

# SCAVENGER GIRL SERIES

## SEASON OF ATCHEM

### An Excerpt

“Um, Father?” I interrupted, “Someone’s here.” My face changed when I realized who it was.

My father, who had come to the same conclusion, rushed us into action. "It's the Authority. Una, Calish, get in the burrow now!" The entire family jumped from the table, and Marsh pulled back the rug, exposing the hidden trapdoor. Calish opened it up, and I hurried into the dark passage as fast as I possibly could. After imagining what must have transpired at Grena’s house, my father had already trained us to take every precaution if and when the Authority came here.

“Marsh, load the thistle spears and go to the loft like we practiced. Wait for my signal. Redena, you stay here. We’ll be fine, just stay quiet.” Calish closed the hatch, and Mother repositioned the house rug, hiding the door from view. My father blew out the lantern, and the house dimmed. I heard Marsh hustling about the house then up the ladder. Then complete silence filled our family’s home.

Calish and I stood still in the burrow. The place I expected to be pitch black was illuminated by rays of light pouring through aging cracks in the stone foundation of our house. “I thought you couldn’t see in here?” I whispered fearfully.

Calish hushed me. “You can’t,” he said in my ear.

A moment later, I heard the bells of the front entry to the yard. Mother stepped behind the door, hiding in the corner of the tiny house. My father opened the door and stepped outside. It was then that I wondered why we all didn’t hide in the burrow together. It was created for me, but there was more than enough room for the whole family. Perhaps it didn’t cross Father’s mind, or

for some reason it did, and he dismissed it. I cursed myself for not asking during the drills he made us practice; it was too late now.

“Scavenger!” the Authority officer yelled to the house.

“Yes, sir,” Father responded. Unable to see anything through the floorboards, I dug away the debris around the largest hole in the foundation.

“Una, we need to go deeper in.”

“No.” I waved my hand at him. “How will we know they are coming if we don’t see them?” He must have agreed with me, because he stopped pulling my arm to make a peephole of his own.

“What can I do for you, gentlemen?” Father inquired. He stood so close to the house all we were able to see of my father were his boots.

“What would *you* do, for *me*, Scavenger?” The man sounded disgusted by the offer.

“My apologies, sir.”

The man surveyed our land. The sun was low in the sky, and two moons were now present, leaving little for him to see. Nevertheless, it provided us enough light to observe without detection.

“Are you looking for something?” Father inquired.

“We’ve had a recent issue with Scablands. Now would be the time to inform me if you intend to disobey the law and refuse me access to your land.”

From behind the berry vines, six men emerged. They positioned themselves in a straight line across the bridge, each spaced equally from the other. A man with a whistle blew it once, and in unison, the men brought the heels of their boots together and their arms straight down to their sides. With the second whistle blow, each raised their right hands to the sheathed blades resting on their hips.

“I have nothing to hide, sir,” Father asserted, waiting for the man in charge to state his business.

“I doubt that.” He cleared his sinuses and spat on the ground before approaching my father. “This is quite a parcel you have for yourself, Scab. Are you sure it belongs to you?” I knew that man’s voice. He was the same Authority man that had been at the Daxins’ the day my father and I were. That was a voice I’d never forget; that was Officer Puken.

“I’m sure you’re aware of the law, sir. ‘A Scavenger has a right to the belongings he earned before his fall of character,’” Father quoted.

“An allowance that should be reevaluated.” He stepped around my father and scanned the property. “Nice beast. Did you retain that as well?” I assumed he was referring to the ox.

“No, sir. My family claimed it.”

“Claimed? Do I look stupid to you, Scab?” He leaned into my father’s face as if to take inventory of him.

My father didn’t answer with sarcasm but gave a proper explanation, “The man who owned it no longer had a need for it.”

“What about the man who gave you this?” He disarmed my father and put the blade to his face. “Did the man who *gave* you this no longer need it?” He twisted it to find the Authority crest on the hilt.

“I’m not clear what your question is, sir.”

Puken stepped back, putting the blade in the sheath with his own. He snickered at his men back at the bridge. Without warning, he turned, hitting my father across the face with the back of his hand. Father fell to the ground on his hands and knees and spit blood into the dirt as the officer massaged his hand.

“Stand up, you filthy animal,” he commanded. My father lifted one leg to step up, but evidently, he did not move fast enough. Puken stepped back and kicked him in the stomach. Losing his balance, Father fell to the ground.

“I said, get up.” He snapped his fingers, and two of the men rushed to my father and picked him up by the arms. Once Father was upright, Puken sucker punched him squarely in the gut. The officer stepped back and nursed the pain in his knuckles. “Where is your family, Scab?”

Father coughed. “They’re not back from the market yet.”

“Oh, really?” He crouched down to my father. “Then you don’t mind if we search the house?” He selected two of his men. “See if this man’s family is home.”

They headed straight for the house as they had been instructed. I glanced through an unrepaired knothole in the floor up to my hidden mother. She bit her lower lip, closed her eyes, and stepped around the door in full view of the Authority.

“Sir.” Mother bowed, but it was a wasted effort. The first one to her grabbed her by the arm and her hair, throwing her to the ground past the front porch.

“Oh, look who’s home!” Puken sang merrily. “My, my, it seems as if somebody may have known we were coming, wouldn’t it, boys?” The men

smirked. “Say—” he leaned in to my father “—your lovely wife wouldn’t happen to be a Seer, now would she?”

Puken turned to the remaining two men on the bridge. “What do you think? Should we have a look?” He turned to my mother, who was kneeling on the ground, fearfully cowering from the men next to her. She must have been terrified as she gathered her skirt under her knees and clutched the front of her blouse. Despite her attempt to ready herself, the officers made it known that they were interested in the task set before them.

“It is our duty to carry out the law,” he announced in a regal tone. “Find her mark,” he growled with clenched teeth.

My mother begged and pleaded as the two men circled her like wolves about to devour a lamb. Father struggled against the two men holding him. “No! NO!” he shouted.

“Ah, ah, ah.” Puken waved his finger at my father. “You will not interfere with justice, Scab. However, to make sure we’re following the law, I’ll let you observe the process of investigation. Turn him around so that he can watch.”

They mocked my mother as they ripped the clothing from her body, beginning with her blouse. She tried to hold pieces of the white linen with her small hands, but she proved to be no match for the much larger, stronger men. As one of them threw the last shred of it to the side, my mother crouched, still kneeling, arms crossed to hide her bare chest. The men lurked around her like animals as she sobbed. Her dark hair that had been piled beautifully on top of her head was now a shaken mess, barely holding the tie at the bottom of its strands.

“No marks on her back, sir!” one called back to Puken.

“Then let’s have a peek under that skirt,” he ordered. A man picked her up from behind, and the other closed in with fire in his eyes. I buried my head into Calish’s shoulder as I heard my mother fight and scream during her final disrobing.

“Let’s go, Una.” Calish tried to get me to follow him.

I shook my head. “No. I will not leave her alone.” I pulled away from him. When her screams stopped, I found the courage to find my peephole again.

The men’s jeering tapered off. “Huh,” Puken sounded surprised, “I guess they didn’t see us coming after all.” He leaned down to my naked mother as she tried desperately to cover her most intimate parts. He leaned into her so close

that his lips brushed her ear. He taunted her while smelling her hair. "So, is anyone else home?"

My mother did not answer. Instead, she leaned back and, with all her force, threw her forehead into the center of his face.

"Ahh! Bitch!" he growled and backhanded her to the dirt. His tongue licked his upper lip and tasted the blood my mother caused him to lose.

Puken stepped inside our one-room house. Seeing the dinner plates still laid out on the table, he chuckled. He slid his little finger around the edge of one of them and tasted it. Seeing nothing under the table, he turned his attention to the loft.

"I'm sorry we interrupted family dinner. Why don't you come out and greet me properly?" He paused. "Well, you can't say I didn't warn you." He stepped outside. "Search the house!"

Three men rushed through the front door. If there was a time to run deeper into the burrow, it was now. Calish and I were both too stunned to move, our bodies frozen in utter fear. If we tried to leave now, with the men in the house above us, they would hear us for sure. Our fear had given us no choice but to stay and take our chances. I put my hand over my mouth to keep myself from screaming. Calish whispered into my ear, "They're going to find Marsh, Una." I knew he was right, and there was nothing we could do but watch like two mice under the floor.

The men were experts in search and seizure, and they seemed to have found joy in carrying out the tasks of their positions. They turned over the kitchen table, pulled the dish shelves from the wall, and tossed about anything not nailed down. They destroyed or moved everything in the house, except the red carpet in the kitchen that covered our rugged hatch.

As we had predicted, they found Marsh in the loft and yanked him out of it head first before dragging him out the front door. Marsh was the strongest of us all, and he was the least likely to follow directions. It was no surprise to me that, after a tussle with my brother, it took all three men and a blade to the throat to subdue him.

"He's it, sir," the man with a newly broken nose reported. Two men held my father; one man held Marsh with the blade, and another stood guard over my mother.

My brother saw my mother cowering in the dirt, pulling her hair in front of her to cover herself. “You son of a bitch,” my brother seethed, “I will kill you.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, who is the ‘son of a bitch?’” Puken taunted before kicking Marsh between the legs.

“We found this, sir.” The final officer exited the house with the blow gun and a spear.

“Fascinating.” Puken studied the weapon. He ran it under his nose and breathed deeply. “Smells like vomit.” He turned his eyes to my father. He handed the spear back to the man. “So, let me see, it seems like there has been a lot of activity here.” From his pocket, he retrieved a pair of black gloves. He put them on as he continued, “Disobedience, disloyalty, and theft.”

“We are not thieves!” Marsh defended.

“Oh, but you are. Well, one of you is. In fact, you might even be a murderer.” He came eye to eye with Marsh.

“Oh, yeah, prove it, Law-man.”

Puken presented the blade he had taken from my father. “This was my apprentice’s blade. He died from a Scab’s javelin in the field next to that beast.” He signaled to the ox. “Seems like sufficient evidence to me.” He made his way to my father. “Say goodbye to your family, Scab.”

“You’d be wise to consider your evidence, sir.” My father held his stare. “Only you and the gods know the exact cause of your apprentice’s death. If your accusations of me are wrong and we both know they are, then you will be the murderer, not me. I will wait for you in the next life. That is a Scavenger’s destiny; let’s see if the gods make it yours as well.”

Puken clenched his fists and tightened his chin, staring deep into my father’s unwavering eyes. He stepped back and weighed the blade in his open palm. With precision and grace, he flipped it around and re-sleeved it in my father’s belt. “You will pay for your crime.” He snapped his fingers and the man with the whistle came to his side.

Puken held his hand out flat. “The piece, please.”

My father struggled once more but was held tighter by the men to his right and left.

“You, Scavenger, have been hereby convicted of theft and shall suffer the sentencing thereof.” In the palm of Puken’s hand was placed a pair of pruning shears, though the Authority was not known for their landscaping talents.

“No, please, don’t!” Mother leaped to stop them.

“Keep the bitch still,” Puken commanded. The man next to her grabbed her arms from behind, holding her still and fully exposed.

“It’s fine, Redena.” Father maintained his stoic expression while offering his hand to Puken.

“You’re very entertaining, *dear*.” Puken grinned. “Give me your *right* hand.”

My father pulled his other arm from his captor. He took a deep breath and held it for a moment. The officer waited, evidently not wanting to rush the experience for either one of them. My father straightened his posture and squared his shoulders in preparation for what he knew would happen next. Glancing back at his wife and son, then to the house where Calish and I still hid, he held out his trembling hand.

“That’s it,” Puken encouraged as he took hold of it. With one swift squeeze of the shears, my father’s thumb fell to the dirt.

My father howled into the night’s air, and it echoed off the hills. He grabbed his right hand with his left, falling to his knees, tears of excruciating pain streaming down his face.

“And you”—Puken turned his attention to Marsh—“You have been hereby convicted of attempted assault to the Authority and shall suffer the sentencing thereof.” He signaled to the man with the thistle spears. Standing in front of my brother, Puken held the spear by the tail, studying the tip. “I wonder what this little guy would have done to one of my men if they hadn’t found you first?” He weighed the dart in his hand then plunged it into Marsh’s thigh.

“No! Marsh! Oh gods, no, Marsh!” Mother cried. The man released her, and she caught my brother as his leg buckled under him. “Marsh, hold on, just, please! Look at me, baby, please!”

My father cried out and struggled to get to Marsh’s side. He knew what was on that dart, and it was far worse than his own injury.

“Oops, I almost forgot! The reason for our visit today! Darck!” Puken snapped his fingers at an officer, who pulled something from a bag slung over his shoulder. “You have a daughter, yes? Oh, but you know the rules, it needs to be worn by the eldest daughter first. Darck, find the girl and make sure she’s pleased, won’t you, sir?”

My heart stopped for a moment; did they see me watching them this whole time? I shut my eyes, waiting for the trapdoor to open, but it didn’t.

“Where are they?” I whispered to Calish.

“I don’t know.”

A moment later, I heard the pigs squealing in their pen to the west of the house. The Authority men burst into laughter. “Seems your pig isn’t interested in a new Atchem Gown! Imagine that!” Puken came back into view, applauding the entertainment. “Well, we’ve delivered it. Maybe she’ll like next year’s design better. Let’s go, men.” The men started back to their horses.

“Oh, how rude of me.” Puken jogged back to my family huddled together. “Thank you so very much for your hospitality. We should do this again sometime!” He grabbed my mother by the hair, pulling her head back, and kissed her on the cheek. “Farewell!”