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Legacy of Runes

Falcon Search: Book 2 of the Chronicles of the Falconers of Nymath

A novel



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Prologue

The young man dragged his trembling body out of the river. Coughing up water and shivering with cold, he fell exhausted on the grassy bank. A blow to the back of his head throbbed with nauseating intensity; sparkling stars filled his vision; blood dripped from a gash in his shoulder. He was naked except for his undergarments and had no idea who he was, where he was or how he had got there. It seemed as though he had come into existence, all of a sudden, in the middle of a maelstrom that spun him round and round, finally spitting him out in the middle of a powerful water course. He had just had enough strength to grab onto a floating tree trunk and pull himself to safety, as the deep current swept him along. His bleary, dark brown eyes recognized nothing of the thick forests and high gorges that sped by on either side. Even as the landscape opened up to reveal endless grass lands with distant hills to one side, nothing was familiar.

Gradually, the log he had travelled on was pulled to one shore, coming to rest after many leagues, caught in a small bay at a curve in the river. The sun was very hot on his chest as he lay on the grass, its heat seeping slowly into his bronze-skinned body, encouraging life to hold on. He had no idea how much time had passed, but his stomach was rumbling with an intense feeling he could not quite understand. What did it mean? His mind was unclear; an idea darted back and forth just out of reach, never remaining still long enough to examine. An image began to form.

...He was flying ... soaring over tree tops, banking to the left and to the right, searching for something ... hunger distracted him. A wood pigeon caught his eye and he dove for the kill, sinking his talons into its back and snapping the spine ... Saturated by the meal of warm flesh and blood, he sprang to the air again and resumed his search ...

The sensation in his stomach was gone, and for some reason the young man felt renewed strength pumping through his veins. He pulled himself awkwardly into a sitting position. His shoulder was stiff and sticky with coagulating blood, the wound throbbing painfully. He stared at it, unsure what to do, then let his gaze wander elsewhere. Bright orange berries were growing on a bush close by, so he reached out to pick some and put them in his mouth. To his delight they burst in sweetness between his teeth, sending rich syrup gushing down his throat. He ate more. After a while he stopped, stood up and stretched painfully, looking around, eyes drinking in the intense colour of the world he seemed to have so recently stepped into. Suddenly, a piping

call reached his ears and he looked skyward. Something was flying at great speed straight towards him. Again his instinct took over and he felt no fear, but rather a sense of recognition. He knew it, yet could not at first name it. He lifted up one of his arms; an arm bearing a strange pattern on its wrist. Diving down, powerful claws settled onto the markings as though locking into place, the weight made him nearly lose his balance. He found himself falling into an intense gaze, as deep as a midnight pool filled with stars, and was overwhelmed by a sensation of familiarity.

Reesha ... he heard a voice whisper in his mind.

1

Not a drop of rain had fallen since Alduin had returned to Sanforan. Looking out of the arched window of the room he kept as a base in the city, he could see the shimmering heat rising off the red-tiled, circular roof of Falcon Hall's hatching chamber. From there his gaze wandered beyond the citadel, over the packed jumble of buildings filling the outer city, and on to the fields and forests outside the gates, coming to rest at last on the distant mountains that barely painted a hazy smudge along the horizon. During the past two years he and his Marven falcon, Reesha, had travelled to many beautiful corners of Nymath in the service of various employers; yet the mountains still managed to take his breath away. Maybe it lay in the fact that Reesha was a wild falcon, native to the high peaks, and that through their special bond his nature was drawn there. He closed his eyes, joined in spirit with Reesha, and immediately saw through the falcon's eyes. The experience had become as natural as breathing, gliding from one state into the other with the fluency of a well-loved song. The bird had flown down to the harbour and was occupied in one of his favourite pastimes, catching the gentle breeze that skimmed over the surface of the ocean, watching his own reflection speed across the wavelets, eyes alert for any sign of a *cirlim* below the surface. *Cirlim*, or ship fish as some called them, inevitably made Alduin think of Erilea: the young Wunand Amazon took such delight in the sleek, grey mammals.

Alduin broke the bond with Reesha and sighed, turning away from the window. Erilea's image appeared clearly before him: her small size and fine features belied her toughness; her cheeky smile and the way she would cock her head to one side, a cover-up for her sensitivity and wisdom. He had been so sure that he would find her in the city upon his return three days earlier, and the fact that she had left, leaving no message of explanation for him, had been a shock. Had

he done something to upset her? Granted, he had not seen as much of her as he would have liked, but surely she knew that it was not for lack of interest. What if her feelings for him were changing? She was young, after all. Could one expect another person to know their heart and mind before they had even had a chance to experience life? The more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that she must be avoiding him; avoiding telling him the truth of her altered feelings.

Deciding it made no sense to hang around feeling miserable, Alduin left the dormitory building and headed over to the main hall where he hoped to find the Master Falconer. The square, with its proud statue of a falconer and falcon clasping his fist with wings spread wide, was deserted: most residents who had not left the inner city for the summer would be taking a rest after their midday meal, escaping from the intense heat. Swirls of dust danced over the packed, parched earth; the only sound the dry, rhythmic buzz of the creeka. Alduin escaped into the hall. The softly lit interior of the building and the familiar, lingering scent of falcons did much to restore his humour. A very special kind of magic pervaded Falcon Hall and, in particular, the hatching chamber. Here, at the large, circular stone table in the centre of the room, the recruits would gather each spring. Hearts beating loudly, hardly daring to breathe, the young men would pray to Lord Gilian to be among those chosen by the newly hatched falcon chicks, and thus begin the mystical journey as Falconers of Nymath. All the training that would lead up to it, could never actually prepare the young men for that unique moment when they bonded in mind and spirit with a falcon chick for the first time.

Alduin's own experience had been very different. He had unexpectedly bonded with Reesha in the humble cottage he had shared alone with his mother, Aranthia, by the Mangipohr River, as it cut its way through the thick forests to the north. Till that astonishing moment when Reesha had entered his life, Alduin had been unaware that the father he had never known had been a falconer before him; yet he had no difficulty imagining how the moment of bonding must have been for his father, as for his friends Rael, Twith, Gandar and so many more, here at Falcon Hall – at the heart of falconry. The joy and pride. The knowledge of a bright future ahead. He could also imagine the sorrow for those like his good friend Bardelph or his former teacher Lotan, who had not been lucky enough to bond; sorrow that would be overcome by the likes of Bardelph or turn to bitterness in the likes of Lotan.

Alduin's thoughts were interrupted by Master Calborth's voice calling from the hatching chamber.

"That be you Alduin?"

Alduin wondered at the uncanny way in which Calborth always seemed to know who was approaching. He stepped into the chamber.

"Yes, it is," he said, with a smile in his voice. "But you really must tell me how you can always tell ..."

"I be having ears, don't I?" the other asked in surprise. "No two people be walking the same way. It be as easy to be hearing clearly as to be seeing clearly."

Alduin shook his head and grinned.

"For some maybe ..."

Calborth, the grey-haired but sprightly Master Falconer of Nymath, was perched on a high stool next to a work-bench under the window. Putting down the leather gauntlet he had been repairing, he turned his twinkling blue eyes in Alduin's direction.

"Your father, he be having sharp ears; and you be looking much like him. Excepting the colour of your skin. Despite having dark hair like you, his skin be very fair."

"My father ..." Alduin said, faltering at the unexpected reference.

He drew up a stool and sat down next to the Master.

"Please, tell me more about him. What do you remember?"

Calborth closed his eyes for a moment, rubbing his chin and pulling on his two-plaited beard. He chuckled.

"I be remembering the day he be bonding with Krath – oh, it be twenty three springs ago already. Before he be very serious, even a bit sulky; but after he be finding his falcon he be transformed. I be remembering his face. The joy, the wonder be bigger than most. I be thinking he not be believing he be bonding. He be so amazed."

Calborth grinned as he continued.

"Master Calborth, Master Calborth! he be crying, jumping around and showing Krath to all of us. His name be Krath, his name be Krath!"

It was hard for Alduin to imagine what his father might have been like; even so, he did feel an undefined connection to the man, and he could appreciate the bonding experience. He smiled in understanding before speaking again.

"How long did he stay in Sanforan after he bonded?" he asked.

“Hmmm, let me be thinking. It not be long. He be flying with Krath very quickly and always be going on long flights with him. Too long, I be thinking; and I be telling him to be careful. You can be losing yourself in your falcon.”

Alduin nodded slowly. He and Reesha’s long, bonded flight across the Black Ocean two summers earlier had made him aware of how easy it could be to forget oneself in the joy and freedom of flying. It was a freedom that could become another form of prison. He shuddered at the thought: as much as he loved Reesha, he would not want to forget and lose the people in his life that he held dear.

“Go on ... please,” he said.

“There be no doubt he be a good falconer. He be leaving Sanforan that same summer, but he be returning every now and then. He and Krath be serving as messengers all over Nymath. I be thinking not many be travelling as much as they. Then, after four or five winters he be coming back no more. I be thinking he be having a family then ...” the older man paused for a moment, deep in thought. “I be very busy. Always be new recruits, new bondings, new trainings ... I not be trying to find out ... I be sorry to be learning from your mother ...”

Alduin lay a hand on Calborth’s arm, gentle at first but then giving it an urgent squeeze.

“Do you think he may actually be alive?” he asked the Master. “Somewhere?”

Master Calborth raised an eyebrow.

“Why you be thinking that?”

“I don’t know. It’s just a feeling. I never met him, but I feel close to him ... my mother ... she’s not sure either. It just seems so ... I don’t know ... how could he just disappear?”

“It be a mystery, there be no doubt,” Calborth agreed. “Still there be regions in Nymath where few be going. He may be somewhere ...”

“Alive?” Alduin asked.

“Or dead,” Calborth answered, his solemn tone telling Alduin that there was no definite answer that he could give and he would prefer not to talk about it.

“I think I’ll take a walk,” Alduin said a moment later, jumping up to leave. “I’ve only been here a few days and already I’m feeling city bound.” he added.

Master Calborth gave him an intense look before simply nodding.

“You be doing that.”

Rather than joining Reesha down by the water, Alduin made his way past the Onur guards at the main entrance to the citadel, down the tree-lined central avenue and out through the main

gate, calling the falcon to join him as he went. The road heading north towards Lemrik was empty, cutting a gently curving swath through the grey-green emmer fields. A sudden shadow rippled across the heads of grain as an erratic breeze disturbed the summer quiet. Alduin eyes scanned the horizon but could see no sign of an approaching squall, so he continued walking away from the city. As the road gradually meandered to the right, Reesha joined him, perching regally on his fist. The fields on either side closed in behind them cutting off the view back towards Sanforan, except for its highest roofs and towers. Alduin felt as though he had stepped into a dream. The lazy summer heat settled over him; an otherworldly silence rang in his ears. Suddenly Reesha tensed. He twisted his head this way and that, weight alternating from one talon to the other.

“What is it, Reesha?”

The falcon froze briefly, then crouched down and sprang with a mighty thrust into the air. Bonded with his falcon, Alduin looked down on the field speeding below, as Reesha flew with powerful wing strokes towards the forest. Something caught his attention. The emmer had been disturbed; as though a large animal had ploughed through it, leaving a trail of trampled stalks and coming to an abrupt halt right in the middle of the field. The falcon spiralled down, hovering at a safe distance as Alduin tried to discern what lay half-hidden by the grain. Whatever it was it was not moving.

Keep your distance. I'm on my way.

Taking his bearings from the road, forest and sun, Alduin broke the bond and pushed his way forwards through the emmer in a low crouch. Reesha's calls of encouragement guided him and warned him as he drew close. He stopped to listen, but even the normal racket of insects was absent. All was still. A strange feeling swept over Alduin, as though he had been caught in an instant outside of time. After pausing for a matter of heartbeats, he crept on, trying his best to be as quiet as possible, his eyes straining to see between the tall plants.

At last he began to discern a dark form lying a short distance ahead. He crept on till only a thin curtain of vegetation shielded him. There was no doubt it was a man. He lay face down on the ground, arms flung out in front as though in supplication, legs spread-eagled behind. His matted, black hair was extremely long, as was the beard that lay sprawled out to one side. His clothes were so faded that the colour was hardly recognisable; it might have been black, brown or even

dark green. Alduin felt no fear. Whoever this man was and wherever he had come from, he represented no danger.

The young falconer took the final steps and squatted down beside the figure, laying a careful hand on his shoulder and giving him a gentle shake.

“Sir ... sir ... what happened? Can you hear me?”

The man did not react.

Reesha landed beside Alduin and let out a plaintive cry.

To Alduin’s surprise, the man stirred and with great difficulty turned his head towards the falcon, bleary ears opening for an instant, pained entreaty begging for understanding. A sound like a rough cough escaped his mouth before his head sank back to the ground. Reesha cried out again, but it was as though the effort had cost the man his final strength, sending him into unconsciousness.

Removing his gauntlet, Alduin took a small water skin from his belt and let a few drops fall over the man’s parched lips in the hope of reviving him. To no effect. He put two fingers to the stranger’s throat and was relieved to feel a weak but steady pulse whispering through the artery; even so, there was no doubt that the man was in a very bad state. Alduin sat back on his heels, considering the best course of action. After a moment he glanced towards Reesha.

“I’ll go get help. You stay here and ... I don’t know ... keep an eye on him!”

In response, Reesha simply settled down close to the man’s face, staring at him intently.

Alduin made his way back through the field to the road. He set off at a steady run towards the city gates, bonding every now and then with his falcon, only to be confronted each time with the immobile face of the fallen stranger. He reckoned the man had seen twenty one winters or so; and while his colouring and build suggested he might be a Raiden, his clothes and appearance were so worn that it was hard to tell.

Alduin nodded to the lone Onur guard as he passed through the outer gate and continued up towards the citadel without breaking his pace. When he reached Falcon Hall it appeared to be deserted.

“Master Calborth!” he called out, hoping the Master might be somewhere in one of the smaller rooms. There was no reply.

He returned outside and went over to the dining hall and then into the kitchen. It was empty as well.

“Where is everyone?” he asked under his breath.

Just then he heard a noise from the laundry room beyond. Inside a plump Kataur woman was folding bed linen into a cupboard. She did not hear Alduin as he entered.

“Can you please tell me where Mistress Calborth is?” he asked.

The woman spun round, slapping a hand to her ample chest.

“My, but you gave me a shock!” she began. “I didn’t think anyone else was here ... what with most everyone gone, and the few left escaping from the heat where best they can ... I swear I nearly had a heart attack when you spoke like that ... don’t be doing that again ... tread a bit louder or something ... I mean, you could cause someone’s death ...”

“Please, please,” Alduin interrupted. “I’m very sorry, but it’s an emergency. I need to find Master Calborth.”

“Emergency? What kind of emergency?”

“There’s a man ... he needs help. He’s out in the field beyond the city wall. I need some strong men and a stretcher.”

The laundry woman took a moment to absorb his words before answering. She shook her head.

“Well, I have no idea where the Master or the Mistress are,” she said. “I suggest you go down to the Kataur barracks by the east gate and get some help there.”

“Right. Thanks. If you see Master Calborth, please ask him to stay here. I’ll bring the man to the dispensary.”

The laundry woman dipped her head in acknowledgement. Alduin dashed outside again, taking the road down through Sanforan’s more elegant neighbourhoods, checking in on Reesha as he went. Nothing had changed. The man lay still as a statue, white as marble. Alduin continued till he reached an imposing structure close to the east city gate. Though Kataur settlements were built in wood, this building, as all in Sanforan, was made of hewn stone; even so, craftsmen had lovingly managed to carve traditional motifs of galloping horses above the doors and windows. The sweet smell of hay assailed Alduin’s nose as soon as he entered the inner courtyard. It was surrounded by stables on three sides. He could hear someone sweeping, so made his way into the pleasant coolness of one of the stalls, speaking into the shadows even before his eyes had adjusted to the gloom.

“Please can you help? I need help carrying someone ... with a litter ... he’s ill ... I think.”

A young boy stepped out of the shadows, broom in hand.

“You’d best go into the main hall, across the yard,” he said quickly. “I think there’re one or two soldiers there.”

Alduin felt frustration growing inside him. How could it be so difficult to get help?

“One or two? Where is everyone?”

A shrug was all the boy’s reply before turning back to his sweeping. Alduin sighed and went in search of the soldiers. Deciding that an emergency gave him certain allowances, he knocked on the door and entered without waiting for a reply. Two men were at a large table in the centre of the room. One was asleep with his head lying next to an empty flagon that had toppled over spilling wine on the table; the other was sprawled in a chair, head lolling back as he snored with a sound like distant thunder. Alduin stepped closer. The smell of cheap, sour wine, wafted over him making his stomach turn.

“Excuse me,” he began, tentatively giving the snorer a shake.

A grunt exploded out of the man’s mouth, but he did not react.

“Excuse me,” he repeated, raising his voice above the rumbling.

To his surprise the man at the table lifted his head and look at him with fairly clear eyes.

“Heh?” he said, raising a sleepy eyebrow.

“I need help,” Alduin said, annoyance shading his words.

The man sat up and yawned, rubbing his beard with one hand and scratching his belly with the other.

“Do you now? What kind of help?” he asked, straightening his uniform as though suddenly aware of the questionable picture he and his companion presented.

“I found a man out in the fields. He’s unconscious. We have to get him to the dispensary at Falcon Hall. I think he’s a Raiden.”

“Ah ... well now ... if he’s a Raiden, you should be ...”

“By all the tribes of Nymath!” Alduin cried. “There’s no time to waste. He may be dying as we speak. I couldn’t find anyone at Falcon Hall, and I was sent here by the laundry woman ...”

The soldier grinned unexpectedly.

“That would be Marla,” he said, the twinkle in his eye suggesting he knew her well. “Very helpful she always is.”

“So, are you going to help me?” Alduin asked impatiently.

The man stood up in reply and nodded formally while grabbing the edge of the table to steady himself.

“Ferl’s the name,” he said. “Bring me some water, lad ... there’s a bucket outside the door.”

Alduin went immediately, returning a moment later. The bucket he carried was full to the brim. The Kataur lifted it to his lips and took a messy swig that left his beard dripping; then he promptly dumped the rest over his companion.

As Alduin and the two men hurried out of the city towards where the stricken man lay, the young falconer wondered at the transformation the two soldiers had undergone in a matter of moments. In spite of being rudely awakened by a dousing of icy water, Cardol – as the second Kataur was called – had been in excellent spirit and ready to assist. In a flash they had cleared away the remains of their meal, located two other soldiers to replace them, found a basic healer kit and a stretcher, and were ready to leave with the precision of a military campaign. Alduin got the impression that they were, in fact, quite delighted to have something to break up the monotonous routine that marked their days in the city.

As they reached the edge of the fields, Alduin paused to bond with Reesha and let him know that they were close. The falcon appeared not to have moved, his eyes still fixed on the man's sunken face. The clarity of his vision picked up every detail allowing Alduin to study the dirty features from close up. A sense of familiarity washed over him, though he was sure he had never seen the man before.

“So where is he, young man?” Ferl asked, bringing Alduin out of the bond.

Momentarily disconcerted, Alduin shook his head.

“I'm sorry ... I ... this way ...” he gestured.

“This ain't some kind of a joke is it?” Ferl asked, a sudden wariness in his eyes.

No, no.” Alduin assured him. “Please follow me. It's not much further.”

He moved off again, picking up speed till he found the faint path his earlier passage had left in the high emmer.

“Here,” he said, beckoning to the Kataur as he pushed his way through again.

The soldiers followed silently till they reached the man; but before they could pay him any attention, they were stunned to see Alduin put on the gauntlet he had left on the ground and pick up Reesha, whispering words of praise to the falcon.

“You're a falconer!” Ferl exclaimed unnecessarily. “Why didn't you say so?”

Alduin gave him a perplexed look, unsure how to respond.

“I ... errr ... it just didn't occur to me. Does it make a difference?”

“Well, I guess it shouldn’t,” the other replied with a grin and glanced over to his fellow Kataur. “A humble Raiden falconer ... with a bit of something else, by the looks of it. Didn’t think I’d live to see the day!”

Cardol laughed in amused agreement, though Alduin bristled with annoyance. Before he could say anything, however, Ferl turned back to him and spoke pleasantly enough.

“You don’t look like a city lad, and that ain’t no Ithil falcon either. What’s your name? You must have a curious story to tell.”

“But not now ... I need some help,” Cardol interrupted, kneeling down beside the unconscious figure, and opening the healer kit. He drew out a small vial of crude glass and pulled out the stopper, waving it under the man’s nose. There was no reaction, though the powerful, pungent smell was enough to make Alduin gag.

Cardol chuckled.

“Not pleasant, but usually very effective.”

His face became serious again as he put the vial away.

“Ferl, check the legs while I check the arms.”

The two men worked in silence, feeling for broken bones with the expertise of those who have dealt with riders and horses for many years.

“Ain’t nothing wrong here,” Ferl said, as Cardol nodded in agreement.

“Here neither. Let’s have a look at his back before we turn him over.”

Cardol lifted the matted hair to one side and began to push up the faded shirt, but saw he would not get far without moving the man.

“Well, I guess he’ll be needing new clothes if he survives this,” he mumbled to himself, taking the bottom hem between his two hands and tearing the shirt open without much difficulty. Milky white skin was exposed, but there were no signs of injuries or bruises.

“Nothing to see on this side. Let’s turn him over ... carefully.”

Alduin watched the men with growing admiration. Ferl flattened the emmer to one side, then helped Cardol turn the man over onto his back. His shirt was open, though laces that had obviously once held it closed hung in pieces from the eyelets. Incongruous though it seemed considering the length of his beard, no hair grew on the man’s chest, making it easy to see that it was unblemished. With surprising gentleness, Cardol felt his way over the man’s ribs and up to the collar bones.

“Whatever is ailing him, it doesn’t seem to be the result of violence or an accident,” the Kataur said. “On the contrary, if it wasn’t for the fact that he’s unconscious, I’d say he was in quite good health!”

“Let’s get him on the stretcher,” Ferl said. “The sooner we get him back to the city, the sooner he can get some proper treatment.”

“Treatment for what, is the question,” Cardol said, shaking his head but helping move the man.

As the two easily lifted the litter and started back through the field, Cardol paused for a moment and looked at Alduin.

“Maybe you and your falcon could search along the path this poor fellow followed. You might find something useful.”

“I will. That’s a good idea. I’ll probably catch up with you soon enough; but, in case I don’t, please take him to the dispensary at Falcon Hall. I already asked ... err ... Marla to warn Master Calborth.”

“Right,” Cardol said, nodding to Ferl to proceed.

Alduin watched them for a brief moment before turning in the other direction.

“Reesha, maybe you can spot something from the air, whilst I search the ground,” he said to his falcon, launching him into flight. “I’ll check in with you in a moment.”

Moving slowly, Alduin searched along the trail of trampled emmer. Without finding anything of interest, he reached the edge of the field where the first trees marked the beginning of the forest. Beyond that, various animal trails wove their way between the trunks, heading off in various directions. Alduin bonded with Reesha who was gliding from one side to another above the trees. Nothing caught his attention so he broke the contact and opened his eyes again. There was simply no clue as to where the man had come from.

Alduin sent Reesha on ahead to Falcon Hall and set off himself as fast as he could. He caught up with Ferl and Cardol as they were being questioned by the guard at the gate.

“That’s all very well,” the Onur was saying to the irate Kataur, “but what if he has some strange disease that could endanger the whole city? My grandmother told me all about the plague back in ...”

“Enough man!” Ferl interrupted. “The city’s half empty and we’re taking him straight to the dispensary at Falcon Hall. We won’t let anyone come into contact with him.”

“But what about you? You’ve touched him I’ll warrant.”

“Look here,” Ferl said, taking a menacing step towards the guard. “I ain’t saying you’re wrong. I may be a step away from death myself. I might just topple all over you and then you’d be next in line!”

The guard drew back in shock.

“Now, we’re going to take this sorry bugger up to the citadel and you ain’t about to stop us. Unless you really want to lay a hand on me that is!”

“I ... I ...” the guard babbled. “I’ll report you ... that’s what I’ll do ...”

“You go ahead and do that,” Ferl called back over his shoulder as he and Cardol proceeded through the gate followed by a stunned Alduin.

“Do you think he might have a contagious disease?” he asked, drawing next to Cardol.

The Kataur shook his head firmly.

“He has no fever; and, as I said, I don’t reckon he’s sick at all. It’s something else that’s ailing him.”

Alduin simply nodded and then bonded with Reesha.

“Reesha’s found Master Calborth,” he explained a moment later. “I’ll run ahead and tell him what’s happened.”

He dashed up the avenue and met Master Calborth heading towards the gate of the citadel. Reesha sat on his fist.

“Reesha be mighty excited. What be happening?” the old man asked.

Alduin quickly explained the situation as the two hurried back towards the Kataur and their burden. The unconscious man’s face was turned to one side and partly covered by his messy hair; even so, Master Calborth nodded.

“He certainly be looking like a Raiden. Be bringing him quickly. Something strange be at play here ...”

“My thoughts exactly,” Cardol agreed with a note of satisfaction in his voice.

To Alduin’s relief, the mysterious stranger was stretched out on the wooden table in the centre of the dispensary a short while later. The scent of countless herbs and remedies spiced the room, while pots of ointments and bottles of potions filled the shelves along two walls. Questioning the Kataur as he worked, Master Calborth let his experienced hands gently probe the patient’s body; but he too found nothing to indicate what was ailing him. After laying his fingers on the

man's throat, confirming the weak but steady pulse, he examined his hands. Though faint, there were tell-tale signs that gave him away.

"A Raiden and a falconer," Master Calborth murmured, nodding slowly.

The old man then smoothed back the hair and gathered the beard together with a leather thong. He began cleaning the face with a wet cloth. The grime was superficial and came off easily, revealing pale, translucent skin. Master Calborth hesitated for a moment, shot a quick glance towards Alduin and mumbled something indistinct. He turned towards the Kataur.

"I be needing some shears and more warm water and cleaning cloths," he began.

Cardol nodded and left immediately.

"Be asking Mistress Marla to be preparing a bed, and to be giving you some spare clothes," Calborth continued to Ferl, who also nodded and left.

Alone in the dispensary with Alduin and the stranger, the Master Falconer turned and lay a gentle hand on one of the boy's shoulders.

"This be mighty strange, and I be not knowing how to be explaining it ... but this ..." he said gently guiding Alduin over to the table, "this be your father ..."

Erilea and Kariya crouched in the tall grass between the bacti bushes, bows drawn at the ready. Having made sure to keep down wind of the animals, they observed a herd of burak deer that grazed unconcerned and unaware of the danger. The huntresses had picked out a young buck and Kariya was signalling for Erilea to move a little west before taking the shot. Following her aunt's instruction, the young girl stealthily crept along through the undergrowth till she felt she had reached the perfect position. Taking aim, she pulled back the arrow till the longing for release hummed through her body; then she let it fly. As it left the bow, a blur of something golden flashed between her and the buck, distracting her and causing her to let out a cry. She heard something solid impact on the ground, at the same instant as the startled herd looked as one towards where she hid and then dashed off at top speed.

"What in the name of Emo, was that?" Kariya asked, coming up to her niece.

"I ... I don't know," Erilea answered. "It just came out of nowhere."

As she finished speaking a plaintive, agonizing yowl reached their ears.

"It sounds like a child!" Erilea exclaimed. "But surely, it can't be?"

Kariya was shaking her head.

“No. It does sound rather human, but my guess is that you’ve downed an Araek cat. It must have been stalking exactly the same buck as we were. That’s a chance in a million, but I guess it just happened.”

“And it’s still alive ... and suffering,” Erilea said. “What should we do?”

“Finish it off. We don’t have much of a choice. It’s not what we were after, but the skin will serve the clan well, and the meat can be stewed till it’s tender.”

The animal’s whimper mixed with a growl as the two Wunand cautiously approached. The arrow was sticking out just below the ribcage, and the visible pain of each shuddering breath made Erilea wince in empathy. Moving closer, Kariya drew out her long hunting knife, preparing herself for any desperate last stand the cat might make.

“It’s so beautiful,” Erilea whispered, despite herself.

The noble animal had no strength to do more than turn its head towards her. There was something so incredibly tragic about its gaze. Moments earlier the eyes had, no doubt, been full of passion, focussed intently on the task at hand. Now they were glazed over; and yet, as Erilea looked into the cat’s eyes, she saw a spark that told her that, given a chance, it could still live. They had a choice: to kill it outright or spare it. A strange feeling swept over the young Wunand. While her mind told her that it made no sense whatsoever to try and save it, her innermost feeling told her they should.

Kariya took a firm step forward.

“Stop!” Erilea cried.

Her aunt shot her a questioning look, but drew back.

“We should put it out of its misery as quickly as possible,” she said.

“That would seem to make sense,” Erilea agreed. “Even so, I’m going to ask you not to. I don’t know why, but I have a strong feeling that we should try and save it.”

Kariya’s eyes widened in consternation, but she could see that her niece was in earnest. This was the second summer they had spent together and she was beginning to trust and respect the young girl’s intuition. Accepting the turn of events, she made up her mind and acted immediately.

“I have jatamansi and doek leaves in my pack back at the shelter,” she said. “Take this knife and stay here. If necessary, use it. I’ll be back shortly.”

Erilea nodded.

With barely a sound, her aunt ran off towards the distant trees, fluid, swift movements defining her as an experienced Amazon. Erilea watched her for a while and then sat down cross legged

a small distance from the cat. Her eyes locked onto the arrow sticking out of its side, trembling with every shuddering breath the animal took. She seemed to feel its pain piercing her own flesh, washing over her and making her feel faint. Faced by its suffering, she felt helpless and frustrated; surely there was something she could do to help him? To her surprise, she suddenly found a song bubbling up inside her, and smiled faintly when she recognized it as an ancient, tribal lullaby.

Ears twitching, the cat's gaze did not leave Erilea's face for a moment, but she could see that its breathing was growing gradually more shallow. On an impulse, she slowly changed position and crawled towards him, reaching out a tentative hand and resting it on his shoulder. The animal made a noise somewhere between a growl and a sigh, but the young Wunand did not feel afraid.

"We're going to help you," she whispered, tears welling up unexpectedly in her eyes. The cat was young, just entering the prime of life, its golden fur soft as silk beneath her fingers, wrapped around muscles that revealed its potential power. "I'm so sorry. I ..."

"Erilea, be careful."

Kariya had returned as quietly as she had left, carrying a bag that she lay gently on the ground and started to unpack. Erilea wiped her eyes before turning to watch her. Because of the nature of their lives as Amazon warriors, Wunand women always carried sufficient emergency supplies of different ointments and remedies. Kariya pulled a wax plug out of a brown bottle, liberally sprinkling drops of a blood red liquid onto a cloth. She handed it to Erilea.

"Place it carefully over his muzzle and let him breath in the jatamansi. I hope it's the right amount. I'm not sure how much is needed to knock out an Araek cat!"

The animal did not resist the girl's ministrations. It was either resigned to the inevitable or simply trusted Erilea for some inexplicable reason; eyelids began to droop and it was soon asleep. Kariya set about carefully withdrawing the arrow from the cat's side. To her relief, the wound did not produce a heavy gush of blood, and was easily smeared with wolfsfoot ointment and covered with doek leaves. She looked at Erilea and shook her head in amazement.

"It doesn't appear to have pierced the lung or any other vital organ or artery. It looks like you're right. He doesn't have to die."

"But he'll need looking after for a while, won't he?" Erilea asked.

"What do you mean? You're not thinking of taking him back to the clan, are you?" her aunt asked in turn.

“But ...” Erilea began, “ ...we’ll need to keep the dressing in place somehow and it’ll need to be changed.”

Kariya looked at her, understanding her concern and trying to find a solution. Finally she shrugged.

“Maybe we can get it to the shelter. You could return there every day or so and see how he’s doing. If he’s gone one day, that will be fine, it will mean he survived.”

“But, till he regains strength he’s vulnerable. Another male might attack him. We don’t know how their territories lie here,” Erilea exclaimed, furrowing her brow in determination before continuing. “I’ll stay with him. It can be part of my *parna*.”

Kariya nodded in understanding. Having finished her training, Erilea was now at the age to go on her own vision quest, her *parna*. This involved spending time alone out in the wild, fasting and communing with Emo, looking for wisdom and guidance for her future. It was a tradition that many Wunand clan’s had dropped over the generations, but not Erilea and Kariya’s. They still considered the *parna* essential; and it would be an unusual challenge to combine it with caring for a wild animal.

“You need to return to the clan first,” Kariya said.

“Just long enough to get a few things and ask for the blessing of the elders.”

Having taken her decision and not expecting her aunt to contradict her, Erilea removed a long woven belt that was wrapped various times around her tunic.

“Help me get this around him to hold the doek leaves in place,” she said with decisive efficiency.

It took all Kariya’s wiry strength to lift the inert body enough for Erilea to slip the belt underneath and pull it round, till she could tie it firmly. It was the best she could do.

“And how are we going to transport it?” she murmured to herself.

“We’ll need help,” Kariya said. “There’s no way we can do it alone. You should go back to the settlement, express your intention to the elders and then bring a couple of the men back with you. I’ll stay here in the meantime.”

Erilea gave her aunt a grateful smile and lifted her fingers to her brow, bowing slightly.