



BOOK 2

DARK SKY SERIES

MIDNIGHT SKY

AMY BRAUN

Chapter 1

They were going to get us killed.

I leaped to the side as Sawyer and the Rattail he was fighting slammed into the tavern wall. Sawyer grunted but kept the larger man at bay. He jabbed his knee into the man's stomach, getting the advantage and then slugged the grimy-skinned marauder in the jaw. He whirled on me, his tawny eyes filled with wildness and fire.

"What are you doing in here?" my captain growled.

I took a breath to argue, then turned my head when the Rattail surged forward and tried to hit Sawyer again. I made my point by lunging, striking the man in the face with my fist just as Riley had taught me. I didn't have the muscles the Sky Guard's son did, but my hit disoriented the Rattail enough for Sawyer to grab him by the shirt, and pound his head into the wall.

He dropped the unconscious man and whirled on me again, still furious. "I told you to wait outside!"

"Seems like you could use help," I barked.

Sawyer narrowed his eyes to slits. If I weren't part of his crew, I would be afraid of him. Sawyer was the son of one of the most dangerous pirate Clans ever to exist. He wasn't the kind of person to be crossed.

But after being on his crew for three months, I knew he would never hurt me, and that his pride—and arrogance—often got in the way of his safety.

"We can handle it," he snapped.

A heavy crash caught our attention. Nash and two Rattails were lying on the ground, caught in a scuffle among the remains of a broken table. Nash was bleeding from a cut at the corner of his eyebrow, but he didn't seem to notice the injury. He rolled onto his feet, grabbed a broken table leg and used it like a baton, swinging and smashing it into the heads of his attackers.

A few feet behind him, Nash's lover Gemma was hanging on the back of a Rattail. Her arm was wrapped around his throat as she tried to choke him unconscious, screaming like a banshee. The Rattail growled and stumbled back, slamming Gemma into the wall. She cried out, but maintained her grip. He drove her back twice more before she was forced to release him. The Rattail roared and whirled around with a savage punch that would have caused Gemma serious injury if she hadn't ducked and rolled away. She came up in front of the Rattail and started her assault again.

As efficiently as my crew was fighting, they were still outnumbered. It wouldn't be long before the rest of the Rattail Clan barged in and beat the life from us.

I looked at Sawyer angrily. "Before or after the rest of their crew gets here?"

My captain said nothing, though I imagined his teeth were grinding behind the firm set of his lips. He glanced over my shoulder, his body going rigid. Riley must have come in.

"Keep her here," ordered Sawyer.

He spun on his heel and took off to find another fight. There were still four Rattails engaging in the brawl—strong, bulky pirate brutes with meaty fists, soiled clothes, and scraggly hair tied at the nape of their necks to give them their name.

Nash, the dark-skinned, heavyset quartermaster dressed in dark work clothes, was throwing punches hard enough to split wood, but each strike was slower than the last. Gemma hadn't drawn her any weapons, relying on her speed and grace allowed by her tightknit sweater, pants, and combat boots. She carried a variety of pistols and knives on her belt, but the feisty brunette didn't have any more muscle than I did.

As for Sawyer... he was being reckless. He was dressed to his roguish nature, dashing in his military coat that hung to his waist, the buckled pirate boots, and cutlass strapped around his hip. Like Gemma, he remained unarmed, not wanting to incite death and the true wrath of the Rattails. We had just come here for information.

But Sawyer was throwing himself at three enemies. He was being sloppy. His temper was shorter these days, his surliness more prominent than before. If he kept acting this way, he was going to get himself killed.

Sawyer absorbed a punch to his kidney, wincing as he snapped an elbow back into his attacker's face. Another blow landed in his stomach, winding him again. I took a step forward, but a hand clasped my shoulder.

I glanced at Riley, Sawyer's newest rigger and my designated bodyguard. The white dress shirt, grey vest, pinstripe pants, and black boots made him look more gallant than his company, but the clothing did little to hide the muscles he'd been building since joining Sawyer and the Wanderers.

I thought his job to protect me was unnecessary, but given what I wore around my neck and the creature rumored to be hunting me, the crew wasn't taking any chances.

"We should stay out of this, Claire," he cautioned, bright blue eyes watching me with concern. "Sawyer has it under control."

I shrugged his hand off and scowled. "Does that look like control to you?"

Riley winced, then glanced at the brawl. After a moment, he sighed heavily, resigned. "Stay back."

He stalked forward without another word, and I fought the temptation to follow him. Despite having trained me in basic self-defense over the last few months, Riley had the same problem Sawyer did when it came to accepting my help in fights—they said no because they didn't want me to get hurt.

Sawyer was too stubborn to ask for help, though I always wondered why he didn't have Riley come with him in hostile situations like this. Sawyer was a good fighter, but Riley...

No one saw him coming. He came up behind the man attacking Nash's unprotected back and grabbed the man's arm as it extended for a punch. The Rattail looked at Riley in surprise, and was immediately punched in the face. He stumbled back, but Riley still held onto his arm. He dragged the Rattail forward and slammed his arm across the man's chest. His legs flew up almost comically before he was driven into the ground, unconscious.

His next target was the Rattail who had Gemma pinned to the wall with both hands around her neck. Riley was there in a heartbeat, slamming both his fists down on the Rattail's arms. The man barked in surprise, turning to Riley, who maintained his grip on his wrists. He jabbed his knee into the Rattail's stomach twice, released his hands, and snapped his elbow across the man's jaw. He kicked him in the stomach until he was doubled over, then grabbed the nape of his neck and drove his knee into the Rattail's face. Riley dropped the marauder, who didn't get up again.

He swerved to where Sawyer was being battered by the last two Rattails. The young captain was on the defensive, unable to find an opening to fight back. Riley appeared on Sawyer's right side, leaping and sending a powerful kick into the side of the closest Rattail. The man yelped and stumbled into his friend, both of them falling out of Sawyer's range. Riley advanced, kicking the left man's inner knee and jabbing the face of the man on the right. He released a flurry of punches, moving almost too fast for my eyes to see.

Blow after blow landed on the Rattails, who couldn't even get their arms up to defend themselves. Riley stepped back and swung a wide roundhouse kick that collided with both of their jaws, knocking them to the side. One man's head struck the wall with a loud crack. He slumped to the floor and remained motionless. Riley kicked the chest of the last Rattail, sending him careening into the tavern's wooden beam. The Rattail stumbled forward at the same moment Riley's foot snapped up and caught him in the chin. He grunted, then collapsed on his stomach in a heap.

He stared at the men he had attacked, making sure they wouldn't rise again. Satisfied, he turned to Sawyer, who was slumped on the floor holding his ribs. Riley held out his hand to help him up. Sawyer glared at him, then stood on his own with a quiet grunt.

"Nash, Gemma, you okay?" Sawyer asked, purposefully ignoring Riley.

"Fine," grumbled Gemma. She was standing with her lover, drawing her fingers over the cut on his eyebrow, as if her touch would stop the bleeding. Nash was doing the same thing to her neck, touching her like he feared she would break.

"Did you learn anything?" asked Riley, walking over to my side. "With all of this bluster, you must have gotten some information."

I stepped closer, eager to hear what the crew said. Sawyer had heard rumors that the Rattails had come across a ship that hadn't been pillaged since The Storm. A decade of abandonment would leave the ship in scraps, but without the Hellions to dog the air over our heads, the scavengers had become more confident in their hunts. There was little they wouldn't risk, even less that they wouldn't claim for themselves.

Sawyer looked at me. The exhaustion and strain of the fight wore on his shoulders. His temper still flared in his golden eyes, but I saw something else there. A haunted look that resembled mourning when he looked at me and saw Riley nearby.

"Was their ship named the *Centurion*?" Sawyer asked blandly, erasing the grief I thought I'd seen.

I shook my head while my heart sank. The name didn't bring back any memories that would lead me closer to my parents' ship. Gut instinct told me it was the wrong one.

"Then no," he said quietly, as if he were sorry he couldn't find the answer for me. Sawyer rubbed his bruised sides. "Doubt they would have given us much anyway. They were more interested in settling old scores."

I waited for Sawyer to give an explanation. He didn't. I turned to Gemma and Nash, who were still huddled close together.

"One of them recognized Sawyer as a Kendric," Nash explained. "The Rattails were old rivals of the Wanderers. They had some bad run-ins with Davin, and... well."

Nash shrugged, but he was just as uneasy as the rest of us. Ever since the fall of the *Behemoth*, no one had seen or heard from the Hellions. But with the old marauder Clans returning to the surface, tensions became high. The Wanderers were once the most feared marauder crew in all of Westraven because of stonehearted Captain Robertson Kendric's and his eldest son, the cruel ravager known as Davin Kendric.

Sawyer's father and older brother.

When the Wanderers were destroyed in The Storm, Sawyer became the last of the line. He salvaged and commandeered his father's ship, rebuilt a small crew, and inherited all of his father's enemies. The marauders were our best resources for help, but every single one of them wanted to shed Sawyer's blood to repay what his family had done to them. He'd become a scapegoat for mistakes he didn't make and actions he'd never been responsible for.

"The Southside is rioting, and the farmers are putting up a fight," Sawyer informed. "Some of them are even demanding money for the crops."

I frowned. The survivors that spent over a decade in the underground tunnels were continuing to struggle for new beginnings on the surface. With the marauders steadily establishing dominance over the city, there was little they could offer besides labor. Farmers monopolizing crops was a sign they were being controlled by the pirates, or fearing they would be soon. For all we knew right now, the farmers could be trying to establish the same fierce consortium the Electricians had.

"We should head back," Riley said. "The rest of the Rattails will be back any minute, and they're not going to be happy with this mess."

Glancing at all the broken furniture, toppled tables, dented walls, and blood drops on the hardwood floor, I had to agree. For once, Sawyer didn't disagree with Riley. We shuffled through the fallen bodies, picking up weapons and bits of coin from their belts. Gemma was the biggest hoarder,

taking anything that had even the slightest gleam to it. I didn't exactly approve, but looting was what pirates did best. And Gemma was obsessed with shiny things.

Sawyer walked stiffly past me. There were some bruises darkening his sun-browned skin, but he didn't seem too injured. Though I didn't like the way he cradled his ribs.

"Are sure you're all right?" I asked, following him closely.

"I'd be better if you stopped chasing after us on missions," he grumbled.

I scowled at him. "I'm trying to help you—"

"You're making me worry," he snapped harshly. "If any of the marauders find out who you are, you think they'll let you walk away unscathed?" He nodded aggressively at Riley's back. "Or him? His job is to protect you while we get information, not be your personal set of fists every time you run off to play warrior."

We had just passed through the front doors of the tavern when I grabbed Sawyer's elbow and yanked him to a stop. He whirled on me, freezing me in place with burning gold eyes. Around us, the latest snow of winter began to fall lazily over our heads. The night was cold—my green work shirt, black waist belt, cargo pants, work boots, and short trench coat did little to stop the biting wind—but I was almost boiling with anger.

"This is about Davin, isn't it?" I shot. "You're worried he'll come back."

"Leave it alone, Firecracker," he warned, using the nickname I loathed as an attempt to ward me off.

It didn't work as he hoped.

"Sawyer, you don't need to worry about him. If serving the Vesper was so important to Davin, wouldn't he have attacked already?"

"We don't know his plan, and that's what we need to be afraid of. The other Clans don't know he's alive. As long as he can keep that secret, the marauders will keep coming for me. I could scream that he's alive until I'm blue in the face, and it won't matter because they will never believe me. They'll remember that the *Dauntless* crashed and supposedly burned, then laugh in my face before they kill me." Sawyer must have seen something in my eyes, because he suddenly looked down. When he spoke again, his voice was on the edge of control. "I'm trying to sort out my priorities. Keep my crew alive, find your parents' ship so we can close the Breach, and watch out for my brother. But you're at the center of it all, risking your life when you're the one I need most."

My hand wavered on his elbow. He couldn't mean it the way I thought he did. Sawyer made it clear months ago that he didn't care about me the way I cared about him. I was trying to make peace with it, painful as it was. But then he said things like this, and that peace began to shatter.

I took a careful step closer to him. "Sawyer—"

He pulled his arm back, away from my hand. "We can make a stop at Davy's. He'll get us some food. At least our deal with him still stands."

Sawyer turned on his heel and walked after Gemma and Nash. I continued to watch him, my heart in my throat. Sawyer was infuriating and difficult, the definition of stubborn and confusing, but the walls around him were beginning to break. He was struggling, and wouldn't let anyone help him. The weight of his family name was crushing him.

I understood, better than he thought. I was scorned, considered a failure because my parents had failed to close the Breach in time, allowing the Hellions to come through and destroy the lives of everyone in Westraven, and the country of Aon beyond. Those few that did survive were forced from the comforts of their old lives, living a sickly existence in the bowels of the city, scavenging whatever they could and obeying violent warlords that held onto their pathetic thrones with an iron grip.

My hand went around my throat, touching the silver chain around my neck and stopping when my fingers brushed the black steel skeleton key. I rotated it between my fingers, looking at the shining, simple item with four blocky teeth. It had been ten years since my mother gave it to me in a moment of desperation, before she sent me away with my sister and left us to fight the Hellions. I never saw her again.

You're a strong, smart, brave girl, Claire. You have mine and your father's talents. One day you'll use that key, and you'll save us all.

The last words she ever said to me. Words that to this day, I had no hope of understanding. I sighed and placed the key back under my shirt. Snowflakes melted on my face. I raised my head and looked at the clouds slowly drifting through the sky. There was nothing ominous about them. If anything, they looked almost casual as they floated by, leaving powdery white debris behind.

As beautiful as the snow was, I only felt the cold. It sank through my skin and chilled me to the marrow of my bones. Somewhere beyond those clouds was a tear in the sky. An entrance to another dimension where monsters lurked in the dark. Monsters that wanted something from me. Despite what I said to Sawyer, I didn't think we'd seen the last of the Hellions. And when they returned, I wasn't sure we would be able to withstand their fury.



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