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The King's Falconer

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Introduction

In a household where rank is measured in the angle of a bow and the sheen of a velvet sleeve, the truest courtier may yet be a creature of the air. The royal falconer stands between throne and sky, entrusted with talons and tempers, with birds that strike like falling stars and hearts that must not waver when they do. His glove is a passport to places in the palace no herald announces—mews cooled by stone and straw, rooftops dappled with wind, galleries whose shadows speak in whispers. In that in-between, messages take wing, and the oldest sport becomes the newest intrigue.

Falconry is a language the court pretends to have mastered, a grammar of leash and lure, of patience and release. To the noble eye it is pageantry: bells chiming at the wrist, feathered crowns nodding in sunlight, a flash of white when a gyrfalcon takes the high sky. Yet beneath the bright spectacle lies a narrow alphabet of knots and stitches. A hood's seam can hold more than care; a jess can carry more than control. In such slender spaces, a kingdom's secrets find their way, and the hand that steadies a bird may tilt the fate of a realm.

This is a palace of rituals and rehearsals, where every step across the rushes is watched and weighed. Pages learn to be silent, stewards learn to be indispensable, and those admitted to the privy chamber learn to be both at once. The hunt, the masque, the procession—each is theater, each a test. The falconer is not a peer among peers, yet his art is a mirror held up to power. The King's favor gleams on a hawk's bells as clearly as on a knight's gilt spurs, and a miscast bird can shame as surely as a misspoken word.

The birds themselves obey no heraldry. Wild at heart even when manned, they teach lessons the court forgets: that mastery is a temporary loan, that trust is offered in increments, that hunger and freedom are bargaining partners. The glove promises safety without surrender; the creance measures distance without denying it; the hood offers calm without blindness. Between the falconer and his charge exists a covenant more honest than any oath in the chapel. To keep it is to understand the delicate arithmetic of loyalty in a house built on pledges.

Espionage thrives where appearances are law. A thread the color of innocence can bind a cipher; a bell tuned a breath too low can ring a warning; a stitch doubled can mark a meeting place spared the ink and blot of a clerk's hand. The mews become a crossroads for those the court refuses to see—laundresses with news on their sleeves, grooms with mud that tells of forbidden rides, gardeners who know which walls bloom with listening. Through them runs a current of favors and fears, a river that can drown or deliver, depending on who holds the line.

The tale you are about to read walks that river's edge. It follows a falconer whose craft makes him both invisible and indispensable, whose quiet path crosses the gilded avenues of ambition. He will read the wind on the palace roofs and the wishes in a sovereign's half-smile; he will be offered a bird that should not have flown so far and a confidence that should not have been given so easily. Hunts will be staged, signals will be set, and loyalties will be tested at heights where the air thins and the view tempts. In the end, as in any true flight, return is not guaranteed—only the courage to cast off and the will to find a way back.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Whispering Mews

The air in the royal mews always smelled of damp sawdust, dried blood, and the sharp, metallic tang of bird lime. It was a scent that Elias Thorne preferred to the cloying perfumes of the inner court, where the musk of civet and the heavy floral notes of rosewater were used to mask the stench of unwashed bodies and sour politics. In the mews, the smells were honest. A bird was sick, or it was well; it was hungry, or it was satiated. There was no room for the ambiguity that defined the life of a courtier. Elias moved through the dim morning light, his boots crunching softly on the fresh rushes, checking the perches before the sun climbed high enough to wake the household.

He stopped before a tiercel peregrine named Malice, a bird with feathers the color of a thundercloud and eyes that seemed to hold a permanent grudge against the world. Malice was a gift from the Duke of Burgundy, a creature of exquisite breeding and terrible temper. Elias reached out a gloved hand, not to touch, but to gauge the bird's alertness. The peregrine shifted its weight, the silver bells on its legs giving a sharp, crystalline chime that echoed against the stone vaulted ceiling. Those bells were more than ornaments; they were the heartbeat of the mews, a constant rhythmic inventory of which bird was restless and which was at peace.

To the uninitiated, the mews were merely a stable for birds, a utility for the King's recreation. But to Elias, the mews were a sanctuary of observation. From this low stone building at the edge of the palace grounds, he could see the backstairs of power. He saw which messengers arrived in the dead of night with lathered horses, which ladies-in-waiting slipped out for clandestine walks in the orchard, and which ministers spent their evenings pacing the battlements alone. The court might have ignored the man in the leather jerkin with the scarred forearms, but the man in the leather jerkin ignored nothing. He was the King's Falconer, and in a kingdom built on sight, he was the only one who truly watched the watchers.

The morning ritual began with the "manning" of the newer birds, a process of gentling that required more patience than most kings possessed. Elias took a young merlin onto his fist, a small, fierce thing that puffed its feathers in a display of nervous aggression. He began to speak to it in a low, rhythmic drone—not words of command, but a steady stream of nonsense intended to anchor the bird to his voice. In the court, words were weapons, used to trap or to climb. In the mews, words were merely vibrations, a tool to build a bridge between two very different kinds of predator. Elias often wondered if the King understood that his power was much the same; it relied entirely on the belief of those beneath him that the hand holding the leash was steady.

By the time the sun had fully risen, casting long slanting bars of gold through the high, narrow windows, the rest of the mews staff had arrived. There were the falconer's apprentices, boys with perpetually scratched hands and wide eyes, and the old grooms who had seen enough reigns to know that the birds were the only thing that remained constant. They moved with a practiced efficiency, cleaning the weathered blocks and preparing the morning's ration of washed meat. It was a silent labor, conducted under the watchful gaze of thirty pairs of predatory eyes. The birds did not tolerate shouting or sudden movements, and so the mews was perhaps the quietest place in the entire palace complex.

"The Lord Chamberlain sent word," muttered Silas, the eldest of the under-falconers, as he scrubbed a stone perch. He didn't look up from his work, his voice barely audible over the scraping of his brush. "The King intends to fly the gyrfalcons tomorrow at dawn. He expects the white northern birds to be ready. He wants a show for the Spanish envoy."

Elias frowned. The white gyrfalcons were magnificent, but they were temperamental in the humid river air of the lowlands. They were birds of the frost and the high crags, and bringing them out for a mere display of vanity was a risk. If a bird refused to return or, worse, if it missed its strike in front of the Spaniards, it would be more than a sporting failure. It would be seen as a sign of waning royal authority. "The white birds are still casting their feathers," Elias replied, his voice flat. "They are not at their peak. I told the Master of the Hunt as much three days ago."

"The Master of the Hunt isn't the one who has to answer to the King when the Spaniard sneers," Silas said, finally looking up. His face was a map of deep wrinkles and old scars, the legacy of forty years in the service of the crown. "The Chamberlain was specific. He said the King wants the 'emblems of the North' to be seen. He wants them to see that even the wild edges of the world answer to his whistle."

This was the drama of the court, translated into the language of feathers. A hawk was never just a hawk; it was a symbol of dominion, a living heraldic device. To fly a gyrfalcon was to claim a connection to the ancient, cold power of the high latitudes. To fly a goshawk was to demonstrate the practical, brutal efficiency of a hunter. Elias understood the theater of it, even if he found it exhausting. He knew that the choice of bird for a hunt was as carefully considered as the choice of a gown for a ball or a stallion for a parade. Tomorrow, he would have to be both a sportsman and a stage manager, ensuring that the King's vanity was protected by the steady nerves of the birds.

As Silas returned to his scrubbing, a young page in the royal livery appeared at the heavy oak door of the mews. The boy looked out of place in his velvet doublet and silk hose, standing tentatively on the edge of the straw-covered floor. He clutched a small

leather tube, the kind used for carrying official scrolls, but his eyes were darting around the shadows of the rafters as if he expected a raptor to drop on his head at any moment.

"Master Thorne?" the boy called out, his voice cracking slightly.

Elias lowered the merlin back onto its perch and draped a small hood over its head to keep it calm. He walked toward the page, his heavy boots sounding a dull thud-thud on the floor. "I am Thorne. What business does the privy chamber have with the birds at this hour?"

"It is not from the privy chamber, sir," the page whispered, stepping closer so that he was well within the circle of the mews' privacy. "It is a request from the Queen's Master of Horse. He asks that you personally inspect the hoods for the gyrfalcons. He says the leather on the new set is... unsatisfactory."

Elias took the leather tube, but he didn't open it. He knew the hoods for the gyrfalcons perfectly well; he had stitched them himself from the finest calfskin, dyed a deep royal crimson and topped with plumes of ostrich herl. There was nothing wrong with the leather. The message was a signal, a coded invitation to look closer at something that seemed ordinary. He felt a familiar tightening in his chest—the sensation of a lure being swung just out of reach.

"Tell the Master of Horse that I will attend to the leatherwork tonight," Elias said, his expression impassive. "If the King's birds are to fly, their finery must be perfect. I would hate for a loose stitch to cause a distraction."

The page nodded quickly, clearly relieved to be away from the predatory silence of the room, and vanished back into the bright sunlight of the courtyard. Elias watched him go, then turned and retreated to his small workshop at the back of the mews. It was a cramped space filled with the tools of his trade: curved needles, balls of waxed silk thread, various punches, and scraps of exotic leathers. It was here that he spent his nights, repairing the equipment that bound the wild to the royal.

He sat at his bench and opened the leather tube. Inside was not a scroll, but a single falcon's hood, half-finished and unadorned. To an untrained eye, it was a discarded piece of craft, but Elias saw the inconsistencies immediately. The stitching along the eye-seam was uneven, a deliberate mess of threads that didn't match the usual precision of the palace leather-workers. He picked up a small scalpel and carefully unpicked the botched stitches.

Tucked into the narrow fold of the leather, where the hood would rest against the bird's cere, was a sliver of parchment no larger than a fingernail. It was covered in a tiny, cramped script that required Elias to hold it close to the whale-oil lamp on his

desk. The message was brief: *The north wind brings more than frost. Check the jesses of the bird from the border.*

Elias burned the parchment in the flame of the lamp, watching the tiny ash curl into nothingness. The "bird from the border" was a reference to a young female peregrine that had arrived only two weeks ago, a gift from a northern lord whose loyalty was often questioned in the capital. The bird was currently being kept in the isolation bay, a separate section of the mews used for new arrivals to ensure they didn't bring any avian pox or mites to the rest of the royal collection.

He walked to the isolation bay, a cool, damp corner of the building where the air felt even heavier than in the main hall. The border bird was a "haggard," a hawk caught in the wild as an adult, and she was exceptionally fierce. She hissed as Elias approached, her wings bating against the air in a frantic attempt to fly from her perch. He stepped in close, his movements slow and predictable, and managed to secure her by the leash.

As he lifted her onto his glove, he felt the weight of her. She was a powerhouse, built for the long pursuit and the killing blow. He looked down at her legs. The jesses—the leather straps that stayed permanently attached to a hawk's ankles—looked standard. They were made of supple, oil-tanned leather, knotted securely through silver grommets. However, as Elias ran his thumb along the underside of the left jess, he felt a slight ridge. It wasn't a flaw in the hide, but something inserted between two layers of leather that had been glued and then stitched together so finely that the seam was nearly invisible.

He didn't dare open it here. In the mews, even the shadows had ears, and the apprentices would be wondering why he was spending so much time with a bird that wasn't yet part of the King's active roster. He replaced the peregrine on her perch, his mind racing. The mews were supposed to be his sanctuary, the one place where the complexities of the court couldn't reach him. But the message in the hood and the hidden weight in the jess told a different story. The birds were no longer just the King's pride; they were becoming the King's postmen.

Elias walked back into the main hall of the mews, his face a mask of professional calm. He saw Silas watching him from across the room, the old man's eyes narrowed in curiosity or perhaps suspicion. In this world, trust was a luxury that could get a man killed, and Elias had survived this long by trusting only the birds. They, at least, were incapable of lying. A hawk would never pretend to be your friend while reaching for your throat; if it intended to strike, it did so with every ounce of its being.

"Is the border bird settling?" Silas asked, leaning on his broom.

"She's a fighter," Elias replied, picking up a bowl of water to refresh the bird's bath.

"She doesn't like the smell of the city. She'll take time to man, more time than the King likely has patience for."

"Most things take more time than the King has patience for," Silas grumbled, "including the turning of the seasons. He wants his gyrfalcons tomorrow, and he wants them perfect. You'd best get to those hoods, Elias. You know how he gets when the finery isn't up to the mark."

Elias nodded and returned to his bench. He spent the next few hours working on the legitimate hoods, his fingers moving with a mechanical grace born of years of repetition. But his thoughts were elsewhere. He was thinking about the "north wind" mentioned in the note. The court was currently buzzing with rumors of a rebellion in the northern provinces, fueled by heavy taxes and a poor harvest. If the northern lords were using the gift of a falcon to smuggle intelligence into the heart of the palace, the mews were about to become the most dangerous room in the kingdom.

The role of a falconer was one of unique access. Because birds needed to be flown in open spaces and kept in quiet environments, Elias had the right to move through the palace grounds at all hours. He could be on the battlements at dawn or in the private gardens at dusk, and no one would question him as long as he had a hawk on his fist. The bird was his passport, his excuse for being anywhere and everywhere. It was a position of immense potential for a spy, and it seemed someone had finally realized it.

As evening fell, the mews grew quiet. The birds tucked their heads under their wings, becoming shapeless mounds of feathers on their perches. The only sound was the occasional rattle of a chain or the soft "whir" of a bird preening itself in its sleep. Elias finished the last of the King's crimson hoods and set them in a neat row. They looked innocent enough—beautiful examples of the leather-worker's art, adorned with gold thread and semi-precious stones.

He stayed long after the apprentices had gone to their loft and Silas had retreated to his cottage near the gate. The mews were bathed in the blue light of a rising moon, the shadows long and distorted on the stone floor. Elias went back to the isolation bay and retrieved the border bird once more. In the silence of the night, he used his finest blade to slit the hidden compartment in the jess.

Out fell a tiny roll of vellum, so thin it was almost translucent. He didn't read it. Instead, he felt the weight of the decision he was about to make. If he took this message to the King's Secretary, he would be rewarded with gold and perhaps a higher station, but he would also be firmly entangled in the very intrigues he despised. He would become a tool of the crown's darker purposes. If he ignored it, or destroyed it, he might be protecting a traitor, or perhaps protecting the only people speaking the truth to power.

Elias looked at the peregrine. She watched him with an unblinking, obsidian stare, her head tilting slightly as if assessing his worth. In the wild, there was no treason, only survival. There was no loyalty, only the bond between the hunter and the sky. He realized then that he couldn't stay neutral. The mews had been breached. The "whispering mews" were no longer a metaphor; they were a reality.

He carefully tucked the vellum into the palm of his glove. He would wait for the dawn hunt. He would see how the King handled the gyrfalcons, and he would see who among the Spanish envoys and the northern lords watched the birds with more than just sporting interest. The hunt was not just a pursuit of game; it was a pursuit of truth, and Elias Thorne, the man who held the leash, would be the one to decide which secrets were allowed to fly and which were brought crashing to the ground.

The bells on the sleeping hawks gave a soft, collective shiver as a draft swept through the room. Elias stood in the center of the mews, a solitary figure between the silent stone and the restless creatures of the air. Tomorrow, the King would fly his white birds, and the world would watch the spectacle of power. But here, in the shadows and the straw, the real game had already begun. The first message had arrived, the first stitch had been pulled, and the King's Falconer was no longer just a servant of the hunt. He was a keeper of the kingdom's unspoken words, and the wind was starting to rise.

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