

Osanna Vaughn

Legacy of Runes

Falcon Spirit: Book 3 of the Chronicles of the Falconers of Nymath

A novel



The author would like to express her gratitude to Ingeborg Ahrenkiel, Monika Felten, Imogen Cooper, Gunther Laudahn, Anna Kristina, Falconer DietmarD amm, (Hamburg), Falconer Lenka Pelakova (Prague), Lynnelle Stewart (editing), Torsten Reinecke, Da Wilkens and the rest of the Legacy of Runes team, as well as her family and friends, for their support and encouragement.

Prologue

The settlement had lain abandoned, deep in the forest to the north-east of Sanforan, for many generations. At a glance the wooden buildings still appeared unoccupied: holes gaped in the roofs where slate tiles had fallen in, weeds grew in profusion between the logs that made up the walls, and the fence surrounding the property had collapsed in many places. Mist swirled close to the ground, weaving insidiously around anything standing in its way, like fingers searching to find a strangling grip on the forsaken place.

Only those who had received the secret invitation knew differently. Following random paths between the trees, eight caped men crept stealthily through the darkest night of Nymath's moons, arriving at the meeting place as the first light of dawn awoke the sky.

Stepping furtively out of the forest into the clearing within a few minutes of each other, they each carried falcons on gauntleted fists; before slipping inside the front door of the main house, they let the birds fly and perch where they would.

Stantel, a tall, haughty Raiden, whose dark, good-looking features were marred by a raw, ragged scar under his left eye and a moody countenance, was the last to arrive. His eyes quickly adjusted to the gloomy main room lit only by a few tallow candles on the mantle-piece over the hearth. Counting heads, he nodded.

"Good, good," he said. "Everyone's here I see."

He bowed with fist to chest towards a figure sitting huddled in a corner, though the gesture emanated a strong measure of disdain.

"Thank you Lotan for letting us use your humble abode," he said.

The other mumbled in reply, looking nervously at the faces sitting round the table. All were Raiden falconers in their prime, and looking at them brought a sour taste to Lotan's mouth. Three times he had hoped to bond with a falcon himself and three times he had failed. Instead, he had become the well-respected archery teacher at Falcon Hall, and for many seasons had made the best of the situation. Until the arrival of that upstart, Alduin, and his wild falcon! Everything had changed then, and the bitterness of disappointment had returned in full force, leading Lotan to make a thousand plans for some kind of revenge. It had never come to anything. Just when a good plan was developing he had fallen seriously ill, and then that idiot Fath, Carto, had done the unthinkable and shot the falcon with an arrow. Only a Fath could be that stupid! Lotan had never intended any harm to the bird; it was the boy he had been out to

get. Unable to trust the Fath to keep his mouth shut once he had been caught, Lotan had been forced to flee the city. To this day, he had no idea who might have learnt of his involvement in the disaster, and he dared not return to find out: harming a falcon of Nymath, even a wild one, was a serious crime; yet the thought of somehow getting his back on the boy Alduin – a young man now – still slumbered restlessly in the back of his mind.

“And you won’t leave us dry-throated I trust,” Stantel said, removing his cape and drawing a drinking cup from his back pack before sitting down.

Lotan surfaced from his grovelling memories and stood up. His skin was sallow, and dark hair fell in greasy strands around his face. With shuffling steps he moved over to the area where he prepared his food and picked up two dusty bottles of mead. After serving his visitors, he gathered up a tattered cloak, wrapped it around himself and returned to his corner.

The falconers drank in silence, waiting for their self-appointed leader to begin. Stantel enjoyed the feeling of tense anticipation that was building in the room, granting him a certain sense of importance. Finally he spoke.

“Fellow falconers,” he began, taking a moment to look intently at each of his colleagues, while making a point of avoiding Lotan’s face completely. “You know exactly why we are here. The child is ... an abomination. There is no other word for it. And there is no other action to be taken but to rid Nymath of this monstrosity forever!”

Just two days to go ...

The thought made Triel's heart pound so strongly in his chest that he was sure his young friend Moreya would hear it. They were sitting in silence, side by side, in the small garden in front of his home in Nymath's capital, Sanforan.

Three at the most, but two most likely ...

With difficulty, he brought his mind back to the task on hand: weaving a crown of twigs and falcon feathers for the little girl, as she watched him with enormous, solemn eyes. He had spent most of the day at his lessons and chores; now he was free till dinner time. Exceptionally, he was eating at home because Moreya and her parents, the Falconer Alduin and his life partner Erilea, had just arrived in Sanforan to be on hand for the ...

"Just two days to my birthday," Moreya announced in a soft voice, startling the young falconer recruit out of his musings.

The statement surprised Triel, both for its length and the fact that the words echoed his thoughts so closely, even if their meaning was different. An instant later she amazed him even further.

"And two days till the falcons hatch."

"Two ... or maybe three," he whispered automatically in reply, wondering at the same time at her sudden verbosity and the assurance with which she spoke. This spring she would turn five; yet, while she was mature beyond her years, talkative she was not. She shook her head.

"Two days," she said firmly.

"If you say so," he said, seeing no point in contradicting her. The falcon chicks would hatch in Lord Gilian's good time, he knew. What he did not know was if he would be one of the recruits to bond and become a fully fledged falconer of Nymath.

True to his promise, Triel's stepfather, the Falconer Rael who flew with Sivella, had made the necessary arrangements for the boy to enter training at Falcon Hall; yet, even though Triel's own grandfather Garan had been a falconer, there was no guarantee that he too would become one. His uncle Lotan was the perfect example. Three times he had tried and failed, having to content himself in the end with teaching archery at Falcon Hall. Then, before Triel had even come to live in the city, his uncle had disappeared without a trace. That was a mystery the young boy's active imagination longed to solve one day. What had caused Lotan to leave Sanforan at the height of his career as a respected master?

Once I become a falconer and can see through the eyes of my falcon, I'll go in search of ...

He caught himself.

Wait and see. Nothing's for certain.

“Don't worry,” Moreya said. “There's a chick waiting to bond with you.”

Shivers ran up and down Triel's spine as he stared at the girl.

“How ... how d'you know?” he asked, barely able to formulate the words.

In reply Moreya simply shrugged her shoulders.

“I just know.”

“Triel, Moreya, come and eat,” Bretta's voice called from within the house.

Giving Moreya a last, thoughtful look, Triel stood up, placed the crown on her head and took her small hand in his. Together they walked into the house.

The parlour where the two families sat down to eat, was warmed by a fire burning low on the grate. Though spring had come at last, the evenings still carried more than a trace of winter chill. Two falcons were perched on the sideboard, heads close together as though catching up on old times. One, a majestic Marven, was Alduin's wild falcon Reesha; the other, a female Ithil with an unusual crest, was Rael's Sivella. In spite of their different species, the two were mates – a rare yet not unknown pairing –, though this year they had produced no offspring.

The conversation, as the food was served and passed around, started out swift and jovial, flavoured with the intensity of friends who have not seen each other for some time.

“It's so good to see you all here under our roof again,” Rael began, grinning first at Alduin, then Erilea and Moreya.

“It's good to be here,” Alduin answered. “You all look well, and the young recruit here,” he nodded towards Triel, “is ...”

“I can't believe how tall he's grown,” Erilea said, smiling at the young man. “You've passed your mother by a full head, yet I could have sworn ...”

“But Moreya's grown too,” Bretta interjected.

“It's been too long since ...” Erilea began.

“I know, it's just too long,” Bretta interrupted her again. “You two have become real recluses. If it wasn't for your yearly pilgrimage to the hatchings, I wonder if we'd see you at all.”

“We like the quiet of the forest,” Alduin said, his tone becoming subdued. “It's somehow easier than being in the city, and those who make their way up there come because they're really interested or have a sincere need.”

There was a moment of silence as thoughtful eyes settled on Alduin. He was no normal falconer. Rumours of his mysterious talents had spread throughout Nymath. The further away people lived, the more grossly exaggerated the rumours became, even suggesting he was a magician of questionable motivation and dark deeds. Closer to home, people spoke of the visions that would overcome him, connecting him to other falcons as he flew with Reesha: visions that might be set in the future, just as much as in the present or the past. While based on the truth, these last were only a fraction of the talents that had developed within him as he grew and matured in his bond with Reesha. Curiously enough, the real truth seemed to interest few; but they were the ones, mostly young falconers, who would search him out at his home by the river, hoping to acquire insights and deepen, beyond what was considered normal, the bond with their falcons. At times there were others who came looking for counsel or an understanding of life's mysteries. Alduin shared his deepening knowledge freely, like a sower tossing seeds far and wide, with no idea where they might take root and sprout.

"How are the recruits looking?" Alduin asked Rael, drawing the attention away from himself.

"Very promising," Rael answered. "When I'm in the city, I drop by the hall every day to see how they're coming along. It's a pity that quite a few will have to be disappointed."

"How many?" his old friend asked.

Rael turned to Triel.

"How many are you? Thirteen? Fourteen?"

"Sixteen," Triel answered, a note of concern slipping into his voice.

"Sixteen for nine eggs." Rael said thoughtfully. "That means seven ..."

"Triel will bond," Moreya said, looking up from her food, surprising the adults and sending a shiver down Triel's spine again.

"Unfortunately, we can't be sure," Rael said, trying to convey the undeniable truth as gently as possible. "The choice is completely up to the chicks. All the training, all the longing and all the best wishes from family and friends, will not change a thing. It's out of our hands."

Moreya shook her head.

"We don't need to change anything. You'll see."

Erilea glanced at her daughter, eyes flashing with puzzled apprehension for a brief moment before she managed to hide it.

"You're probably right," she said in a conciliatory tone. "We'll know soon enough."

"You'll see," Moreya repeated, before turning her full concentration back to her dinner.

Bretta lay a hand on Triel's arm, but said nothing. Having grown up as the daughter of an impassioned and arrogant falconer, and sister of a would-be falconer, she had known bitterness and painful consequences. When she was married and taken away from the city by her husband, she had never thought to return. Though there was fear at first and later little joy in her marriage, Bretta had never wanted to see her old home again. The light in her life through the bleak years had been her son Triel; yet when he began to show keen interest in becoming a falconer himself, she was adamantly opposed. All that had changed when Rael had entered their lives, and when Triel's father had been killed in a mining accident. Bretta had, after all, returned to Sanforan, and her son had become a falconer recruit. Now that the moment of truth drew near, fear for her son's possible disappointment was giving her many a sleepless night.

"Have you seen your mother and Bardelph yet?" Rael asked, trying to bring back the light mood with which the meal had begun.

"No, we came straight here," Alduin answered. "We'll go visit Aranthia in the morning, and I guess we'll see Bardelph at Falcon Hall, after his lessons. How's Master Calborth?"

"Well enough, though his eye-sight is failing," Rael said. "He depends on Bardelph a lot."

"What a pity Bardelph never tried to bond with a falcon a second time," Erilea lamented. "If he had he might have become Master Falconer one day."

"You're right," Rael agreed. "He has many of the talents necessary to run Falcon Hall, but lacks the personal experience with a falcon. It's a pity. Especially as there doesn't seem to be anyone else in line to take over once Calborth's gone."

"Well, let's hope that's still a long way away," Bretta said.

"May Lord Gilian hear your words," Alduin whispered under his breath.

"And what of Cal, your father?" Rael asked Alduin.

"He's still living on the outskirts of Thel Gan, just on the edge of the forest," Alduin explained.

"Believe it or not, he's taken up carpentry. Marla's delighted he's found something at last that he really enjoys. It's taken long enough, but he seems fully recovered now."

"And we have to thank Marla for a lot of his recovery," he added, with Erilea nodding in agreement beside him. "She began caring for him when we first brought him unconscious to Falcon Hall, and she never stopped."

"Yes, everything has turned out so well, all things considered," Rael said, looking affectionately towards his family and friends. "The future looks good. No clouds on the horizon."

"Emo," Erilea said, quickly looking towards her daughter, again sensing something vaguely worrying that she could not quite pin down.

“Yes, we have some excellent looking recruits,” Rael continued without noticing. “They all seem to be taking their training very seriously.”

“I have an idea I’d like to pass by Master Calborth,” Alduin said. “I think it might be good for the new falconers to spend a bit more time with experienced falconers during the time before the first bonded flight. We had no such interaction during our training.”

“Could be interesting. It’s always been very individualistic: leave each to his own; but maybe it’s time to broaden our thinking,” Rael said.

“Not everyone will be in agreement,” Bretta said. “Some families hold very much to tradition and are proud of the independence, rather than interdependence. They might not appreciate anything that could be considered interference in the bond between falconer and falcon.”

“I realise that,” Alduin agreed. “We’ll have to be subtle and only work with those who are open to it.”

“Anyway, we’ll have to speak to Calborth first,” Rael said. “I’ll be happy to help if you think I can be subtle enough!”

“Of course! Remember how we went on the survival training with Bardelph?” his friend reminded him. “I was thinking of something similar. Let’s bring the recruits up to the cottage – with their falcons, once they’ve learned to perch properly. You and Sivella could come too. Reesha would be there.”

“Share some of our experiences with them,” Rael said, warming to the idea. “Even the really strange ones.”

“That remains to be seen,” Alduin cautioned. “It might be enough to get to know the recruits and see which ones have potential for the future. Having been to the cottage once, they’ll know how to find their way back, if they feel the impulse to do so. Let’s talk to Calborth and Bardelph about it tomorrow. See what they think of the idea.”

The decision made, the young men turned their attention back to the food. The meal continued in relative silence, only interrupted by exclamations of pleasure, and a toast for the success of the forthcoming hatching. Finally, Triel stood up and excused himself.

“It’s been wonderful to see you, but I have to head back. I’ll see you tomorrow, right?”

“I’m pretty sure Mistress Calborth will let us join you for the midday meal,” Alduin said. “In fact, maybe you could forewarn her. I’d like Moreya to come as well.”

Triel’s eyes widened in delight at the thought of such illustrious visitors joining him at table.

“I’ll be sure to tell her.”

Lifting his fist to his chest, the young recruit bowed solemnly to the adults, one after the other. Then he tousled Moreya's black curls.

"Wait till you see the kittens Mistress Calborth's cat just produced," he said to her. "They're 'dorable."

"I want to see the falcon chicks," the little girl replied.

"Yeah, but that'll take a couple of days. In the meantime, you'll love the kittens."

"All right," she said, though her voice did not sound very convinced.

The following morning, Alduin, Erilea and Moreya wended their way through the cobbled back streets of Sanforan and up a steep side alley, till they came to the house Aranthia and Bardolph had occupied since moving permanently to the city. It had once been the home of Madi Tarai, the Onur seer who had been Aranthia's mentor in her younger years; but it had lain empty for a few years after the old lady had passed on, and since her apprentice, Malnar, had gone mad and been taken into the care of the Elves.

Alduin looked up at the sign hanging over the door: a round wooden disk, painted blue and adorned with three gold runes. *Ansuz*, *Raiðo* and *Perpro*: "inspiration is the road to hidden wisdom" was the meaning. Crystals for clarity, feathers for flight of the mind and bones for the foundation of all things hung in pendants from the disk. Alduin smiled at the fond memories of his first visit to this house so long ago. He knocked on the door.

"Alduin! Erilea!" Aranthia cried in delight after opening the door, giving them both a hug. "Moreya, How you've grown!" she added, bending down and kissing the little girl on the brow, before giving her a hug as well. "When did you arrive? I've been wondering when you'd get here."

"Had a vision of us coming?" Alduin asked, teasing his mother.

"No vision necessary with the hatching so imminent. I know you like to be close on hand."

She moved aside, ushering them into the house.

"We've changed things around. The parlour is downstairs now. Go straight in."

A short while later the four were seated in Malnar's former room. The curtains were pulled wide to either side, exposing the grand view of the ocean, as a fleet of fishing ships approached the harbour after a night at sea, furling rust-red sails to lessen their speed.

"I just made calba," Aranthia said. "Would you like some?"

"Thank you, yes," Erilea replied. "Bacti juice for Moreya, if you have some."

“Of course. Let me get it.”

“I like it here,” Moreya said when Aranthia had left the room to fetch the drinks. “Can I stay with Mimi?”

Alduin and Erilea looked at their daughter in surprise.

“You’d like that?” Erilea asked.

Moreya nodded.

“We’ll ask Mimi then.”

When Aranthia returned with the tray of calba, juice and sweetmeats, Moreya did not waste a moment.

“Mimi, can I stay with you?”

Aranthia glanced at Erilea, but saw no concern there.

“Of course. I’d love that.”

“Bado too?”

“Bado will be delighted,” Aranthia said, knowing that Bardelph’s love for the little girl equalled her own. “And remember, we’re celebrating your birthday here tomorrow.”

Satisfied with the response, Moreya took the glass of juice her grandmother offered her and walked over to the window. In a moment she was fully absorbed, sipping her drink and staring out at the gulls that floated on the breeze, squawking impatiently for the fisherman to start gutting the catch.

“We’re going up to Falcon Hall and then I’ll have to pick up her things; but I’ll bring her here around fifth bell. Will that be all right?” Erilea asked.

“Of course. Whenever it’s easiest. I’ll be here.”

“Actually, it might be good for her to be with you for the next few days,” Erilea began. “There’s something strange ...”

“With Moreya?” Aranthia asked.

“She says some unusual things. Like she knows something. She’s very sure of herself.”

“Has she been seeing things?”

“Not that I know of. She just says things. And it’s always to do with falcons.”

“Though her grandfather’s Raiden blood shows in her white skin, she’s surely inherited some of your talents as well,” Alduin said, speaking directly to his mother. “What Erilea says is true. Moreya speaks with incredible confidence for her age ... and it’s always about falcons. Just last night she said that Triel would bond with a chick; and it was as though there was no question about it.”

“Lord Gilian forbid she should ever bond with a falcon,” Aranthia said, before she could stop herself. “Nymath wouldn’t be ready for something like that.”

“Do you think that’s possible?” Erilea asked in shock.

“Anything’s possible,” Alduin said. “Look at me. Even so, she wouldn’t be given a chance to try. At least not here at Falcon Hall. Master Calborth’s open-minded enough, but I don’t see him going for an idea like that.”

“So it would have to be in the wild ...” Erilea began.

“Let’s not get carried away,” Alduin said quickly. “It’s not going to happen. There’s too much tradition to contend with. Let’s see if even my small proposals for change are accepted.”

“I won’t need my own falcon,” Moreya said, surprising them all with her unnoticed return and her assured words.

“What do you mean, darling?” Aranthia asked, taking the little girl’s hands in her own and looking into her eyes; but Moreya just gave her an enigmatic smile.

“We should get going,” Alduin said, breaking the silence that settled over the room. “I’d like to watch the recruits for a while before the midday meal.”

“I’ll walk with you. It’s a beautiful day and I may even stay to eat. Let’s see what they’re serving.” Aranthia said, as they stood up to leave.

With Moreya skipping along ahead, the three adults followed the main road from the west gate of the city up to the back entrance of the citadel. People everywhere were enjoying the spring morning. Whether carrying out their business, returning from the market or just chatting with a neighbour, the mild weather was heartily welcome after the unusually long winter.

When they arrived at the square in front of Falcon Hall, Moreya stopped in her tracks and stared up at the statue in the centre. Made of bronze, it depicted a falconer with raised arm, a falcon with wings spread wide clasped to his fist. Suddenly embarrassed at being caught staring, the little girl straightened up, put her fist to her chest and bowed to the statue, much to her parents’ and grandmother’s amusement.

“Well, she’s respectful, at least!” Alduin said.

In that same moment, Master Calborth stepped out of the main hall and saw the group. He hurried towards them, squinting as he came.

“Be that you Alduin? Erilea? and ... what be the name?”

“Yes, it’s us Master. With Moreya and Aranthia.”

Master Calborth's blue eyes twinkled when he reached them, but it was painfully obvious that his sight had deteriorated considerably.

"It be very good to be seeing you," he said. "You be coming for the hatching?"

"Yes. I like to be around when it happens. Even if I can't be in the actual chamber," Alduin replied.

"Well, we be seeing about that. Maybe I be needing some help."

"But surely Bardelph ..." Alduin began.

"Bardelph be a good man, an excellent man. But Bardelph not be a falconer."

"That's right," Aranthia said, touching Alduin on the arm to reassure him that Bardelph accepted and understood the situation.

"If you all be quiet, we can be watching the recruits at archery lessons," Calborth said, changing the subject and leading the way to the long, enclosed courtyard at the back of Falcon Hall.

As they approached, they were assailed by the sound of arrows singing through the air and thudding into bales of hay. The recruits were divided into three groups, quietly awaiting their turn, listening attentively to Bardelph's soft words of encouragement and guidance.

"Bardelph be an exceptional teacher," Calborth whispered. "A good man."

Alduin could not avoid remembering his experiences in this same courtyard, but with a very different teacher. Lotan, Bretta's bother, had despised Alduin from the first time they had met, and had made archery the most dreaded lesson of the day. Luckily, it had not lasted too long. As soon as the falcons learnt to fly, priorities changed and archery was no longer part of the schedule.

The small group watched in silence from under the arched walkway surrounding the yard, until Bardelph finally called a halt.

"That's all for now," he told his students. "And tomorrow ... well you may be having other things to think about. Good luck to you all. May Gilian guide the bonding and, remember, there's hope even if you don't ..."

He left the sentence unfinished.

Subdued and thoughtful, the students filed out of the practice yard, glancing furtively at Master Calborth and the others as they passed by. Triel came last and, with a quick grin, mouthed the words, *See you in the dining hall*.

Bardelph's joy at seeing the young family was no less than Aranthia's had been. After greeting Alduin and Erilea, he swung Moreya up into the air till she giggled and shrieked, then sat her

on his shoulders. Ducking down so that they could pass safely under the gateway, he ran across the forecourt, as she waved her arms like a fledgling falcon.

“Bado, I’m flying. I’m flying,” she cried.

“You are, you are,” he replied, finally slowing down, turning around and heading back to the others.

The dining hall was crowded with Raiden, Onur and Wunand students, but Mistress Calborth, twin sister to the Master Falconer, had kept a table free for the visitors. Triel jumped up when he saw the group enter, and turned to his fellow recruits at the table.

“Sorry, I have to leave you,” he said, barely able to contain his pride as he nodded towards the new arrivals. “That’s the Falconer Alduin and his family. They’re here for a visit. See y’all later.”

Slipping out of his seat, he wove his way between the tables till he reached his friends. A moment later they were joined by Rael.

As Bardelph started pouring mead for the adults, Triel served Moreya and himself a glass of water. Soon the steaming dishes of food were set before them and they tucked into a meal of tender spring roots and peeri roast, covered with a delicious herb sauce. It was so tasty, that hardly a word was spoken till the plates had been wiped clean with chunks of fresh bread. Licking his fingers, Triel turned to Moreya.

“Let’s go see those kittens. You’re gonna love them.”

When the two had left the table, Alduin leant back and tapped his stomach with satisfaction.

“Mistress Calborth has outdone herself. The food was superb!”

“She be wanting to be sure nobody be thinking she be getting too old for the job,” her brother said. “But the truth be ... we be getting old.”

“The two of you just want some extra attention,” Bardelph said, trying to bring levity into his voice. “You’ll run us all into the ground. You’ve as much energy as ever.”

“Energy, yes. But it be the eyes, and you be knowing it.”

“Resting them would help,” Aranthia said. “You spend too much time in that badly lit hatching chamber, repairing gloves and tinkering with who knows what else. I’m going to give you something to alleviate them. It’s a gentle mixture of herbs to steep in hot water. Once it’s cooled off, soak a cloth in it and lay that over your eyes. Actually, I’ll go and get it right now, so you can start straight away.”

With a swift gesture of farewell, she left the hall as though there was not a moment to lose.

“She’s right,” Bardelph said. “You need to rest the eyes. And you have to ask for help.”

Master Calborth grunted as Bardelph continued, looking towards the young men.

“I think Alduin and Rael here should be at the hatching tomorrow. There’re sixteen boys.

Having two experienced falconers around them will certainly keep them in line.”

Calborth peered at the two who sat quietly, trying not to show their eagerness. Having bonded with a wild chick in his home by the river, Alduin had never taken part in the solemn ritual that took place at Falcon Hall each spring; Rael remembered his bonding so intensely, that he was delighted with the idea of being at a hatching again.

“I be thinking that myself. It be a good idea,” Calborth said at last. “It be a change, but it be a good one.”

Alduin gave Rael a quick smile and raised his eyebrow in a questioning expression. Rael shook his head very slightly. Master Calborth might be ready to make some changes, but it would be better to wait a few days before presenting him with their rather unconventional plan.

Triel and Moreya were hunkered down in front of a basket on the floor beside the hearth. The mother cat lay on her side licking a paw, while six kittens occupied the space surrounded by the curve of her body. Four of them were mewling and squirming, fighting to get at her milk, though there was plenty for all. Two lay intertwined, paws draped over each other, fast asleep. Despite her former disinterest, Moreya was captivated by the little animals. The mother was a tortoise shell, as were three of her off-spring. Two were jet-black and one an unusual golden colour.

“Told you they’re cute,” Triel whispered. “Ten days old. They’ve just started opening their eyes – all deep blue still. Can’t see much yet.”

“Can I touch them?” Moreya asked.

“Just the sleeping ones – and stroke very gently.”

Cautiously reaching out her hand, the little girl ran a chubby finger softly down the back of the golden kitten that lay half covering a black one. It reacted by slowly rolling over. A wide yawn and full stretch revealed tiny but sharp teeth and claws. Moreya gently stirred the downy fur on its belly, making the kitten curl up around her hand. She giggled in delight.

“It’s so soft.”

“It be going to be a beauty, that one,” Mistress Calborth said, crouching down beside Moreya.

“Be looking for a home some time too.”

The little girl stared at her.

“Can it come home with me?”

“It be too young yet and we be needing to be asking your Mam, but I be thinking it be an excellent idea when it be old enough.”

“Oh, please ... yes,” Moreya said. “I’ll ask tomorrow. It’s my birthday!”

Triel listened to the exchange with a wistful smile on his face. It would be lovely if bonding with a falcon was as easy as asking his parents. He sighed.

“Gotta go Moreya. I’ve got classes,” he said.

“Can I stay a bit? I won’t ‘sturb anyone.”

“You be telling Erilea she be here,” Mistress Calborth said to Triel. “She can be coming to be getting her when she be ready.”