

LAST FLIGHT HOME



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Chapter Excerpt

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My father sat on his throne with his shoulders hunched forward and a scowl on his face, looking a bit unseemly for his station and not at all, I felt, as a king should look. And where usually a bite of food lightened his mood, by the second course of the feast, we were all wondering if the fun-loving King Jorgen Buteo would ever show up.

My father was a great wit, and everybody loved laughing when he tore apart some remark by an unwitting guest or the behavior of a drunken baron. He left not even the slightest misspeak or curiosity unaddressed, and the voice that could be heard over the clash of battle could also freeze a boisterous partygoer in his or her seat.

The feast was the send-off for the annual eyes hunt that was to start the next morning, and this year's hunt was especially important because it was to be my first. But my father had been distracted and agitated for hours, and now he pulled at his beard and stared through the open doorway to the veranda. His seat at the head of the feast table offered a view past all four Sun Point mountain faces and, on a clear day, all the way to the dark silhouettes of both Sentinel mountains.

I tried to see what he was looking at so intently, but the only thing out there was the pink light of our sun Telios as it backlit the Shoulder Mountains. His eyes didn't move from the dimming glow, and I glanced across the hall at my mother, who was surrounded by her entourage of ladies and looking bored.

My attention was pulled back to the impromptu bout of Slip that was about to take place in the center of the hall. Lord Hengry, one of my father's closest friends, was busy handling all the bets being made on or against me. That sneering Captain Jasko and drunken Lord Rogell stood beside him. They boiled my blood when they taunted me by saying that my beard was like the down of a newborn falcon and I would never match up to a fighter like Cony Teilyr.

Cony was the finest Slip man of all the Austringers, and after too much

barley wine, I had boasted that I would have no problem taking his title. It was a threat no champion could turn down if he didn't want people to believe he was afraid of a non-ranked opponent. Even without the barley wine, I was confident that I posed a real challenge to Cony because I was the best Slip man in the amateur ranks.

Slip was the favorite Austringer game among the rank and file, and since no Austringer could become a baron without serving first as a common warrior, the barons also had a well-established taste for the sport.

Jasko and Rogell continued to taunt me and warned Cony not to lose them any gold. Lord Hengry was also getting on my nerves. I wasn't sure who he was cheering for as he waved his fists full of gold rings, the currency of betting. Luckily, my best friend Markyn was also there—aggressive, incoherent, and drunk, but at least he was rooting for me.

Slip consisted of three sets in which contenders tried to remove one another from a pre-established ring by using the opponent's energies against him. No punches or kicks were allowed. A contender only had to win two sets, and matches often did not go past the second set.

Cony looked across the hall at my older brother, Aillil, who sat beside my father at the feast table. Aillil smiled back and nodded, letting Cony know that he had no problem with his best friend teaching me a lesson.

Cony and I started in the regulation stance, with the outer edges of our right feet touching and the backs of our right hands pressed against each other at shoulder height. This stance was intended to start both contenders at an awkward balance that a savvy Slip-man might exploit.

Everyone probably expected me to push my hand toward Cony in a typical but often clumsy opening move. Instead, I swept my hand away from him. The move left me off balance for a fraction of a second, but I countered by shifting my left foot and twisting in his direction. Cony knew this move but was not ready for my speed. His weight pitched him forward over my back, and a quick push of my hips sent him out of the ring.

The toss would have sent him into the feast table if the damned barons hadn't been so tightly packed around the ring. They all screamed as Cony landed in the laps of three barons, knocking them onto their backsides.

It was the first time in years that Cony had been thrown, and he got up off his cushion of barons with a new look in his eye—one that could kill giants. He didn't like surprises, especially when it concerned his clout in the Slip ring. Thank the Sirens I was too drunk to care.

He got back into the starting stance, and when I positioned myself, he growled, "Good show, Prince. But that will be your last win until the day I no longer climb these crumbling cliffs."

My heart was pounding all the way up into my throat. I was so excited

I wasn't sure I could go another round. The crowd cursed and laughed, and more gold rings were passed from hand to hand as the more daring gamblers switched their bets to me.

Lord Hengry started the second set, and Cony moved more aggressively this time. In my drunken state, I couldn't think of any more tricks, and he exploited my split-second pause with a backhanded push that knocked me off balance. I stumbled backward, and all Cony had to do was get his foot behind my body then bump me out of the ring.

It was considered more skillful if a Slip man could rend his opponent so off-balance that all he had to do was give a light push of a single finger to tip him out of the ring. But Cony was still angry about his first-round loss, so he gave me a hard push to the back of the head as I stumbled clear of the ring—a push that some spectators considered too similar to a punch, while others argued that it was within the regulations of Slip play. Unfortunately, this time the crowd was ready and got out of the way, which meant there was no one to break my fall when I bounded out of the ring.

In the third set, Cony beat me handily and saved all the obvious bets from losing. The crowd let out a sigh of relief, and after much shifting of gold rings into various hands, Lord Hengry helped me to my feet.

“My boy,” he said, “I appreciate your courage, but you should be more careful about who you threaten. Even Aillil stopped trying Cony.” He slapped me on the shoulder. “Either that or learn more than one trick. I switched my bet after your first-round win, so you just cost me ten rings.”

“Me, too,” interjected Captain Jasko.

I was surprised. Jasko was a cranky old captain of the Austringer army who made no secret of the fact that he did not care much for Aillil and me. His breath stank of wine as he leaned toward me and said, “I put ten on your skinny ass after that first round. That's ten rings you owe me, boy.”

He grabbed me by the shoulder, and I twisted out of his grasp and said, “I owe you nothing.”

Jasko started to respond, but Lord Hengry pulled me toward the feast table, where full glasses of barley wine waited.

“Don't let those cranky old warriors get to you, Tyrrel,” Hengry said as we walked away. “They're just angry that they can't move like they used to.”

At the table, Lord Hengry and I sat down across from Aillil. Hengry handed me a glass of wine and began rambling in his usual fashion, this time about the hunt I would be attending the next day. He talked about the cliffs of Hunter's Bluff, the highest southern-facing cliffs of the Shoulder Range, and how in the mornings, our sun Telios made it the warmest place in the Midlyn Range.

“It’s logical, Tyrrel, that the falcons would make their homes in those nooks,” he said.

He was taking that patronizing tone that infuriated me. As my father’s oldest friend, Hengry had helped raise me, but at eighteen, I had long ago outgrown his lessons.

He babbled on. “Even in these colder days, there’s enough heat to warm those cliffs. Even these days, Tyrrel.”

I looked restlessly around the table, and my gaze fell on Aillil, who sat on father’s right with his elbow propped on the back of the empty seat beside him. He was pretending to watch the ladies dancing at the other end of the hall, but he kept looking back at father, whose lips were moving as though he was deep in conversation.

We had both heard the rumors circulating around the Overhang that my father was slipping into madness. But the mediums say it’s not uncommon for great men to be able to communicate with natural objects and animals—which, if nothing else, I hoped my father was doing whenever he sat alone talking with himself. And Aillil held his roost master in high regard because he was directly descended from the ancient Austringer sages who had communicated with the first falcons of the Midlyn Range and he had a natural gift with our sacred birds.

But even so, Aillil was embarrassed and angry about my father’s behavior and didn’t like to talk about it with me.

To father’s left sat Lord-general Landys Tuecyr. He, too, noticed my father’s lips moving in silent conversation. His eyes met Aillil’s, then they both quickly looked away.

Lord Hengry seemed to take my lack of response as an invitation to continue his lecture. “Up there, Tyrrel, you’ll see farther north than you’ve ever seen. Almost all the way across the straits.”

He took a drink of his wine then lowered his glass slowly, as if he was taking extra care not to break it. He sat back in his chair, his chest heaving under the weight of a huge feast, too many cups of wine, and too much excitement around the Slip ring.

Everyone at the table waited for him to continue, but he lowered his chin to his chest and seemed to be falling asleep when he mumbled through his beard, “Keep your eyes open up there, Tyrrel.”

I waved a hand impatiently as though to swat him away, and from across the table Lord-general Tuecyr said, “For what exactly, Hengry?”

Lord Hengry’s cheeks glowed a warm pink much like the hue of the setting Telios, his sleepy face suddenly turned serious. “I’ve heard rumors floating around. Strange things from Port Tallion.” He fixed his gaze on Tuecyr and added, “I believe it’s perfectly reasonable to remind a young prince to keep his

eyes open. These are difficult times for Austringers and our northern neighbors.”

The lord-general smiled. “I didn’t say it was unreasonable. I was just curious what TyrceI ought to be on the lookout for.”

To everyone’s surprise, my father chimed in. “Doing a fine job as usual, hey, Hengry? It’s good to know you’re still keeping up on the latest gossip.”

His quick laugh and good-natured teasing seemed to put everyone at ease. Father sat with his hands draped over the ends of the throne’s ornately carved armrests while Hengry looked down at his beard.

Father winked at me and said, “Hengry is right, son. Those are the warmest cliffs to hunt. And it’s always wise for young princes to keep their eyes open.”

I got flustered whenever father focused his attention on me in public, and I hurried to defend myself. “I am well prepared for this hunt, and I can climb as well as any Austringer.”

“Yes, but can you stand on a ledge no bigger than a pebble and hold onto a crack above you while rooting through a falcon’s roost?” he asked.

My face flushed, and I had no response because I had never hunted an eyas before.

Lord Hengry decided to add to my embarrassment. “And can you do all that while gently placing a live and squirming eyas—so delicate and fragile—into a leather rucksack that is dangling over your shoulder?”

Again, I had no response.

Tuecyr, who never had a problem scolding Aillil or me, added his own question. “And have you ever been climbing while being attacked by a mother falcon whose only drive is to defend her nest?”

I held my tongue.

Tuecyr smiled. “I promise you, you may be able to climb as well as any Austringer, but you will never climb fast enough to escape a determined mother. She’ll have your eyes out before you know what direction is up.”

“For the love of the Sirens,” cursed father. “Landys, why do you always have such heavy thoughts? Why in all the Midlyns am I cursed with such a sour lord-general?”

“My apologies, King Buteo.”

Father waved his hand in the air to silence Tuecyr. His mood had changed again, and despite the fact that it was still early, he proclaimed, “Telios has gone down, and I wish to make the blessing for tomorrow’s hunt.”

He stood and raised his chalice and waited for the rest of the partygoers to do the same.

“At first light tomorrow, my youngest son, TyrceI, will be making his way toward the sacred hunting grounds that have provided the falcons we Aus-

tringers have worshipped and used to keep our people alive. Tomorrow he will possess his first falcon.”

He stood for an uncomfortably long moment with his chalice in the air as he smiled down at me. He wobbled a bit, and his toast became less formal. “He might be greener than a kid goat’s teeth—”

“And not much smarter,” Cony called drunkenly from the far end of the table.

All the older warriors at the crowded table joined in with their owntaunts. It was a verbal gauntlet that all eighteen-year-olds had to navigate, and as a prince, I got the worst of it. My mother, who was standing behind father’s chair, gave me a look that I knew meant for me to keep calm.

Father finally interrupted my drunken tormentors to say, “At least he has his brother to watch over him.”

The room erupted in cheers and laughter at that insult. I was livid but had to keep my mouth shut because no Austringer warrior gets near a falcon without suffering through some sort of hazing. An Austringer falcon was much more than a pet, and if a man couldn’t handle some verbal abuse, then how could he possibly handle an unruly hunter falcon?

As the laughter died down, father finally lowered his chalice. He closed his eyes, and everyone watched him expectantly, the smiles still on their lips.

“I have spoken with our Telios,” father said, and people glanced at one another nervously.

He was speaking of the one remaining sun around which our planet, Axis Solan, revolved. The disappearance of the other sun, Solan, was one of father’s favorite wine-induced topics. When he was a young prince, the planet had been warmed by two suns. The smaller one, Telios, shone on the northern cliffs of the Midlyn Range, while Solan cast a searing heat down on its namesake planet.

It was because of Solan that centuries ago the first Austringers moved to the cooler peaks of the mountains that filled the Midlyn Range. But for decades, Austringer astronomers had noticed odd behavior coming from Solan, and mediums in the City Valley warned of threats that the sun was dying and the planet would be destroyed when it did. Most Austringers dismissed the mediums’ rantings, but eventually Solan did begin to shrink. The days grew cooler, and when the mountains began to rumble and quake, my grandfather and his court decided to listen more closely to the rumors. That’s when citizens of the City Valley flocked to the mediums, begging them to send their prayers to the Sirens and offering sacrifices to the angry Solan.

I had heard the story many times before: My father, who was a toddler at the time, was sent with his mother and a noble entourage on a pilgrimage to make offerings to the Sirens. Grandfather remained at the Overhang to handle the mayhem that was beginning in the City Valley. It was during that slow,

terrifying journey on cable-lines that were plucked back and forth by the strange winds like a seasoned warrior playing with a child's bow that my father first heard the voice of Solan.

As soon as the royal cable-car came to a stop, his mother swept him up in her arms. The frantic pilgrims shoving their way around the cable station pulled his attention in every direction. But one voice was suddenly more distinct than all the other noises. The voice told father to look back over his mother's shoulder. From this vantage point, he could see out the bay doors of the Sun Point 1 cable station. It was late morning and the sickly Solan was almost at her zenith, the time of day when her light turned Gavina into a glowing obelisk that towered over the Midlyn Range. Sun Point Station 1 was two leagues' distance from Gavina, but Solan's light cleared all the clouds and shone so brightly that the striations and rock formations of the distant mountain were discernible.

Solan told father to look at her light shining all over his precious Overhang. He obeyed and saw that Solan's usual intense light was dulled by a dark flickering that strobed across Gavina. The entire cable station shook. Then the voice turned sour and told father to keep looking out the bay doors. He gazed at the distant Overhang, and just as a page lifted him from his mother's arms to better protect him from the throng of frightened people, he saw half the Overhang drop from the face of Gavina—his father along with it.

It had been more than fifty years since the Day of a Thousand Quakes and the death of Solan, but the trauma of what seemed like the entire world falling apart had not left father. Lately a few drinks of wine seemed to turn his sarcastic nature into stinging cynicism or a distant seriousness. Conversations became difficult because his attention tended to wander off as he gazed at the distant cloud banks. He had to be constantly reminded to pay attention, and one never knew what comment or question might trigger a violent outburst. His voice was still strong and his random tongue lashings were loud enough to echo through an entire floor of the Overhang.

But now father continued without any concern for the discomfort of his audience at the feast table. "Telios claims that the Austringer race is at its zenith, just as Solan once was."

He looked down at the table, lost in thought, and finally said, "But I believe he is a liar."

My father was not only having conversations with the sun, but he was forming opinions about Telios' apparent claims. These were not the actions of a sound mind. Embarrassed, I glanced across the table at mother. Her eyes were fixed on the back of father's head. Next to him, Aillil frowned and shook his head as though telling me not to pay father any heed. Beside him Lord-general Tuecyr sighed, but I thought I saw an odd gleam of satisfaction in his eye.

Father continued, undeterred. “We Austringers have lived just fine in these ice-covered peaks for centuries.”

His tone became livelier and the crowd perked up, despite the fact that their king sounded as though he was about to declare war on our planet’s only remaining sun. Austringers always enjoyed a little patriotism, especially when it was mixed with barley wine.

“We have heated our homes and halls for centuries without Telios’ help,” father said. “Even as this planet has cooled, we have mined these mountains to their core and used the molten heat to warm our homes. Never once have we needed Telios’ help.”

His gaze fell on me, and his voice grew gentle. “Tyrrel, on this eve of your first hunt, the Austringer elder council has agreed that you are ready for your first falcon. The Mother Siren knows you will treat the falcons she gives you with respect. We will need those gifts to secure our place here on Axis Solan despite what Telios might do. By the grace of the Sirens, we Austringers have always endured any threat, be it from man, giant, or sun. Enjoy the few weeks of freedom that the eyas hunt will give you. Be in the moment of the hunt because it will signify your transition into the next phase of your life.”

The Lord’s Hall erupted in applause, as much for me as relief that father’s speech had ended on a positive note.

The partygoers began to make their farewells. The younger ones went off to find another party, while older wives and husbands headed home to their beds. Cony grabbed Aillil’s arm and pulled him out of his seat. They rushed after a small group of other young men, and I was about to follow when father said, “Stay a moment longer, Tyrrel. I have more to tell you.”

My head was swimming from the wine, and I was certain that I knew all I needed to know about hunting for falcons. What more could father possibly have to say?

Mother noticed my agitation and leaned over to kiss me on the crown of the head. “Don’t worry, my dear, your friends will still be up when your father is finished with you. Be sure to say goodbye before you leave tomorrow morning.”

“Remember, boy,” said Lord Hengry as he rose to leave with mother. “Eyas hunting is as much trouble as not, but I look forward to meeting your new addition to the royal roosts.”

After a quick bow to his king, Lord Hengry took mother’s arm and left the Lord’s Hall.

My father waited until they were gone before he began. “Hengry is right. The cliffs of Hunter’s Bluff are not like those of the inner mountains of the Talliedes. Your training has taught you a lot, but nothing can compare to the

winds off the Northern Straits that thrash against those cliffs. And nothing can ready you for an attack from a mother—”

“Father, forgive me, but I know all that.”

He clenched his fist. “For once just listen to me. I know you are strong and I know you are one of the best climbers. But these things don’t matter. My warnings from Telios have not been just about the end of the Austringers. Most of the warnings have been about you.”

I was shocked into silence. I had never really understood my father’s conversations with Telios. Like most of my friends, I spent my energy learning about warfare and hunting and did not devote any deep thoughts to what the mediums had to say. I was also not comfortable with the realization that my father was one of those crazy doomsayers and that he was dragging me into it.

“I do not know what is in store for you,” he said. “Therefore, be cautious, Tyrcel.”

He slouched back in his chair with the air of a man who was out of options.

“Telios is so stubborn,” he said quietly. “Only speaking with me when it pleases him.” In a sudden burst of energy, he slammed his fist on the table. “Damn him. His diminishing light has turned our world upside down. Abbo Doldra’s northern horde wants to move into our lands as the country up there freezes to death. And now he makes threats against my family.”

“But why me?” I said, more baffled than afraid. “What do these voices... what does Telios want with me?”

Father’s shoulders drooped again. “He told me you should ask him that yourself, when you speak with him.”