

THE ECOLOGY OF The Bird Maiden

Mufti's Two Masters

by Paul Culotta

Artwork by Karl Waller

Ah, but it was warm, and Mufti eagerly looked forward to reaching the oasis. It was there that he would replenish his waterskins, refresh himself, and water Mandrake. The sturdy war camel had been pushed hard during this chase. Given the freshness of the trail, it seemed likely that it would end soon with finding the woman and child in the oasis. And it was there that Mufti would have to defeat the genie who had stolen the two females; it seemed unlikely in this heat that they would travel during the day.

As Mandrake kept up his steady pace, Mufti pondered the character of his foe. Some genies were known to be cruel and uncaring, but one who stole a noble merchant's wife and child through enchantment was certainly to be despised. And the fact that this magical opponent could not be seen meant that it would have to be dealt with carefully. But the most grating aspect was the genie's blatant pride. To leave a note to the husband bragging of the theft had to be the height of vanity. Did not the Loregiver teach that the intolerant who mock those beneath them shall choke on their own self-righteousness? This genie apparently felt no guilt about violating Her teachings, and that, above all else, was a threat not only to the family in this matter, but to all inhabitants of the land. Yes, Mufti concluded, this genie would have to be destroyed.

Which was why the merchant Suleman had sent for a faris, one who would not only undertake the mission without fear, but one who would destroy the magical thief and return Afta and her daughter without any thought of despoilment. Mufti had volunteered readily along with several others of his class, but Suleman had chosen him—due, no doubt, to Mufti's greater accomplishments and his carefully cultivated reputation for purity of heart.

Just on the horizon the warrior spotted the dim outline of the oasis. He stopped, mopped the sweat from his brow with the sleeve of his aba, and concentrated. Yes, it was the oasis, not a mirage. No doubt the genie could see him by now as well, and battle would soon be joined. There was no opportunity or need for approaching subtly. While surprise would have been an advantage, in the end either Mufti's skills at fighting blindly would prevail or they would not. Fate would decree the result.

Yet one should not tempt Fate sorely, the warrior reflected, and he commanded Mandrake to kneel. After dismounting, he kept his eyes shifting about for any telltale signs of an approaching unseen enemy. He drained what was left in one of his last waterskins and kept looking. But there was nothing that gave any indication of an invisible enemy anywhere. No sudden sifting of the sands, no break in the heat waves, no sound, nothing. Well, oh magical

one, you want me fully clad, eh? So be it. My thirst for water is now quenched. Now my hunger for justice must be satisfied.

Mufti reached among the bundles secreted on Mandrake and unlimbered a carefully wrapped heavy package. Untying the knots, he took out a shirt of fine steel chain mail and, after a few quick glances all around, he put it on, suspecting that now would be a prime time for the genie to strike. But nothing happened, a little to his disappointment. Had the genie suddenly rushed in, it would have discovered that Mufti had grasped a sharp dagger concealed within the armor and had kept it in his hand the entire time, ready for instant use. The warrior sighed. Ah well, the genie apparently wanted him to come to the oasis. He pondered the matter some more. Since the wife and child probably would not remember the details of the fight once the enchantment was lifted, there was no sense in taking a chance. He reached into one of Mandrake's bags and pulled out a finely crafted bandolier that he slid over his chest and tightened. In it were three finely honed daggers, each one having a sunburst nicely etched into its blade, and they were joined by the fourth that had been hidden in the chain shirt.

All along Mufti had worried about being ambushed by his invisible opponent, but the genie now giving him the opportunity to get fully protected and armed was unsettling. All during this chase, it had not made the slightest appearance—no observations, no tracks, nothing. To be sure, everyone Mufti had questioned had seen the woman and child, and their tracks were quite visible once he had picked them up. But no one had seen anyone (or thing) with them. Perhaps the genie could fly and be invisible, an uncomfortable thought that caused him to scan the sky as well as the ground.

There—up above was a bird of some sort lazily circling. Peering intensely, Mufti finally recognized it, a desert owl up looking for a desert rat or snake for a mid-afternoon feast.¹ Hmm . . . could it be the genie in disguise? Mufti rebuckled his weapons belt nonchalantly, keeping his head turned just enough to keep the owl in sight, but it made no move toward him. Perhaps it lived in the oasis and felt disturbed by the genie's presence?

Certainly the owl would not have been uncomfortable with Suleman's wife, Afta. From everything he had heard from the farmers in the river valley, she was a

Level	Bird form	AC	MV	HD	THACO	#AT	Dmg
2	Parakeet	9	1, Fl 24	1/2	20	1	1
3	Swallow	8	1, Fl 30	1-1	20	1	1
4	Parrot	6	1, Fl 30	1+1	19	1	2-4
5	Falcon	5	1, Fl 36	1-1	20	3	1/1/1
6	Owl	5	1, Fl 27	1	19	3	1-2/1-2/1
7	Eagle, Wild	6	1, Fl 30	1+3	18	3	1/2/1-2/1
8	Eagle, Giant	7	3, Fl 48	4	15	3	1-6/1-6/2-12



kindly lady, a kahina who had stopped along the way to cure a diseased oxen, share her water with an overheated farmer, and set the broken leg of a boy who had fallen from an apple tree. She had even spent an entire day with a village, instructing them how to better irrigate their fields.² So strange that the genie would have allowed her to do so, or perhaps it was that magical being's way of sneering at any pursuit by allowing such a clear trail. The latter was the more probable reason—otherwise it could have just taken the wife and daughter in its arms and spirited them all away, Mufti mused.

But Suleman's words of warning still remained with the faris. Afta was powerful in her own right and the magical garment the genie had placed on her, a veil of some sort, could make her a dangerous opponent as well. The upset husband had been most insistent: above all Mufti must remove the veil and bring it back along with wife and daughter.³ He had given the warrior a potion, one that he said would put the kahina and her daughter in a deep stupor. It was necessary, he said, because there was no telling what would happen or what the desert priestess would say once the veil was removed. Better to drug them. Mufti had suggested to Suleman that he simply destroy the veil on the premise that destruction of the enchanting item would negate the charm, but the fat merchant had replied quickly, "No, just bring it back. I would give it to the College of Wizardry for their research and use."⁴

Mufti unpacked his steel helmet from another bag and strapped it in place, then untied the shield carefully secured to Mandrake's saddle. His final steps were to pull out the carefully slung lance, then remount his camel. A few nudges in the side got the beast up and trotting toward the oasis. Time to get this done and over with. At least the sun was to his back. Still there was no sign of the genie; even the owl had flown away. Mufti entered the oasis unopposed.

It was a fine place with a clear pool of sparkling water surrounded by numerous date and palm trees, and most of the ground was covered by a nice mat of green grass. There were several piles of rocks and boulders here and there. Mufti had been to this haven three times before in his travels, and it looked as normal and as peaceful as before.

Except for the girl who sat by the pool. She was dressed in a fine aba and sat cooling her feet in the water, her sandals beside her. Laying a few feet away was a spear, another aba, a wooden case with a handle, and another, slightly larger pair of sandals.⁵ The girl looked at Mufti as he trotted up, and he was taken aback—the dark eyes behind the veil showed no surprise, relief, or fear—only a penetrating curiosity. It must be the daughter, Fatira, he decided—her body was far too unshaped and young (about ten years old) to be that of the mother. But where was the

mother? And, above all, where was the genie? Mufti kept one suspicious eye on the pool. The girl just stared at him.

"Little one, where is your mother?" he finally asked.

"Off," was her only reply.

"Off? Off where? And where is your abductor?"

The girl cocked her head, her eyes looking confused, then asked in return, "Our ab-duc—our what?"

"The one who took you and your mother away. Come, you can trust me, I am here to take you back to your father," the warrior replied, looking all around for any sign of danger. But all he saw was the owl again, fifty paces away sitting upon a boulder, busily tearing something apart and eating its fill.

The girl got to her feet, put her hands on her hips, and gave him a piercing look and a surprising scornful rebuke: "You mean to take me and Mother back? To my wonderful, loving father, who only talks about how he can't wait for a few more years until he sells me? If I were you, I would leave before Mother comes back, mercenary! She promised me we would never return! Now you just better go away before she gets back!" With that, she picked up the spear and pointed it threateningly.

The large war camel snorted and grumbled—it was not smart to make such a display to his master—but Mufti kept a tight rein and muttered some words of restraint. Well, the daughter was enchanted as well, just as Suleman had suspected, and it seemed to be a powerful charm since Fatira did not have the dim faraway look in her eyes that he had witnessed in those who had fallen prey to unscrupulous sorcerers, priests, and genies. Perhaps the genie had used two veils, one for the mother, and the other for this child?

Suddenly the girl screamed in terror, dropped her spear, and ran.

Mufti's reflexes, developed from years of training, immediately kicked in. In one fluid motion, he jerked Mandrake about, dropped his lance, and pulled one of the daggers from the bandolier. With uncanny speed, the dagger went sizzling through the air and buried itself in the wide open mouth of a large, toothsome, spotted canine. It staggered back, choking and gasping, and fell, rolling spastically in the grass.

Five more of the creatures were running quickly toward the warrior, shrieking a high-pitched racking laughter that resounded throughout the oasis.

"Run!" Mufti yelled over his shoulder, then added, "Climb a tree!" Then a second dagger found its mark, buried to the hilt in the chest of another of the monsters. The beast stopped, looked down helplessly at the dagger, and collapsed.

Cursedly powerful genie, Mufti thought. There was no time for another throw as the beasts were upon him, and he pulled the scimitar from its scabbard. Mandrake

responded to the quick nudges from his master and charged left, trampling another of the howling, devilish beasts under his large hooves. As Mandrake turned, Mufti slashed at the one that was jumping up to pull him from the saddle. It fell back, headless. But there were too many. One of the last two jumped up and caught Mandrake's neck in its jaws. And the last one vaulted up the back of the camel and knocked Mufti from his saddle. He hit the grass of the oasis with a thud, and there was an incredible burst of pain in his ankle, and the scimitar fell from his hand.

Instinctively, he rolled and slashed sideways with another dagger, but it only nicked the snout of his assailant, which jumped back with a shriek. Then Mufti tried to stand, but it was impossible. Something was wrong with his leg, and he was forced to fight on one knee. Breathing hard, the desert knight quickly surveyed the scene. The one who had knocked him from Mandrake was bleeding from the snout, but was approaching menacingly, no longer laughing but growling. A few feet away was the beast that Mandrake had trampled, but amazingly it was up, apparently unharmed. It shook itself, and then moved toward Mufti as well. Thirty paces away his prized war camel was thrashing about with the beast's jaws firmly clamped on its neck, and a sickening flow of blood was staining the grass. It was not a good shot but Mufti had to do something, so he threw his blade and just as quickly pulled out his last dagger. The monster on Mandrake was hit in its thigh, and the blow was enough to make it bark in pain, which unlocked its jaws. Mandrake staggered away, but collapsed just a few feet later. Mufti could see that it was a horrible bite, and knew that his camel would not last long. But the hyena left him alone, and loped over toward Mufti.

Mufti wondered whether he would survive this fight. Three angry hyenas (a little bigger than normal, he noted) faced him, and he had not even faced the genie yet! Mufti unsnapped the holder for his ceremonial hatchet and got it in his left hand. Then he quickly faked a throw with the dagger and scrambled on all fours for a tree as the beasts scattered momentarily. It was enough for him to get there and put his back to the tree, but the movement caused pain beyond words in his ankle.

The three hyenas recovered from the ruse, and approached slowly, laughing hellishly, and Mufti did not know whether it was in respect for his ploy or just to unnerve him. Not that it would take much at this point, he thought. One quick rush en masse would take him out.

As if they had been reading his thoughts, the largest gave a quick yelp and all three lunged toward the crippled faris. At the same time, Mufti heard a singing (a woman's beautiful voice, he thought),⁶ and he raised his last knife to throw. But the dagger never left his hands. Instead the two palm trees at his back suddenly came

to life like writhing snakes, and his arm was knocked aside. Then the warrior found himself wrapped tightly by a thick trunk, which wound around his body and over his face. What in the name of Kor—but he thought no more as the breath was squeezed out of him and he blacked out. The last thing he heard was the hyenas shrieking in panic. They were laughing no longer.

“Are you all right?”

Mufti shook his head slowly, groaned, and opened his eyes.

Kneeling over him was a woman in a plain tan aba, her nose and mouth covered with the strangest veil he had ever seen. It seemed to be made of light brown feathers tightly woven together. Her eyes were dark and curious just like the girl’s had been, and Mufti suspected that if the veil were removed, the face would be beautiful. Her hands, elegant but strong looking, offered a cup.

He grunted his assent and sat up to drink—only to be reminded of his ankle by a blinding flash of pain. Despite his training he gasped and nearly fainted.

“Here, drink this, it will help the pain,” she said. “It is all I can do until I regain my spells.”

Breathing shallowly (his chest hurt too!), Mufti sipped, then gulped from the cup. A sweet taste, far better than he expected.

“My thanks,” he croaked, “but why waste your potion, lady? Certainly the genie will kill me for slaying his beasts?”

She looked at him curiously, and started to answer, but then saw there was no need. The potion had done its work as the warrior slumped to the ground unconscious.⁷

Suleman al Fataq stretched, yawned, and belched loudly. One of the harem girls woke up, wrinkled her nose, and closed her eyes again, pretending to be asleep. The other one was not as smart: she turned over to see what was making bullfrog noises, and Suleman saw her.

“Do you have something to say, desert blossom?” asked the merchant, grinning widely, exposing his crooked teeth from behind his thick lips.

The woman shook her head vigorously. No woman in her right mind ever did anything to annoy the mountain of flab that was master of this house. His jolly appearance could quickly become a terror to whoever offended him, and in these circumstances it was best to say nothing.

And this morning she was lucky, because Suleman was in a good mood. He roared with laughter as he smacked the buttocks of the lady who was trying to appear asleep, and howled hysterically as she bounded out of bed with a cry of pain.

“Go, both of you, and get Mustafa to prepare my morning meal and coffee!” he chuckled. “And tell Hassan to make sure the house is clean! Today your mistress returns, and I want the place to look presentable? He snickered nastily as the two

women quickly gathered their night clothes, bowed, and left.

Ah, what a great day this was going to be, thought Suleman. His chubby, ringed fingers reached into the box of sweetmeats that was always at his bedside, and he plopped a few into his mouth. Chewing thoughtfully, he considered himself lucky. The story had worked, and the faris was returning with Fatira and Afta in chains, no less! Oh, how sweet his vengeance would be. Licking his fingers clean, the merchant poked his other hand into the box, grabbed another fistful of snacks, and then lumbered off to the eating room. May as well start with a good breakfast, he thought. Then we will receive the faris, get the veil, and pay him off. And finally, to top the day off, we will have some real private quality time underground with his beloved (he smiled as his mind lingered on that description) wife. The rivers of Zakhara would turn to ice before she ever got close to her veil again.

As his spies had said, the faris arrived a few hours later, with wife and daughter chained securely, their veils removed, and looking quite drugged. They were escorted into the courtyard where Suleman was enjoying his midmorning snack of glazed duck, honeyed artichoke hearts, and sweetened coffee.

“Ah, Mufti al Kaban, exalted faris of the land, I welcome you!” cried the merchant, not bothering to get up from his comfortable, pillowed lair, where he was being fanned by an attractive, lithe, dark-haired girl. “Come, sit, and enjoy a few delicacies I’ve saved for such an occasion. We must share salt and celebrate your success!”

“My thanks, Suleman,” replied Mufti, “but I must get to my next mission quickly, and I would just as soon receive my reward and be on my way.”

“Of course, of course,” cried the merchant enthusiastically, gnawing the last morsel of meat from a duck leg, “but really, first let me hear of your success! Did you destroy the genie? Where did you find them?”

Mufti sighed. This was not going to be easy. “Very well, you deserve to hear the story, but first I should like to be paid,” insisted the faris.

Suleman chuckled, then choked briefly on an artichoke heart. Coughing and laughing, he said, “Really, Mufti, you sound more like a beggar from the bazaar than a holy warrior! But you deserve it as much as I deserve to hear about the story. Oh, where is the veil?”

The faris produced the feathered garment and handed it over, and Suleman took it, stuck it in a pouch, and rubbed his hands with glee as his eyes gleamed triumphantly. Then he pulled a jingling sack from behind a pillow and tossed it to Mufti. Finally, he cleared his mouth with a swallow of coffee and spit it out over his shoulder. It splattered right on the feet of the girl with the fan, and she did not flinch.

Mufti looked inside the sack, but did not bother to count the dinars. It did not matter. The contract was completed. And now he could deal with this pig.

He sat down cross-legged in front of Suleman and stated dryly, “I don’t know why you are inquiring about a genie. There was none.”

“Hah! I knew it!” the merchant exclaimed. “Once the genie saw you, Mufti al Kaban, renowned faris warrior, coming after him, I knew he would flee! Lucky for him, too. But oh yes, there was a genie, don’t you recall it left a note?” the merchant added.

Mufti’s voice was cold: “The only luck involved was that your wife saved my life from a pack of hyena-men who happened to come to the same oasis where I caught up with her.”

Suleman stopped eating, and looked at the faris carefully. “Truly? Well, perhaps she did so to defend herself and the child. Hmmm. Well, no matter, I am glad you are safe, and that you captured her. I see you drugged her as I instructed, and that is good, too. Well, uh, I am sure the genie left once it saw you. Perhaps Afta will remember something once the potion wears off and will let me know. Here, let me give you this as a bonus for your trouble and let you be on your way,” he said, taking a jeweled ring off one of his fingers.

“No, that’s quite all right, Suleman,” Mufti said, holding up his hand, signaling refusal. “In a way, I am already on my next mission.”

“What?” asked the merchant stupidly.

“After she saved me, Afta told me the most incredible story. She indicated that she was a slave to her husband who had power over her by keeping her veil, the one I have just given back to you. She also said that as long as the veil was parted from her, the holder became her master.

And she said that her current master, you, Suleman, inflicted atrocities upon her and her daughter too unmentionable to name.”

“That is none of your business, faris!” roared Suleman, waddling from the couch, and shaking his finger. “You agreed to this mission and swore your word to accomplish it! Nothing can change that! Now, get out!”

“That is exactly what I told her, Suleman,” replied Mufti soothingly, holding his hands open while remaining seated. “Even though she had saved my life, even though she nursed me and my wounded mount back to health, and regardless of the fact that her husband might be cruel and inhumane, I advised her that I could not be broken from my oath.”

Suleman relaxed a little, and nodded. “Good. Then we are agreed that what happens in a man’s house is his own business. Well, you may be on your way.”

“Well, if you please, remain,” the warrior stated flatly. “You insisted on hearing the story so I shall finish it. I did not believe her until I put the pieces together. There was no genie, there never was. The note



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was a hoax, similar to the tricks you perform on your competitors, and I remember you had me dine with you when we first talked. It is apparent to me now that you probably put something into my drink or my food to get me to believe such an incredible tale. Once I had agreed to the mission and given my word to complete it, you knew that something like this could happen. Thus, you gave me a potion to keep her and her daughter drugged."

"Yes," grinned Suleman, "but she is my wife, and an oath is an oath, whether by contract or by marriage. We have no further need for your services, faris, so if you please?" and he pointed toward the back door that led to the alley.

"Of course," Mufti stated, and he got up to leave, but then added, "but I did make an oath to her as well that you need to know about. I promised her that upon completion of my contract to you that I would ask that you release her from the vows of the marriage you have forced upon her by possession of this veil, and I do so now. You know that she is not only a creature of the wild, but a caring person who ministers to the land and its people. Her knowledge is great, and her ability to render assistance is considerable. Why keep her in this gilded cage when her knowledge and learning could be shared with the people? Please, Suleman, go to the qadi with her and declare that this marriage should be dissolved. She will agree readily and it will be done. You will have done a great service to her, yourself, and the Land. She will want none of your property. What say you?"

Suleman laughed heartily and long. He fell back on his pillowed couch and it creaked dangerously. Tears came to his eyes and he slapped his fat knees. Then he sat up and cried, "You self-righteous donkey! She is mine, I captured her fairly, I married her legally, and that is that! You have kept her promise to her. You asked me to release her, I refused, and that is the end of that! Now get out before I summon the mamluks to remove you from the city!"

"That is your final answer?" asked Mufti gently. "There is nothing I can say or do to change your mind?"

"No, now go!" shrieked Suleman.

"Very well," shrugged the faris, and he took the bag of money, and turned to leave, leaving the helplessly drugged wife and daughter standing there.

And as he did so, his hand slipped inside his aba and removed a dagger from a bandolier. A moment later, he whirled around, and a dagger with a sunburst on the blade hissed through the air of the courtyard.

"Tell me, grandson, do you think this was all really worth it?"

"Yes, grandfather," replied Mufti. "You will find this document in order. It deeds the household and all of the goods of Suleman al Fataq from his widow to our

servant, Anwar. What we have gained far outweighs the loss. We have needed such a place for some time."

The old man brushed aside the document, then asked, "But, grandson, what of the woman and her child? Were they really drugged?"

"Yes, grandfather, they were. It was hard to convince her to allow it, but by the time we had left the oasis, we were firmly agreed that she had to have her freedom and that I had to fulfill my oath. It was the only way to accomplish our goals without both of us losing our honor. I trusted her fully, and once I convinced her that I was a holy warrior and told her of my training, she gave me her trust. Without drugging her, we might have been discovered by a sorcerer or hakima hired by the fat one."

"And where did the mother and child go?" asked the old man.

"Off to the mountains,"⁸ replied Mufti. "She said that she had to take her daughter to receive training in the ways of her kind. I offered to accompany and guard them on their journey, but she refused, as I knew she would. Ah, what a wonderfully independent creature!"

"Independence!" snorted the grandfather. "If Kor could reveal total knowledge to me, I suspect the Old One would tell me that my grandson's lust for independence, especially being freed from keeping the garb of a faris, was the real motivation behind this incident!"

Mufti smiled. "Oh exalted one, I believe Kor speaks through your lips as he has for many years. Yes, being a faris was getting tiresome. Please tell me that I do not have to continue."

"Hah! You made your own wish come true, did you not? The city is still in an uproar over the killing of the fat toad and his six guards by a faris! How could you pose as one now? Mufti al Kaban will be searched for by mercenaries and bounty hunters all the way to the Isle of the Elephant."

"Ah, you are wise, grandfather," cooed Mufti.

"And you are impudent! But," he added with softness in his voice, "you are one of our best, and it is indeed time for a change. I think you should learn to cut hair and trim beards. There are certain people in Huzuz we want to keep track of, those who seem to be, well, unfriendly to the scholars of Kor's mosque for reasons yet to be divined. Are you interested?"

"Exalted one, I am yours to command," replied Mufti, bowing.

"Very well, go out and talk to Latifa. She will teach you the ways of the barber and brief you on your new background and mission. May the knowledge of the Old One protect you on this, your new life."

"Yes, grandfather," replied Mufti, bowing again, and he left the tent.

The old man laid back on the pillows in his tent and looked at the deed again. Justice had been done and there would probably be a day when the bird maiden

could be called upon to return a favor. And what a wonderful home Mufti had procured. Posing as a faris for five long years, he had brought in much useful information. It would be interesting to see how well he would do in the Grand Bazaar of Huzuz posing as an enterprising barber. As a faris, Mufti had to rely on his brawn and fighting skills. This new role would require a lot more wits. If he did well, it would probably be time to consider even greater things for him among the Wrath of the Old. Yes, with followers such as Mufti, the future of the Order always would be bright with the blood of those who opposed it.

The Grandfather of Assassins smiled happily, looked at the deed again, and reached for a pear.

Notes

1. The bird maiden is a creature unique to Zakhara, the Land of Fate. It is always female, just like the swanmay living in the northern lands of Toril, and in some respects quite similar to that creature.

Like a swanmay, a bird maiden may *shapechange* to bird form. While the former can transform only into a swan, the bird maiden can change into a variety of bird forms, depending upon her level.

It is important to note that as the bird maiden rises in level, she may elect to take the form for that level or any form of a lesser level. For example, a 6th-level bird maiden could *shapechange* into an owl or any bird form allowed for a 2nd- through 5th-level bird maiden.

There are other differences between swanmays and bird maidens. A swanmay is a ranger while in human form, while a bird maiden is a kahina, with all of the powers of that class (See *Arabian Adventures*). Another important difference is that swanmays are always good-aligned, while a bird maiden may be of any alignment. Most bird maidens (80%) are of neutral alignment, while 10% are good and 10% are evil. Whatever the alignment, it always has a neutral tendency (i.e., neutral good, true neutral, or neutral evil). It is rumored that evil bird maidens are able to *shapechange* into ravens, blood hawks, and giant vultures.

2. Good and neutral bird maidens see themselves as protectors of living things and guard against those who would despoil the land. Hence, they have a tendency to help and teach those who respect the land. Their protection applies to sentient beings as well, in line with the tolerance extended to all by the teachings of the Loregiver. Hence, a bird maiden would teach irrigation to farmers to help their crops grow, but she would ensure that the system would not harm the lake or river life being used as a water source.

3. The power of a bird maiden resides in a shawl, veil, or other significant object of clothing that is made of feathers. This

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me, to thank him for giving me a life. There was so much I wanted to say.

But as these words stuck in my throat, a memory wedged its way in. I remembered my youthful anticipation as I would wait in the castle for his return from distant lands, the warm look on his face as he burst through the doorway, and the smell of the woods on his hands and clothes when he greeted me with hugs of the same fervor as those he had for Averett and Kile.

What would my life have been without Davrin? Where would I have been without Lorien?

I gazed at him. His head shook with more than the cold. His lips were dry and creased, showing no signs of having been treated with the oils that Lorien would have made him apply. His hair blew about his uncovered head.

A new thought managed to struggle through my own selfish concerns. One so disturbing that it caught my breath and drew me harshly back into reality.

Davrin had never been alone before.

"When are you leaving?" he asked.

I swallowed and cleared my throat. There was only one answer to this question. My time of leaving would come when Davrin's came, and this was not it. "I am not ready yet."

He grimaced. "I have nothing more for you, Garrett. You should go and live your life. Leave an old man in peace."

"No, I disagree. There is much more I can learn from you."

Davrin pursed his lips.

I walked to his chair and knelt beside him, warming his cold hand in mine. "I'll make our breakfast in a moment. But first, tell me about when you first met Lorien."

He sat in silence for a moment, staring at the cliffs. Then he began to speak. As he described their first meeting, the sun crested the far ridge of the canyon. I raised my free hand and shielded my eyes, squinting into the light of a new day. Ω



Bird Maiden

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object is given to her at the end of her initial training. If she ever loses it, she loses all her powers as kahina and shape-changer until she recovers it. Unscrupulous men have been known to come into the possession of a bird maiden's feathered garment, and with the creature helpless, have forced her into marriage.

4. Destruction of the feathered token of the bird maiden always results in the creature's death with no hope whatsoever of resurrection.

5. When *shapechanged*, only a bird maiden's feathered garment and her body

transform. All other worldly goods must be taken off and guarded by someone else.

6. Just as mystics dance, bird maiden kahinas sing, and the verbal components of their spells are always sung in a sweet, warbling voice. They have major access to the spheres of All, Animal, Divination, Elemental, Healing, Plant, and Weather. They have minor access to the spheres of Creation, Protection, and Sun.

7. While bird maidens always have the nonweapon proficiency options allowed to kahinas, one proficiency they always possess is herbalism due to its connection with the land they are sworn to protect.

8. The place of training for bird maidens is said to be a place called the Crown of All Feathers. It is supposedly a great wooden fortress concealed among the clouds in high hills or mountains. There aarakocra teach the rituals, duties, and abilities of the bird maidens. It is rumored that a very special genie of enormous power guards this place and uses powerful illusions to keep it safe from the curious and unsavory. All bird maidens know where this place is, but no sort of magical compulsion or physical abuse can pry the location from them. Ω