

"Will have readers fired up at every monstrous battle sequence and gasp-inducing turn."

—Amparo Ortiz, author of *Last Sunrise in Eterna*



SKY'S END

1

ABOVE THE BLACK

MARC J GREGSON

CHAPTER 01

I REFUSE TO BE MY FATHER, BUT HALF OF HIM IS ME.

Even six years later, his death festers. It's a wound that tears open whenever I gaze upon the manor at the crown of the mountain. A gnawing reminder of everything I lost when I was just ten.

All's quiet here in the attic above the tavern except for the snowy wind hissing through our cracked window. Mother and I sit near the dying fire. Her hair, skeletal white, hangs over pallid skin. Her frail fingers clutch the armrests.

I'm failing her. Can't even scrounge up enough coin for medicine or to layer her in warm blankets. And while I'm not sure I miss Father, his absence has left Mother a ghost of her former self. Years ago, she'd been powerful and carried a dueling cane. That proud and honorable weapon would've protected and guided us back to High.

But then her cough came. The shakes. And I've not seen her cane since.

She gazes at me. "What are you thinking, son?"

Winter air hisses through the latest crack in the roof, threatening our fire's last embers. I shiver and tuck my knees against my chest. Once, we lived like royalty, but everything changed when I found Father in his office, lying in a pool of his own blood.

Suicide, they called it.

My teeth grit.

"Conrad," Mother says, rasping, "you're thinking of *him*. Again." She covers a cough and clutches my shoulder, forcing me to face her. "Revenge won't bring everything back, son."

"It'd bring one thing back."

Her hand retreats. She goes quiet, and her lip trembles. My eyes shut. Never remind her of my little sister, the hole in her heart. Never.

"Conrad," she whispers, "the world wants you to take. Always take. There's a reason your father was never satisfied. Do you want to become like him?"

"Mother . . ." Why can't she compromise?

"Do you?"

"No."

"Then be better than what the world intends," she says forcefully. "Be better."

We go silent, and I wish it were easier to be better. But it's nearly impossible when this merciless world has no problem drowning us under the garbage they drop from on High.

Mother claims that kindness reciprocates. That's how we got free rent in this place. A decade ago, she gave McGill some coins to start this tavern. But outside of McGill's kindness, her claim has proven birdshit. What about my former friends, the ones I showed every kindness? Where were they when Uncle exiled us?

I lick my teeth bitterly.

Mother reaches for her water, but her hand tremors and knocks over the mug. Suddenly, she's coughing with the force of a cannon blast. I leap to my feet.

“Mother!”

She gags and begins convulsing. Her head slams back, and she topples forward. I catch her before she hits the floor and clutch her tight. Her arms flail and her body locks up.

Is this the last time?

Black tar oozes from her lips. Her eyes roll back white. I tuck her head under my chin and squeeze her like I can stop this. Like I have control. Like I’ve had any control over anything since Father died.

Her trembles linger until, after a final shudder, she becomes limp. Dread prickles my back. Don’t want to check her pulse. Don’t want this to be the last time I hold her. My fingers press against her neck. There’s nothing . . . nothing until a gentle rhythm taps my fingertips.

My vision wets, and I fight the false sense of relief. The tremors will come back. They always do. They’re like a stalking predator, creeping closer at night. The reason why I sleep on the floor beside her bed.

Mother breathes lightly in my arms, as frail as an infant. I carry her to the worn mattress and wrap her under our thin blankets. Then I brush her hair from her eyes and wipe her mouth with my sleeve.

Mother is the half of me that demands compassion, even when it’s undeserved. But how can I reach higher when we’re lucky to fill our bellies on the tavern’s scraps?

My jaw sets as I focus on the window. The city’s lights climb to the crown of the mountain, all the way to the island’s greatest manor. That place was going to be my inheritance. But when Father died, I was too young. And Mother didn’t have the blood.

So now Uncle’s the Archduke.

But I don’t give a damn who Uncle is. Someday he’ll lie beneath my feet, bleeding, and he’ll suffer the way he made us suffer.

Someday he’ll beg for mercy.

Mother’s breathing grows raspy, and her forehead burns. As she struggles, Father’s voice cuts into me like a rusted blade.

She’s dying.

My head shakes. No. It's just a cold night. I'll get some wood. Tend the bar downstairs for McGill for a couple hours and earn her warm soup. She'll recover.

You know her last wish, Father's voice whispers. Bring Ella to her.

And I know that Uncle's been molding my sister in his treacherous image. Still, I can't leave Mother. Can't abandon her. But when my hand touches her chest and feels her weakening heart, my eyes clench shut. A feeling, like the frost on the window, fogs my head.

Need to do something. Now.

Father's dueling cane glimmers above the mantle—a three-foot rod with a silver eagle on the end. Each crack in its black surface is history, the story of my ancestors' rise, and it's been our only way of earning coin since losing everything.

Some nights I've taken the weapon and slipped off into the Low pit. There, in that decrepit arena, I've fought desperate Lows for a bit of coin while the crowd laughed and gambled. Father taught me the way of the cane, but the Lows fight hard, and I've often paid for my winnings with bruises and black eyes, all to feed Mother.

But food won't help her now. Hell, medicine probably won't either. She needs hope again. A reason to keep fighting.

She needs Ella.

I kiss Mother's forehead, snatch the cane, and slip from the window into the snowstorm.

The white city climbs Holmstead Island's lone mountain and towers over me. Smoke rises from the shoddy chimneys of the Lows. Above the Low shacks, and higher up the mountain, stand the bricked homes of the Middles. And even higher, nearer to the peak, shine the incredible manors of the Highs. Each with glistening columns, private grounds, and warm rooms.

My breath mists as I lower over the wobbly tavern roof's lip, clutch a drainage pipe, and slide into the alley. Pain jabs my skin as my bare heels stab into slushy dirt. But the cold won't stop me. Winter's already taken my left pinky toe, I'll not let it take anything else.

I start running. The steep, narrow alleyways stink of rotted garbage. The cold wind blows through the curls in my hair.

My legs burn from the incline, and I furrow my brow. Got to push myself.

Shadow envelops me as the gleaming moon dips behind a neighboring island floating above. The floating island, dappled with trees and blanketed in snow, hovers among the clouds. It's as quiet as the alleys.

Suddenly, I slide to a stop—a man lies face down beneath the icicles of a shack. My body goes rigid. I scan the snow. Search for evidence of an attack. Bloody weapons. Trampling footsteps. But there's nothing.

He died cold and alone.

I continue jogging, squeezing my cane tighter, just in case.

Mother would want me to feel for the frozen man, but Father taught me the cane and mercilessness. In the middle of the night, he'd drag me from bed, stuff a practice cane into my hand, and force me to face him in the Urwin Square. Father was a legendary dueler, trained from when he could first walk. And he'd always disarm me. Beat me into the earth and never relent. No matter how much I cried or struggled while sopping in my own blood.

This, he said, was to prepare me for when it would be my duty to protect the family from challengers.

My spit hits the ground.

I stop at an alley's edge and peer over a Low street. My heart's racing. Breath's tight. Feet sting. This street's a mess of sleeping people huddled in corners, of wandering animals and meager fires. A trio of Lows, in their tattered jackets, warm their dirty fingers over a barrel of flame. Beyond them, two women beat each other with sticks. No dueling canes. They're so busy smacking each other over a loaf of bread that a dog snatches it and races away.

I scowl.

The Meritocracy is designed to make us Lows want more. Want to rise. But the problem is we're too weak. Too malnourished to be a threat to those above us. And that's exactly what the Highs want. Keep the

Lows low, and they'll never be strong enough to duel you or challenge you for your status.

I dart across the street, slip into another alley, and continue past the dilapidated shacks. Eventually, I reach the walled entrance into the Middles. No gate. Sweat trickles my brow as I jog through the Middle street composed of quaint, bricked homes. The windows glow with warmth. Fences and gates border the larger homes—protection from looting Lows. Crystal lamps hang over the snowy sidewalks.

Seems everyone's sleeping, peacefully tucked into their beds.

As I round the corner, I glimpse a procession of hovering carriages that climb the beautiful High streets above. These carriages, powered by crystal energy, flow like silver bullets, and they're all headed toward one mighty gate of gorgantaun steel.

The gate to Urwin Manor.

Uncle's throwing a party again.

I lick my lips, run past the Middle homes, and reach the entrance to the High streets. The gate's closed. I bite down on my cane, clasp the icy bars, and start up.

Suddenly, a guard approaches from the High street beyond. Dammit. My heart rises into my throat. I lift my leg over the top of the gate. And just before he glances my way, I slide down the bars and dive behind a parked carriage. Skin my knees, too. I wince, then hobble into the High neighborhoods, using trees and parked carriages for cover.

Once away from the guard, I soak in the incredible Highs. Thawed water gushes down the heated streets and spills into the storm drains. Manicured trees follow the sidewalks and border the impressive walls that separate each manor. Golden lights glow through the windows of the grand terraces and balconies.

Warm water spills over my toes, soothing the numb pain in my heels. I rub a little over my bloody knees. But I can't stand around. More guards watch each street corner, their vicious eyes scanning the storm.

I duck as advanced-metal carriages flow past, then trail alongside them, beneath the windows, as they carry the rich to Uncle's party. These silent carriages, forged from the pure gorgantaun steel, float almost like ghosts. But they're not great cover because they leave my legs exposed, so I slip into a storm grate. I gaze down a dark passageway. Because of the heated streets, it's like a steamy sauna.

Guards check these tunnels regularly. Hopefully Uncle's party causes a distraction. I clutch my cane close and slosh through the warm water, peering out the occasional grate. Finally, I glimpse an easy target. My brow rises with surprise at the family who kept their gate open.

The Haddocks. Rich bastards.

Outside their grand door, a driver stands beside the open carriage, his stance erect.

My fingers twitch. No second chance at this. Got to be quick.

I slide out the grate and run. The icy gales sting my moist skin. My feet ache. Knees hurt. But I ignore the pain because Mother's dying.

While the carriage driver focuses on the cobbled path leading to Haddock Manor, I tap the button on the opposite side of the carriage. The door rises silently, and a pair of steps lower. The carriage's interior contains two leather benches bolted to the carpeted floor, drinks on ice, and a small, pulsing heatglobe.

Gently, I climb into the carriage and close the door. Oh, it's warm. I slide under the rear bench and position two folded blankets to block me from view.

The driver's voice is muffled. "Good evening, Haddocks. Your carriage awaits."

A familiar voice answers. "Yes, yes," Nathan of Haddock says. "It's bitter cold."

Hearing Nathan again makes me squeeze my dueling cane. This man was sweet to me when I was a boy. Brought me and Ella candy. But only because he needed favors from Father.

When Mother and I were exiled, the Haddocks did nothing for us. But tonight, their carriage is my ticket into Uncle's grand party.

I peer through the gap between the blankets. Nathan climbs into the carriage, making it wobble a little. He removes his black top hat and straightens his fine jacket. His dueling cane, clipped to his belt, is crested with a golden duck. His wife, Clarissa of Haddock, enters next. She's wearing a dress with a red fur coat, and she grips her gray cane close.

The door hisses shut, and the carriage rocks as the driver enters his driving capsule at the front. Then the ground rumbles beneath me as the carriage lifts. I feel the crystal engine vibrating against my face, and the soft carpet against my side. If my heart wasn't pounding with nerves, the warm carriage could lull me to sleep. Still, I shift a little, moving away from the metal latch that digs into my hip.

As the carriage glides away from the Haddocks' manor, I feel the smoothness in my gut. Like I'm floating on a cloud. But as comfortable as I am, it's not long until the Haddocks' conversation grates on me. Complaining about a rude gesture from a neighbor. The audacity of not being invited to a luncheon. The annoyance of having to fire a Mid cook for burning their morning toast.

These two lotchers. Not true Highs. They carry dueling canes, but their canes hold no attestations to their strength. No cracks. They pay professional duelers to stand in their place, all so they can enjoy their warm carriages, their lives of excess, and not have to work for it.

Finally, we slow to a stop. A muffled voice greets the driver, and presumably, the driver shares the Haddocks' party invitation.

The carriage starts moving again. And I don't need to see it to know where we are.

Urwin Manor.

The manor where I was born. The grounds where I played as a boy and where I practiced dueling with Father in the Urwin Square.

I've only been beyond the manor's gate a couple times since Uncle took over. The first time I used the storm drains, but I didn't make it

two steps on the grounds before getting tackled. Uncle has since locked the storm drains. After that, I stole a small boat in the Lows and flew to the Urwin skydock. Almost made it to the door, but yet again a damn guard happened to spot me.

Uncle spared me each time—for the same reason he hasn't sent assassins to finish me and Mother off. He needs me. But I won't consider his offer. Never.

Still, he promised if I snuck onto the grounds again, he'd have me tossed off the island. Well, I'm not going to get caught. Not this time.

"Nathan," Clarissa says. "Do you smell something?"

He breathes. "Why, yes. I thought I detected something faint. Like wet dog."

She sniffs. "I think it's coming from beneath my seat."

My stomach twists. Oh hell.

The next instant, Clarissa crouches to look underneath. She clutches the blankets, ready to yank them away. But I pull the latch under my hip and drop through an escape that deposits me directly on the path before Urwin Manor.

I roll from the carriage's shadow and into the snowy bushes. The branches cut my arms, my back. Clarissa and Nathan stand in the carriage, perplexed, investigating the open hatch that's meant for loading luggage.

My heart thuds as they glance out the windows. They must know someone was inside. But what are they going to do, report it to the Order guards? Prove they were so weak that they couldn't even detect a stinky, hidden Low?

They shut the hatch and sit, their faces disgusted as their carriage moves on. The other carriages follow.

While my shirt soaks, I gaze through the bushes at Urwin Manor. That shining manor with its grand balconies, its giant skydock, its grounds that splay across the peak—is Ella's home. Where my sister's been for the last six years. She's twelve now.

What does she look like? Will she recognize me?

I crawl out and race up a flight of stone stairs and enter a small courtyard. Nearby, guards patrol the ice-crusting gardens or walk the paths that lead to the pond behind the manor. Each armed with auto-muskets. Meanwhile more carriages continue toward the manor's entrance, where a massive door stands behind a giant, heated fountain that jets colorful water.

The snow soaks my thin rags.

I run for the icy hedges that form lines west of the manor's entrance. Got to be careful of the manor because atop the roof, and along the verandas and terraces, several Order guards watch the lines of pompous guests entering the grounds.

Suddenly, a pair of sleek, black skyships soar overhead, gushing wind over me. Guess Uncle hasn't just invited Highs from Holmstead Island, but Highs from other islands, too. The skyships descend toward the Urwin Docks, where more of the world's rich and powerful parade down the gangways from docked vessels.

Many of these people are the false Highs—lotchers—the ones Father despised. All full of insecure pomp with thick makeup, eyelash extensions, and designer dueling canes.

The influential Bartiss couple climb out from their carriage. Amelia and Isla of Bartiss. They own Holmstead Bank and demand home-stealing interest rates. My eyes widen at the man who trails behind them: Admiral Goerner. His white uniform flaps in the wind, and his thick dreads bounce against his shoulder pads. His powerful gait hides a limp from the hip he ruined in an honor duel. Goerner's not one of the false Highs. He's earned his position through blood and sweat.

"Hey!"

A hand grips my shoulder, and I nearly shout. The next second, I'm gazing at the face of a huge Order guard. His brow furrows.

"You aren't supposed to be here, little Low."

He raises his wrist to speak into his communication gem and alert every guard in the manor about my presence.

My heart hammers against my ribs. This man's arms are twice as thick as mine. His body's taut with muscle. But his mother isn't dying. He hasn't lost everything and had to claw just to eat.

I press the release on my dueling cane, doubling its length.

Then I bury it into his stomach and smack away his wrist. He staggers back, and just as he's about to roar, I twist, slicing the silver eagle into his teeth.

He hits the ground.

I leap onto him. Ready to choke him out with my cane against his neck. But he shoves me off. My air's stolen as I hit the ground. The man rises. Furious. Mouth bloody.

Oh shit. Can't breathe. Got to breathe.

"You're mine," he says.

He snatches me by the neck and lifts me like I'm fluttering laundry. Digs his fist into my gut. I hit the ground, wheezing. Dammit. Can't overpower him. I've been malnourished for too long. Still, Father taught me how to handle those with a size advantage: by any means necessary.

I strike him between the legs. He lets out a groaning shudder. Once I'm up, he raises his auto-musket, but I pivot around him and slam the eagle into his forehead.

This time, he doesn't get up.

I spit on him, wipe my lips, and hold my aching gut as I coax air into my lungs again. Then, as I limp away, I grin a little, thinking that the winds flow with me tonight. I've made it back onto the grounds. Beat a guard. I'll get Ella back to Mother. And our fortunes will change. Maybe Ella will have money with her. We can pay for a passenger vessel and leave together, as a family. Go to another island, far away from Uncle's influence.

I hobble for the manor's west wing and duck beneath the frost-tipped bushes. Six guards patrol the terraces, and one stands on the roof directly above me, rubbing his arms as he dances in place.

Got to hope he doesn't take a closer look at the unconscious man tucked in the hedges.

Once the guard steps away, I jump to catch the first window's ledge. I nearly lose my grip, and my bare feet rub against the coarse wall. Finally, my aching arms lift me, and I rise enough to peek through a window. The study waits, empty.

But the window's latch doesn't budge.

Damn.

Of course Uncle would lock the windows, even when he has a whole squad of guards watching his home. But maybe, if I go higher, I'll get lucky.

The guard above returns. I stop. For a moment, he leans forward to glance in my direction. The hair on the back of my neck rises. The shout's certain to come.

But it doesn't.

He steps away again.

I exhale before climbing again. My feet bleed. After some careful work, my fingers find handholds between the stones, and I land on a balcony on the third level. A glass door exposes a room inside.

And I stop. I've been so preoccupied that I almost forgot whose room this was. It was the Hales' room when they came to visit. My stomach twists with ache as I think of my grandparents, of Mother's parents.

The Hales were Middles—the kind who never bothered to rise to High. They were from another island. And Mother and I were supposed to live with them after our exile. They were coming for us. We waited for two days at the Low docks for them to arrive. But their skyship fell from the sky on the way here.

Uncle.

That bastard promised me I'd suffer if I turned down his offer.

My body feels hollow as I peer into the room, throbbing under the rays of a heatglobe. Then I grip the doorknob and shut my eyes.

Please be unlocked. Please.

The knob twists, and the balcony door swings open. Unbelievable. Still, I grin a sad grin as I step into the warmth. A memory floods into

me: me sitting on the soft sofa beside Grandfather while Grandmother told stories and braided Ella's hair near the heatglobe. Grandfather winking at me while Ella laughed at his funny voice.

I soak in the memories, doing my best to fight the horrible emptiness inside me.

Master your emotions, Father's voice hisses. Move.

My fingers fiddle with the hem of my frayed shirt. Part of me doubted I'd ever get inside again. But here I am. Thick carpet pads my bloody feet.

Got to find Ella. Over sixty rooms line the halls of this manor. Four kitchens. Dozens of bathrooms. She could be anywhere. Fortunately, I know this place as well as my own voice.

The hinges creak when I open the door. A marigold rug flows to the end of the hall. Even though the ballroom's in the center of the manor, the party hums. Clattering silverware, the strum of musical instruments, and the buzz of conversation.

As I creep down the hall, two irritated voices carry from the base of the stairs below. I carefully lean over the banister and observe a woman holding an accusatory finger in Admiral Goerner's face.

"I'm looking for assurances, Admiral," the woman says. Her simple blue dress matches her severe eyes. "The Order fleet must be dispatched at once. Cut off the gorgantauns before they migrate."

"Order is already stretched thin, Beatrice," Goerner says in his smooth accent. "Besides, gorgantauns are not my responsibility."

Beatrice? My brow wrinkles. Oh, *that* Beatrice. The Duchess of Frozenvale, an island just north of here. She's a tough one. A true High. Unconcerned with the latest fashions, or cosmetics, or anything else that the lotchers of my island peddle around with. Her cane, like mine, bears the scars of her family's rise.

"Order's job is to provide security to the Skylands," she says.

"Don't lecture me on my responsibilities, Beatrice. The southern pods are threatening the supply lines near the capital. The Central skies keep Mercantile going, the economy, everything. If those lines

to Ironside Island are cut off, the economy will collapse everywhere. Including Frozenvale's."

He starts to stomp away, but she catches his shoulder. His eyes focus on her fingers.

"My island is being left to die," she says.

There's a tense silence. For a moment, it seems he'll smack her. Instead, he brushes her hand off and straightens his white jacket. "The Hunter Trade has been tasked with pushing back the southern gorgantaun pods. If they succeed, I'll send the Order fleet from Ironside to help your little island."

"Hunter?" Beatrice says. "They've not been able to handle the Northern Isles for six years. That's not good—"

"They're all you've got." He starts to walk away again. "I'd not return to Frozenvale if I were you. It's safer here."

"Admiral," she says, "it's not safe anywhere."

Her words chill the air, prickling my skin. Gorgantauns are the horrors of the sky. They are takers. They take from the Skylands, destroy and consume. When Father was Archduke, he frequently met with the leaders of Hunter, always doing his best to protect Holmstead Island and the other Northern Isles from gorgantaun attack.

The gorgantaun threat has grown, even beyond what it was when Father was alive.

But I have other, more pressing concerns now.

After turning the corner, my heart begins throbbing so much, it climbs my throat. This is Ella's hall. And now, standing outside her purple door again makes me feel little. Reminds me of all the times we played. Like when we tracked mud around the halls or drew faces on the old paintings. Oh, we broke so many windows.

Please be inside. Please.

My eyes shut. I twist the handle and push it open.

I blink for a moment, adjusting to the light. The room has changed. No toys. The floor's spotless, the books are stacked neatly, and the

chair's pushed in behind the desk. My eyes travel to the row of practice canes on the walls. Each one showing the cracks from use. Then I spot a gold necklace on the desk's wooden surface.

It's not until I step forward that I notice the shadow standing near her bed.

A guard. His auto-musket points directly at my skull.