

First Chapter of SKYDESCENT

At half an hour to closing, I was the only one left in the Lucky Tavern, besides the owner and his family: his wife, three sons, and ancient mother. Usually, when the first day of the qualifying tournament finished, throngs of people poured onto the streets and partied well into sunrise. This year, the masses took shortcuts home, barricaded their doors, and bolted their shutters. One name was on their tongues, hissed between a string of curses. The raiders.

While I sat at the bar, sipping lukewarm ale, the youngest son saddled up next to me. He was a couple of years older than me, eighteen or so, and had a pimply face that reeked of fish. His interests included woodwork, dragons, and removing the top buttons of my dress. *Oh, no, not for me, for you. I don't want you to be uncomfortable, in such a hot and stuffy tavern. Your collar is practically up to your chin!* He also enjoyed discussing my face, which was 'not bad' for someone with so many freckles. *Hold on, is that a scar below your chin? What's a nice girl like you doing with a scar like that?*

A smile played across my lips as I imagined what he'd say if he knew what I did to earn that scar. Or better yet, if he saw my back. Inevitably, the conversation turned to the qualifying tournament.

"You think we have any good contenders this year?" he said. "Any future dragon riders?"

Technically, everyone had two chances in their lifetime to score a place in the Blood Moon Festival — even lowborns from the Burrow, the kingdom's poorest district. One, pass the Divine Readiness Assessment. Officials tested every nine-year-old in the kingdom, and if they had high enough levels of Divine, a carriage whisked them away to

begin training in Court. But no one from the burrow has passed the DRA in decades, so the second chance was far more likely. At eighteen years old, win the qualifying tournament.

“I wouldn’t know,” I replied. “I only went for the food.”

“Ha,” he snorted. “Didn’t we all?” Free food was a rare occasion in the burrow. For many, the qualifying tournament was the only time all year they would fill their bellies.

At around ten, the owner’s wife began tiring of me. But to be fair, the woman looked tired with life. Her wire-thin frame was painful to look at, and her reddened knuckles were worked to the bone.

“Is your friend close?” the wife said.

I wished I had not seen her knuckles. Now I kept picturing the wife on her hands and knees, spending all day scrubbing the floors and all night staring at the ceiling as stomach pains kept her awake. I knew all too well what that felt like.

“Dear?” the wife repeated, looking concerned now. “Your friend?”

“You know what?” I said. “I think... I think I made a mistake. I think I was supposed to meet him at a different tavern.”

But just as I stood, the door kicked open, and Marcus walked in. He was thin and gangly, around my age, and had at least five piercings in each ear. But his most notable feature was his tattoo. His shirt was open to his navel, exposing thin chest hair and a ram skull tattooed across his neck.

The wife's eyes went wide when they landed on his tattoo. “Raider!” she gasped. She grabbed the old woman and scrambled to the back of the tavern, hiding behind the

spirits shelf. The men jumped to their feet, all but the youngest, who remained at my side.

“Not to fear,” he whispered, circling his arm over my shoulders. “I’ll protect you.”

“Hmmm,” I mumbled, dropping back into my seat. I tilted my head back and downed my ale all in one go. I would need something to dull my senses... Meanwhile, the men demanded Marcus leave.

“Get out!” the tavern owner snapped. “Haven’t the raiders done enough damage to my business?”

“That couldn’t be farther from my intentions,” Marcus said. “I’m here to help your business, not hurt it.”

The tavern owner flushed a vibrant red. “Get out!”

While the tavern owner distracted Marcus, one of his sons crept across the room, raising a heavy wooden chair over Marcus’ head. He swung, and the chair froze an inch from cracking against Marcus’ skull, as if it hit an invisible wall. Then the chair jerked from the son’s grasp and slammed into the floor, shattering into a hundred pieces on impact. The men reeled back, letting out startled cries. The wife froze dead in her tracks, a choked squeak escaping her throat.

I nudged the youngest son. “You mind?”

The boy couldn’t tear his eyes away from the chair pieces scattered across the floor. People from the burrow had heard of the Divine, but they rarely – if ever – saw it in person. The Divine was like money. Hard to acquire unless you’re born with it, and you don’t live in the burrow if you had it. The most he managed to do was lift his arm, letting me slide out of my seat. I crossed the tavern to stand beside Marcus.

“Are you mad, girl?” the owner hissed. “He’s a raider! It’s not safe to –” His voice fell off as he finally noticed my throat. I had unbuttoned my collar, exposing the ram skull tattoo winding around my neck like barbed wire. The owner’s eyes darted between me and the shattered chair, putting two and two together. His face turned beat red, and his fingers twitched toward the shank hanging from his belt.

“I wouldn’t recommend it. For *your* sake, not ours.” Marcus jerked his head at me. “This little freak of nature is called Nine.”

Technically, Nine was my alias. My real name was Regan Black.

“Formerly known as Crenshaw’s Pet,” Marcus added.

That was all it took. As soon as Marcus said ‘Crenshaw’s Pet,’ the men weren’t angry anymore. They were scared. The tavern owner dropped his shank, and one by one, his brothers followed suit, dropping their weapons and lowering their fists. They stared at me like I was a wild animal, poised to rip out someone’s throat at any moment.

“I’m going to have another drink,” I said, patting Marcus’ shoulder. “I’ll let you boys hash out the financials.”

I sat back down at the bar. The wife scrambled to pour me a drink, her hands trembled so much that the ale missed my cup and hit the table. I curved my fingers, black swirling at the edges of my eyes. The stream corrected itself, curving into the cup. The wife’s hands shook harder.

“For fifty silver a month, we’ll offer you security,” Marcus told the owner.

“Protection against the local thieving problem and whatnot.”

The owner’s jaw ticked. “We don’t have a thieving–”

I cleared my throat.

The wife rushed forward to clutch the owner's arm, her red knuckles turning white from the force of her grip. "He means, we couldn't be more grateful for your help. Honey, let's take Mr..."

Marcus grinned, revealing rows of jagged, platinum-gold teeth. "Ghost."

"L-I-let's take M-Mr. Ghost to the back, where we keep the money."

As they moved to the storage room, the owner's mother took a seat beside me. She was short and squat, her skin sun-spotted and wrinkled like a raisin. I watched her, partially surprised and partially amused by the bold approach.

"I'd poison your drink if I could," the old woman hissed, her milky blue eyes burning into me. "Then I'd laugh as you burned from the inside out. The raiders were never saints, but they used to know where to draw the line. And now look at you, stealing from your own people like vultures at the graveyard. You should be ashamed of yourselves."

I forgot how to speak. I just stared at the old lady like a moron, my heart hammering against my chest.

"Grandame, enough!" the oldest son snapped. Then he turned to me, his eyes wide and desperate. "Please forgive her. She's barely senile. She doesn't have the faintest idea what she's saying."

"I damn well do." The old woman swung. Her palm struck my face, her gnarled yellow nails biting half-moons into my cheek. The tavern went dead silent; all the air seemed to suck out of the chamber. You could practically hear the crickets chirping from miles away.

“Oh gods,” the oldest son whispered, his breath leaving him in a shudder. “Gods above, take mercy on our souls.”

Fear sparked in the old woman’s eyes as I rose to my feet, my eyes stormy and bright. For a second, no one moved. The whole tavern seemed to hold their breath as they waited for me to make good on the reputation of Crenshaw’s Pet. Would I throw the old lady across the room? Would I snap her bones like twigs and grind them into stew? I turned to the storage room, breaking the tension. “Ghost! Do you have the fee?”

Marcus emerged from the storage room. The couple followed, looking pale-faced and scared senseless.

“They claim to only have forty silvers,” Marcus said. He cracked his neck side to side and ground his knuckles together. “We’ll have to –”

“That’s fine,” I cut in flatly. “If they only have forty, they only have forty.” I knew I should watch my tone. I was supposed to be a menacing raider, not a bratty teen, but my composure was already fraying since the moment I walked into the tavern. The old lady’s speech killed it, confirming my worst fears out loud.

“Well then,” Marcus said tightly. “It seems we are feeling generous tonight.” He turned to the owner, staring him down without an ounce of sympathy. “Best use it wisely and start saving up for next month’s fee.”

“Mr. Ghost,” the wife said. “My oldest has a baby on the way soon; money is tight. If we could just–”

“A baby?” Marcus exclaimed, widening his eyes. “Well, that changes everything! Now that I know you have an extra set of hands to put to work, I’m upping the charge. Next month, it’s fifty-five silvers.”

I have known Marcus for nine years, ever since he knocked on the orphanage's door, everything he owned stuffed in a knapsack no bigger than his head. But at that moment, I didn't recognize any part of my childhood friend in him. All I saw was the raider.

When we were outside the tavern, tucked away in a quiet alleyway with no one else around, Marcus let me have it. "You can't let them weasel out of the full fee," he snapped. "It doesn't matter if it's ten silvers or a thousand or one. It's not about the silver; it's about the respect. If you let them get away with giving forty this week, it'll be thirty the next, twenty the next, and before you know it, they give you nothing."

The whole time Marcus spoke, I stared ahead, his words going in one ear and out the other as I wished for the sweet, sweet release of death. The raiders never had the best reputation, but at least we weren't known as the vultures and leeches of society, begging the local tavern for spare coins, and getting bitch-slapped by old ladies.

"We're supposed to be running a tight ship, now more than ever," Marcus ranted, his skin flushing redder with every word.

"Hey," I said, worried now.

Marcus pulled at his hair, his breath coming fast and sharp, like a wild animal backed into a corner. "We've got the most important job of the year coming up. Is this how you're going to treat it?"

"Hey!" I said again. When raising my voice didn't work, I grabbed his shoulders, forcing him to look at me. "We got the money. It's going to be okay, Marcus. No one's gonna hurt you."

Marcus pulled away, his face hardening, going from panicked to emotionless in the blink of an eye. Then his eyes dipped to my neckline as if he could see the amulet hidden behind my dress. The charm, a flat circle engraved with stars, was cracked in two. I wore one half. I didn't want to think about who wore the other.

"It's Ghost now," he said.

In a herculean feat of strength, I resisted rolling my eyes. *It's Ghost now.* Okay, pal. Whatever rocks your boat. I fixed my dress' buttons, refastening my collar securely to my chin.

"Going somewhere?" Marcus asked.

I pushed off the wall, striding out of the alleyway. "I need some fresh air."

"Nine," he shouted after me.

I kept walking, muttering *Regan* under my breath.

"Don't forget quota!"

I waved him off, like one might shoo a nagging fly. But to be fair, Marcus was right to worry that I was slipping up. The most important job of the year was coming up, and not just because of the money we stood to gain. If we were caught, the consequences would be drastic.

The kingdom of Scaldril was divided into four provinces, and each province was ruled by a House, which each answered to the king. We were stealing from our province's House Balthasar – the most powerful and vicious House. Their motto declared that under their rule, everyone got what they deserved. The poor stay poor, the rich stay rich, and when their enemies are caught, they maim first and ask questions later.

And while the other raiders were indoors, studying the heist plan or the manor layout, I was carrying out my own affairs. The late hour had emptied the streets to just a few stragglers and drunks. I moved among the shadows, walking at a quick pace until I arrived at the border between the slums and the wealthier districts. Still not a nice area by any means, but the row of shops sold things you'd be hard-pressed to find in the burrow.

It was long past closing hours, so I didn't bother with the apothecary's door. I pounded on the window, startling the shopkeeper standing behind the sales desk. Grinning, I pressed my forehead against the glass and held up a bag of coins ten times as heavy as the one I had gotten from the tavern.

"You're late," the shopkeeper said as he led me through his store. The shelves were crammed with an assortment of potions and elixirs, the smell strong enough to make your head pound and eyes water.

"At least I didn't come during shop hours."

"I would've had your head if you came during shop hours." The shopkeeper set my coin bag on a scale and then turned to me in annoyance. "This is two thousand. Enough for one ticket, not two."

"Ay. I'll pay half the fee now, and the other half after my friend and I reach land." He stared me down as if the weight of his glare would force me to backtrack. When I didn't stir, he heaved a sigh. "Gods, you're paranoid." He fished a chain out of his shirt and used the key dangling from his necklace to unlock a small cabinet hidden behind his desk. After some rummaging, he retrieved two boat tickets. "If you're one copper short of four thousand, you're fish food. That is not a joke. They don't care that you're a

woman. They don't care that you're young. If you short them, they will slit your throat and toss you to the waves."

"Deal." I accepted the tickets and carefully tucked them into my cloak. Something in my voice made the shopkeeper pause – perhaps the careless manner I accepted my death. He studied me, his sharp eyes picking up on the details most people missed — the scar below my chin, the unnatural darkness of my eyes, the bulge of my dagger against my hip. But he knew better to ask who I was, how I made the money, or what I was running from. He would accept my gold quietly, and Marcus and I would get the hell out of dodge. But first, we had quota.

Bloodydamn quota.