

Osanna Vaughn

## **Legacy of Runes**

Falcon Sight: Book 1 of the Chronicles of the Falconers of Nymath

A novel



Alduin flattened his body on the hot rock and slowly inched his way forward, pausing for a number of heartbeats each time he moved. The dry, sweet smell of heated stone filled his nose; his ears strained for any sound that would show that he had betrayed his presence, but the only thing he heard was the sigh of the breeze through the tree tops, and the buzz and skittering of insects and small lizards enjoying the midday sun. He crept on. Just as he reached the edge of the cliff and began to peek over, he heard a falcon cry. He froze, holding his breath. A shadow passed over him and a second cry, so close that only an immense effort stopped him from flinching, warned him that the mother falcon had returned. He waited, slowly counting to one hundred. Silence. He stretched out till he could see into the narrow, rocky hollow below him. The falcon was perched next to the one grey-speckled egg, apparently unaware of the observer so close by. The bold feathers that flowed from her head down her back and ended in the pointed tail were a deep green-blue. As she shifted position, the light rippled down them, producing a play of colour with flashes of purple, bronze and gold. Her breast was pale blue, like the sky on a late autumn day, with brush strokes of dark aquamarine.

Suddenly she lifted her proud head and stared straight at Alduin. A shiver went up and down his spine as he returned the intense gaze; a gaze full of an ancient wisdom that recognized that he meant no harm. The falcon dipped her head like a queen greeting a loyal subject, stretched out her wings and, with another brief glance at Alduin, dove off into the void below. Forgetting his previous caution, the boy scrabbled forward to watch her go. He quickly lost sight of her, but an instant later she soared up against a backdrop of dark fir trees and, with a final cry, sped off into the distance.

Alduin was at a loss to understand the meaning of all this. Marven falcons were very rare and usually laid their eggs in the highest peaks where eagles were the only predators that could reach them – and then only with a fight. Apart from that, little was known about their habits; yet, Alduin found it hard to believe that the mother's behaviour was normal. The egg sitting in its rocky shelter would be easy prey for any sort of rodent; and she could hardly expect him to lie there and keep guard while she and her mate were gone.

The thought shook him.

Why did he feel that she knew very well that he had been observing the falcon pair and their egg for many days and that, somehow, she trusted him? He pulled himself into a sitting position, arms wrapped around drawn up knees, and stared off in the direction she had flown. He seemed

to have no choice but to await her return.

Time passed slowly and still neither the mother nor her mate returned. At first Alduin was not concerned; he loved sitting at this particular spot. The view stretched over leagues and leagues of forest-covered hills, searching out secret vales and catching glimpses of the distant river, till it finally lost itself in craggy mountain peaks backed by a sky of intense blue. The Pandaras. This was the name his mother gave the mountain range in the distance. He guarded it like a special gift because she rarely spoke of anything beyond the small clearing in the woods where they lived beside the river. Did the river have a name? Did it matter? It was a river that sang as it passed by; songs of where it came from and where it was going, joyful, exciting, full of a sense of adventure; but in a language he could not understand. However, together with this panoramic view, it had instilled in him a longing to see and know more of the world that stretched out in every direction.

Sometimes he dreamt of jumping aboard one of the boats that called in to trade provisions in exchange for his mother's herb remedies and ointments; or of setting out one day and simply not stopping or turning back when the sun set. More recently, he had dreamt of flying like a Marven falcon; but he knew he could not leave his mother alone. He would only leave if she came with him and that, he believed, was not likely to happen very soon.

Coming out of his reverie, Alduin sighed. The sun had already moved quite a distance across the sky. It was beginning to get cooler. He realized that the heat that had kept the egg warm was beginning to fail, and that it would suffer if the falcons did not return soon. Remembering the mother's trusting gaze, he ignored the doubting thoughts that pushed themselves to the front of his mind, and pulled off his moss-green over-shirt. He stretched out and gently dropped the garment over the rocky nest, hoping it would afford the egg protection and warmth; but when a cool gust of air swept up and danced around the rocks, he realized that his effort would not be enough. He searched around for some kind of safe footing and spotted a narrow ledge to one side. Ignoring the immense drop just a hand span away, he lay down on the rock again, worked his body round and slowly let himself slide down. His feet found the ledge and tested it for strength, his fingers grasping tiny cracks in the rock in case it gave way. It held his weight. He edged his way along until the egg was within reach and, slowly bending down, picked it up, wrapped in his shirt. He placed it gingerly on the rock above him, pushing it further up with his fingers tips till it found a small dip where it sat still. Then he climbed back the way he had

come. The effort left him trembling, with perspiration pouring down his face and flashes of light filling his vision. He lay still waiting for his heart to slow down and muscles to relax; then he reached out for the egg and lifted it to safety.

Moving away from the cliff top, he found a sheltered gully filled with evening sunshine, and sat down with his back against a boulder, cradling the egg next to his body. He hoped that his own warmth would protect it; that there might still be a future for the chick inside. An uncanny shiver ran down his spine. Unable to understand why, he nevertheless knew that the falcons would not be returning. It was all a mystery beyond his comprehension; but the sensation that he was caught up in a flow of events over which he had no control – like a leaf dancing on the river current – left no doubt in his mind.

*Take care of him ...*

Had the wind whispered the words or was his mind playing tricks on him? Whatever it was, Alduin knew he could not stay there all night. It was early spring and, while the days were already very warm, the nights could still turn frosty. He seemed to have no choice but to make his way home with his precious and unexpected ... gift.

It was dark by the time Alduin reached the cottage where he lived and pushed open the front door. His mother looked up from the hearth, concern etched over her face; but a smile quickly replaced it when she saw it was him.

“You’re very late. I was worried.”

“I’m ... I’m sorry. Look.” In explanation Alduin opened up his shirt to show her the egg nestled against his body. She started and put her hand to her mouth.

“A falcon egg! How did you know?”

“That the mother wasn’t coming back?” Alduin asked, misunderstanding her question. “I’m not sure. I just knew somehow. The only hope for the chick seemed to be to bring it here. Can we make some kind of nest for it by the fire?”

With all his attention focussed on the egg, he did not see the dazed look in his mother’s dark brown eyes, nor hear the hesitant tone in her voice.

“Yes ... of course. But don’t set your hopes too high. This is a wild bird. It’s not like ...”

Alduin did not notice the unfinished sentence. “We can only try our best,” he answered, resigned to whatever would happen.

Alduin's mother went to a cupboard, pulled out some old rags and placed them in a fairly large clay bowl.

"The clay will draw the warmth from the fire," she said. "Let's see how it works."

Alduin carefully placed the egg among the tattered cloth. His mother then put the improvised nest down close to the glowing logs, moving it various times till she found the place she considered would give it the right amount of heat.

"There, we can do nothing more for the moment. Let's eat supper."

Reluctantly, Alduin turned away from the egg and sat down at the table. While his mother served the evening meal of cooked cereal with dried apple, his eyes were constantly drawn back to the nest; and for a while he worried if he had done the right thing. On the one hand, it seemed like he had had no choice, on the other he wondered if he should have waited just a little longer in case the falcons returned.

"Don't worry, Alduin, there was nothing else you could have done," his mother said as though she had read his mind. He found the firm conviction in her voice comforting, but did not question how she could be so sure; he was too distracted thinking about what would happen next.

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When Alduin's mother went to bed that night, she left her son dozing in the rocker by the fire. Her own thoughts were more distressed than she had let show all evening; the falcon egg reminded her of just one of the many things she had left behind when she had chosen exile from Sanforan over half a lifetime ago. She had accepted to live in solitude, trusting that the past would leave her alone and in peace. Now she wondered. What powers were at work here? Alduin had explained the full story to her: he had first spotted the falcon pair around the time of the new moons, and had watched them whenever he had a chance, up till their strange disappearance that afternoon. What forces had moved them to leave their offspring in the care of a boy? There was no doubt in her mind that this was what they had done. In spite of his direct involvement, Alduin could not see it as clearly as she could. Of course, there was so much he did not know, and now it seemed as though the time to tell him had caught up with her unaware; the choice of when and how had been taken from her. Words of explanation began to run through her mind; first one approach and then another. Where to begin? How much to say? The questions filled her thoughts until she drifted off to sleep.

A beam of early sunlight danced through the trees and the farm house window, playing across Alduin's face. Sleepy eyes flickered open and immediately searched out the egg, relieved to see it lying quietly where they had left it. It had not been a dream. He bent down to check that it was warm enough and, just as he stretched out his hand, a soft cracking sound accompanied a quick rock of the egg. He gasped and looked around in confusion. Somehow he had not expected it to hatch so soon. The coincidence seemed too amazing to believe; or had he damaged the egg when he transported it home? What had his mother said last night about feeding a baby falcon chick?

"Ma!" he called out.

At that moment, his mother came in from outside carrying a slaughtered chicken, which she lay on the chopping board and proceeded to cut up.

"We'll need some fresh meat," she said, pulling out the offal, chopping them very finely and setting them aside on a plate.

"Ma, the egg has cracked. I think the chick's about to hatch!"

"Yes, I believe it is. But try and stay calm or you'll scare it out of its wits."

"Calm? How can I stay calm? What if something goes wrong?"

Alduin's mother washed off her hands, dried them on her apron and, walking over to her son, ran loving fingers through his dark curls. She looked directly into his eyes.

"You have been chosen and everything will be fine. Trust me."

"Chosen? What do you mean?"

"There's no time to explain. Just trust me."

Alduin seemed to have no alternative. His mother was obviously not going to explain further; so he took a deep breath, steadied his nerves and turned back to the egg. It was now rocking rhythmically and a second hairline crack was tracing its way down one side. His mother laid the plate of offal gently on the floor next to him. Suddenly, the egg just seemed to burst apart in one small explosion of shell and the falcon chick was there, greeting the day with a loud, assertive chirp. Alduin crouched transfixed in front of it, staring at the amazing sight. The chick's down feathers were wet and plastered to its body, but it emanated a strong feeling of confidence and pleasure at being there, cocking its tiny head to one side as though observing him with equal curiosity.

Alduin jumped back in shock.

"Reesha?" he asked, looking towards his mother. "His name is Reesha?"

"If he says so," she nodded. "Look, he's opening his beak. Give him some of the meat and

speak quietly to him as you feed him. But don't touch him."

Alduin did not have the time to wonder how she could know all this. Reesha's impatient cry quickly drew back his attention and he started feeding him tiny bits of the chicken innards. In the meantime, Alduin's mother carefully removed the egg shells from the nest, placing them on the window sill to dry out.

"Powdered falcon shells are good for strengthening the bones," she mumbled to herself, as though recalling knowledge taken out of a long unopened closet.

Reesha ate a small amount, settled back down and promptly fell asleep.

"You can see his crop is full," she explained. "Once the food is digested, he'll be asking for more."

Alduin cleared up the area round about, storing the left over meat in a cooling jar for later. Then he went looking for his mother who had left the house a few moments earlier. He found her sitting on the rough wooden bench by the river landing place. She tapped the seat beside her, inviting him to join her. For long moments they sat side by side, watching the water flow by, the sun reflecting off its surface, beams of light scattering in every direction; but the river itself was silent, as though aware that a more important story was about to be told.

"Ma, do you have a name too?" Alduin asked, breaking the silence.

"I mean, other than Ma?"

She turned to him and smiled, a touch of sadness in her eyes. "Well ... yes. Long ago, people called me ... Aranthia."

"Aranthia," Alduin repeated. Questions filled his eyes as he returned her gaze; but he remained quiet and expectant.

"Aranthia .... it belongs to another world, certainly another life. Where do I start?"

Alduin gave her an encouraging smile, "At the beginning!"

"Hmmm ... that's a very long time ago; before you were born, even before I was born ... but no, I'll begin with my own life and we'll see where that takes us."

She paused for a moment and closed her eyes, travelling back to a time long forgotten and put aside.

"I was born into a Wunand family living in Sanforan," she began.

"Wunand? Sanforan? What do you mean?" Alduin asked.

"Shhh ... don't interrupt. But you're right, I had better explain things a bit first."

She took a stick and made a drawing in the packed earth in front of them. "This is a map of

Nymath – the country as you know where we live.”

She drew a spiky line along the top, speaking as she went.

“These are the Pandaras Mountains; and this river that we live on is called the Mangipohr.”

A line even longer than the whole mountain range crossed diagonally from one end of the country down to the bottom left of the drawing, where it divided into many branches.

“It ends here at the Black Ocean in Wunand territory. The Wunand are one of the tribes of Nymath, as are the Raiden, the Onur, the Fath and the Kataur.”

She pressed the stick into the ground beside a point about half way along the river.

“This is where we live. Across the water begins the forest which is home to the Elves. I don’t know if it has a name. They are not one of the tribes of Nymath; but were shipwrecked here many generations ago. We all live together in peace thanks to the help they gave us in difficult times ... but that’s another story.”

Further up river she made another point with the stick. “This is Lemrik, the closest village to us, as you know, and this ...” yet another point in a direct line south on the edge of the Black Ocean, “is where the capital, Sanforan, lies.”

She paused for a moment and looked at her handiwork.

“That will have to do. I can’t remember the details too well. Anyway, as I said, I was born in Sanforan. Most Wunand live out by the delta of the river. We like the open spaces. Our tribe is very different from the others because the women rather than the men are the warriors, the Amazons; and also the hunters. They’re the ones who go out into the world while the men stay behind and tend the home fires. However, my mother was on the council of Nymath and so we lived in the city. It’s a different kind of life, and meant that I grew up knowing the other tribes and their customs quite well.”

As though to emphasize what she was saying, she drew a circle around the point that was Sanforan before continuing.

“I had a pleasant enough childhood; plenty of friends and the freedom which is quite normal for Wunand girls. We learn to fight very young, so it is quite safe for us to be out and about on our own. In groups few would try to cause us any trouble. However, my heart was never really into it. I didn’t long to learn to use the fire whip like my siblings, or to hunt and use a knife. I was no Amazon at heart.”

She shook her head as she remembered.

“And then, as I reached the time of my womanhood, the changes began ...”

She fell silent and after a few moments Alduin felt compelled to ask, “What changes, Ma?”

She sighed, “Nothing ... it doesn’t matter ... it’s not part of the story that concerns you ...”

She looked at her son with sorrowful eyes.

“Suffice to say that my parents were shocked that I didn’t want to follow the traditional ways. For my mother, as a council member, it was a matter of pride. She hoped I would follow in her footsteps ...”

Aranthia drew a cross over Sanforan and hesitated for a long moment before continuing.

“So I left. Mainly to get away from the people who couldn’t accept me as I was. I decided to find myself a place where I could live alone and in peace.”

She looked at Alduin again and smiled.

“It was the right choice.”

“And me?” Alduin asked.

Again Aranthia smiled and this time her eyes laughed with fond memories.

“One day ... maybe I was eighteen or so ... a man appeared at my cottage door. He was a Raiden and a falconer; his name was Cal. Many Raiden men become falconers, but not all. He had also grown up in Sanforan and trained there. As Cal reached manhood he bonded with a falcon chick ...”

Alduin gasped as he began to get a glimmer of understanding.

“By the time I met him,” his mother continued, “he was fully trained, travelling far and wide as a scout and messenger. The gift of the Raiden falconers is that they are able to see through their falcon’s eyes, so their skills are in high demand. After that first meeting, he would look in whenever he was close by. Our friendship grew from affection to love; and eventually he made this his home.”

Sadness returned to Aranthia’s eyes.

“The last time I saw him was barely a year after we first met. He headed off one sunny morning on his way to Lemrik, intending to buy seeds to plant and look out for a young calf. I had no sense that anything was wrong. Maybe I was protecting the child I didn’t yet know I was carrying ...”

“He died?” Alduin asked appalled.

“I don’t know. My mind says he must have, but my heart and senses say otherwise. When he didn’t return after various days, I made my own way to Lemrik; but no one had seen him there ...”

She sighed but looked at her son fondly.

“Soon I realized that you were on your way and I knew that my first task was to prepare for

your arrival. Time flew by, the winter was mild, and after the first moon cycles of the winter solstice, you were born. You have been my great joy ever since.”

Aranthia fell silent and closed her eyes again. Alduin’s hand crept into hers and they sat together for a while without speaking a word.

“So, my father was a ... a Raiden, and I’ve inherited his gift.”

With wisdom beyond his years, Alduin acknowledged and accepted his mother’s words with no recrimination or painful questions. Aranthia sighed with relief.

“It would seem so, though this bonding has happened at a rather early age. I intended to tell you everything soon enough – or so I thought – though I wasn’t sure that you would follow in your father’s footsteps. When I left Sanforan, the bonding and training of falconers took place in the safe environment of Falcon Hall with birds bred and kept there. I never heard of it happening in the wild, much less with a Marven falcon.”

“So what do we do now?”

“First of all, we’ll have to see if we can keep the chick alive. It won’t be easy.”

“But we must!” Alduin exclaimed. “The falcons trust me to do so ...” he finished weakly.

The idea of Reesha not surviving caused him more pain than he could have imagined possible, and a sudden fear overtook him. He jumped up and ran inside.

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Despite of Aranthia’s cautioning words, Reesha thrived over the next few days. However unusual the circumstances, he seemed determined to survive; and the little fledgling’s confidence was quickly transferred to Alduin. Each morning the boy was up at daybreak to feed Reesha before he began with his other chores: drawing water from the river; collecting eggs from the chicken coop around the back of the cottage; clearing weeds from the vegetable and herb gardens; and chopping kindling for the fire. The mid morning feed always tended to drag out as he admired the falcon chick’s developing features.

“See, Ma! One side of his beak is darker than the other.”

“Look how fluffy he is now ...”

“Did you see how much he managed to eat?”

“Look, the spots on his breast are beginning to appear.”

A day did not pass without at least one new discovery to admire and praise; and Reesha responded to it all with happy chirps.

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On the fourth morning, frustrated that the chick was sleeping once again, Alduin took the time

to return to the rocky nest to see if there were any traces of the mother falcon's return; but the place had an abandoned feel about it, with only a few stray feathers to show it had been in use just a few days earlier. Alduin stood on the high ridge and looked out towards the mountains. Some instinct made him close his eyes and reach out with his feelings, quietly letting time flow over him till it was lost in the past and in the future. He did not know how long he had been standing there, but suddenly a shadow swept over him and he opened his eyes again. Looking up he saw the two falcons gliding towards him. He lifted his right hand to shade his eyes against the glare of the sun, stretching his arm out and holding his breath as they approached. To his shock and surprise, the female suddenly dove down and landed on his wrist. The heavy weight of the magnificent bird claspng him tightly made him gasp in pain; but he gritted his teeth and held his arm as firmly as he could. Her beauty was overwhelming: the regal head with eyes as dark as a summer night, the iridescent plumage and the sharp claws on her powerful talons. He stared in wonder; drinking from the depths of her mesmerizing gaze, feeling as though he had stepped into another world where nothing but the two of them existed. Again the royal bow of confirmation; then she sprang up and returned to her mate. With simultaneous cries the two turned and flew away.

Alduin dropped to the ground and grasped his aching arm. The pain, however, was not enough to smother the joy he felt at the falcon's acknowledgement. He no longer doubted that he was meant to take Reesha. He still did not really understand what had happened, but he accepted it. He sent a silent message after the retreating birds.

*I will take care of him ...*

Many moments passed as he sat on the rock massaging his sore wrist. Glancing down he saw that the talons had left a deep imprint on his skin, like a broad bracelet or gauntlet that did not seem to fade, however much he rubbed. A reluctance to let it be seen came over him. He rolled down his sleeve to cover it and headed for home.

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