



F O N D A L E E

U N T E T H E R E D
S K Y

Award-winning author of *Jade City*



FONDA LEE
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FOR SASHA,

My writing companion and a very good dog

I

FLEDGLING

Zahra was her name. When the crate opened, all I saw at first were her eyes, the largest of any living creature, enormous golden orbs fixing me with a raptor's murderous glare. She was a year-old fledgling taken from the nest, already lethal and immense. I was a woman of eighteen, small, wounded, overanxious. Sweat coated my hands and lathered my body beneath heavy leather work gloves and a tarnished scale vest. Ruhkers have been killed on the first day. If it happened to me, another apprentice would take my place.

Zahra stepped calmly into the mews pen without coaxing. Babak and the gathered ruhkers watching from behind the bars nodded approvingly. The fledgling hadn't hunched in the crate in fear, nor exploded out of it screaming with rage. She was healthy, calm, and brave—the most anyone could ask for. My excitement ran like a fever—the blood hot in my head, my fingertips tingling and swollen. I was thrillingly, terrifyingly aware of my fragility. A roc could knock me down in a single blow. With one massive taloned foot, she could crush my head like a ripe apricot and tear out my entrails before anyone could make a move.

I loved her with the gravity of a stone sinking into a pool.

A fully grown female roc stands a head taller than most men. Fully spread, her wings reach as wide as three people lined up fingertip to fingertip with arms outstretched. Rocs aren't the impossible size that storytellers and artists would have you believe, but nevertheless Zahra loomed over me. She made the falcon I'd flown as a girl seem like a toy.

I began to speak quietly, murmuring my admiration for her as I picked up the butchered hind leg of a boar, careful to use my nondominant hand as I placed it on the wooden perch. Zahra's head jerked, staring first at me, then at my offering. A moment of fateful decision—one that felt to me like the

judgment of God—before she hopped onto the perch as if she'd done it a thousand times and began to tear into the meat.

Audible sighs of relief escaped those watching. I backed out of the mews, opening and closing one barred gate and then the other, my knees weak. Babak was counting out a fat purse of silver for Gazsi, the roc hunter. He handed over the payment grudgingly but without complaint. As Master of the Royal Mews, Babak was responsible for ensuring that the king's rocs and the ruhkers who handled them were maintained at full roster and in good condition. Gazsi charged a fortune for a captured fledgling, but as one of the few reliable roc hunters, he could do so.

Gazsi sauntered past, whistling and swinging the bulging bag of coins. He paused beside me. "She was second to hatch." The roc hunter's voice was gruff, but had the singsong quality of a man from the mountain tribes. "Her sister tried to kill her, to push her out of the nest, but she hung on. I was going to take the older chick, but then I saw this one start to fly. She flew farther and faster than the other one. Was the first to hunt, the first to make a kill."

He seemed almost teary-eyed—an incongruous sight, as Gazsi was a lion of a man, with a mane of wild hair and so many roc-inflicted scars that he looked as if he'd been flogged in a dozen dungeons. Roc hunters are even more demented than ruhkers. Gazsi spent months scaling the steepest peaks in search of roc eyries. If he found a nest, he camped in hiding nearby, watching the ugly white chicks until they grew into sleek dark youths and could fly and hunt on their own. Then he set a baited net trap in hopes of capturing and subduing a fledgling while its parents were away or not paying attention. So many things could go wrong: The trap might fail, leaving him with nothing to show for the season. The angry, trapped roc might kill or maim him. The adults might discover him and tear him to pieces, feeding him to the same chicks he'd watched hatch and grow.

Gazsi looked down at me, his nostrils flaring. His expression suggested he didn't think I was worthy of the roc he'd risked his life to bring to the mews.

Perhaps he held that opinion of every new ruhker. “Camel meat is her favorite. Liver especially.” He jingled his bag of money and strode away.

“Ester!” Nasmin came over and embraced me. When she pulled back, she kept ahold of my shoulders, her eyes dancing with excitement and the covetousness that every ruhker has when a new roc arrives. Ruhkers can’t get enough of rocs. Even with their own to occupy them, they can’t help jealously admiring new fledglings. “She’s splendid,” Nasmin declared. “I can’t wait until we’re hunting together. I’ll bring you all the choice bits from Azar’s kills during your dark days.”

I nodded in wordless thanks, relaxing a little into her optimism. Most ruhkers paid little attention to the apprentices, but Nasmin was one of the younger women in the mews and one of the few who’d been kind to me when I’d arrived a year ago. The simple knowledge that I had a friend who’d gone through what I was facing and was confident in my survival made it easier to not think about the alternative.

Babak handed me a canteen of water, a sack full of raw meat, and a blanket for when night fell. The Master of the Mews was nearly forty, a veritable ancient by ruhkers’ standards. His face was square and sun-leathered, his beard closely trimmed, and he spoke with gestures, grunts, and frowns more than words. Babak never treated me better or worse than any other apprentice. Only competence and dedication to one’s bird meant anything to him.

When a ruhking apprenticeship opens, each satrapy in the realm is required to submit the name of one candidate between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two, with talent in hunting, tracking, riding, and falconry, among other qualities. When I’d presented myself in the governor’s receiving room to ask for the nomination, Governor Govad had frowned down at me with grandfatherly bewilderment and concern. “Ruhking is no fit life for a young woman.” Govad had tugged doubtfully on his thick beard. “If you succeed, you won’t be able to come home. If you fail, you certainly won’t be able to come home.” In the end, however, he nominated me, perhaps because I

continued to plead my case no matter his attempts to dissuade me. Or perhaps there were no better or more willing candidates.

Out of every five apprentice ruhkers, two will be killed or maimed, two will leave or be sent away, and only one will ever fly a roc. And the dangers do not diminish after that. Babak had seen apprentices come and go. He would place no odds on my success, yet his equanimity was an odd comfort, because I shared his blunt assessment: Either I would become a ruhker, or I would die trying. I would train and care for Zahra, yet she could never belong to me. In name, she belonged to Antrius the Bold and the Kingdom of Dartha, but even that was not true. A roc is always a wild thing, always God's monster alone.

"Five days dark, then hood her," Babak said. "I want her up in the air by next month, which means no time to waste backtracking on training if you make mistakes. Do it right."

I tilted my face toward the sky, trying to soak in enough sunlight to carry me through the days to come. Then I went into the pen to join my splendid monster in darkness.



I was six years old the first time I saw a roc. At first, I thought it was an especially large buzzard circling overhead, but then it drifted lower in the sky, and I saw the shape and color of it, the sheer *size* of it. I started running, laughing and shouting, toward the open ground beneath where it balanced on the stiff wind. I wasn't afraid, just childishly delighted, as if I'd seen a horse the size of a tree, or a dog the size of an ox.

My mother grabbed me by the arm with a shriek. "Holy fires, it'll think you're a little monkey and carry you right off!"

That was nonsense. Rocs don't carry their prey away, and trained rocs don't attack humans, but my mother didn't know that. Nevertheless, she was right that it's a bad idea to run underneath a hunting roc and distract it with noise and movement; ruhkers hate it when people do that.

Wild rocs were a rare sight in the south where I grew up. My father was a minor landowner with a small but fertile and well-managed parcel of pastureland upon which we raised goats and grew olive trees. We weren't wealthy, but we were well off enough to have house servants in addition to field serfs. After I was born, it seemed my mother wasn't able to have more children. She miscarried several times, each loss causing her tremendous pain and heartache. In some of my earliest memories, she's lying on cushions, sweaty, pale, and exhausted, her breath sour from throwing up. "You were too big and came out too late," she moaned. "You ruined something inside me."

My parents went to the Fire Temple and fed sticks of sandalwood to the holy flames, they consulted with magi and astronomers, my father sacrificed many bulls and gave money to the poor, my mother sought out a slew of midwives and physicians, even journeying for days to see specialists in Antopolis, trying every medicine or remedy. But by the time I was eight years old, my parents had given up on their dreams of having a large family.

"Ester," my mother said, "you're a miracle. You're our one and only. Don't ever get married, don't ever leave your father and me alone." Even though she was a sad and unhealthy woman, my mother was still sweet to me. She was undemanding, generous to the servants, and didn't make a fuss over getting things done in a certain way or by a certain time. She thought life ought to be enjoyed in the moment, messiness tolerated, and even children and slaves should feel free to sing and dance.

My father's desire for a son was so strong that he not only allowed but encouraged me in the things I most loved to do: wandering for hours, getting dirty exploring, riding my mule, and looking after all sorts of animals, from baby goats to injured birds. He took me along as he made the rounds of our property, speaking to the senior field hands about irrigation, and crop yield, and fences against the wolves. I loved our land: the pale green grazing fields in the valley by the creek, the tidy groves of sunbaked black olive trees in red dirt, the mist that sometimes rolled down from the blue shadow of the

mountains, and the gigantic sky, upon which only a few stretched clouds loitered.

Then, a miracle: My mother became pregnant. My parents were afraid to be too hopeful; after all, my mother had lost babies in their fifth month. So they prayed earnestly but quietly and tiptoed on cosmic eggshells, trying to pad our lives with good deeds in the hopes that this time their efforts would be noticed and rewarded. My father held a summer feast for three hundred people and gave our servants time off to visit their relatives. My mother did healthful breathing exercises and drank special soups and admonished me if I ever so much as muttered an unkind word about anything.

All their fervent wishing paid off. I was nine years old when my brother, Arnan, was born.

Arnan was a fussy, temperamental baby, but my parents were so overjoyed with him that even his hours of incessant bawling didn't dent their enthusiasm. The whole house would be kept awake during his colicky nights, but if, in my sleep-deprived clumsiness the next morning, I happened to drop a bowl on the floor, my mother would hiss at me to be quiet and not wake the baby.

You can't blame me for not being as thrilled with Arnan as my parents were. When he was in a good mood, he could be a charming little fellow. He would run up and hug me, and I would hold him on my lap and play with him and tell him stories, feeling very much like a responsible big sister.

Most other times, though, I felt driven to slip away to where I felt most at ease and most myself: wandering alone in the wide, quiet spaces, searching out birds' nests, picking wild figs, stirring the creek bed with my bare feet.

I had a falcon, a male saker I named Cas, and I trained him to hunt birds. He was small and unusually light in color, quick off the glove and beautiful to watch, cream and dappled brown, like milk sprinkled with cinnamon. We had some open fields at the edge of our property that were ideal for flying him. One cool morning in the spring, I walked out to see a chariot standing in the tall grass. I was in a sour mood; my mother had told me to be back in an hour because I had to watch Arnan today, as she was going into town to

shop for spices. So I could only get a couple flights in, at best. But the sight of the chariot made me forget everything. It looked like it might be a nobleman's war chariot. Sunlight winked off the rims of its wheels as if they were giant golden coins, and its sides were painted with red feathers on a shining black background. The two harnessed stallions had proud arching necks and flowing white manes. There was a figure standing in the chariot, one hand shielding his eyes as he tilted his head back and scanned the sky. He blew a shrill reed whistle: *tweee tweeeeee*.

I walked closer and he noticed me. I stopped, Cas sitting hooded on my fist, as I stared into the face of a young man with a jet-black beard and dimples over his eyebrows. For a long moment, we eyed each other curiously. "That's a good-looking tiercel you have," he said. "I bet he's got fire. How long have you been flying him?"

"Since last year," I said. And then because the young man seemed friendly, and knew something about falcons, I asked, "Are you a falconer too?"

The young man laughed, a musical sound. "I don't hunt *sparrows*." He looked up into the sky once more. I followed his gaze and saw the vast silhouette of a roc swooping toward us, wings spread, just the tips of the long flight feathers moving as she sailed in a long, curving arc, nearly skimming the ground at the end of her trajectory. I ducked as she brought her flight up short, her huge taloned feet reaching seemingly for my head. A single one of them could encircle my skull the way a man might pluck a peach. She went right past me, the wind in her wake buffeting me in the face like a flash gale, here and gone in an instant. With astonishing silence, she landed on the chariot cadge, calm and regal as a queen.

Her ruhker tossed her a piece of meat the size of my fist, then hooded her and leashed her jesses. Up close, her size and beauty stole my breath; she didn't seem as if she could be real. In some of the magi's stories, angels take the form of rocs to convey the immortal souls of heroes to the spirit realm. In that moment, I believed it utterly. Yet the ruhker moved around her with ease and complete lack of fear, as if going through a familiar routine with an

old friend. When he was done, he took up his spot in the chariot. He glanced back at me, touching his forehead briefly in greeting and farewell. “Good hunting.” He flicked the reins, sending the horses forward.

I watched until the pair of figures, the man and the roc, vanished behind a dip in the land. Then I turned around and ran back home without even flying Cas, my heart thumping. I wished I could’ve run after the chariot and shouted for it to wait for me. I imagined the ruhker holding his hand out to me, so I could take it and jump up beside him and go to whatever wondrous place it was where people and giant birds lived together.



Heavy canvas covered the gate and window of Zahra’s pen, blocking out the sunlight and noise of the outside world. During my waking hours, I walked slowly around the enclosure, my hand trailing the wall, talking to Zahra in a calm, low tone. I heard her shifting on the perch, ruffling her feathers.

The dark days acclimate the roc to the ruhker’s voice and presence. In the long period of sensory deprivation, the fledging starts to forget her old life, to feel that perhaps she has always been in this dark room, that the voice of her trainer is the only constant, the only thing there is, the only thing there ever will be.

It does the same to the ruhker. As the hours and then the days passed, my life shrank to nothing but Zahra. I marked the passage of time only by the regular occasions when the corner of the drape would lift and a hand would pass me a fresh canteen of water and a small meal—kebab wrapped in flatbread, a bowl of rice or stew, a piece of fruit. A few times it was Nasmin’s hand that reached through the bars. She squeezed my fingers in wordless support and passed me damp packages wrapped in cloth—the liver of a jackal, the heart of a wolf, the lungs of a wild pig.

I fed these delicacies to Zahra. I parsed out her food sparingly, so it was never long before she felt hungry again. It was important that she view me as a source of food as many times as possible during this impressionable

period. Humans are not the preferred prey of rocs, but with a strong enough appetite and opportunity, they're not picky. I had to prove to my roc that I was a better provider than I was a meal.

Sometimes a young roc is not convinced. I'm glad I wasn't at the scene last month when screaming erupted from inside the mews and the canvas was drawn back on one of the new fledglings, mantled over her ruhker, eating his entrails.

Zahra became accustomed to the sound and shape of me moving around the pen, bringing tasty treats to her perch. It was not entirely dark in the room after our eyes adjusted. Light seeped in between the cracks of the wooden-plank walls and around the edges of the draping, just enough to see by. I paid close attention to how eagerly she fed; I couldn't let her get too hungry or too full. While she ate, I ran my hands down her wings and back, admiring the sleekness of her feathers, teaching her to accept my touch. I felt a little sick with fear every time I approached her, but my voice did not waver from a soothing monotone. I was careful never to walk slower or faster, or to let my hands and body shake or fidget. All those things would've been signs of weakness, glaring evidence that I was just another prey animal.

On the second or third day, a loud noise came from outside—perhaps a cart fell over—and Zahra startled, opening her wings and lifting off from her perch. She knocked me into a wall and I slid to the ground as if I'd been thrown. There was only room for her to flap a few times from one end of the enclosure to the other. By then the noise had stopped, and she settled down, but my head kept ringing for a while. Another time, I waited a bit too long with the next meal, and Zahra grabbed for the meat in my left hand as I moved it toward her perch. One of her talons tore through the thick leather of my glove and gave me a bloody gash on the forearm. Tears sprang to my eyes. I dropped the meat on the perch and, as she ate, I pulled off the glove and sucked the wound, silencing a whimper as I retreated to a corner. I could leave the mews if it was a matter of life or death, or I could reach behind the bars to pull a rope that would ring a bell for urgent help. I did neither. The

cut wasn't deep. I wrapped it tightly in the cloth that had carried the still-warm wolf's heart.

Ruhkers must be endlessly patient, determined, and stoic. They can't express frustration, anger, or pain around their charges. During his apprenticeship, one of the other young ruhkers, Darius, had his arm broken by a roc while he was tethering it. He passed the leash to his other hand, tied it one-handed, and finished his chores cleaning the mews, sweeping with his right arm while his left hung dangling. All the while he never made a sound. After Darius's arm healed, Babak gave him the next roc to train.

I relieved myself in a straw-filled chamber pot and received one change of clothes through the bars. I drank water from my canteen in small sips every few minutes, but even so I wore my throat down. Ruhkers can barely talk at all after the dark days. What I said was not important, only the sound of my voice. So I told Zahra about how long I had been waiting for her. I told her about the other rocs and ruhkers in her new home. I told her about our future, about how we would always hunt together. I told her everything about my family and the place I grew up: olive trees and goats, the stone house, creek water ice-cold from the mountains, falcons waiting on above. Mother and Father and Arnan. When boredom and exhaustion turned my constant talk into babbling nonsense and dragged my chin to my chest, I slept.

I became convinced that Zahra was listening to me, that she understood and accepted me, that she would always hold in confidence my innermost thoughts and secrets. She would never question my purpose or examine my motives; for her, I simply *was*. An immovable aspect of her world, as she was now in mine. That is the true purpose of the dark days. Perhaps training a roc can be done in other ways, but shocking a person into the mindless devotion of a ruhker cannot.

★ ★ ★

When Arnan was four years old he was insufferably stubborn and demanding. My mother, who'd never been a robust woman to begin with, often suffered from back pain and leg cramps that sometimes caused her to lie in bed most of the day. Even with seemingly boundless reserves of indulgence for her precious son, she regularly told me to take him away for a few hours to give her some peace.

One morning I told Arnan we were going to the east pasture because there were new goat kids and I wanted to see them. He declared that would be boring and refused to go. What did he want to do then? He wanted to look for stones. Arnan had a collection of colorful creek stones that he carried around with him in a small leather sack. He was a little miser about those rocks, always taking them out and sorting them, polishing them, piling them in different groups, and putting them back in, like a moneylender counting his silver.

I made Arnan a deal. I'd play with him and his rocks for a while if he would then agree to go see the goats with me. And he would have to walk fast, because he was too big for me to carry and I had a lot of chores to do later. He agreed. Partway through the game, he realized he was missing one of his white rocks, which elicited a stamping tantrum. He ordered me to help him search in the grass for it, and when we couldn't find it, he demanded we go to the creek to look for a new white rock to replace the lost one. I refused, and started walking to the pastures. Arnan trailed after me, yelling at me to stop and turn back. I was the worst sister, a stupid girl, it was my job to take care of him, Mama said so. And so on. I kept walking. I heard him turn around and run back toward the house, howling with every step. *Good riddance*, I thought.

Arnan's voice didn't seem to be receding at all even though I was walking away as fast as I could. Finally, his screams cut out, presumably because he'd run inside to complain about me, and I closed my eyes at the bliss. The bees droned again. The birds chirped once more.

I sighed and turned around. My parents would not be impressed if I ran off for the rest of the day when I'd agreed to watch him. Since he'd calmed

down, perhaps I could bribe him to forget his rocks and come along peacefully. I hurried back down the road and before I saw the house come into view, I saw *it* instead.

It was crouched like an enormous cat, elbows and hip bones jutting sharply out from its stocky frame, the quill-like hairs of its mottled pelt raised like a forest of needles. Its apelike head was bent low and I stared into its demonic face: malevolent mismatched eyes, slitted nostrils, a short grinning muzzle filled with two rows of dagger-teeth. The spiked mace-like tip of its tail whipped back and forth, lazily, in an arch over its body.

I had never seen one before, but countless frightening children's stories gave me the name at once: *manticore*.

At the manticore's feet was Arnan's embroidered red silk jacket. Inside the jacket, I knew in an instant of detached horror, was Arnan. The manticore's black tongue snaked out and licked his face, almost like a dog. Then it picked him up by his throat and stood, and my brother's body dangled limp from the manticore's jaws, the neck bent at an impossible angle, feet swinging just over the ground, one sandaled and one bare.

A scream began to leave my lips, but my fist, as if moving on its own, shoved itself into my mouth. I cut my knuckles on my teeth, tasted blood on my tongue just as my bladder gave out.

Run!

Arnan!

The two words shrieked in my mind at the same time and crashed, like two of my brother's warring stones flung into each other, meeting in midair with equal force, falling. Piss warmed the insides of my legs and between my toes, but I was frozen, frozen like a rabbit in an eagle's shadow, frozen as the breath before death. The manticore turned its gaze on me. One long, infinite stare. Its eyes resembled human eyes, but whatever feeling or intelligence was behind them was alien and hungry. One iris was golden brown, the other was as blue as the sky.

In the endless second when I knew my brother was dead and I was soon to join him, the door to my house opened and my mother came outside with a

pitcher in one hand. “Arnan!” she called. “Ester—” She dropped the pitcher and screamed. Her scream split the air like axe cleaving bone.

The bronze pitcher landed and rolled away from her, spilling a river of white goat’s milk. *No ...* My brain seemed to be moving too slowly, far slower than everything else around me.

The manticore was not slow. It dropped Arnan and took three great bounds away from me, its body coiling and uncoiling with terrible grace, and on its third bound, it knocked my poor mother to the ground. Her skirt billowed and flapped between the manticore’s front paws and her scream died in the air the instant she did.

My legs unlocked. They connected to the part of me that understood it was prey, the part that wanted to live. As the manticore shouldered through the open door of my house, the servants inside began to scream, and I ran for my life.

The well. I reached the well and rolled over the stone lip, bruising my hips. Hanging on with shaking arms, I scraped the skin off my knees and feet, scrabbling for a hold on the curved inside wall. My toes jammed into a crevice and I stifled a cry as one of the nails bent backward. A handhold, another foothold. A childhood spent climbing trees and scrambling up and down rocky embankments—*I could do this*. I could still hear screaming, which meant the manticore was not coming for me, not yet. I concentrated only on lowering myself, one inch at a time, to the bottom of the well.

My arms were fraying cord. At last I was low enough that my foot could almost stretch down to the surface of the water. How deep was it? Not deep, it couldn’t be—the spring had been drier than usual, nearly gone already. I pushed off the wall and dropped the rest of the way, legs buckling like a colt’s as I landed in the knee-high water and fell onto my tailbone with a splash. I curled into a sitting ball, wrapping my arms around myself, and leaned my head on the wall, my mouth stretched wide in silent sobs.

There was no more screaming from above, no more sounds at all. Manticores are driven into a killing frenzy by the sound of screaming. As long as it hears screaming, the manticore will not stop to feed—it will keep