

## ***Brightfire – Chapter 1***

In the clean, cold cut of light the blade was a beam of silver spewing from the guard. The hilt was a gaping dragon, dragon gaped, obsidian eyes like black wishes. Skyrian turned the sword carefully over in her hands, angling it so that the moonlight dripped down the flat and into the dragon's jaws. She smiled half-heartedly at Mhara, who sat at her feet.

"Close," Skyrian said, with a little shake of her head, "but not quite."

Under the bright crown of the full moon, Mhara closed her eyes and allowed her mouth to tighten in disappointment. "They all look so similar."

"Black eyes," Skyrian tapped the one that rested just above the curl of her hand, "Master Dakko never made any with jeweled eyes. They were always a part of the hilt, never ornamented – he said metal saw well enough without jewels to dazzle it." She let the corners of her lips curl into a whisper of a smile. "He was like that. He spoke as though metal were its own creature."

Mhara watched as Skyrian dipped the tip into the throat of the scabbard and slid the two together. "Was he a Draconii?"

Skyrian had, over the seventeen years of her life, learned not to tense at the word. Still, she could not keep the brightness of her eyes from dimming, or the hollow of her throat from dimpling slightly. "No."

"But even with his love for metalwork – not all his blades were his alone," Mhara remembered. "Didn't he let students make the hilts sometimes?" She rose and took the sword from Skyrian gently.

"Yes. The demand was too high later in his life for him to make everything on his own," Skyrian brushed a tender hand along the scabbard. "I thought this might be one of the Blends, at first." Skyrian lifted the wooden window latch and let the shutter flap shut against the stone of her room, cutting out the moonlight. The five candles in her room burned like small fireflies in her pupils. "But moonlight was the last test – they used to say that Master Dakko's blades breathed it. That's why I asked you to bring it over tonight. It isn't quite the same. I've seen one, before." She turned to face Mhara, offering her palms in a smooth, practiced gesture. "It was like holding light, it was so weightless. And in the moonlight –" she shrugged. "Breathtaking."

Mhara's dark hair broke over her shoulders in waves as she leaned back, sighing, into the hard wood of Skyrian's dresser. "It's still a beautiful sword."

"Yes, it is." Skyrian moved to her mattress, relaxing into the heaped blankets of woven wool.

"It's for you, you know."

Skyrian stilled.

"I knew you'd be like this," Mhara got to her feet and hung the sword carefully up by its strapping, beside a small square of broken mirror-glass. Skyrian followed the movement with her eyes until they stopped at her reflection, pale, thin, golden hair braided to her waist, arms clenched tight at her sides, legs braced as though for impact. She'd gotten the mirror-glass from the Astronomers four years ago, when they had ordered fifty pieces for a new Looksky. The old Looksky was smaller, too small to Predict with accuracy, and with the war beginning the king had asked them for a better one. The mirror-glass panes had come wrapped in soft hide and had been personally poured in Harayan across the Baskian Sea, but a few were not quite perfect. On her way to the stables, Skyrian had found their shards glittering like lights across the cobblestone court beneath the Astronomer's Keep, so that the courtyard looked like it had been punctured with pieces of the heavens. She'd hunted until she found a square piece about the width of four

hands, and strung it up in her tower room with a bit of golden ribbon. Mhara often commented that even the wives of the Yatar did not own such a luxury.

In the glass, Skyrian's eyes watered. "No."

"Skye," Mhara's tone was disapproving. "A sword isn't a part of the Arts. And no one will know."

"But even if I could own one, a sword isn't a sword until I'm granted one by the king," Skyrian lay back. "The day that happens is the day lights burn without oil."

"You'll have to settle without a Blessing, then." Mhara stood firm. "Maybe that's strange to you. It might be untraditional. But your whole life is untraditional."

"That's why—"

"That's why you should have it," Mhara sighed. "You might not believe that you need one. But I do. You know more about them than anyone I know. Adrian himself said that you show the talent that is your inheritance."

"Our beliefs cannot always be of the same mind, Mhara," Skyrian fell back on the covers, feeling her eyes sour with brief, angry tears. "You always do this. I've let the past be the past. It's time you let it go." About time, too, considering that her eighteenth birthday was in half a year. Had she been born a son, her eighteenth birthday would mark the day she would be inducted into the Draconii Ward and the royal family's Sirra, the seventy seven members that made up the King's closest council. But she would not be inducted. And the Draconii could not claim Apprenta Sangra, because she was not his apprentice. Which, if she understood the Law correctly, meant she was free.

Mhara's eyes burned in the silence that followed. "You practice," she accused. "You fight with a quarterstaff. You cannot play both parts. You know what they say about those that court a passion with two faces."

Skyrian lay still a long time, staring at the yellow swathes of candlelight on her wooden ceiling. Accepting the sword was not the same as using it. It would hang, a beautiful reminder of the things she loved – and how she had fought free of them.

"Take it as you would any gift," Mhara said softly. "Please, Skyrian. Pretend it is not a sword, but something I have brought back for you. As your dearest friend."

"You ask a sword its greatest honor," Skyrian sighed. "To deny it its presence or purpose..."

"I will leave it. I need not deny it anything."

A long silence passed.

"Skye," Mhara whispered, her eyes lowered. "You know that is not all. If you plan to leave, you will need a sword. You must protect yourself."

Skyrian closed her eyes.

"You have less than a year. And the war is coming. They may close the borders soon. You have to be ready!"

Skyrian said nothing, thinking of the years she had waited, to be old enough to leave Cyriel and start over, to leave her heartache behind and pretend she was someone else entirely. And her father, who had already endured losing her mother, who had to live with the disgrace of a daughter and no heir –

"It will break his heart," Skyrian murmured.

Mhara knew what she meant. "Oh, Skye."

Skyrian shook herself with a sigh and rolled over to face Mhara, her features golden with candlelight. "I will have to find some way so that the Draconii will not be shamed. Even to lose his one dishonorable daughter would be more wickedness in the eyes of the court."

"There will be other signs of wickedness," Mhara's eyes met hers. "I am going with you."

"No."

"You will need a sword to protect me, at least," Mhara smiled. "I cannot fight as you do."

"No, Mhara, you can't." Skyrian sat up again. "I must do this alone. You must let me. And I can't let you leave what you have. You mustn't leave your future behind." Her eyes dropped to the floor. "Where I am going there is no future. You have been so good to me." Her eyes flickered up to Mhara's face. "You have to stay here, and make sure there are no others that cannot claim their place under the Law."

Mhara searched Skyrian's expression carefully, seeing in it the steely resolution that had kept Skyrian from the jaws of court rumors, made her as stubborn as she was cold. Skyrian was strong. But she couldn't let the world swallow her friend up, blot out her existence.

"Stay, Mhara," Skyrian whispered. "Please. If you want me to be happy."

"Marry," Mhara said lowly. "Marry Adrian, marry – marry anyone. Then you may claim your right in the citadel."

Skyrian laughed humorlessly. "Marry? Who would marry me, the cursed daughter of the Draconii, the one woman to end a tradition sacred to Cyriel for thousands of years? Besides, I want this. It is the only chance I have."

Mhara watched Skyrian silently for a long moment. Then she sighed and laid the sword carefully in Skyrian's lap. "If you are truly starting over, then you are free of guilt. It is nothing more than what you wish it to be."

Skyrian stared down at the glittering sheath, the long, elaborate hilt, winking softly in the light. Tremblingly, her hands closed over it, gripping it tight.

In the mornings that washed over Cyriel, Skyrian would get up to watch the stars fade. In summer under the cold pins of light she could see the Astronomers moving at the top of their keep, dark shapes that shifted until they melted away with the rising of the sun. Wrapping a gold robe about her frame, she would linger at her window until she heard her father, his thin, light step on the cobblestones, and the roar of the dragons in their pens when they sensed his presence. In the spring, she practiced swordsmanship in the simple circle of her tower room, working on control as she cut air milky with moonlight.

When she was much younger, Skyrian had practiced with Adrian, Mhara's cousin. He taught her the basics of swordsmanship at a time when the court could still smile at the Draconii's daughter, the little blond-haired darling who despite her heritage would never learn the Art or wear the Dragon Rings. Of course, there were ugly rumors, and not a few saw Skyrian as an omen or a curse. No Draconii in the past four thousand years had ever failed to produce a male heir, and Skyrian was an only child. It troubled them that they were not sure how to treat her: with respect or with disgust.

But when she grew old enough to begin the duties of the Draconii, her father had no choice but to make his intentions clear. Moges, a distant cousin from Skyrian's mother's side, came to be an apprentice, to learn the Art and to spite Skyrian in everything she did. While she chopped liver and cleaned the pens, he learned first to be a Chemist, broiling strange brews and mixing pungent powders with her father. Four years later, he took the dragons out to field, while

Skyrian's hands blistered from twisting ropes for the dragon harnesses. When he returned, defiant face black with soot, he would say nothing but let the scent of smoke fill the kitchen as she rinsed blood from the creases in her fingers.

Whenever she attended the King's court, draped in precious silk robes with golden lace, she felt her face burn at the stares and at the way the cloth would not slide smoothly over her callous hands. If there had been another, a second child, a son, she would not have to live in the strange veil between two worlds. Having an obvious heir made her place less intrusive. But with Moges only a doubtful candidate, Skyrian could not be ignored. She was, after all, the child of a Draconii. The days in the meadows with Mhara stopped. The sword lessons stopped.

Sometimes she believed that there were ghosts whispering in her blood. They needed the sword, the smell of dragonfire. They made her ache inside with impossibility. When Moges first arrived the pain crackled along her tendons. And as she grew older, the prickling subsided as she wrestled to whisper back the truth. Now the ghosts were a dull ache that grew restless only if she stayed too long in the dragon pens. She did not tell her father she had the first signs of a Draconii heir; his heart was already broken. She knew that he loved her, that he had wanted to give the Art to her. As he had loved her mother, and wanted to give the Art to her.

Skyrian sat cross-legged on the bed, the sword resting on her palms. The silver hilt, the detailed curls of dragon mane stirred her blood so that it surged in her veins. She could not practice with this sword, gift though it may have been. Years ago Aidan had leant her a boy's simple sword for their practices, forged more as a toy than as a weapon. But this sword had seen battle. She could feel it in the metal, the wicked power to bite. It was not innocent.

"I have no right to you, you know," she whispered to it, half-expecting an answer. She had never touched a sword after her fifteenth birthday, because the second sign of the Draconii was making its presence known: the ability to speak to metals, or to fire. It was less of a language than an understanding of power. Draconii who knew the Art could forge the most beautiful, most deadly objects with dragonfire and the right metals.

The sword was silent, but brooding, if not a little irritated.

With great effort, Skyrian got up and hung the blade carefully on its peg beside the mirror.

*I sometimes think I imagine you,* she thought, watching her reflection. *Perhaps you want to be a Draconii so passionately that you pretend you have seen the signs manifest, that swords speak to you, that you feel restless when near dragons.* It certainly would make things easier, because the signs made her feel cheated and only served to suggest tantalizingly that she had some right to the Draconii title. Skyrian shook her head to clear her thoughts. She thought she had won this argument three years ago when she had last handled a sword. It did not matter. She would never be a Draconii.

Skyrian brushed a hand gently over the scabbard, then picked up her lamp and blew out the light. Dawn was near. It was time to go to the dragons.

The morning was bitter with rain. Skyrian pulled the windows open and fastened them by their wooden hooks so that the scent of dripping trees reached her in the meat locker where she kneaded redroot into sliced fish. Her gaze was steady and flew beyond the castle walls, over the Nabben Wood to the mountains in the North. General Mager's troops were expected back from their journey to the Cyriel-Amina border, to treat with the Aminans. Though an uneasy peace had been kept between the two countries for more than a hundred years, Mhara had said that the Yatar, the King's council, believed Amina would make war soon.

Skyrian scooped the spiced fish into a metal pail and went down the spiraling stone steps of the keep, her ears filled with the roar of rain. The clouds were fast-paced over her head as she threw her cloak up over her ears and tucked the pail under her arm. A few short seconds in the downpour, and then she was slamming open the door to the first dragon pen, stumbling in. The hot musk of the newborns filled her nose and throat.

“Perfect,” Skyrian grumbled, as the pail slipped in her hand and clanked noisily to the floor, spilling fish on the stone. She picked the glistening pieces up in her hands, casting them into the pens beside her. Dark eyes flashed in hard, metallic faces as the dragonets leapt up to snatch the pieces mid-air. At the last pen, she stopped. There was a single golden Dalasamder behind the thin grey bars, scraping his claws energetically against the stone so that hot sparks spit themselves sparkling into the corners.

Skyrian leaned gently against the railing, meeting his gaze shrewdly. He gave her a feral grin and flicked away into the shadows of its pen. She watched him go expressionlessly, her hands tight against the bars. If the Dalasamder grew healthily to full size, he would be the King’s next mount.

“You’re going to make me serve you, aren’t you?” She crouched on the floor, digging her hands into the pail. “Here. But don’t eat my fingers.”

The Dalasamder snuffed once or twice in the dark, then scurried forward. Bright teeth glinted once and the fish was gone. Skyrian hardly had time to snatch back her hands in reflex, breathing hard.

“Skye!” Mhara burst into the pen, wet wind howling around her. “Did you hear? The army is back!”

Skyrian rose from the floor. “General Mager’s?”

Mhara slammed the door shut against the gale. “They’ve taken a prisoner. He’s going before the court as we speak. They came in this morning. They think he’s a spy from the North. They caught him on the wrong side of the border. He’s young – about our age.”

“Are you going to court?”

“This one is not open to me, no. But once Father and the rest of the Yatar make a decision I will know.” Her eyes glittered with excitement, the way they always did when a closed court was held. “The hearing is probably going to go on for hours. You should have seen the guard coming in – I’ve never seen them so baffled, or so wary.”

Skyrian sighed. “And the Astronomers?”

“As far as I know, they Predicted a disturbance at the border, which was why His Highness sent General Mager. But the readings from the Looksky suggested a battle, which is the General’s main concern – they hadn’t expected just one man.”

“Are they sure it’s safe to come back? Perhaps what they’re waiting for comes later?”

Mhara shook her head so that droplets of water scattered on the floor. “The Looksky can’t tell anymore, and they don’t want to aggravate Amina with permanent troops so near the border. General Mager left a band to scout and to enforce the border but otherwise they detected no signs of any kind of rising.”

Skyrian looked down at the floor, biting her lip. “Could the Looksky be wrong?”

Mhara paused, doubtful. “It *has* been wrong before. But usually only because it was difficult to read. They only have a handful of reliable stars, I’m told, and depending on the season there sometimes aren’t enough reference points to put together a clear picture. I only know because father says the Yatar are very patient with the Astronomers. It’s hard for them.”

“Maybe they shouldn’t rely so heavily on the Looksky, then,” Skyrian scowled at her feet.

Mhara bit her lip. “That’s another thing,” she said slowly. “I’ve wanted to tell you for a while, but even the Yatar are not sure yet and my father doesn’t know.”

Skyrian looked up, surprised.

“I only know because of an accident,” Mhara went on. “I overheard something I wasn’t meant to. And it feels – dangerous. It’s the kind of thing that hurts as it spreads.” She looked down at her hands, twisting them anxiously. “I haven’t told my father.”

“If you shouldn’t,” Skyrian whispered, “don’t tell me.”

“But I want you to know.” Mhara began pacing the length of the dragon pen.

Skyrian watched her warily. “*Don’t*. Don’t Mhara, you always meddle where you shouldn’t—”

“I’ve already told you *something*,” Mhara shook her head. “The secret is half-out already. I think you ought to know. It might just be a rumor – but it still has something to do with Draconii.”

“Does the Draconii know?”

“I don’t know,” Mhara whispered. “But I think you should. The King says there’s a better way – other than the Looksky. He has another weapon, another plan – something else that will give Cyriel an advantage in war.”

“To protect Cyriel, of course,” Skyrian’s response was automatic, but her gaze was hard. Mhara would not meet her eyes. “Of course.”

“I’m leaving, Mhara,” Skyrian sighed. “In just a few months. I can’t – I mustn’t know.”

“If the borders close for war you’ll never make an escape! Don’t shut it out; trust me, just this once!”

“I always do,” Skyrian frowned. “And if you insist you’re coming with me, you can tell me once we are out of Cyriel.”

“I won’t give up, Skye, you know I won’t. I won’t stay if you go without it.” Mhara pulled her hood up over her head and turned to the door. At the last minute she paused, one hand raised to tuck her dark curls further into her cloak. “You say you want to start over. You have to practice. You can’t let the past haunt you like this. Take up the sword to *fight*. When you are free, no one will be able to say you are wrong.” The rain swirled down around her, and then she was gone.

Skyrian glanced at the Dalasamder, who watched her with sharp, brilliant eyes.

“You must think I am a coward,” she smiled at him half-heartedly and pressed the backs of her hands to her eyes until she saw stars burst. Her friendship with Mhara had taken on a different tone in the years since she had revealed the truth about the signs of the Draconii. Mhara would not let her give up what she had forced herself to lose, and it sometimes drove her mad. She could feel the rift between them growing, and she hated it – hated Mhara, sometimes, Mhara, who had been her best friend for as long as she could remember. She understood what Mhara meant. But she wasn’t sure if Mhara understood. However far she journeyed, she might not be able to start over. The past had a habit of sticking and never letting go. And then the sword, every time it was in her hand, would only remind her that she was not really freed, but still running.

Behind her the Dalasamder growled, and she turned and dangled another fish over the bars of his pen, unable to hold back the gasp that pushed past her lips as he leapt into the air, leathery, half-furled wings beating passionately, the hot graze of teeth on skin.

“You’ll be flying soon,” Skyrian murmured. Leaning over, she offered the dragonet a last fish. There was a wild flash of gold, a momentary weight in her sleeve, a quick bite of claws into her arms, and then the dragon was scampering across the floor, sparks flickering upward as his tail swished on the stone.

“No!” Skyrian shrieked. Leaping to her feet, she stumbled over a pile of buckets, sending the wooden pails rolling in every direction. Hissing, the dragon turned and made for the door, which had blown open with a sudden shriek of wind. Skyrian slammed into the wooden door just as he juttet past, snapping it shut as his tail flashed over the threshold. Cursing, Skyrian wrenched the door back open, running out into the wet street. She turned wildly on the slick stones, following the bright spark of gold in the corner of her eye. As she rounded the corner, she crashed brutally into a broad shoulder, sending both of them sliding. She knocked her head once on the cobblestones and grit her teeth to bite back a sharp hiss of breath.

“What do you think you are doing?” a voice growled. Skyrian looked up, one hand to her ear, where there was a dull pain. Moges glared at her as he got to his feet slowly. She realized with relief that he was clutching the Dalasamder, which squirmed and hissed in his arms.

“You can’t possibly be telling me that you almost managed to lose the king’s mount?” Moges’ voice was mocking, belligerent. “Tell me you had some master plan as to this one’s freedom.” The Dalasamder bit down hard on his gloved hands, but the thick hide muted the force of his jaws.

Skyrian distractedly rubbed at her ear and pulled her hand away, watching as the rain rinsed the bright smudge of red from her fingertips. Rage pounded through her, still raw from Mhara’s words, her refusal to understand, the tension in their friendship. “He flew,” she growled, wiping her hand on her robe. “It isn’t my fault that no one moved him earlier.”

“Haven’t you been attending to him every day? Didn’t you notice he was ready to fly?” Skyrian opened her mouth to respond, but fell silent as she heard the familiar *clunk* of the Draconii’s staff on the stones.

Even in the rain, the Draconii made a powerful figure. Candlelight from the windows of the stables burned brighter as it flickered on his skin, and his black eyes under their hood were sharp and feral, though his expression was kind. His long staff, usually a dark amber, was ocher in the faint light, though the markings at the tip and base glittered defiantly like a delicate net of gold. Throughout its length a dark fire seemed to swirl and subside, like molten lava. His gold and red robes were dark with rain.

“Skyrian?” The Draconii’s voice was dry and deep. “Moges.”

The Dalasamder froze. In the next instant, Moges was sputtering and the dragon had leapt from his arm to the Draconii’s staff, curling its golden body tight against it. It shivered, and its black tongue tested the rain.

“The Dalasamder shouldn’t be outside in this weather,” the Draconii went on.

“I’m sorry, sir.” Moges bowed low. “Skyrian let it escape.”

“He flew,” Skyrian repeated through gritted teeth.

The Draconii sighed and scooped the dragon up effortlessly, tucking it deep into the folds of his robes. “Come, Moges.” He gave Skyrian a sad smile, and then the two of them turned into his keep. The door shut solidly behind them, leaving Skyrian in the rain.