enemy to attack by slaughtering horses, noting that the "carcasses will attract buzzards, creating a scene of desperation." Commanding attention, the novel is propelled toward its gripping end: the world into which the twins were born is not the world that they will leave behind. Intelligent and brave, they inspire a new generation of citizens.

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sisterly love.

SAMANTHA ANN EHLE (January 4, 2023)

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