

# Animal Heroes (Vol. 1): Wings of the Falcon

By THiLO

## In the Mayan Temple

Cliff Hanger stood inside a Mayan temple, clenching his fists. His quest had taken an entire month, but now he was finally here. The snake sculpture in front of him looked exactly like the drawing in the handwritten book he had studied. More than a thousand years ago, boys had used it to find their animals and take on their abilities. And it would still work the same way today. That's why Cliff needed to obtain the sculpture: In the hands of Mister Yashimoto, his greatest enemy, it would bring disaster to the world.

Cliff stopped right in front of the altar and took a deep breath. Then he carefully lifted the snake sculpture. As he did so, a grinding noise came from the ceiling above him. Cliff turned around and started running. As he was jumping over the poisoned arrows at the exit of the temple, something hairy hit his neck. He felt a sharp pain and wiped away a spider with his free hand. It had bitten him hard, and more than once. Cliff started to feel dizzy. He only managed the last few metres into the forest in a stumble. A bellowing laugh echoed through the jungle. Mister Yashimoto stepped out from behind a tree, a revolver in his hand. "Cliff Hanger!" he sneered. "So you actually did it."

Cliff tried to focus on his enemy, but the images blurred in his head. His legs gave way and he sank to his knees. Through a fog, he saw Yashimoto coming towards him. He tried to maintain his grip on the sculpture. But the magic snake slid from his powerless hands.

“Oh, you have a present for me?” jeered Yashimoto. “I will use it to create a group of boys that will make the world tremble: the Beast Boys.”

He grabbed Cliff’s backpack, rummaged through it, found the vial with the antidote and trampled it on the jungle floor. Then he picked up the sculpture, wrapped it in a cloth and, with a last derisive laugh, disappeared into the jungle.

“I must ... survive ...” Cliff Hanger stammered. “I must ... retrieve the sculpture ... because only superheroes are a match ... for the Beast Boys ... Animal Heroes.”

## 1. Eyes like a Falcon

On the outskirts of Barcelona, Pepe sat on his favourite boulder and looked into the distance, just like he did almost every day. He could sit here for hours and study the movement of the waves. They made him feel calmer, for deep inside, Pepe was as agitated as the sea on a stormy day.

Pepe was eleven years old, had no siblings, and no real friends at school either.

Sometimes his classmates made fun of him because he was so quiet, but mostly they left him alone, and he liked it that way. Even more so since his parents had separated.

Pepe tucked his arms around his legs and watched a cruise ship get underway. He swallowed. For a long time now, he had dreamed of a grand voyage, but he would probably never be able to afford a trip like that.

Pepe turned his head and let his gaze wander along the coastline. Some distance away, there was a small headland that stretched far into the sea. At its tip stood a small, semi-derelict tower.

“I’ve wanted to have a closer look at that for a while now ...” Pepe murmured. He got up. It would most likely take him a good hour to get there, but apart from a silent apartment and a full fridge there was nothing waiting for him at home anyway.

Pepe reached the headland in the late afternoon. However, access to the tower was blocked by a wire mesh fence. Pepe looked around. He saw no one who could have ratted him out. So he lifted up the wire and squeezed through underneath it.

The tower had been built from rough-hewn stones and was covered in moss and lichen. It was locked, but kicking in the old wooden door proved easy.

Seconds later, Pepe was climbing the spiral stone staircase to the top. Strange! he thought to himself. The higher he climbed, the farther he left solid ground behind, the more he felt at home. The tower would have to be at least a few hundred years old. A sign on the fence had said that the city was going to tear it down in the near future and build luxury apartments in its place.

“Nothing but luxury!” Pepe grumbled. “And nobody gives a toss about the poor!”

After about two hundred steps, the stairs opened into a circular room. It was completely empty. There was a view out to the ocean on one side, and across the roofs of the city on the other. Pepe immediately sensed that he had found a secret hiding place here, one that only belonged to him. He climbed up onto the windowsill facing the ocean and dangled a leg out the window.

He had never been scared of heights. The cruise ship was sailing along in the far distance; Pepe only recognised it because of its four thick chimneys.

All of a sudden, there was no more room in his head for any thought of rich holidaymakers or luxury apartments. Instead, he felt an unknown force all through his body, the proximity of another living being.

Pepe whirled around. Next to him, just a metre from his face, a kestrel sat on a protruding beam.

Pepe knew that kestrels were usually rather shy. Biology was one of the few subjects at school he actually found interesting. Yet this one was quite tame. It scuttled a little closer towards Pepe and he felt like the eyes of the bird were looking directly into his soul. The kestrel exuded power, tranquillity and wisdom.

“You’re crazy!” Pepe scolded himself. “It’s a perfectly normal kestrel, you’ve just never seen one this close before.”

Pepe slowly raised his arm and gently touched the kestrel, stroking the bird's feathers with his index finger. At he did so, a stroke of lightning seared through his body. It felt like a small electric shock, but it didn't hurt. Nevertheless Pepe's heart started to beat faster. No, this was no ordinary bird, that much was clear to him now. But what was it?

Pepe found he was no longer able to meet the kestrel's gaze. He turned his head and looked out the window. As he did so, he felt a jolt: He could now see the cruise ship in extraordinary detail, as sharp as if it were lying in port in front of him. Much better than with binoculars! Passengers were walking around on deck, two waiters serving drinks. A man seemed to be getting very upset, his face puffy and red.

Pepe shook his head in disbelief. It was as if he had acquired the kestrel's eyesight! He looked around to the city. The towers of the Sagrada Familia, the most famous church in Barcelona, reached up into the sky. Pepe was able to see so much detail, he could have counted its bricks. Panic gripped him. He touched his face with shaking hands but didn't feel any changes. What had happened?

Pepe jumped down from his lookout and ran down the stairs. He took two, three steps at a time, stumbled, caught himself just in time and kept running. He heard the kestrel screeching behind him. His hurried departure must have startled the bird of prey.

Outside, he kept running and only stopped when he ran out of air. Pepe leaned against the side of a house and caught his breath. The kestrel was nowhere to be seen.

“At least it's not following me,” Pepe gasped, his throat dry. He urgently needed something to drink. He glanced at the kiosk on the other side of the street. Did they have his favourite juice? However, try as he might, Pepe could not decipher the words on the sign. Just like it used to be, before his encounter with the kestrel. Pepe's heartbeat calmed down immediately. Whatever the kestrel had done to him, it had obviously passed. Pepe bought a bottle of water, drained it in one go and took the next bus home.

That night, it took Pepe a long time to fall asleep. He got up in the middle of the night and switched on his computer, devouring any information he could find about falcons until the crack of dawn: how they lived, what they could do, how much they had been

revered by ancient cultures such as the Egyptians and the Mayans. The sun was already coming up when Pepe finally fell into his bed.

The following day, Pepe could barely wait for school to be over. Tomorrow, they would sit a test in his most hated subject: maths. Yet he was utterly unable to focus on the teacher's words. It wasn't just the lack of sleep. Pepe couldn't stop thinking about the kestrel. Something had changed inside him. His fear had gone and given way to curiosity. He wanted to find out what was going on with this special animal.

Finally the school bell rang and released the students. Pepe pushed past the others to the bus stop and went out to the headland he had left helter-skelter the previous day. He climbed up into the round tower room again, but the beam was empty. The kestrel was gone.

"I'm such an idiot!" Pepe berated himself. "Why do I always have to be such a wuss!" He looked out towards the sea but saw no better or worse than any other human being. That meant the change in his eyesight couldn't have anything to do with the tower and was indeed linked to the kestrel. Pepe was deeply disappointed. He was convinced he had scared away the shy bird forever. He was all the more astonished when he heard a screech above him. The kestrel was sitting up in the beams of the tower ruin, inquisitively looking down onto the boy.

"Come!" Pepe whispered and held out his hand. "Horus, come!" Pepe couldn't have said why he called the kestrel Horus. During the night, he had read much about the Egyptian falcon god, whose name had been Horus. However, the kestrel seemed to react to the name and scuttled a little closer towards Pepe.

"Horus!" Pepe said again.

The kestrel pushed off the beam, sailed through the top of the tower and then landed on Pepe's hand. The grip of a trained hunting falcon could easily crush a human arm, Pepe knew. But he hardly felt Horus. What he felt was another stroke of lightning all through his insides.

Pepe looked out towards the sea. His eyesight had once again increased a hundredfold. He could see all the details of the yachts sailing past, right down to the colour of the painted toenails of a beauty lazing on one of the decks. It was incredible!

“This is your doing, Horus, isn’t it?” Pepe asked.

Instead of an answer, the kestrel screeched.

Pepe sat like this on the windowsill of the tower for a good half hour. He didn’t dare move for fear of scaring off the kestrel again. As it slowly began to grow dark, Pepe had to make a decision.

“I have to go home,” he said quietly. “My mother is waiting with dinner. Do you want to come along?”

The kestrel stretched its neck, its beak hacking at the air as if catching mosquitoes. Carefully, Pepe got up. Horus remained on his hand.

When Pepe had reached the outskirts of the city, Horus took to the skies. But he followed Pepe all the way home.

“I’ll open a window right away,” Pepe promised. “So you’ll know where I live.” He unlocked the front door and ran up the stairs to their apartment. Without saying hello, he stormed past his mother into his room. Horus was already sitting on the window ledge, waiting for him.

“Do you want to come in?” Pepe enquired uncertainly.

Horus didn’t move an inch.

Pepe left the window open.

“I’ll quickly eat something, then I’ll be back,” he said.

It worked: The kestrel was still there fifteen minutes later. Pepe spent the entire evening talking to it. He told it everything he would have told a good friend – if he had had one. Even more, he unburdened his heart to the bird. How he had felt since his parents’ separation, how much it hurt not to have any friends, and how he yearned for something else, something important in his life. A goal, a task.

Horus screeched. The kestrel seemed to understand Pepe only too well. Pepe wished that Horus could talk to him as well, like a human being.

At about ten p.m., Pepe’s eyes began to close.

“Good night, Horus,” he mumbled sleepily. “Will you come back tomorrow?”

Horus cooed like a docile pigeon. Then he took to the air and gracefully flew off through the narrow lanes of Barcelona.

The next day, Horus followed Pepe all the way to school. Pepe quietly smiled to himself. He still had a kestrel's excellent eyesight, which meant he was able to spot the solutions for all the math problems in his teacher's notebook. Pepe deliberately worked some mistakes into his test so his teacher wouldn't get suspicious. But even so, this would be his best math test ever, that much he knew.

After school, Pepe started out on the long journey to the derelict tower for the third time. And the surprise that awaited him there would change his life forever.