



Vial of Tears

by CRISTIN BISHARA

★ “A heroic tale that feels both classic and fresh.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

ABOUT THE BOOK

Two sisters become trapped in the underworld—and in the machinations of deities, shapeshifters, and ghouls—in this lush and dangerous Phoenician mythology-inspired fantasy.

Teenage sisters Samira and Rima aren't exactly living the dream. Instead, they live with their maddeningly unreliable mother in a run-down trailer in Michigan. Dad's dead, money's tight, and Mom disappears for days at a time. So when Sam's great-grandfather wills her the family valuables—a cache of Lebanese antiquities—she's desperate enough to try pawning them before Mom can.

But she shouldn't. Because one is cursed, forbidden, the burial coin of a forgotten god. Disturbing it condemns her and Rima to the Phoenician underworld, a place of wicked cities, burning cedar forests, poisoned feasts of milk and lemons, and an endless, windless ocean. Nothing is what it seems. No one is who they say. And down here, the night never ends. To get home—and keep her sister safe—Sam will have to outwit beautiful shapeshifters, pose as a royal bride, sail the darkest sea . . . and maybe kill the god of death himself.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is the purpose of the Prologue? At what point is the identity of the boy revealed? The mother doesn't appear until much later in the book. Explain her overall role in the story. Why is her story crucial to Sam's growth?
- Why did Sam's dad feel his wife and youngest daughter needed someone to care for them? How is this assignment a burden for a twelve-year-old? Why does Sam think this promise is her duty and how does she overcome this at the end of the novel?
- Sam's great grandfather, Jiddo Naameh, sends her a box that contains a clay jug and seven coins. She cannot read the letter inside the package because it is written in Arabic. How does the letter add to the mystery of the package?
- Why does Jiddo pick Sam to receive the jug and the coins? What does Sam learn about the origin of the jug and coins when she is in the underworld?

- What does Eshmun want from Sam? Why doesn't Eshmun believe Sam when she says she doesn't have his obol? Why is the obol so important to him?
- Explain the importance of the "gateway, paradise, and prophecy" to the story. How long does it take Sam to figure out the meaning of these things?
- Why does Teth think that the Sam and Rima may be in the underworld to help Eshmun fulfill his prophecy?
- What and who is the greatest danger to Sam?
- Zayin promises to help Sam if she brings her a vial of Eshmun's tears. Why is Zayin so eager to have the tears? Discuss why Zayin later changes her request to include some of Eshmun's hair and blood.
- Explain the following line: "Sometimes we cling to hope like a raft when in fact it is an anchor" (p. 149). When is Sam's hope a "raft" and when is it an "anchor"? How does realizing these two kinds of hope help Sam navigate the underworld and deal with the realities of her life in Michigan? Which type of hope contributes to Sam's decision to take Rima on a cross-country fishing trip that she had once planned to take with her father?
- Discuss Sam's mom's reaction to the cross-country trip. Is Sam surprised by her mom's endorsement?
- Explain the meaning of Sam's memories of being lost from her dad at the fair. What is the purpose of the creature that resembles Mr. Koplou, the Clark's landlord?
- How does the parallel between Sam's earthly life and her journey to the underworld explain the overall conflict of the novel? Discuss how the conflict is eventually resolved.
- What does Rima mean when she tells Sam, "You've always had blind spots with our parents" (p. 224). How has Sam opened her eyes by the end of the novel?
- Sam eventually finds meaning in all the people and creatures that she encounters in the underworld. How does each small piece fit together into a larger puzzle?
- Explain what Sam means when she says, "Eshmun had been looking for a door when he was the door himself" (p. 290).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Cristin Bishara is a writer of young adult fiction. She has worked as a copyeditor and taught writing at the university level. Cristin lives in Florida with her family and dog.