

SCAVENGER GIRL SERIES

SEASON OF ATCHEM

An Excerpt

After breakfast and the standard controlled argument among the men of the family, it was decided that Calish, Father, and I would go to the river and Marsh would stay with my mother as they each continued to regain their strength.

“Are you sure you’ll be safe on your own if I go with them, Mother?” I worried.

“Yes, of course. I doubt there is much here that would capture your interest for another day. You should enjoy the light while it’s here.”

I was so excited to go to the river that I almost forgot my gown. “Isn’t that the reason you’re going?” Father inquired.

“Yes, it was, I mean, it is.” I grabbed my crumpled dress from the yard and shoved it into my pack.

I don’t know that I’ve ever enjoyed a walk to the river as much as I did today. It was so nice to get out of the house. What made it comforting was knowing my mother was alive and Marsh was getting stronger. I didn’t want to think too much about tomorrow. I wanted to enjoy what was happening now. I’m sure someday soon we’d go back to the river, living out our days the way our lives used to be. There was even talk about taking the ox to the river in the next day or two. At least, that was the plan. It was always good to have a plan, but flexibility always proved helpful in case the plan didn’t pan out.

When we arrived at the river, Calish warned me, “I doubt that dress will wash clean. Go see what’s being offered and let me know what you need.”

Grateful for the suggestion, I set my dress next to his pack and wandered among the sunbathing Citizens. Some were here simply because it was a beautiful day; others were here to trade, even though trading with Scavengers was prohibited. I walked timidly past them, eyeing the piles many had laid out next to

their blankets. Of all the wares, there was only one white gown, and it was far too small.

I bowed to the couple on the blanket and inquired, “Does this belong to anyone?”

“I think I saw them leave five hours ago,” the woman replied in code. I picked it up and turned it inside out. If the seams were big enough, I could let it out or sew in a panel to make it fit me. “It’s not going to fit you.” The woman smirked.

It’s not worth five fish, either.

Finding nothing better, I walked back to Calish. “Any luck?” he asked, holding the fishing line between his teeth as he tied his fly to the end of it.

“Five fish for a child’s gown.” I crinkled my nose.

He spit out the line. “What? Do they have any idea how long that’ll take? It’s a shame they can’t try their hand at this to see how difficult hooking one is.” He shook his head, insulted by the offer. “I’m glad the gods gave us rights to the river, not them. I wonder if they would have made the law if they knew fish tasted so good.”

“I’m going to see what I can do with this one.” I shook the dress out. Its condition had not improved; in fact, it was worse than I remembered.

“You head upriver. I’ll tie off.” He chuckled. Those who were poor enough and experienced with the river knew this strategy well. If I lost hold of the garment, Calish would, or at least attempt to, retrieve it. The rope would prove its worth if he had to go deep into the river to fetch the gown; it would be the only thing keeping him from being washed down the river with it. My brother gave me the nod that he was set and cast his line in the water.

I dipped my dress in the water several times, wringing it out and re-dipping until all the loose soil made its way out of the garment. As I had feared, the clay of the ground had dyed the fabric in several places, and the dress seemed dirty even though I’d done my best to clean it. It was a warm day, and I was certainly ripe, so I decided to sit in the water and wash as I continued to work the stains. I wasn’t able to get undressed there in the shallow of the river in front of everyone, but I didn’t have a need to. Even fully clothed, the water granted me a newness that a wet rag never would.

I was not concerned about walking home in wet clothes. It was “unbecoming of a young woman,” as my father would say. I knew we’d be there all night until I

had dry clothes. Either I'd dry out, or I would have new clothes. Calish would make sure of it. I saw him turn to check on me as I emerged from the water, slicking my hair away from my face. I smiled at him; he blushed and shook his head. He knew he would have to catch more than he'd intended for the day if I were to have dry clothes tonight, but he didn't seem to mind.

Crouching shoulder deep in the water, I swayed the dress left and right beneath the surface as if we were dancing. She was an ugly, twirling girl who thought she was beautiful. "Poor thing, you'll never catch a boy's medallion wearing that hideous thing, but you keep on trying," I encouraged the tattered and stained dress.

"Una? Is that you?"

I turned to see Blue standing on the shore. I shot upright, embarrassed to be wading around in the river like some stinky fish playing with my clothes.

"Oh, hi, Blue," I said, and then I remembered my manners. "Crap!" I stood up, the river at my waist. "Forgive me, I meant, hello, sir." I bowed.

When I stood up, I was taken prisoner by his captivating eyes, but he wasn't taken by mine. They were focused a bit lower. I glanced down and noticed that my white, long shirt was clinging to my breasts, and my wardrobe proved to hide nothing about them. I may as well have been naked! I immediately folded my arms across my chest in humility and lowered myself in the river to avoid his stare.

"Oh, no! I mean, my fault, my fault entirely." He refocused his attention beyond the treetops on the other side of the river. His nervousness made me smile. Or maybe I smiled because I had exposed myself, not on purpose of course, but exposed myself all the same. My father had an issue with my hair pulled up; he most certainly would have an earful to say about this!

"What are you doing here?" I broke the silence.

"My grandmother wanted some fish." He glanced down at me and saw I was proper. Well, more appropriate for conversation anyway. "She suggested I come to the river to see if any Scavengers, I mean, fish were left behind." He captured my gaze. He was finely dressed for a farmer boy. He was in light tan shorts and wore a dark indigo, short-sleeved shirt that must have been chosen to complement his eyes. The collar was turned up in the back to protect his neck from the sun, as was commonplace for the farming community.

"Calish can get one for you."

"Oh, no, I wouldn't want to impose, I'll find something." He swept his foot over the sod nervously.

"Well, you'll have better luck on the riverbank than in the grass," I quipped. *My gods! Did I just say that?*

"You're probably right. What is that in your hand?"

"Oh, this. It's my Atchem gown," I said with a shrug of my shoulder. I was embarrassed but played it off well.

"I thought they were supposed to be white."

"Yeah—" I held up the soiled gown "—I've heard that. I guess I'll stand out in the crowd this year," I mumbled.

"I'm sure you stand out every year."

I knew I was blushing. "Uh, thanks, sir."

"Please don't call me 'sir,' it makes me feel old. I haven't even had my Coining yet. You can call me 'sir' after that, I guess."

"Oh? When is that?"

"In ten days or so." He squatted down to get closer to me. Wow, he was beautiful and sixteen, well, almost seventeen. Seventeen in ten days or so.

"Well, that's great timing. You'll have your medallion before the Festival. Don't spend it all at once." I laughed at my own joke.

"I'm not ready to make an offer to a girl yet. So I guess I'll be saving it for another year."

"You'll get earnings on your investment."

He cocked his head to the side. "What?"

"You know, if you save your coin in the bank, you get more for it later, or so I've been told."

"Oh, it's not that kind of coin."

"I know. I was kidding." This was not getting any easier with Blue looking at me. I was getting more and more nervous by the moment.

"Oh, yeah. Ha! That's funny! Because it's a 'Coining.'" He finally seemed to relax, and so did I. Still crouched, he pulled out the grass in between his feet. "Do your brothers still have both of theirs?"

"Scavengers don't get a medallion. The men stay at home until they have to move into the hills."

"What about you?"

“The girls, like me, um—” I fixed my posture “—girls like me are won at the Seller’s Stage, by some lucky, strange person.” I rolled my eyes.

“Unless an arrangement is made, right?” He stopped pulling at the greenery.

“I’m not sure arrangements can be made for Reclaimers.” My slouch returned.

“Una, I didn’t mean to sound insensitive, please forgive me.” Blue reached out to touch my shoulder and lost his footing. I prepared to catch him, but he didn’t fall after all.

"Oh, no!" I'd let go of my dress, and the river caught it. "My dress!" I lurched out for it, but instead of catching it, I fell face first into the water. I lifted my head and realized I was traveling behind it in the push of the current. I couldn't stop! I caught glimpses of Blue running along the shore, but the river was a more formidable competitor. There was no way he'd catch me.

“Calish! Help! Calish!” I cried out.

He saw me coming and tore off his shirt, threw the rope over his shoulder, and jumped into the water. “Una, swim toward the shore!”

“I can’t! Calish—” The water took me under. I fought and flailed to get to the air. “Cal—” Under again I went. I opened my eyes but was unable to tell the water’s surface from the riverbed. The rushing water had rolled me, and I lost all perception of up and down. My hair had tangled around my face, making it impossible to see. I moved most of it from my view, but all I saw were bubbles from the turning water. I thought for a moment I was swimming for the surface. I reached out only to feel my fingers scrape over the rocks. I tried to grab hold of one, but there was nothing to grip; they were all so smooth.

The next thing I knew, someone stronger than the river caught me and held me tight in one arm. They thrust my head above the surface of the water. I gasped for air before finding myself under the water again. Whoever had me wrestled the river for the right to survive, and I clung to the strength that held me. Volaris, the god of the river, was not giving up easily. I took in a burst of air as often as my face felt it, but each time I was plunged back into the water too soon. A longer break for breath came, revealing Calish as my hero. He continued to fight the current and pulled us back to shore. We were now downstream of his fishing spot, the rope's length pulled taut at his waist.

With his final great effort, he lifted me out of the water and fell back exhausted on the sandbar. Still held in his arms, I landed on him, breaking my fall

with his body. I lay there with my head on his heaving chest, coughing, but free to breathe, completely limp from the fading of the adrenaline rush. It all happened so fast but lasted far too long. The people around us applauded as if my drowning was scripted for their afternoon entertainment. Calish paid them no attention; he held me tight, trying to catch his breath.

"Una! Are you all right?" Blue had arrived, notably winded, grabbing a pain in his right side.

It took a moment before I was able to sit up, but when I did, I pulled my knees to my chest, remembering the view my shirt revealed. It was bad enough everyone saw what they had; they didn't need to see anything else from me, or of me. Blue must have understood my positioning and fetched me a woman's coat from one of the onlookers. As soon as he placed it around my shoulders, I pulled it closed around my front. Calish saw his gesture and stood up, water cascading off his chest.

"That was incredible!" Blue held out his hand to properly congratulate Calish.

Calish slicked the water from his hair, chest, and arms. "Thank you, *sir*." He left Blue's hand hanging, giving him a slight nod and nothing more.

"I would hate to have seen what might have happened if you weren't here." He pulled back his hand, and it appeared that it fit better in the pocket of his nicely pressed shorts than hanging unmatched in the air.

"Me too." Calish continued his unwavering stare at the young farmer.

"Well, um, I really should be going. That lady over there said this coat didn't fit anymore, so I guess you can keep it." Blue seemed to be getting more and more uncomfortable with every passing moment. "Well, Una, maybe our paths will cross again, someday."

"Thank you, *sir*." I tried to stand.

"Don't; I'm fine. Well, goodbye then," Blue said, giving a timid nod to Calish, who stood rigid at my side. I noticed Calish glaring at the finely dressed farm boy as he took my brother's cue to leave. I hugged my knees a bit tighter as I watched him go.

As I had suspected, I came home with new clothes, but not because we caught any fish. The onlookers made a pile next to me as I sat on the bank alone. I watched my brother cast his line into the river over and over again as he tried his best to hook something to trade. I could tell he wasn't too keen on me having

the coat Blue gave me, and my suspicion was confirmed when he tossed it into the grasses, giving me his shirt to wear instead.

My father came up the bank as the sun was low in the sky. “What’s this clothes pile for?”

“Pity,” my brother answered over his shoulder. My father seemed confused.

“I fell in, and I guess people felt sorry for me. So, they left them here.”

Father raised an eyebrow. “You fell in? In the river?”

“I think farmer boy pushed her in,” Calish growled.

“He did not, Calish! I lost my dress and tried to get it back.”

“Don’t worry, I grabbed her; it was no big deal. She would have gotten herself to shore eventually. I helped her out of the water.” He pulled his line out of the water, evidently giving up on the river providing dinner tonight.

“Not a big deal?” Father considered the pile next to me. “Well, I won’t accuse you two of lying, but pity piles don’t grow from little ordeals.”

I picked up a skirt from the pile, pulled the cinching string to its tightest, and stuffed all the other articles of clothing inside. Next, I gathered a loose piece of it from each side of the hemmed end and tied them like a sack. Finally, I found a fallen branch from a nearby tree and stuck it up under the knot of the skirt. It took a little effort to hoist it onto my shoulder, and I carried it, with my skirt-bag hanging behind me.