

The cover features several black silhouettes of birds in flight, scattered across the white background. Some are positioned near the top, some near the bottom, and some are integrated into the text layout.

RED  
SKIES  
FALLING

ALEX LONDON

THE SKYBOUND SAGA BOOK II

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX NEW YORK

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers  
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC  
120 Broadway, New York, NY 10271

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Printed in the United States of America  
Designed by Elizabeth H. Clark  
Map illustration by Keith Thompson  
First edition, 2019  
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

[fiercereads.com](http://fiercereads.com)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: London, Alex, author.

Title: Red skies falling / Alex London.

Description: First edition. | New York : Farrar Straus Giroux, 2019. |

Series: Skybound saga ; book 2 | Summary: Orphaned twins Kylee and Brysen  
continue to fight for survival and power in the remote valley of the Six Villages.

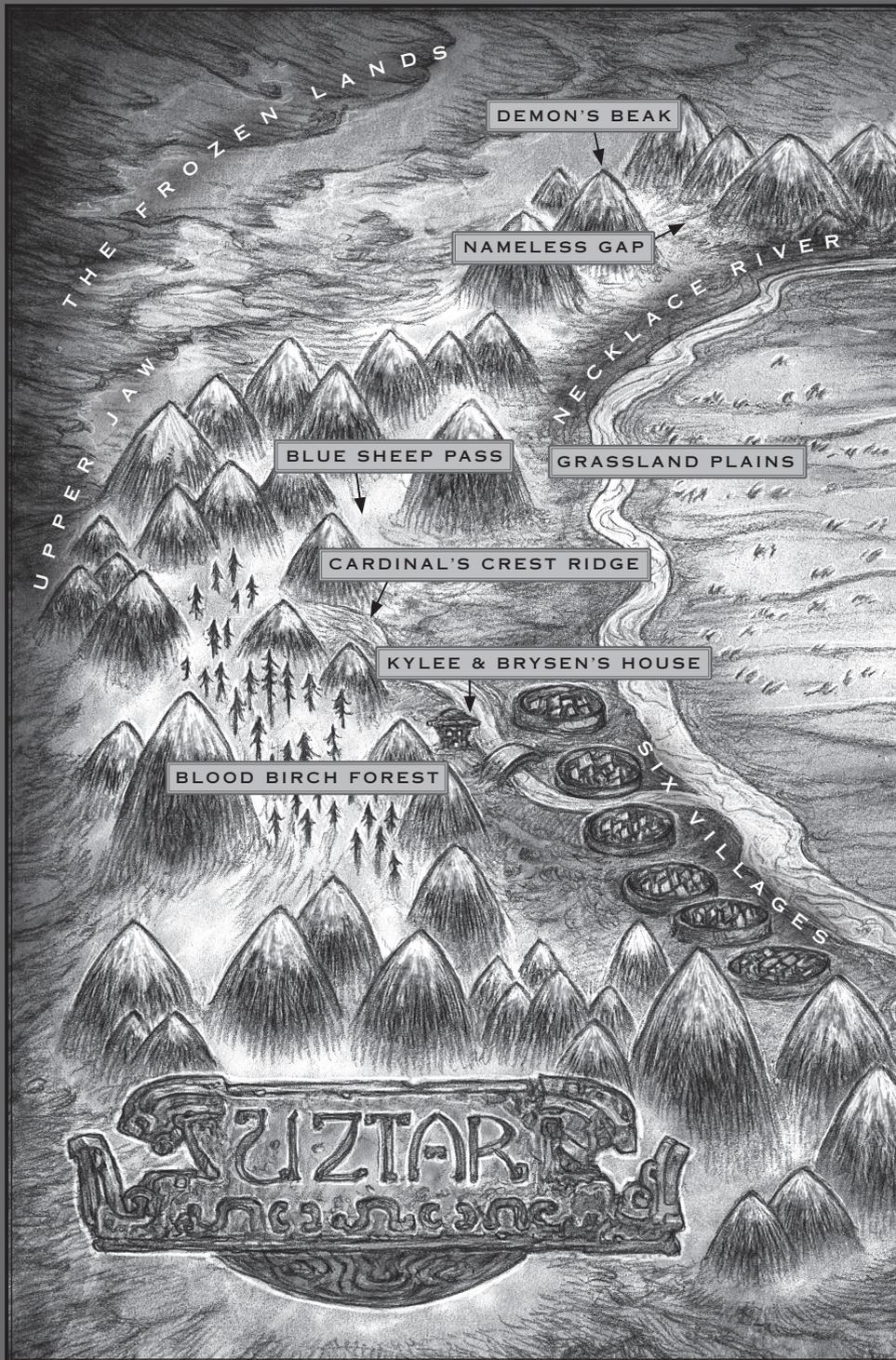
Identifiers: LCCN 2018046457 | ISBN 9780374306847 (hardcover)

Subjects: | CYAC: Falconry—Fiction. | Brothers and sisters—Fiction. |  
Twins—Fiction. | Fantasy.

Classification: LCC PZ7.L84188 Re 2018 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018046457>

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THE FROZEN LANDS

UPPER JAW

DEMON'S BEAK

NAMELESS GAP

NECKLACE RIVER

BLUE SHEEP PASS

GRASSLAND PLAINS

CARDINAL'S CREST RIDGE

KYLEE & BRYSEN'S HOUSE

BLOOD BIRCH FOREST

SIX VILLAGES

**UZITAR**



LOWER JAW

SKY CASTLE

RISHL BRONZE PITS

PARSH DESERT

TALON FORTRESS

# THE ASSASSIN

**THERE ARE MORE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN AN ASSASSIN AND A** murderer than there are shapes in the clouds, but that makes no difference to the victims.

Yirol could forgive the lack of distinction made by those she was about to kill, but she found the lack of distinction by those she served deeply insulting, even though she would never say as much. Rising to the position she now held—signed and sealed as the apex assassin for the Council of Forty—took political cunning as well as mental ruthlessness. She was no common murderer and would never let her passions or desires dictate her dispatches. She did her job, and she did it by the most effective means necessary to its

particular requirements. She had no love of poisons but would deploy them if called for. She truly enjoyed bladeplay but would never employ it on a job meant to look like a hunting accident. An assassin was herself the blade, whatever tools she wielded. And yet, to the kyrgs of the Council of Forty, she was defined by the corpses she created, not the efficiency with which she created them.

And now the young man kneeling in front of her kept calling her a murderer, which she found irksome.

“Please,” he begged. “You don’t have to do this. You don’t have to be a murderer.”

Yirol shook her head and squatted so her eyes were level with her target’s. “A murderer kills for reasons of the heart—for want or hate or lust or a little of each,” she explained. “I want nothing from you, and I feel no hate for you. As to lust . . .” She hooked a finger under his chin. He had kind eyes and a boyish face in spite of the stubble. Light-brown skin that shone like desert glass, his youth a sun lighting him from within. How many ice-wind seasons did he have behind him? Twenty? Not many more than that, certainly. His full lips had yet to know all the kisses they were meant for, and now, thanks to Yirol, they never would.

She leaned in and let her own lips touch his cheek. She heard his breath catch as she whispered in his ear, “*That* would be a reason to let you live.” She leaned back, and he looked at

her hopefully. They always looked at her that way, imagining that her kindness might save them.

It would not.

The practiced blade came up in her other hand, silently spun from its sheath on her wrist, and made a clean slice across the pulsing artery in his neck. His shocked eyes went wide, and his hands grabbed at her wrists, tugging, as his life bled away. She held firm, stared down with the same expression as the statue of the ancient falconer watching over the courtyard from its high plinth. The artist had carved Valyry the Gloveless with as much emotion as the stone hawk that perched on her fist, and Yirol appreciated the sculptor's stoic skill. She didn't like the newer sculptures filled with lifelike emotions, as if the great heroes of Uztar's past were made great by their humanity, not by their triumph over it. Greatness, she knew, only came to those who could stand as stone against the buffeting winds that blew through every living heart.

*The great and the dead share one trait, she thought. Imperviousness.*

She waited for the young man to collapse and join the unfeeling dead, then she turned him over with her foot so that his lifeless eyes could stare up at the stars. Someone would want to give him a sky burial. There would be wailing and lamentation, as there always was for her younger targets, but

the life of the city would move on, as it must, as she had helped it to do. The kyrgs of the Council of Forty had decided that this young noble was a danger to Uztar, but that danger had now been eliminated.

Yirol did not wonder what danger this young man might've been. That was not her purview. She'd followed him for days through the city's winding streets. He'd only left the gates for close hunts with his cast of falcons, always with different young men and women of the Uztari nobility for company and a team of valets to serve their wants and needs, and then in the evening he either threw or attended rich dinners and decadent dances. In her youth, Yirol had attended such dances, too, before she'd found her calling in the assassins' guild.

Looking down at the dead boy, she wondered how many boys just like him she had killed in her time, whether for debts owed or politics played poorly. She preferred the kills that went like this, quick and smooth and peaceful. The violent endings were the ones that haunted. They suggested a lack of discipline or planning on her part, and she hated to think someone's end could've been made easier had she only worked a little harder. Pretty though he was, she'd likely forget this boy's death before the next moon rose.

*Except . . . this is odd.* The boy's skin had taken on a kind of texture it hadn't had before. His eyes seemed misshapen. A trick of the light?

Yirol bent down and wiped the blood from her blade on his shirt. She found the material strange, like a pelt. And had the shirt been this color before, the same light brown as his skin? As she stared at the body, it was like looking into a reflection in a mountain lake. She saw the young man, but through him, rippling, she saw something else, a double vision of horns bursting from his head, an elongated face and the hooves of a beast. While nothing moved, everything shifted. Her head spun.

She leapt up and away and poised herself to fight, but what she meant to fight was unclear. She now stood over the dead body of a mountain elk where the young man's corpse had been.

*You can never plan for everything, she told herself. You've missed something vital, and now you'll pay dearly for your failure.*

"You should see the look on your face," a young man spoke from behind her. She whirled and flung her knife, but he dodged and the blade sparked against the stone and clattered away. He was the mirror image of the noble she'd just killed . . . or thought she'd killed. He was dressed finely in a black tunic and black pants. His bare arms were brushed with the light golden powder that some hunters wore to mask their scent from prey. It'd become a fashion statement in the last few seasons, finding its way from practical use in the brush to cosmetic use in the parlors of the elite. And this young man

was certainly one of the elite. If he survived this night, he would be named to the kyrg, one of the Council of Forty, and the Council had wanted to avoid that outcome.

Yirol had never before failed an assignment. She drew another blade from the sheath on her arm as she kicked back gently at the prone elk, making sure it was still dead and still where she'd left it. She had the courtyard layout memorized and was plotting her next move.

*You're a failure, she thought. End yourself now before the Council does it for you.*

"What trick is this?" she demanded, knowing these thoughts were not her own. "How are you doing that?"

"I'm not doing a thing," the young lord said, then looked up. "It is." A wide-winged shadow drifted in a spiral over the box of sky framed by the courtyard. As it whirled, it lowered, visible only by what it blotted out. It was the largest bird of prey Yirol had ever seen, but it was more than its size that rooted her feet to the stones. This bird was darkness itself, oblivion on the wing. She knew its name, or at least, she knew what it was called: the ghost eagle.

The assassin stepped back over the elk's body as she searched for her route out of the courtyard. She'd been an assassin long enough to know when she was outmatched, when retreat was not cowardice but prudence. She never entered a space without at least two escape routes, and yet now, her

mind was cloudy, her thoughts scattered. All she saw were high stone walls. Where had all the doorways gone?

“*REEEEE*,” the terrible bird shrieked, making one great flapping turn high overhead, preparing to dive.

*You’re careless. You forgot your way out*, Yirol thought.

“No, I didn’t,” she said out loud, arguing with herself, trying to clear her head. The ghost eagle’s shriek was rumored to unleash horrors in the mind, but these things were lies. It was just a bird.

“It was a strange thing watching you slit an elk’s throat, thinking it to be me,” the young man said. “But they say the ghost eagle can torment your thoughts before tearing you to pieces. Philosophers claim the world is nothing but what we perceive it to be. Our minds can make an elk into a man, a door into a wall, a dream into a nightmare. If all the world is air and thought, then that which masters thought masters all.”

Yirol spun and searched. They were in her head, the eagle or the man. She put her hand out to make sure the stone of the wall was real, was solid. Somehow she had been tricked into believing that which wasn’t there. She’d whispered in an elk’s ear and listened to an elk’s plaintive cries, then answered them with words. She remembered it clearly now, as it actually happened, not as she had hallucinated it. And now, as realization dawned, she heard the young man laughing at her.

“I know . . . nasty stuff, this eagle’s tricks. Hard to know what’s real, isn’t it?” The young man chuckled. “Some think the bird is magic. Personally, I think it has a mind so different from ours that it’s not bound by the same rules of consciousness that we are. It can alter consciousness—its own or others’—to suit its needs. Of course, this isn’t really a concern of yours at the moment, is it?”

“*REEEEEEE*,” the eagle screeched, and her vision of the young man wobbled. She saw herself standing where he had been, looked down at her hands and saw the light dust of powder he wore. She focused on her breath, regained herself. Her hands were her hands, his were his, and he stood across from her. The dead elk was still dead, still just an elk. She searched the sky for a sight of the eagle. How could you fight something that could muddle your thoughts so completely?

If she did not regain control of her mind’s eye, that elk would be her last kill. She had to focus. She had to tame her perception. She looked at the statue of Valyry the Gloveless. A climb up the plinth, a leap off the stone falcon’s head, and she’d be on the rooftop.

But running toward the sky would not save her. The sky belonged to the ghost eagle and to the dead.

She couldn’t see any other ways out of the courtyard to the street, but there was a drain for snow melt, a drain that led down, under, into the depths of the city on the mountainside.

Even now, crystal-clear meltwaters flowed along its channels, guiding her path in the dark. Like a hunted rabbit, she would go to ground!

*Like a frightened rabbit*, she thought.

*No, like a rabbit that survives.*

She threw her blade straight up toward the black, winged shape in the night, more in the hopes of causing a distraction than to slow the attack.

“*Iryeem-na*,” the young lord said, and Yirol had no time to wonder what that meant, because she was running for the drain as the ghost eagle dove, a scythe from the stars. Before she was even halfway to the sewer opening, the eagle swooped. Its massive talons tore her head from her body. She ran three more steps before she fell. The eagle rose away, clutching its grim trophy and painting the assassin’s blood across the rooftops like a bee spreads pollen.

The eagle screeched, sending all who heard it into the dregs of their bottles or below the furs on their beds, and then eagle and young lord alike vanished into different shadows.

What was left of Yirol, the Council’s assassin, would not be found till morning, after which a new kyrg would take his appointed place and a new apex assassin would be needed.

**KYLEE**

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PARTNERS



# 1

**“DO YOU WANT TO DIE LIKE THIS?” ÜKU SCREAMED.**

The white-haired Owl Mother had the back of Kylee’s tunic bunched in her hand, thrusting her forward, and that bunched fabric clutched between her shoulder blades by a wrinkled fist was the only thing holding Kylee over the precipice of the Sky Castle’s walls. The clouds below roiled and broke against jagged cliffs.

“I could let go and spare us all the time you waste shambling to your death. If you plan to die so young, why not leap headlong for it?”

Kylee wanted to tell Üku that she did not want to die like this, had no intention of dying young, and that the

featherbrained old woman better pull her back up. But she couldn't find her voice just then, so she swallowed and considered the strength in Üku's arm, how long she'd been holding Kylee, and how much longer she could. Finally, Kylee managed to scrape the word *no* from the gravel in her throat.

"Then show me the reason you're here," Üku snapped. "Show me how you plan to survive! Call the eagle to hunt. You know the word. Speak it!"

Kylee cleared her throat, focused her mind away from the sheer drop and onto the giant bird of prey that lurked somewhere in this dusky sky.

She searched the low clouds for any sign of the black-winged ghost eagle. She looked at the mountain elk idly picking their way up the cliff below the Sky Castle's walls, as comfortable on a nearly ice-smooth rock face with a foothold no bigger than a baby's skull as an eagle was on a breeze. They chewed cloudgrass without care or worry. None of the local hawks were big enough to take a mountain elk, and none of the nobles would risk injury to their finest hunting eagles just to catch some gamey meat.

But the ghost eagle was ten times the size of the next largest bird of prey, and there was no prey in the world it couldn't hunt, that it *wouldn't* hunt if Kylee could marshal the Hollow Tongue she'd been studying and *command* it.

"*Raakrah*," she said.

The elk stayed calm. How could they know a ghost eagle prowled the low clouds? When had that terror ever haunted the Sky Castle's air, and why should a bird of the night stalk them in the day? Their lives up to that point had offered no clues for the situation they were now in.

*Just like me,* Kylee thought.

The wind blew her cloak around her. The braid of her black hair whipped, and she felt Üku's arm shudder. How much longer could she hold Kylee there, tilted over the wall's edge?

Maybe the elk were right not to fear her.

The Hollow Tongue was the bird's lost language, known now only in fragments, and Kylee had little grasp of it, even after two full moon turnings spent studying. When you spoke the Hollow Tongue, you had to mean what you said, deeply and truly, or your words might as well be lies. No bird of prey ever listened to a lie. There was no word in the Hollow Tongue for lying. But there were infinite ways to say "kill."

*"Raakrah,"* she said again.

Nothing happened.

The nobles and kyrgs and their valets, who had gathered on the outer walls to watch her, chattered nervously in huddled clumps. While there were others with some abilities in the Hollow Tongue, Kylee was the only one in the castle who had the interest of the ghost eagle, and so she had the interest

of everyone else, but she had yet to command the dreaded bird successfully.

“Think!” Üku scolded. “What have you learned?”

Earlier that afternoon, just as the air began to cool for the evening, Kylee and Grazim, Üku’s only other student, had been learning to command colorful tulip hawks to fly between their fists, trading places.

The fact that she and Grazim hated each other made the exercise more interesting, and a few kyrgs and their valets had gathered to watch.

“*Toktott*,” Üku had snapped just as the birds crossed in mid-air, and suddenly, the tulip hawks adjusted their flight paths, slammed their bodies into each other, and then bounced backward. After one or two more attempts to pass, they each gave up and returned to the girls’ respective fists.

“*Toktott* means *to block* or *to stop*,” Üku said. “If you are to overpower the command I have given them, you will have to mean your own command with greater force of will than I have with mine. The Hollow Tongue demands the perfect marriage of word, truth, and intent. To use it, you will have to truly *want* your bird to do as you wish. Find *your* truth and speak it.”

“How can we speak our truth for someone’s else’s purpose?” Kylee asked.

“*That*,” Üku replied, “is the fundamental question of your studies. The Hollow Tongue demands your full self: your history, your beliefs, your knowledge, your feelings, and your desires. Either you control those things, or they control you.”

“Those are all the things that make you *you*,” Kylee noted.

“Exactly,” Üku agreed. “No one ever attained power over a bird of prey without first attaining power over themselves. Tame yourself and you can tame the world. So . . . what words might you use here, to tame this tulip hawk to the purpose? How might you make what you *must* do match what you *want* to do?”

“*Sif-sif*,” Kylee suggested, the word for *trade* or *switch* that they had already been using.

“And yet that is not strong enough.” Üku dismissed her guess. “What does *khostoon* mean?”

“Partner,” Grazim said, puffed with pride at her vast vocabulary.

Üku nodded at the other girl, even smiled. “Very good. Your birds already know your relationships to them, but not to each other. You must *tell* them. A partner or an ally is a mighty thing, but the two of you must *believe* you are partners to overcome those who would get in your way.”

Kylee blew a loose strand of hair from her eyes. There was no way she could truly see Grazim as her partner. Kylee had been born in the Six Villages, an Uztari town whose faith and fortunes were tied to falconry; while Grazim had been born to Altari priests who wandered the grasslands in exile, cursing falconry and all who practiced it. Grazim had run away to the Owl Mothers for shelter, for study, for purpose. Kylee had only come reluctantly, forced to study in order to protect her brother back home. Grazim resented Kylee's connection with the ghost eagle, and Kylee resented Grazim's eagerness to serve the Sky Castle. No amount of bird trading was going to change their mutual resentment. It'd be easier to kiss a vulture's tongue than to believe she could ever be Grazim's *partner*.

"*Khostoon*," they both said without conviction, and the frustrated bird on Kylee's fist did nothing in response.

"Girls, girls, girls," Üku clucked. "If you succumb to your adolescent squabbles, you will never master the power you have. Even the mightiest eagle can be bested by a unified flock. Try again!"

Grazim frowned. Kylee frowned back.

"*Khostoon*," they snarled in unison, again to no avail.

Üku looked at her feet. "I just don't know how to get through to either of you. Are you so weak-minded that you can find *nothing* to share with each other? You've more in common than you think."

Kylee gazed at the other girl, looking her up and down. Grazim had cut her blond hair short for training, and her skin was sun-darkened almost to the color of Kylee's own, but she had a feeling that sort of superficiality was not what Üku had meant. What could Kylee have in common with this officious, ambitious, and overall vicious lowland girl, who'd have happily knifed Kylee the day they'd met? Kylee, for her part, would've been happy never to have met her in the first place.

When the ghost eagle appeared on a parapet above, interrupting the training, it was a relief to both of them. Everyone watching their struggle with the tulip hawks scattered for cover, all but Üku, Kylee, and Grazim.

"Your *friend* came back," Grazim said, putting as much bite in her voice as she could, although the words tripped on her tongue and stumbled out of her mouth. It was impossible to look directly at the ghost eagle and not feel a pang of ancient fear. Some people were said to hallucinate in its presence, others to confess their darkest secrets, or the darkest secrets of other people. Alone among birds, the ghost eagle could shred the mind of its prey before its talons crushed the body.

Kylee swallowed. She would not let her own fear show in front of these people, even as the skin on her arms prickled beneath the great bird's black-eyed gaze.

The eagle stood as tall as a desert camel, and spread its wings wider than one. The ghost eagle was the only bird that

could carry off a full-grown man or horse. It could weaken the most flint-hearted woman's resolve and had caused more than one little boy to wet himself. It was death and fear incarnate, and it had chosen Kylee for its attention. The kyrgs who ruled Uztar had taken notice.

It was when the ghost eagle shrieked over the courtyard and took flight again that Üku grabbed Kylee, dragged her up the stairs to the top of the wall, and thrust her over the ledge, where she now found herself.

"Maybe this will get through to you," Üku growled. "See there! In the distance along the river? That is your home. Even now the Six Villages are building barricades, preparing for war against our enemies. Your friends are there. Your mother is there. Your brother. If you do not master your power, they will *all* be slaughtered by the invasion of the Kartami hordes. *This* is your chance. Find the words! Command the ghost eagle to hunt for you! Show me why you are here! I'll ask you again: Do you want to die like this?"

"No!" She yelled it the second time. Then Kylee closed her eyes, thought of blood, death, and hunger, and searched for a word as if her life depended on it . . . because it did.



## 2

**“RAAKRAH,”** KYLEE TRIED A THIRD TIME, AND FOR A THIRD TIME, nothing happened. The elk kept chewing the cloudgrass, scampering sideways up the cliff as calmly as hares graze in clover.

Üku pulled Kylee back from the wall’s precipice, letting her stand upright on her own, balanced only a hairbreadth from the edge. She’d never had any intention of dropping Kylee off the wall, and now Kylee knew it. That did not, however, make her want to forgive the old woman for the threat.

Üku turned to Grazim, who had followed them up the stairs and now stood, arms crossed, in an exaggerated performance of impatience. “Why is Kylee’s word not working?” Üku asked her.

“*Raakrah* is the word you would use to ask a bird of prey to hunt for you,” Grazim said, standing beside the Owl Mother. “It can also mean *gather* or *find*.”

The ghost eagle had never shown any interest in Grazim, the only other student of the Hollow Tongue the Sky Castle had found, but the Altari girl’s skill gave her impressive influence over hawks and falcons and even a few of the lesser eagles. She loved showing off her superior knowledge and now offered Kylee a smug smile.

“Is that what you want, Kylee?” Üku asked. “For the ghost eagle to hunt for you? Are you hungry for wild elk? If you are, you have to mean it when you say it. Speak like you would a curse or confession or love song.”

Grazim chuckled. Kylee was so not a singer of love songs. From the corner of her eye, Kylee saw the throng of kyrgs and their hangers-on huddled in the sheltered doorway of the tower opposite. Only one person was out on the wall in the open, exposed to the sky: a young noble, finely dressed with an embroidered falconer’s glove on, though he had no bird in sight. His robe bore a bronze signet on the lapel, so he was a kyrg himself, one of the Forty. His dark eyes were set on her, not on the clouds below, and the line of his lips curved up on one side in a lopsided smirk shaped like a blade. Kylee had seen him watch her training before, but he’d never stood out from the crowd of onlookers until now.

Yval Birgund, the chief defense counselor and one of the more powerful kyrgs in the Sky Castle, stepped out beside the young noble and whispered in his ear. The young man nodded and continued to watch, his smirk settling into a needle-straight line.

The high wind howled around them where they stood. To their backs rose the huge city of the Sky Castle, hewn from the pink, gray, and black stone of the mountains. Its wall-ringed neighborhoods were stacked along the slopes, roofs and courtyards colliding with ramps and stairs at dizzying angles. Kylee turned back to the soothing open view in front of her, the cherry-red sunset sky draped over the Uztari plains. To her left, the rugged untamed mountains hooked around the plateau farther than eyes could see. To her right, the same, but the Necklace flowed along the range's base, shimmering with the last of the daylight as it fed the grasslands and foothills, and somewhere past the lower clouds in those foothills, the Six Villages waited, preparing for war.

Her brother was there, and his life was in Kylee's hands, or, to be accurate, in her voice. His life—all the Six Villagers' lives—depended on her voice speaking true. For an instant, she felt she could see him, not as in a memory, but like she was looking at him through a glazed window, watching him track a hawk through the foothills, his shock of gray hair

ruffled by a breeze blowing down the mountains from where she now stood. He looked up toward the Sky Castle, like he was looking directly at her, though she was at least a full moon's march away. He was looking in the wrong direction, though. Behind him, danger lurked. Something loomed, something terrible, and she wanted to shout at him to turn around, to defend himself, or better yet, to run!

She nearly shouted, *Run!*, then caught herself, remembered where she was, and how very far from home. She couldn't see her brother. That was the ghost eagle's work, toying with her, as it would do until she could command it.

She tried to see the deadly arc the dread bird cut in the sky, tried to see through the crimson clouds into herself, to what she wanted most, what she could ask of this monstrous eagle that it might believe was true.

"REEEEE!" it shrieked, and her thoughts bent with the blade of its cry.

*Kill them all, she thought. They brought you here; they're using you. Forget the elk. Find the words to make them prey. Return to your home, to your brother. To the life you want. They are in the way. Kill them all.*

She shuddered; knowing that the thoughts weren't hers didn't make them any less true. She wanted to go home; that was why the eagle had shown home to her, but if Uztar couldn't win the war against the Kartami, there would be no

home to return to. She didn't have to like these people to share the same purpose with them. She didn't have to love the kingdom to serve it.

She thought to her lessons, lists of words with only partial definitions. Most of the Hollow Tongue was a mystery even to the Owl Mothers, who'd preserved it for generations. They had a few words they'd passed down, and tiny bits of text they'd managed to match to the words they knew. The written language was even more lost than the spoken one. Travelers and long-haulers talked of ruined shrines in the Parsh Desert that still carried whole sentences in the Hollow Tongue, but no one was even sure *who* had written them. It certainly wasn't the birds themselves.

Kylee knew the words for *feast* and *hunt* and *mercy* and *trade* and *falcon* and *owl* and, now, *block*. She'd learned other words, three or four dozen, but she couldn't recall them in this moment and cursed herself for not studying harder.

Nothing she *could* remember was useful here. And what good would a word do if she didn't know what to ask for? What good would all the words in any language be if you found yourself with nothing to say? What did Kylee *really* want?

She looked over her shoulder, back at Grazim's sour-fruit face, at Üku, who loathed her but had promised the kyrgs to train her. At the defense counselor, who had taken her from

her home so that she might serve the kingdom and protect them from the Kartami, and at the strange young noble beside him, waiting, watching.

Images flashed in her mind, memories this time, real ones, not hallucinations—she and her brother and their friend Nyall tackling the ghost eagle and binding it; her brother and his beloved goshawk, Shara, winning a fight in the battle pits; laughing with her friend Vyvian while a gaggle of battle boys tried to flirt with her; she and Brysen learning to climb together, coaching each other up, anchoring each other's ropes, going higher together than they ever could alone.

She knew what to say.

“*Khostoon*,” she said, and suddenly a black streak broke through the low clouds like a hurled spear, lanced straight up the cliff, and grazed the castle wall, making everyone duck, even those safely under the shelter of the stone parapet. The giant bird circled once, tucked its boulder-crushing talons and folded its wind-beating wings, and fell like lightning's shadow on an unsuspecting elk.

The elk brayed and grunted when the eagle crashed onto its back, vanishing beneath the giant bird's widespread wings. Together, both eagle and elk fell from the cliff. It looked like the weight was too much for the bird to carry. They tumbled into the cloud cover and vanished. Kylee felt her own breath falling with them, hope exhaled and not returning. Falconry

was an art of loss, and even the tamest birds could leave you, even the most vicious birds could fail.

*Stupid*, Kylee cursed herself, and cursed all of Uztar for pinning their hopes in a war on one bird, no matter how powerful, and one girl, no matter how determined to save her family. *Stupid, stupid, stupid*, she thought, and then, before she knew why, she felt a smile blossom up in her and a sudden laugh escape her lips.

Flapping so powerfully that the clouds dissolved around its wings, the ghost eagle rose, bursting into the sky below the wall, clutching its massive quarry by the flesh of its back. The elk stirred and kicked, then hung limp as the eagle brought it higher and higher.

The laughter in Kylee's mind was not her own. The ghost eagle's fall had been . . . a joke? Had the eagle been *playing* with her?

*Great*, she thought, and knew the thought was hers. *My fate hangs on a giant killer bird with a sense of humor.*

All eyes followed the eagle's winding flight up into the reddening sky, then watched it swoop low and drop the massive beast. The elk let out a loud cry as it plummeted, then hit the top of the wall with a sickening thud in front of the cowering nobles.

Its body opened on impact like a split summer melon, splattering their finery with its insides. Even Defense Counselor

Birgund gasped. Only the young noble with the knife-blade smile stood resolute, his golden cheekbones and lightly pursed lips now splattered with elk's blood.

"REEEE!" the ghost eagle shrieked, diving away and disappearing. It abandoned its prey's remains, demonstrating that it had no interest in the hunt, nor even, really, in the kill. Only in Kylee's desires.

Khostoon *means partner*, she thought, and knew that the thought was a promise.

"Looks like I found a *partner* after all," she said to Üku, staring a warning at the Owl Mother never to threaten her again. She stretched her fingers, locked her thumbs across her chest in the winged salute of Uztari respect, and smiled a biting grin. "Thank you for teaching me the word I needed, Mem Üku." She looked at Grazim, then pointedly looked away. "I mean . . . that *we* needed."

As she marched down the steps back to the courtyard below, she walked with her hands behind her back. She hoped it appeared like defiant confidence.

In truth, she had to stop her hands from shaking.

*Partner partner partner* echoed in her mind in a voice that wasn't her own.



3



**KYLEE STOOD TREMBLING IN THE SMALL CHAMBER JUST OFF THE** training courtyard. She could barely get her falconer's glove off and onto one of the pegs on the wall. She simply dropped her game bag and belt on the floor and let her face fall into her hands. She wanted to scream. She wanted to go home. She wanted to be anywhere but here, forced to meet everyone else's expectations of her.

She had just done something no falconer in generations had done, and rather than feeling liberated by her success, she felt more trapped than ever. The moment she demonstrated mastery of the ghost eagle, she'd be deployed to war, and then

everyone would expect her to save them. What, she wondered, would her new “partner” expect?

She thought about her twin brother, Brysen. He’d had a goshawk named Shara, one he’d rescued from their father’s wrath for losing at the battle pits, and he’d loved that bird and tended her every need, and she had hunted for him and battled for him. But still she had left him, and it had broken his heart. Had *they* been partners? Would the ghost eagle break Kylee’s heart when it left, or just her mind? She could never love the ghost eagle, but she was bound to it regardless.

Traditional falconers trained their birds for several seasons with food and lures and hoods and leashes, taught them to recognize the falconer on sight, to return to their fists and eat from their hands. The falconers gave the birds names as part of the human urge to tame the wild with words, as if naming a river can control its flow or naming a hawk can harness its appetites. Speakers of the Hollow Tongue did not name their birds of prey. They knew that no name they gave the birds would be true, and the Hollow Tongue required truth. Kylee couldn’t imagine calling the ghost eagle anything anyway, nor stroking its tail feathers or feeding it tiny cuts of meat from her hand while she whispered her secrets to it, the way Brysen had with Shara. Even so, she needed the ghost eagle to

serve her. She had to keep it interested in their partnership, no matter how much the shine of its eyes and the echoes in her mind terrified her.

She had no doubt that what Üku said was true: If she failed to command the ghost eagle, her brother would die, either at the end of a Kartami blade or by one of the Council's assassins. To protect him, she had to keep the ghost eagle from fleeing her like Brysen's hawk had fled him.

A shadow filled the room, and Kylee whirled, reaching for the blade strapped to her upper arm.

"Whoa!" Nyall held his empty hands up where he stood in the waning light of the archway. "I heard you put on a show for the kyrgs. Word is already winging its way through the quarter."

Kylee relaxed and slumped back against the wall, glad it was he who'd come. Nyall's tall, broad-shouldered body filled the space like a door, which he took to be a part of his job, protecting Kylee's privacy when she needed it, keeping her company when she wanted it. He was the only person who'd come with her when she left the Six Villages, the only person at the Sky Castle who actually knew her.

"I did what they wanted," she told him.

"From the look on Üku's face when I passed her under the colonnade, it looked like you did something more than what

they wanted,” he replied as he came into the chamber to do his actual job as her valet, checking and maintaining her equipment.

It was strange to have a friend as an assistant. She didn’t want to boss him around, and she didn’t like to be served. Even in their military training, he was tasked as her second and instructed to follow her orders, though he had far more experience fighting than she did. He’d been a battle boy back in the Villages and knew the wounds a talon or a blade could make. He’d been on the giving and receiving ends of each more than a few times.

In spite of her discomfort with having a valet, he appeared to have no problem with their arrangement. He was enthusiastic about seeing Kylee as often as he could and deciding who had access to her and who did not. Because of her gift for the Hollow Tongue, she had a lot of callers in the castle. They did their best to curry favor with him in order to get to her. He enjoyed that part of the job as well, accepting their gifts and doling out tiny pieces of hope that she might eat a meal at their homes or come to their parties.

The long green coat he wore now had been a gift from a noble who’d wanted Kylee to command a very expensive fox-catcher falcon to hunt instead of sitting, fist-bound, flapping its wings but never flying when it saw prey. What

good was having an impressive hawk if it wouldn't make a kill?

The kyrg was a junior counselor for district sewer-and-lighting maintenance, which was an unglamorous but very lucrative role, and the coat she'd given Nyall was made of fine green silk, lined with fox fur, and studded with glass buttons in a great array of colors. The stitching around all the pockets, collar, and cuffs was gold thread. The kyrg's husband had given Nyall the emerald studs he now wore in his ears. Kylee worried she'd end up having to pay the couple a visit as compensation for Nyall's outfit.

He'd tied his long coils of hair up like a regal nest on top of his head, and the dark skin of his long neck, she saw, was dusted with fine gold hunting powder. He'd even added a small tattoo on his neck: six black feathers for the Six Villages, a reminder of home or, more likely, a way to show he was proud of where he came from, even as he moved in the highest circles of power now.

She smiled at him while he rubbed oil into the leather of her glove to keep it supple, and he flashed his own bright smile back. That tattoo on his neck was just the kind of in-your-face joke Brysen would've enjoyed.

"Any news?" she asked him. When he wasn't working, Nyall spent a lot of time in the pubs that other valets

frequented, and he usually knew the latest gossip. Hearing him share it reminded her of being home. She could almost imagine she and Brysen and their friend Vyvian were sitting around the Broken Jess, listening to news of birds caught and sold, hatchlings learning to fly, and battle boys learning to brawl.

Nyall smiled, and his mossy eyes shone. His dimples dented his dark cheeks like stones dropped into a deep mountain lake, and she understood why anyone with any romantic blood in their veins was more than happy to give Nyall gifts, even if it never got them any closer to a meeting with Kylee. He looked like a classic hero, one of the great falconers they sang of in stories: broad-shouldered, dark-skinned, and taller than her and her brother by two heads. He had the kind of arms people wanted to be wrapped in, the kind of shoulders the sky itself might want to cry on. No one understood why Kylee turned down his advances, and she never asked him if there were different favors he gave in exchange for the gifts he received. That was the sort of thing Brysen enjoyed discussing, not her.

Nyall pulled a letter from his jacket and passed it over. She unrolled it quickly, buoyed by the sloppy hand it was written in. Brysen's. The pigeon that brought the letter had hit a heavy mist, which had dampened the ink and made it runny. She had to guess at some of the words, but her brother wrote the

way he spoke, and she could almost hear his voice through the creative spellings.

*Hey Ky, hope all's good with the great and powerful kyrgs up there in the Sky Cassel. You running things yet? If not yet, I guess you'll replace Kyrg Bardu as the proctor by the next moon's end and start telling them all what to do. Got yer last letter. Sounds blazing there. Hot water piped from springs? Bet folks smell better than here. Don't worry, tho. I'm taking care, washing bedstuff sometimes even. Sorry I left that to you all those seasons. It's not the best fun.*

*Ma and I are getting on well enuff. She still prays most of the time and gives too much bronze to the Crawling Priests, but we're getting more and more Altari refugees from the grasslands every day and she's started doing wash for them, no cost. I tried to throw my own in the other day and she hissed at me, said she woodn't clean unholy bird scuzz off my shirts. I asked her was there such a thing as holy bird scuzz and wood she clean that? That's how I ended up doing my own lawndry.*

*Jowyn is still here. He took yer room. Don't worry! I'm not doing anything you woodn't approve of. Least not with him. JOKING! No time for that stuff. We help with the barricades along the river on rainy days and*

*when the weather's fair, Jo goes out trapping with me.  
 Catching more than ever, selling them faster too, but  
 still . . . no Shara, tho I thought I saw her a couple  
 days ago. She's close, I can tell.*

Brysen had started another line twice below that, something about his lost goshawk, but he'd scratched the lines out. Kylee could sort of make out the phrase *give up* but wasn't sure of the words surrounding them. Brysen wasn't usually the giving-up type.

*Anyway, don't worry about us here. Stay safe and  
 show them what a Six Villager can do. When you save all  
 Uztar, I wanna see that Kyrg Birgund on his nees at yer  
 feet, eating out of yer hand like a tame kestrel.*

*Yer handsum brother, if you remembr,  
 Brysen*

Kylee laughed, glad to hear he and their mother hadn't been fighting and even gladder that he hadn't fallen in love with the strange owl boy who had come to live with them. Jowyn had followed them home from the blood birch forest when they'd caught the ghost eagle, exiled from the Owl Mothers by Üku herself. Brysen had a heart that raced as fast

as a sparrow's and fell to predators just as often. She hoped he was being careful with it. It wasn't just her brother's heart she was worried about. She hoped he was being careful with all the parts of him that led him astray. Without her around, he could get into all sorts of trouble.

Thinking of Brysen peacocking around the Villages had her smiling, but Nyall had other news to deliver, and there were hints of it in Brysen's letter.

Altari refugees arriving in the Six Villages.

Barricades along the river.

Birds selling faster than ever and for higher prices.

"The Kartami are moving fast," Nyall said. "Huge flocks of birds in front of them, fleeing for the mountains, more than anyone can trap. Folks are afraid of scarcity as the kite warriors get closer because Kartami are killing every bird of prey they find and every falconer, too. Anyone who even does business with falconers. They took out two more long-hauler caravans full of grain for Zilyntar. Then they took Zilyntar, too. Slaughtered every Uztari and every bird and sent a few hundred Altari fleeing straight for the Six Villages."

"Brysen didn't mention that." She held up the letter.

"You think he wants you to worry about him? He'd lie lightning into a rainbow if it'd keep you from worrying."

"You think he'll go out and fight?"

Nyall actually laughed, which made Kylee laugh, too. Of course Brysen would fight. Brysen never let something like training, skill, or practice get in the way of a grand heroic gesture. If the Kartami kite warriors laid siege to the Six Villages, he'd be on the barricades before the first feathers flew.

"I have to stop the kite warriors before it comes to that," she said, any laughter leaving her voice instantly.

"You aren't the only one fighting them, you know?" He raised an eyebrow at her. Leave it to Nyall to remind her that the salvation of everything under the sky was not her responsibility alone. She wished she believed him.

"I'm the only one the ghost eagle listens to," she replied.

"You think you're ready?"

"Not even close." She bit her lip. "Much as I hate to admit it, I think I have to work harder with Üku and Grazim."

"I don't trust either of them."

"Me neither," she told him. "But if I'm going to keep the ghost eagle around and get it to do what I need, I'm going to have to know what I'm saying to it more than I do. I'm afraid that if I say the wrong thing, it'll kill the very people I'm trying to protect."

"Not killing the people you're trying to protect is pretty thoughtful of you," Nyall agreed. "I hope I'm one of them."

“What can I say?” She grinned at him. “Not getting my friends killed is the least I can do. I’m nothing if not thoughtful.”

“You could never be nothing to me. You know, I think you’re everyth—”

“Apologies for the intrusion,” a man’s voice cut into their conversation, and they both flinched, whirling to the open archway. Nyall already had his knife out, but the figure in the door held his hands up to show them empty, just as Nyall had when Kylee’d pulled her knife on him. Everyone in the Sky Castle had been jumpy ever since the headless body of the assassin Yirol had been found. “I must say, I was impressed by your demonstration today,” the man added. “The finest minds in the city are singing your deeds all over town and embellishing the song with each telling. By sunset, rumors will have you riding the ghost eagle over the rooftops of the city while chanting the *Epic of the Forty Birds* in its original language.”

Kylee looked the man up and down. He was that young kyrg with the bladed smile.

“Ryven,” he introduced himself.

“*Kyrg* Ryven,” Nyall added for emphasis. He had a comforting way of making sure Kylee always knew to whom she was speaking, so she didn’t have to bother remembering everyone’s names. She’d be lost in the city’s social circles without

Nyall's help. In the Six Villages, she'd known basically the same people her whole life.

"Guilty of politics," Kyrg Ryven confessed. He rubbed the deliberate stubble on his cheeks while she looked him over. He seemed very aware of the impression he made: charming, insouciant, and a little dangerous. His teeth were slightly crooked, which meant he hadn't been born to wealth, but they were gleaming white, which meant he had wealth now.

He stepped into the room as Nyall sheathed his blade. "I've seen a speaker of the Hollow Tongue command a peregrine to bring a hare back to its tamer, but to see a ghost eagle drop a full-grown elk at a hunter's feet? Marvelous."

"You weren't afraid?" she asked him.

"I felt safe in your presence." Ryven offered his smile once more.

She didn't want to tell him his charm was wasted on her. He was more Brysen's type. Her lack of interest in a handsome grin hadn't been of much concern or of much value back in the Villages, but here in the seat of Uztari wealth and power, everything could be a weapon, and a kyrg didn't need to know she was immune to his seductions or anyone else's.

*Let him try, she thought, and in the trying, he'll reveal more of himself than I will of myself.*

Nyall stepped forward and made the winged salute, his

palms pressed over his heart, hooked thumbs and fingers spread like wings to either side. “To what do we owe the honor of this visit?”

“I’m having a party tonight,” Ryven said. “And I’d like to invite Kylee to attend.”

“She trains with the infantry early in the mornings,” Nyall answered for her, which was both true and not a reason not to go to the party.

“Training tomorrow will be delayed until mid-sun,” Ryven replied, not looking at Nyall. “I’ve already taken care of it. I’d be simply heartbroken if you failed to come. Unless, of course, you don’t *want* to?”

She shook her head, knowing better than to offend a kyrg who could whisper in the ear of the defense counselor or even the proctor herself.

“I’ll see you there, then.” Kyrg Ryven saluted, then left them gaping after him with no opportunity to decline.

“Did he get an entire battalion’s training delayed so that you could go to his party?” Nyall wondered.

Kylee nodded.

“Careful, Ky. Having the attention from a kyrg like that is like climbing in a lightning storm.”

“Thrilling?” she offered, missing the freedom of her early-morning climbs.

“Tempting the sky,” Nyall replied.

“We’ll meet up after the party,” she told him. “Maybe while I’m there, you can go have a drink or two at one of the pubs. Find out more about this kyrg. Put those dimples of yours to work.”

“Hey!” Nyall protested. “I am more than just my pretty face!”

She laughed, but if she’d known that was the last time she’d see his smiling face, she’d have said something other than “Just don’t drink too much sandthorn wine. I don’t want to listen to your singing.”