



BLACK WINGS BEATING

ALEX LONDON



THE SKYBOUND SAGA BOOK I

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX NEW YORK

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

Copyright © 2018 by Charles London
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Elizabeth H. Clark
First edition, 2018

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

fiercereads.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data [TK]

ISBN: 978-0-374-30682-3

Our books may be purchased for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by e-mail at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

AN IMPOSSIBLE BIRD

ALL BIRDS OF PREY MOCK HUMAN GLORY BUT NONE SO CRUELLY AS THE ghost eagle. It looks down upon the world from its mountain eyrie and sees only scuttling rats. And yet mankind, the clever rodent, has found some ways to trick the eagle, to blind its all-seeing eyes and bend the bird to its will.

But first it has to get into the scuzzy trap.

“Come on, you stupid bird,” Yzzat grumbled, wrapping a boar pelt around himself. Frost clumped in his blond beard, and he shivered against the whipping mountain wind, but he kept his ice-melt eyes fixed on the sky above. Ghost eagles built their nests inside dark caves as high as possible, shielded from

wind and light and prying eyes like Yzzat's. The altitude alone made less hardy trappers ill.

Yzzat knew, from thirty years of tracking and *almost* finding, of too long waiting and too late arriving, that the eagle's lair would be littered with the bones of hawks and buzzards. There would be goat skulls and the rib cages of wolves. There would be the bones of male ghost eagles, because the females killed their mates when they were through with them. There would be one or two skeletons of the distinctly human variety.

The ghost eagle was an opportunistic hunter, and people presented plenty of opportunities. It had a wingspan wider than a mule and flew faster than ground lightning, with feathers so black, they could blot out the night itself.

Yzzat knew the giant bird was near. He'd climbed from the dusty lowlands of the Six Villages, through the blood-birch forest where the Owl Mothers reigned, and into the high crags of the Nameless Gap in its pursuit. From his turf to the eagle's, like countless failed trappers before him. Like the rare few who succeeded.

The eagle knew the territory better than Yzzat ever could, saw to the horizon in all directions, and had surely been watching his approach for days. But Yzzat had patience, patience to match its own, and he was determined to wait this bird out.

When he did, he'd become a powerful man.

No more haggling at the market for second-rate sparrow hawks and counterfeit breeds of falcon; no more standing at the scuzzy battle pits, ending a night of gambling covered in bird droppings and pigeon guts. He'd have a valet with an umbrella to keep the filth from falling on his head. And he'd eat lamb. Fresh lamb. No more chickpeas and onions for dinner. His children would learn to respect him, and he, in turn, would share his new fortune.

Yzzat knew his children were terrified of him, but he also knew he could be kindly. He *would* be kindly, just as soon as the world showed some kindness to him. Until then, he would do the twins no favors by treating them like high and mighty kyrgs in the castle, when their lives were as cursed as his own. He only beat them down to keep them grounded. When he took flight, so would they.

This was the night. He was perched on the edge of happiness. All of them were.

He tugged the thin silk string, small and strong as a spider's web, that led from his fingertips to the tail feathers of a hobbled corral hawk. The shimmering pink raptor was enraged at the insult of being tethered. Proud birds, these hawks were. Not used to being bait. This one flapped and shrieked, rising from the ground as far as the string would let him. Yzzat yanked

him down again, simulating the motions of a bird that had been injured.

Ghost eagles would only eat live prey, so Yzzat had captured this fine hawk first. Normally, the sale of a corral hawk at the market would be enough to keep him in drink and gambling at the Broken Jess for a full moon or two, with enough left over for his wife to stop nagging him about clothes for the twins or alms for her Crawling Priest, but this hawk would hardly be worth the weight of its beak by the time it had served its purpose tonight. The loss of the hawk would be repaid with the reward of the eagle.

*It watches high upon the eyrie,
Thus only fools approach unwary,
Yet for the faithful, it reveals
The dreams they're seeking
Or it kills.*

He whispered the old Uztari poem to himself while he waited. The trap was his own design, a delicate operation that relied on perfect timing and absolute attention. Only one falconer in a thousand could capture a ghost eagle, and only one in ten thousand could hope to keep it once caught. It could not be tamed but might be controlled.

Might be.

He had a buyer ready, a great kyrg of the Sky Castle, one of the Council of Forty, who already had an impressive cast of raptors in his mews. There were perfect gyrfalcons and peregrine falcons and kestrels in every color imaginable. But the kyrg wanted a ghost eagle more than anything. A man who'd mastered a ghost eagle would be revered. He could command armies and decide the fate of dynasties. He could crush a rebellion or ignite one. A man who mastered a ghost eagle might rule.

Whether or not *this* man could master a ghost eagle was not Yzzat's problem. He'd been willing to pay any price Yzzat could name just for the chance to try. Prices Yzzat hadn't even the imagination yet to name.

All he had to do was get this one into his net.

Mountain, field, and forest alike were littered with the bones of those who'd tried and failed before him. The ghost eagle loves a worthy fight but kills all who disappoint it. It has long found humans the greatest disappointment.

Yzzat, however, had made a lifetime study of disappointment. His wife was disappointing with her fits of pious melancholy, guilty tithing, and awful cooking. The twins were the disappointing offspring she'd given him.

The girl had a gift for falconry, a once-in-a-generation gift, but was reluctant to outshine her brother.

What had Yzzat done to deserve a timid daughter?

And to think of her brother . . . Yzzat felt the blood rise behind his eyes. Her brother was a waste of a boy if there ever was one.

He was timid like his sister and pretty like her, too. He was slim and slight for a boy who should've been molting into manhood. In appearance, he was as far from Yzzat as a fish was to a falcon, but he looked back at his father with the same mountain-blue eyes that Yzzat saw in his own reflection.

His son had no special talents, no great intelligence or strength. He took up space and ate the mediocre food from Yzzat's table and outgrew clothes beyond his mother's mediocre mending, and his every sigh and snuffle reminded Yzzat that this was the boy who would replace him one day. All sons destroy their father's legacy—that was the widening gyre of generations—but this one might do it while his father still lived.

No amount of beating seemed to motivate the boy. He bled and bruised and burned, but he never learned. When men looked at his son, they saw Yzzat's own failings. If the fruit was rotten, so was the tree from which it grew, no?

Yzzat shuddered. These thoughts weren't his. The bird must've been readying to attack.

They said a ghost eagle could not only see the hot breath in your lungs and the warm blood in your veins but could also see the weakness in your heart and show it back to you. This was a bird that drove its prey to madness before it devoured them. Brave men soiled themselves when it was near, and pack animals hurled themselves from cliffsides as it circled above.

Yzzat cleared his head and focused his thoughts on the one thing that mattered now: his purpose. He was in position. He was ready to pull an impossible bird from the sky.

Then he heard a stir from the slope above him and glanced up toward the lip of a ridge near the top of the Nameless Gap. There was a person skulking in the shadow of a shrub. He'd been followed!

Was it some poacher thinking to take his score once he'd done all the dangerous work? Or perhaps one of his buyer's enemies on the Council of Forty, another kyrg, or a kyrg's assassin? A religious fanatic who thought the trapping of a ghost eagle was blasphemy, or one who believed the ghost eagle would bless them if they could take it? The great bird gave wing to unlimited wants.

He drew his knife. The curved, black-talon blade slid silently from its dog-leather sheath. He gripped the handle in a fighting stance, let the cold metal rest against his forearm, the

razor edge facing out so he could slide it straight across the throat of his night stalker with a backhand swipe.

He took a breath in, held it, listened and looked into the dark, trying to relocate his prey with the same intensity as a hawk on the wing.

There!

He saw the shrub shudder, and through the leaves, a glimmer of starlight reflected off an eyeball. He sprang toward it.

But his feet never hit the ground.

Gigantic talons came from the dark behind him, snatched him by the shoulders, and pinioned him. He dropped his knife as he felt himself being hoisted into the air.

The tethered corral hawk shrieked, unscathed. The trap remained unsprung. The eagle had him, not he the eagle.

“REEEE!” it called so loud his ears rang.

He was airborne, as every falconer dreamed of being, but there was no joy in this flight. He knew the bones in his arms were broken. He knew one lung was pierced.

He also knew, as certain as the eagle’s beak would tear out his throat, that he would not be missed below. He watched as the human shape that had distracted him cut the corral hawk free with Yzzat’s own knife. He screamed.

The person below watched, unmoving, as Yzzat was carried away into the starlight, and Yzzat allowed himself to cry with

the shame of it all. His tears fell like paltry rain, and they were the last piece of him that ever touched the earth. Everyone in the Six Villages heard his screams on the wind as he was carried away, aloft and alone.

He did not go quietly.

KYLEE

TETHERS



1

IT WAS THE DAY BEFORE THE HAWKERS' MARKET, AND KYLEE FOUND her twin brother exactly where she had hoped not to find him: at the battle pits.

Brysen stood in a throng of the usual battle boys, his sleeveless vest buttoned to the neck, his long goatskin jacket on the ground at his feet. There was a coil of battle rope around his shoulder, and he had on his elbow-length leather glove. His hawk, Shara, stood perched and hooded on his fist, tethered by short leather jesses to the forearm loops on the glove.

Brysen was easy to spot in the crowd. His storm-cloud-gray hair spiked out in all directions like a hatchling's fuzz, and his

lower lip bulged with a wad of hunter's leaf. When he turned to spit, he saw Kylee at the gate, met her eyes between the jostling shoulders of gamblers and spectators.

But for his hair, Kylee and Brysen were the mirror image of each other. Hers was still black, like his had once been, but they had the same elk-brown skin as their mother, the same ice-blue eyes as their father, bright as cloudless mornings. They were the kind of eyes that held windstorms. You'd be blown away if you looked too long.

Folks in the Villages thought Brysen's prematurely gray hair made him look wild and dangerous, like a haggard falcon, and he did his best to encourage those ideas, used them as a shield against other people's pity. Kylee couldn't have cared a puke what other people thought of her.

She opened her palms toward him, questioning what he thought he was doing there when she needed him working. This was the most important market of their lives, and he knew it. Brysen turned his attention back to the battle pits.

"Dirt-biting scuzz-muncher!" Kylee cursed.

After her morning climb up the knife-edge ridges, she'd come home to find his bed empty and had made her way down the rocky slope from their house, over the rickety bridge that crossed the meltwater river—the Necklace, as they called it—and into the Six Villages. Just a few weeks earlier

the Necklace had been solid, shining ice. The Six Villages were strung like beads along its bank, more one town than six separate townships.

There was no formal date in the Uztari calendar for the Hawkers' Market, but the thawing of the Necklace told the time. When the Necklace flowed knee-deep, the tents began to rise along the road. When it rolled waist-deep, the market opened.

There was no announcement, either. Spies simply watched the river and sent pigeons back to tell their masters, who were traveling along the haulers' routes from the Sky Castle in the north to the Talon Fortress in the south.

Everyone knew who the spies were, of course, and for whom they spied. Spying was a Six Villages tradition, passed through families for generations. The more prestigious the noble family, the more prestigious the village family who spied for them. There were no secrets in the Six Villages, after all. With the surety that ice turns to water and back again, when the river ran, the customers would come and the spies would buy the first round at the Broken Jess.

Her brother couldn't resist. Kylee watched, seething, as Brysen laughed with the other battle boys. The current fight drew to a close, and two of the youngest boys swept up the footprints, blood, and scattered feathers from the pit.

Running off to the battle pits the day before the Hawkers' Market was the kind of recklessness for which their father would have beaten Brysen breathless. Then again, their father had never needed an excuse. He seemed to enjoy the sport of hurting her brother the way a hawk enjoys stunning a mouse.

Good thing Da's dead, Kylee thought, and spat once on the ground, then stomped the spit into the dirt to keep him that way. *Mud below and mud between. The dead can't rise to a sky unseen.* It was a superstition but a satisfying one. Some men didn't deserve sky burial.

Travel across the plateau was becoming dangerous, and prices for Six Villages birds were soaring. From one end of the steppe to the other, everyone knew the Six Villages offered the best birds of prey—for hunting, racing, fighting, or companionship—and the market was the only time the best buyers would risk traveling all the way there. Word was that this would be the last good market for a while. Word was that war was on the wing.

What “word was” didn't concern Kylee, but she knew that if they could sell off all the birds Brysen had trapped and trained this year, they could finally pay off their inheritance: gambling debts their father had racked up at the Broken Jess. After three seasons of desperate scraping for every last bronze they could

get, Kylee and her brother could break even and close the business; they could be free of falconry.

Not that Brysen wanted to be free of the profession. But Kylee did. *She* could finally be free.

Already the roads and inns sparkled with throngs of eager village visitors. Even Altari holy men crawled in, the backs of their sunburned necks shining angrily up from knee height. One of them bumped his head against Kylee's leg as he approached her on all fours at the gate of the Broken Jess.

"Alms for your skyward sins," he groaned through the din of the growing crowd, lifting one dirty hand at her without looking up. The Crawling Priests had bloody knees and hoarse voices from shouting doom upon the falconers' craft, but they kept their eyes fixed firmly on the dirt. They believed the Uztari training of birds was blasphemy and that only the ancient Altari cult of reverence for the wild and untamed sky was the true faith. They saved their harshest words for Altari who left the religion and became Uztari, with a bird on the fist.

They were, however, happy to beg for Uztari bronze.

"Go away," Kylee grumbled.

"It is not too late for you to repent," the man cried, gripping her by the shin so hard that his knuckles went white. "Repent the wicked wind you worship and accept the true faith of

our land. Repent and be saved from the coming destruction and—*ooof!*”

His face bit the dirt when a foot swept his other arm out from under him.

“Suck a vulture’s toe,” Vyvian Sacher laughed at the Crawling Priest as he pushed himself back up on all fours. “Get out of here!”

“Your kind brings the curse of the Kartami upon us,” he growled at her, and lifted his head to look Kylee and Vyvian in the eyes. “None shall be spared.”

Vyvian raised her rolled-up umbrella and the Crawling Priest winced, then looked down and crawled away, leaving the rough crowd of the Broken Jess behind.

“You believe that cockatoo?” Vyvian scoffed. “Threatening us in our yard.”

“It’s the usual nonsense.” Kylee shrugged. “Not even half as bad as the stuff my ma says.”

“Yeah, well, your mom’s a fanatic,” Vyvian said, running a hand through her long, dark hair and tying it back into a knot. She wore black-and-brown leather pants and a long feathered robe, and the way she stretched looked more like preening than working out a kink in her neck. Vyvian wanted to be seen, which was why she carried an umbrella to protect against bird droppings but never opened it. Only the truly wealthy

actually opened their umbrellas, caring more for their fabrics than the view other people had of them. Vyvian aspired to riches but had a long way yet to go. She did love market days, though.

When they were little, before she'd taken up the family business, she and Kylee would play bone dice underneath the market stalls. These days, both of them were too busy when the market came around; Kylee hustling bronze and Vyvian hustling secrets. Her family spied for one of the kyrgs at the Talon Fortress, so she usually knew what was happening on the rest of the plateau before most Six Villagers. "Your mom has the sense to do her ranting in private. This priest doesn't have the right to spread panic at the Broken Jess. People are nervous enough about the Kartami already."

"Do you think it's true?" Kylee asked. "Are they coming?"

The Kartami—also called the shards—were a roving band of religious fanatics who lived in the farthest reaches of the Parsh Desert. Even the Crawling Priests were too moderate for them. While the Altari believed that humans taming birds of prey was a sin, the Kartami believed that the birds themselves carried the sin. The Altari looked away from the sky in awe; the Kartami looked directly at it with disgust for what it had become. Where one group prayed to repent, the other prayed for annihilation.

In the Six Villages, the Altari were moralistic scolds, while the Kartami were merely a distant threat that parents used to scare their children: *Eat your greens, or the Kartami will steal your songbirds while you sleep. Clean the mews, or the Kartami will steal all the birds from the sky.* But the Kartami had been growing bolder, attacking closer, cutting roads between settlements, and cutting the fists from every falconer they found. Minor Altari nobles—those who had been pledged to Uztar—had begun to surrender, committing their souls to the Kartami faith, their bodies to the Kartami cause, and their resources to the Kartami war machine. The Council of Forty urged calm throughout Uztar as towns and villages begged for the Sky Castle’s protection.

Now that the thaws of the ice-melt season had come, rumors of Kartami advances flew as fast as sparrow hawks.

Vybian shrugged at Kylee’s worried question. “You know my family doesn’t give out information for free. What kind of spies would we be if I didn’t make you pay for it?”

“An old friend?” Vybian frowned, and Kylee rolled her eyes. “I don’t spend bronze on rumors.”

“Who said anything about bronze?” Her friend turned back to the battle pits, raised an eyebrow at Brysen on the edge. He was talking to his trainer, Dymian. They were leaning in close. “I can take *all kinds* of payment.”

Kylee groaned. “Even if I were the kind of sister who’d sell you her brother, you are singing to the wrong bird.” Brysen had his fingers laced between Dymian’s, his lips whispering against the older boy’s ear.

“It’s a tragedy,” Vyvian sighed. “The things I could teach your brother about a body . . .”

“Gross.”

“I’m just saying, if he ever stops preening for Master Birdnester over there, send him my way.”

The trainer, Dymian, had taken his own falcon from a nest he’d found when she was still a baby eyas. Someone who took eyasses from their nests was called a birdnester, but Kylee was pretty sure that wasn’t what Vyvian meant by it. Dymian was a few seasons older than Brysen.

“You can’t see it because he looks like you, but with that hair and those eyes . . . your brother’s keener than a prize peregrine. And you’re not such a plain pigeon yourself.”

If Kylee could’ve rolled her eyes straight out of her head, she would’ve.

“I’ll take a fight!” Brysen shouted over the crowd, and the rough boys around him cheered and patted him on the shoulders, ruffled his thunder-struck hair. Dymian squeezed their interlaced fingers.

The Broken Jess had been a temple in ancient times, of

what kind no one knew. Like most sacred things in Uztar, it had been put to more human uses than its founders could have imagined. All that remained of its sacred past now was a big stone sanctuary that housed the pub, piles of random stones scattered about its yard, and a great rock painting of two falcons in combat that decorated the cliff face behind it.

Below the sheer cliff face and the hawk mural were the battle pits. There were three pits around the edge of the property and one large “show pit” in the center. Brysen was at the smallest pit.

The pits were about as deep as a sinner’s grave but wide enough for two people to circle each other. The sides sloped up, wider at the top than at the bottom, and spectators sat and stood around the rim, crowding, shouting and cheering the fighters they’d bet on. Brysen had begun his climb into the pit when a man slid down the edge opposite him.

What was Brysen doing? They did not have time for this!

His opponent wore the pale tunic and loose pants of a long-hauler. Not master of a convoy, but someone higher up than a driver. His red beard was thick and full, bejeweled with colorful desert glass, and his copper hair was hidden under a flat white hat that was also dotted with more desert glass.

He removed his tunic to show a pale, muscled chest

covered in long-hauler's ink. He had markings along his collarbone for every journey he'd made across the Parsh Desert, ornamented text of a hauler's prayer to the flocks scrawled up his side, and, across the rippling expanse of his back, a colorful scene from the *Epic of the Forty Birds*. The tattoo was filled with symbols whose meanings were known only to long-haulers, but he showed it off now to make one thing clear: His back had never met the whip.

Had Brysen ever taken his shirt off in public, his back would tell a very different story.

The long-hauler's companions whispered to one another, laughing beneath their colorful round umbrellas, which cast their faces in shadow. The man in the pit had a female kestrel, square-tailed and brown-striped, that sat steady on his glove. He removed her ornamented leather hood, and the teardrop eyes in her white face fixed on Brysen and his hawk.

Brysen swiped Shara's plain hood off, revealing her bloodred eyes. The pupils were so wide that the red barely ringed them, two blazing eclipses held afire inside a bird's skull. When she saw where she was, she shrieked and spread her wings, clutched her talons around Brysen's wrist, footing him hard. He whispered something to her. The bird calmed.

Shara was a goshawk—far bigger than the kestrel but far

moodier, too. She had a crooked wing and a nervous temper, was prone to fits of brutal violence and days of sullen pouting. The two of them weren't so different, Brysen and Shara.

She shifted her weight nervously on his fist. His thumb rubbed one of her talons.

"Here's some news for free," Vyvian whispered in Kylee's ear. "That long-hauler's nickname is the Orphan Maker."

"Don't do this!" Kylee called to Brysen, shoving her way through the crowd to the edge of the battle pit. Brysen's ambition in the pits was not always matched by his talent. He always tried to take on the biggest opponent with the longest odds. When he won, he won big, but when he lost, there were scars.

"The challenge is accepted, Ky!" Nyck, one of the battle boys, called across to her. "He can't back out now."

"Don't worry about it," Brysen shouted up. "When I win, I'll buy us all lamb leg for dinner."

He smiled but not at her, then unhooked the short string that tethered Shara to his glove, unwound the battle rope from his shoulder, and, with one hand, tied the split end to the jesses around her ankles. The rope had a clasp on a swivel below the bird's ankles, giving Shara a free range of movement while keeping her attached to the glove. They were bound to each

other in the battle, tethered from wrist to ankle, from earth to air.

Mud below and mud between.

“Wish me luck,” Brysen said.

“When have you ever had luck?” Kylee asked.

Brysen scowled, then drew his black-talon blade.

2



HER BROTHER TURNED TO FACE THE ORPHAN MAKER AND GRIPPED HIS knife in the fighter's stance. The curved black blade mirrored the brutal beak of a hawk, and Shara's eyes glanced at it unsteadily.

The knife was old, but how old, they didn't know. It'd been inscribed with symbols their father had always said were in "the Hollow Tongue," the ancient language of the birds. But their father was also easily deceived and might've just convinced himself that was true to avoid facing the fact that he'd been ripped off for a fake antique. No one could actually read the Hollow Tongue or even knew for sure what it would look like in writing.

Regardless, it was the only thing they had left of the man, and Brysen had wanted to keep it. He had scars on all his fingers from where their father missed whenever he played a drunken game of pinfinger using Brysen's spread hand pressed against the table. Why Brysen clung to it puzzled Kylee. Strange magic bound a blade to the wounds it made.

Brysen crouched, arm across his chest, resting the base of the knife handle on the middle of his gloved forearm and forming a T with the blade as its base.

He waited.

The Orphan Maker assumed the same position, and Brysen's eyes fixed on him.

Shara saw the other blade and the other falconer and the other hawk. It was a familiar sight, surely, but not a comfortable one. She shrank back into herself; this was a bad time to show fear.

A frightened goshawk perched with its talons tucked under its tail feathers and its head pulled back is a ridiculous sight. They're big birds but stubby, shaped like a thumb drawn by a child, with the beak an angry V in the center of the face. And Shara, who perched with a slight tilt to the side, looked more ridiculous than most.

Her chest was striped gray and white in a herringbone pattern, and her red eyes were hooded with black. The rest of her feathers were a mixture of grays, which helped camouflage

her against the rocky terrain of the foothills but stood out brightly against the lush green grasses down in the Six Villages as the melt came on.

Nyck whistled, and the opponents circled each other. The birds sat on their gloves with a stillness known only to a predator and its prey. Kylee could feel the stillness in herself.

Anyone who grows up in a home where they are prey to a parent's rage learns to sip silence the way the rich sip wine. Silence has infinite flavors, with endless shades and notes. The sharpest of all the silences, and the most necessary to know, is the silence before an attack. Kylee took half a breath in and held it just as the other falconer thrust his arm up, launching his bird.

"Utch!" Brysen shouted, and thrust his own hawk arm up. For a heartbeat, Kylee feared Shara wouldn't let go, would foot her brother so hard that not even the glove would protect him. But just as his arm reached the apex of its rise, offering her to the air, the air accepted. Her wings stretched, her head pulled out of her shoulders, and she took flight. His arm jolted.

The bright white underside of Shara's wings glowed like snow on mountain peaks. Her tail feathers opened, her flight feathers spread, and her talons tucked up beneath her. She flapped furiously in the opposite direction of the brown kestrel and screeched. Brass bells tied to her anklet, meant to keep

track of her during a hunt, jingled as she flew, and the battle rope unfurled behind her.

When she reached the rope's full extension, Brysen planted his feet and turned his torso, steering her back toward the other hawk, which had caught an air current and spread her wings to glide, swooping beneath.

Shara looked down, her eyes following the line back to him. His muscles strained against her power and the wind's pull. He circled to keep his distance from the other man and whistled, more a warning than a command. Shara tucked her wings against her body and dove.

She was a sleek streak of gray across the sky. Head forward, eyes fixed, tail feathers wavering to steer her straight for the brown kestrel. The air rushing through Shara's anklet bells shrieked. Brysen's hawk, so gawky and afraid on the fist, had become grace and perfect form, never more beautiful than when doing what she was born to do: kill.

Shara's strafing dive was aimed at the smaller bird. The kestrel saw her coming and reacted instantly, turning her body so their talons clashed and tangled in a midair collision that sent them rolling, tumbling in imitation of the cliffside mural behind them. Just as quickly, they parted and swooped away from each other in opposite directions.

A few feathers whorled to the dirt.

On the ground, Brysen and his opponent tried to control their hawks with their gloved hands while closing the distance between them.

Brysen shuffled his feet around the perimeter of the pit toward the long-hauler. The long-hauler's arms were thicker than Brysen's thighs and his bird smaller than Brysen's, so he moved with far more ease, cutting the distance between them straight across instead of along the edge. His blade came up, and he swiped it fast, straight for the rope that connected Shara to Brysen's glove.

If the tether between hawk and human was severed, the match was lost. The match was also lost if bird or man or both were killed. Every fight in the pits could be a fight to the death.

Brysen twisted away from the Orphan Maker's blade, using Shara's tether and his light weight to swing sideways. As he moved, he slashed with his own knife, blocking the attack. There was a clang of metal on metal. Kylee winced as the power of the blow shook her brother's hand. His opponent was far too strong for him, but he was faster.

The second and third knife attacks went wide while Brysen dodged the blade with a dancer's grace. Even his slight weight pulled Shara low as he regained his footing, but he timed the last pull so that her drop put her just below the circling kestrel.

When he released the line again, Shara was able to shoot

straight up, her wings beating mightily, and she slammed into the underside of the other bird, slashing at its belly.

There was a tangle of talons in the sky, a drizzle of blood. The two fighters on the ground were pulled toward each other by their entwined battle lines.

The birds broke apart, circled, clashed again, shrieking, talons tearing for each other but unable to hold on. With every turn and attack, the battle lines below became more twisted and Brysen was drawn closer to the Orphan Maker.

“I’d rather cut your pretty face than your rope, little bird,” he taunted, and slashed his blade at Brysen with blinding speed.

Brysen’s parry connected and he protected his face, but the force of the attack was so strong, it snatched the curved blade from his hand, sent it scuttling away in the dirt. He moved for it, but the long-hauler tugged the tangled lines and pulled Brysen back. He could’ve cut Brysen’s battle rope right then, but instead he yanked Brysen closer, spun him like a dried-grass doll, and gripped him from behind with his gloved forearm. The battle lines whipped and twirled while the falcons fought, but the long-hauler’s thick arm locked Brysen in place against his chest.

The air turned to stone in Kylee’s lungs when the Orphan Maker put his knife to Brysen’s throat.



3

IT WAS CONSIDERED BAD FORM TO KILL YOUR OPPONENT WHEN YOU had the option of cutting the line, but it wasn't against the rules. It wasn't murder if it happened in the pit. The rules did, however, say you had to offer a chance to yield three times.

"Do you yield?" the long-hauler hissed into Brysen's ear, so loud that everyone could hear.

Brysen struggled to break free.

"Yield, little bird, or I'll give you your first shave with this blade."

Brysen struggled. His eyes scanned for Shara in the sky.

Five melting seasons ago, their eleventh, he'd rescued Shara

from the battle pits after she'd lost their father a full moon's fortune. She was wounded, and Brysen hand-fed her for weeks, snuggling her to his chest at night to keep her warm and training her in the few hours he could snatch in the meadow whenever their father was away.

"Shara's got potential," he always said. "She'll show she's a great hawk when she's given the chance."

The hawk had yet to show greatness, but Brysen still had the scars from protecting her from their father's rage.

"Hawks aren't your pets!" their father had grunted as he whipped Brysen with a dog-leather leash the night Brysen brought Shara back home. He'd cradled her under himself to protect her. *Crack!* The leather had struck his skin. *Crack!* "I'll teach you what loving one will cost you!"

Crack! Crack!

Later, Kylee had helped Brysen scrub his own blood from the floor, but he cleaned it from the bird's feathers himself one by one in a cold bucket. The bird had let him do it and never made so much as a chirp. They'd been a pair ever since.

Brysen returned to the battle pits with Shara, match after match, chasing a victory so high and wild, it would blow away the past. He hadn't found one yet, and he lost far more matches than he won. There was no convincing him that only a fool chased the approval of a dead man.

“Yield!” Kylee shouted. She looked for his friends, the rag-tag gang of battle boys, and saw Dymian. He was maybe the only person whose advice Brysen would heed. *Maybe*. “Dymian, tell him to yield!”

Dymian locked eyes with Kylee, frowned, and opened his palms up to the sky. He couldn’t make Brysen yield any more than she could. Her stupid brother would rather die than fail. He slammed his lips shut and clenched his jaw.

The long-hauler grinned. “Last chance, little chick. Do you yield?”

Their hawks screeched above. Shara had bitten the other bird’s wing and forced them apart. The creak of the clasps straining against the leather gloves sounded like a body being stretched on a torturer’s slab.

Kylee’s heart screamed for her brother. In his face, she saw their father’s brutal stubbornness. She hated to see it in Brysen, hated the part of her brother that hated himself so much.

As her heart screamed, she felt it reach out to him, like an invisible tether that looped between her chest and his, an endless figure eight. Her pulse quickened, and a strange wind rushed through her, like the sky bursting from her lungs. She felt she would explode if she didn’t exhale. It hurt to hold it in.

In her mind, she saw her father towering over Brysen, his

thin back a loose nest of bright red lines cut by the whip. She saw herself cowering with her mother, no one coming to save Brysen, no one offering to protect him. She'd felt that burning breath then, too, but had fought it back, had been afraid to let it out. Had sworn she would never let it out. Even now, she was still afraid of it. But she could not hold it in.

"*Shyehnaah*," she exhaled, and the strange word burned her mouth as she spoke it.

Shara shrieked.

The goshawk broke from the battle above and dove, furious, at the Orphan Maker's face. She hit him with enough force to break his nose. Kylee felt the impact in her own bones. He yelled and lost his grip on Brysen, who wasted no time spinning away and diving for his knife. Shara dug a talon into the long-hauler's cheek and the other into his scalp.

"Argh!" the man screamed as the blood from his forehead blinded him. Brysen used the moment to lunge forward, blade up. Shara took off from the man's face as Brysen sliced the big man's leather leash clean through.

Above, the Orphan Master's kestrel flew free, flapping away toward the horizon.

"Match!" the battle boys around the pit called out. "That's the match! Brysen wins!"

Brysen looked up at the cheering throng, breathless and grinning. Shara swooped down to land on his extended fist and he gave her a morsel from his vest pocket, praising her, although it was the meat she liked, not the praise.

He met Kylee's eyes and winked, as if she'd had nothing to worry about, as if he'd been in control during the whole match, when, of course, it'd been *her* who'd saved *him*. Maybe he didn't know. Maybe he chose not to know. It had been such a long time, maybe he'd forgotten.

Next to Kylee, Vyvian stood, not watching Brysen celebrate but watching her.

"What?" Kylee asked, her cheeks feeling hot. "What are you looking at?"

Vyvian cocked her head. "Nothing," she said, curiosity tugging the corners of her mouth. "Wild fight. Surprising end."

"Yeah," Kylee told her. "Good thing Shara's so loyal to my brother."

"Good thing," Vyvian replied, the weight of what neither of them was saying perched between them. Kylee looked back at her brother.

He'd turned to find Dymian, and his face had sunk. She followed her brother's gaze to the trainer. He wasn't cheering like the rest of the battle boys, and he wasn't running into the pit to embrace Brysen—which was what Brysen really wanted.

Instead, Dymian had sidled up to Nyck, counting out bronze to pay for his . . . *loss*?

Of all the grub-sucking finch faced mud-eaters! He'd bet *against* her brother. He'd bet Brysen would lose.

And Brysen saw. Brysen knew. All the joy of the victory drained away from her brother's body, and his shoulders slumped. Even the gray of his hair seemed to grow more ashen. Leave it to Brysen to win a miraculous match and break his own heart at the same time.

Her brother was so fixated on Dymian in the crowd, and Kylee was so fixated on him, and Vyvian so fixated on her that none of them saw the bloodied Orphan Maker step behind Brysen until it was too late.

In the long-hauler's shadow, Brysen turned just in time to get a fist in the face that knocked him straight back into the dirt. Shara launched herself as he fell, but the long-hauler slapped the bird down midflap, knocking her back into Brysen. Then he grabbed up his knife and cut the slack battle line attaching Brysen to Shara. He squinted through his blood-streaked eyes.

"I'm gonna slice the skin off your skull, boy!" he roared as he came at Brysen, knife up. Shara, startled, used Brysen's chest to launch herself away, untethered.

"Shara!" Brysen groaned.

“Stop!” Nyck shouted, his voice breaking. “The match is called!”

But the long-hauler didn’t heed that rule. Wounded and enraged, he kicked Brysen in the side and slashed at him.

Then the battle boys rushed the pit.