

The Second Inheritance

Chapter 1

Skyler could barely see her hands clinging to the rough rope of the ship's shroud. Her arms ached from the slow climb and her fingers were numb with the night's chill. The ship she was boarding wasn't the largest slave ship she had boarded but it was a slow journey and she had to wrap her arms in the rope to keep them from tiring. Ten men waited above. Ten men who would only refrain from killing her because they wanted the reward that came from her capture. The thought eased some of the pain in her tense neck. She didn't want to write herself a ticket to Yogsdon Penitentiary and certainly not into the belly of a dragon. She would wait for the signal. No matter how exhausted she felt.

The ocean below was rank with salt, fish, refuse, all of those scents that surrounded docks. The stench clung to her nose and she wished she could take off her black hood and mask, knowing that it would cling to them as well. The scent of Lamborg's port would stick to her for the next few days which wasn't a pleasant thought. She peered down into the water, watching the black surface shift as it was pulled and pushed by the tide. In the distance, patches of dim torchlight showed the outline of a weatherbeaten dock but the water was sinister in the mystery of its depth and vastness. And here she was, clutching onto the shroud of an enemy ship, using more strength to keep herself still so that the guards on board wouldn't see the way the rigging shifted and moved as she climbed.

"Come on Cyrus," she muttered under her breath. "Anytime now." It of course wasn't his fault that the patrolling guards hadn't left the position above her yet, but she was in pain and nervous about whether their plan would work or not. She trusted Cyrus, obviously with her life because here she was now, but, Goddess, she wished he would flash that mirror already.

As if in response to her quiet complaint, the ocean lit up beneath her with a sudden flash of light. It was time. After being inanimate for so long it felt strange to move, hoisting herself higher and higher on the Gods' Blessing, finding comfort in the lantern that gently bumped up against her thigh. Without that lantern and its contents she would be forced into a fight and despite being mightily dependable with a cutlass, she doubted she could beat ten men. Even if she could, one of them was bound to set the alarm and their operation would be over with. She gripped the rope tightly as she grew level with the Gods' Blessing's bannister. There was no reason to, but she was nervous and feeling the pressure of the rope against her hands, the pain of it, reminded her of what she must do.

With a final heave, she silently pulled herself a little higher on the shroud, allowed her body a few seconds of recovery, and then hoisted herself over the bannister. For the first time in the last three hours she looked behind her at the massive black shadow of her own ship. The masts were like the jutting bones of a skeleton, reaching for the dark sky like dead hands climbing out of a grave. It was larger than the vessel she was on, but the deck wasn't lit by the warm fires that illuminated portions of The Gods' Blessing. It was dark, empty, a ship which had been moored for what could have been days. It was eerily still, but that was perhaps because she knew that there was a whole crew on board, watching her, waiting to move the moment the time came. It was now up to her, all of their lives, the success of their mission, was in her hands.

Sticking to the shadows outside a halo of firelight of a torch before her, she untied the lantern hanging from her belt. This would be the undoing of Roy, the slave trader captain of this vessel. As always, she was grateful for the firelight. It provided more cover for her as long as she stayed in the darkness. The guards were blinded by their own dependence on the torchlight, it made it harder to spot movement in the shadows. The main deck was clear for now. The majority

of the guards would be stationed next to the hatch, the location where their most precious cargo was located. The others would be patrolling the length of the boat or next to the Captain's Quarters, where draklings and valuables were kept. All of the guards needed to be dealt with.

Her crew wasn't interested in money but they were very interested in the human life that had been stuffed away like cargo below. Skyler opened the glass and steel cage of the lantern. It was filled with a carefully rolled bundle of herbs, roots, powders and rancid smelling oil. Quickly, she pulled up the additional mask that she had around her neck, the fabric damp with her sweat from the climb. It fit firmly around her nose, over the mesh of her other mask, but she pressed it closer anyway. Myra had warned her that if she breathed in the fumes from the concoction in the lamp, that she would be as bad off as the guards. Her friends would likely have to leave her if the guards didn't suffer the same fate. That would be an embarrassing way for this all to end.

Placing the lantern on the worn planks of the ship, she unsheathed the dagger from her belt along with a piece of flint. Deftly, quickly, she struck the two together over the lantern mouth, allowing a few sparks to rain down. The contents inside caught instantly. It blazed a sickly green before diminishing into the normal reds and oranges of flames.

Great clouds of smoke poured from the lantern and she hurried to her task, desperately choking back the desire to gag at the stench. Holding her breath, she held the lantern in front of her and crept forward into the shadows, keeping to the side of the ship, smoke spewing out from the lantern in front of her. The first group was huddled around the hatch as she expected most of them would be. Five of the ten guards stood there now. They were the first to fall.

The smoke downed them quickly, as Myra had told her it would. One of the men scratched his nose, another opened his mouth as if about to say something. Instead, he clutched

his throat, his eyes wide with panic before falling to his knees with his comrades. The mixture first made the victim's tongue numb, working its way in less than seconds to render the vocal cords and throat unusable. It was only after that, and by Myra's clever design, that the second part of the toxin took effect, making the person lose control of all their senses and then fade into unconsciousness. By the time you noticed your comrades fall it was too late to call for help. Your own tongue would have gone numb and your body would be giving out.

None of them had the key. She chewed the side of her tongue. It was smart to give it to a guard in a different position on the ship.

Like death, she swept forward towards the captain's quarters where three more guards were stationed, they too fell. No key.

There were two left, two who were patrolling the ship. She found them together at the helm, speaking together in hushed tones. The noticeably taller man of the two clutched at his throat making the other take a step back, fear in his eyes. Skyler inched closer, her black cloak fluttering silently around her legs. Why wasn't he falling? This was the first time in their five raids they had used the smoke. Before they had grown infamous amongst slave traders, the slave ships were more loosely guarded. She had merely taken out the few men on board with her own two hands or simpler powders from Myra. They had a reputation now and that meant more guards. It also meant the concoction might not work.

She crept closer, closer, ready to strike the moment the man uttered a sound. He must have seen her, a black shadow emerging from darkness, because he staggered backwards, his mouth in an "O" but no sound coming out. She pulled out her cutlass with a faint scratch, ready to use his terror against him but she never got the chance. The fumes must have taken him because he collapsed. His body shuddered and then settled. As she had with the others, she bent

down and checked both his and his comrade's pulse. Both were alive. Members of the Phantom's Guild didn't kill. She was no exception, though a bitter part of her was tempted to only follow the letter of the law. It was the fumes, not me who killed them. The thought made her guilty. Careful. It was not her place to take a life. The Goddess said to give one's life was more noble than robbing an evil man of his.

But they were dealing with Maldians who didn't believe in the Goddess. They believed that one day all humans would be the slaves of dragons. They believed that humans were less than dragons, that they deserved to be chained and used. She didn't hate Maldians. But she did hate dragons. Major dragons especially.

The older of the two men had the key. She swiped it off of him, shut the lid of the lantern, which had already ceased smoking, and returned to the hatch. She peered at the men at her feet suspiciously, men who had been hired to keep men, women, and children confined like animals. There was no telling when they'd wake up. Myra had guessed that they had about two hours, not a lot of time to move about 200 people off this ship and onto their own. Some of them would be injured or need assistance. For the most part, however, they would be in good shape. Captain Roy had a cruel reputation. He would kill captives that didn't obey if he thought they wouldn't sell. But in the same line of reasoning, the people he sold were healthy, ready to work for their future major dragon masters.

Her gaze shifted to her own ship to wait for the signal. The Brave Allison was the name the old ship had been given when it was a slave ship. Now, her crew, as they insisted that they were *her* crew, called it affectionately, The Phantom Ship. They, including who should have been their captain, Bronson, called it that because herself, Cyrus, and Myra were a part of the

Phantom's Guild, a secretive and illegal organization that broke into the strongholds of major dragons and freed the enslaved humans inside.

Being out on the ocean was strange, even now, as she waited, she took note of the way the ship moved beneath her as if it were a living thing. She had been like most phantoms, stealing away into castles, pretending to be a slave, creeping silently into the night with escapees at her heels. But then she had come up with the idea while in the Water Territory to free captives before they were ever sold. That's why she was here. That's why she had been assigned to lead a small team of phantoms, been introduced to the ex-pirate, Bronson, and asked to hire a crew of seamen. Her whole life had changed but the challenge felt good.

A flash of light came from the base of the main mast. Cyrus was signaling to her that the smoke had cleared enough that it was safe to walk around. She moved to open the hatch quickly, though she tentatively slipped her mask down, remembering the look of fear on the young guard's face. Her face was still obscured by her hood and the airy mesh covering beneath, but they would do nothing to protect her from any stray fumes. She trusted Myra though, and so she removed it, knowing the other phantom wouldn't allow anyone to be exposed who didn't need to be.

Her nimble fingers pried open the door of the hatch, revealing near darkness below. Silently she descended, past the bare shadows of the crew's living quarters and to another latched hole in the floor. She fumbled with the bolt, her fingers aching from her climb. Finally, it came loose and she lifted the creaking door.

The stench of human sweat, urine, and excrement hit her hard, making her eyes water. She squinted into the hull, subconsciously moving the cloth of her cloak closer to her nose to block out the odor. Myra's plants had been more pleasant. She forced her eyes wide open so they

could adjust to the darkness faster. Finally, a mass of heads and human-like shapes, all huddled close together, were visible. Cyrus had estimated there would be about three-hundred-fifteen people down there, and that was taking into account the inevitable event of deaths along the journey. They had learned from past raids that not all of the captives would accept an invitation of freedom. Each captive had been threatened with their lives. The punishment for running wasn't usually death, a human was more valuable than that to dragons, but it was typically bodily harm, as severe as it could be without rendering a person unusable. Skyler didn't blame those who stayed. They were afraid. They had been treated like animals for the last few weeks, some months. It was the dragons she blamed.

"I've come from the Phantom's Guild," she announced into the darkness below. We have a vessel ready to escort anyone to the safety of Guardious. Members of The Third Gate will be waiting to aid you."

Silence. Most of them had probably been asleep. But then there was a rumble as hundreds of cramped human beings muttered amongst themselves. "Make your decision," she continued after she listened to her heart beat thirty times. "We leave shortly and will need all aboard who choose to come."

She stepped out from the darkness and waited on the eerily silent deck. Rhythmically, she tapped the hilt of her sword with a stiff finger.

The first people who crept out of the darkness were a Maldian woman holding a baby close to her chest and a boy grasping onto her hand. Others followed directly behind from all the known races. Most of them would be Maldians. Skyler nodded at the woman who pulled her child in closer at the sight of an unconscious guard. She didn't need to explain for the mass of people creeping out of the hull to be quiet, they knew. They had been traveling in silence for a

long time now. "Follow me," Skyler ordered in a hushed voice. She waved at The Phantom Ship. The first movement from aboard the vessel was visible since she had climbed over the side of The Blessing.

Vague human outlines shifted, the men Bronson had hired. Large planks of wood were lifted and placed between the two ships so The Phantom Ship could be boarded. This was the dangerous part. This was the part others could see from below. Quickly, they needed to move quickly. Skyler led the first woman and her children to the traffrail. An eerie groan from the plank caused her and those following to look up and see a bulky, towering man crossing from The Phantom Ship.

Bronson cut an intimidating figure. He had been the first mate of an infamous pirate ship for years. He was bald and jagged scars were visible stretching down to his face from beneath a red bandana. His skin was a rich brown, like those from the Western Kingdoms, but his size was hulking like those from Maldia. Bronson's jaw was permanently set at an angle from when it had been broken and never properly healed. He had a strong nose and intense blue eyes. Her charges had frozen.

"These the escapees, Captain?" Bronson asked, focusing on her more than those he was asking about. He knew he looked scary and it bothered him more than he'd admit. The older child pushed himself closer to his mother's skirts, the boy whimpering but not daring to cry out. He was probably scarred from the mistreatment the slave traders were bound to have shown them.

"Yes. More will come. I'll go back to help the less able." She knew to make her voice as calm as possible when talking to Bronson. These people were trusting her with an escape

because the Phantom's Guild were reputed heroes of the enslaved. She needed to make sure they trusted her and those like Bronson who were associated with them.

She turned to the growing crowd. Her voice needed to stay soft so she spoke more to those in front and hoped the message would be clear to the others as they followed. "This man will help you board our ship. There will be other phantoms and seamen who will aid you on the other side. Unfortunately, you'll need to be smuggled in the hull, but the journey won't be long after that, four days at the most."

The woman gaped at Bronson timorously before glancing back at her. Pirates had been known to kidnap human cargo and sell them themselves. Skyler wouldn't blame them if they wondered if these weren't phantoms at all but pirates tricking them into thinking freedom was close at hand. "You'll have a much better chance with us than your current captors. It's a risk I'd be willing to take."

The woman nodded, holding her baby closer before crouching beside her son, "We're going on the other boat, okay. Follow me."

Her son slipped behind her as she approached Bronson who nodded at her respectfully before reaching down from on top of the plank to help her climb up. Skyler waited as the woman timidly watched him help her son before walking across, her skin pale and the arm clinging to her baby, shaking. Others followed and Skyler left once she was sure the woman and her children had made it to the other side with others close behind her.

Bronson and her colleagues on The Phantom Ship had this under control. She walked back to the hatch where a steady stream of worn, haggard humans were slipping out. She slipped past an older Western man with a bad leg being helped by a Maldian woman. Down she returned to the darkness.

A few stragglers were being helped by friends and strangers while others hobbled out weakly on their own. Those who were staying behind made it obvious, huddling on the ground, pretending to be asleep. She went directly to an older woman who was shaking as she tried to climb the steep steps. In two trips she was able to help three others climb to a waiting Bronson who led them across the planks. A few members of Bronson's crew had come out to help the stragglers as well. Everyone must have felt the pressure of a perceived time limit. They weren't nearly as intimidating as Bronson but rough, wrinkled faces showed their experience out on the sea. Brave captives returned to aid others as well.

Each time she passed the unconscious guards her stomach lurched uncomfortably. They could awake any minute. It was only when she and two escapees went back for the last time she let herself breathe easier. The concoction had worked. Goddess bless Myra.

"Is that the last of 'em?" Bronson asked as they approached him. His men aided a sick woman and an elderly man across the planks. The others who had gone back with her the last time followed closely behind. The deck was empty of everyone but the guards.

"Yes, the rest are staying."

Bronson nodded, "Let's set sail. I don't like not knowing when those guards will wake up."

As if on cue she heard the scuff of a boot behind her. She turned, expecting to see an indecisive straggler. Instead, she saw the young guard from before, the one who had taken longer to fall from the concoction. His eyes were narrowed and he held out his sword more steadily than Skyler would have liked. His mistake was that he didn't raise the alarm.