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



SKY'S END

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ABOVE THE BLACK

MARC J GREGSON



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Teen

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.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MARC J GREGSON attended the University of Utah, where he graduated cum laude and received his bachelor of arts in English teaching. Marc's pursuit of learning has led him into the classroom, where he teaches middle school English. He believes in the power of words and that stories can unite people from all origins. *Sky's End* is his first novel for teens.

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