



BY THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF SWORDBIRD



A PREQUEL TO SWORDBIRD

SWORD QUEST

NANCY YI FAN



The background is a vibrant, detailed illustration of a jungle. A large white bird with a sword in its talons is the central focus. Below it, a black bird with a gold collar and a colorful woodpecker are perched on a branch. The scene is filled with lush green foliage, red and yellow flowers, and a stone wall in the lower right corner.

Sword Quest

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TO ALL WHO WANT TO BE
MASTERS OF FATE

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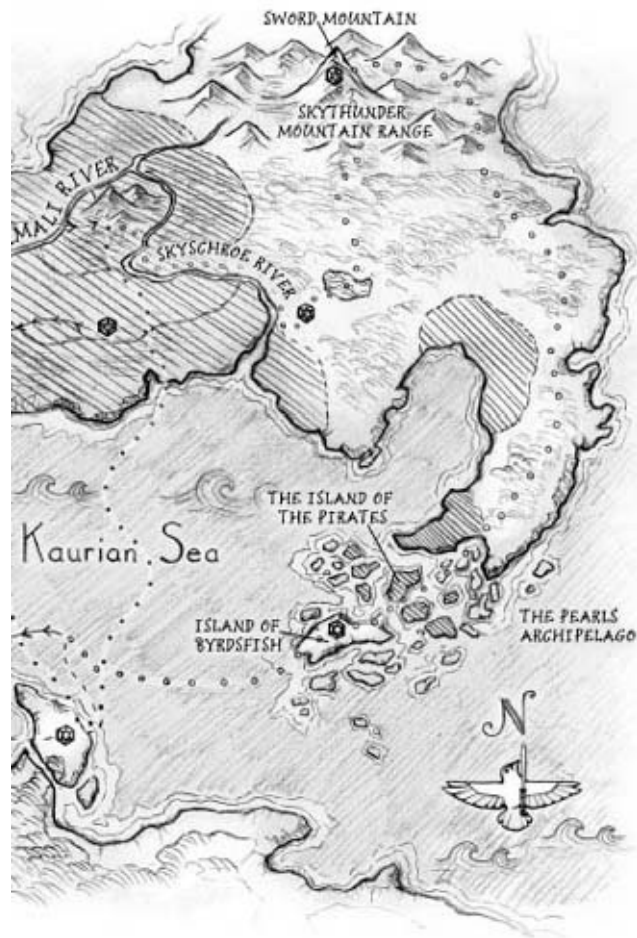
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Map

The World of Birds





*This is a special sword,
a sword that can change the world.*
—FROM THE *OLD SCRIPTURE*

A SWORD IS MADE

Rosy clouds of dawn floated over the Island of Paradise. King Pepheroh of Kauria crouched among the fronds of the tallest palm tree, his linen robe and tail feathers whipping in the breeze. The old phoenix meditated on the Great Spirit with his eyes half open, hoping to hear his will, but his mind was distracted by the troubling news his messengers had been bringing him for many months. Between the earth and the sky, birds were struggling. Once they had freely shared trees and nest space, seeds, roots, and berries, but, somehow, arguments had arisen. That led to cheating, then to stealing, and then to pecking and scratching. As time rolled steadily on, the most powerful winged creatures, feuding with one another, had turned to weapons. Four-winged dinosaurs and archaeopteryxes swooped down, killing and destroying. War spread across the ptero-world like a hurricane so that now nearly all lived in fear, distrust, and uncertainty. Pepheroh's magical kingdom was one of the last peaceful lands remaining.

“Help us, Great Spirit,” Pepheroh cried. “Send us a sign.”

A sound came drifting on the wind, so faint that Pepheroh at first thought it was only his own hope whispering in his ear. But then he heard it again.

Make a sword, the Great Spirit told him. Somebird has to guide the world into order again. Make a sword, and he will come to wield it.

Can a sword truly be used to bring peace to the world? Pepheroh wondered as he clutched his garments around him. “How can I forge such a powerful sword?”

When the sword is nearly finished, I shall make it magical. But beware, the Great Spirit warned. Guard the sword until a worthy bird comes to claim it on the day of the fifth full moon three years from now. If an evil bird wields it, it will bring more disaster to the world.

“Yes, Great Spirit,” Pepheroh promised.

After the blacksmiths and metalworkers all over Kauria heard the old king's proclamation, they came to present their service and skills.

A month passed. Pepheroh was visiting the forge at dusk. *Will this sword be a blessing or a curse?* he thought anxiously as his eyes followed every stroke of the hammer.

Suddenly, Pepheroh saw a flash of light beaming down from the sky. He realized that it was the tear of the Great Spirit, who was saddened at the warring world. The glistening drop fell onto the earth and shattered into eight gemstones, the largest bearing all the colors of the rainbow, and each of the others glistening with one of its colors.

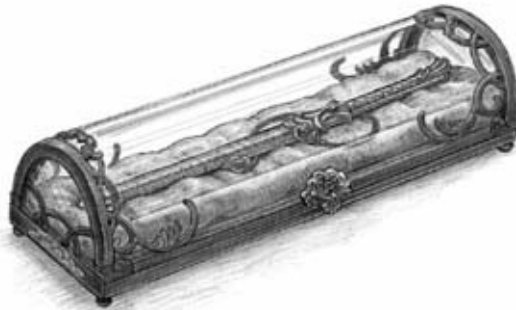
As the biggest tear-gem of the Great Spirit streaked through the forge's open window and fell onto the hilt of the sacred sword, all the blacksmiths stopped, amazed. The sword was finished! Pepheroh touched the perfect blade with a claw. "I shall save you for the hero," he vowed.

Seasons passed. In a holy chamber, the sword lay in a crystal case, waiting for its master to come.

Not all was well in Kauria. The dark power of chaos began to reach toward the island like a devil's claws, and the island's green lushness started to fade away.

"Will a hero come?" the old king asked.

"Your Highness, I will go out to find him!" Ozzan the toucan blacksmith said. "I have seen scores of years, and my life's work was the hero's sword. It is my wish to see it wielded by the right bird, so I will go out into the mortal world and find this hero."



"But Ozzan, it is dangerous for you." Pepheroh reached out a claw to place a magical protection but the toucan stopped him.

"This decision is my own, my good king," he said, and flexed a claw to prove his strength. Under the worn, wrinkled skin there were still muscles from his younger days. "I will take a badge to remind me of my home and of you. I will see to it that a worthy bird comes."

There was a pause, and they could hear the wind blowing the sand around them. The toucan's blue-lidded eyes were shining.

“Very well, Ozzan. You may go.”



Who loses and who gains is settled within a flap of the wings.
—FROM THE *OLD SCRIPTURE*

Loss

Hungrias II, the Ancient Wing, emperor of the archaeopteryxes, sprawled like a huge spider on his whalebone perch. He was staring out of a rounded window at the forests of Castlewood, but his eyes reflected the world. “Secrets. Delicious!” he declared, his bloated face squished into furrows. “No secrets can sneak past my mighty empire’s eyes and ears. Yes, go on!” Down the great golden hall of the Sun Palace, the rows of plumes on the leather headgear of his knights all dipped forward as the subjects leaned in to listen. Across from them, his scholars swished their sleeves.

“The lowly birds in your territories are starting to whisper about rare gemstones. Leasorn gems, they’re called,” the head of the scholars said. “They have strange markings on them. It is said they come from the sky and have something to do with a hero. One in particular, our sources reveal, seem to hint at when the hero will come—sometime in three years.” The members of the court gasped. The scholar spread the claws of one foot wide in wonderment, then closed them abruptly. He pointed at a ragamuffin twitching beside him. “I have found a witness, Your Majesty!”

“Speak.”

“Yes, Your Majesty!” the young archaeopteryx said. “I chanced to see that particular stone during my morning foraging. ‘Thank the Great Spirit the gem is here,’ one of the birds around it was saying, so I knew something was peculiar. I hid and watched...”

Magical stones from the sky! thought the emperor, his gaze sweeping across the sunset painted on the arched ceiling.

“Color! Location! Tribe!” Hungrias’s eyes glittered as if two gemstones were already in his pupils. “Speak up!”

“Beautifully orange it was, Your Majesty. It’s about a couple dozen miles south of your Plains territory, with a band of doves living near a river.”

Sounds like something for me. Hero, the wise bird said? Well, I’ll show how archaeopteryxes can crush all heroes! “I must have this treasure.” Drumming his sausagelike talons, Hungrias straightened

on his jeweled perch and barked, “Sir Maldeor!”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The head of the knights stepped forward on the carpet and bowed.

“Take some elite soldiers and find this gem for me.”

Before the knight could reply, the curtains behind Hungrias’s throne trembled and a fat feathered ball waddled up to the emperor. “Me too!” Prince Phaëthon cried, his beak full. In his claws he held a blueberry muffin. “I shall go along. I must!”

“You’re young. Battles are not for you.”

“I must! I want to learn how to fight. Please, Father!” the prince begged, crumbs on his beak.

Hungrias’s tiny eyes flitted shut. Then he huffed and said, “Sir Maldeor, I entrust my son to you.”

Phaëthon grinned with green-tinged teeth.

Good grief, thought the knight. “Yes, Your Majesty,” he managed to say.

The next day, Sir Maldeor, Prince Phaëthon, and thirty soldiers journeyed to the dove tribe.

Easy picking, Maldeor thought when they arrived. The squat, knobbly olive trees where the tribe lived did not seem to present a threat, but because of the prince, precautions had to be taken. “Stay behind the first line,” Maldeor whispered.

“Why? I hate that!” shouted the prince, surprising a dove named Irene coming back from a morning flight. She rushed toward her tribe, shouting, “Archaeopteryxes! They’re coming, they’re coming!”

Surprise plan foiled! Maldeor spat in disgust and flipped his long tail to signal the charge. As if that weren’t enough, as the soft fluttering wings of the defending doves obscured the olive trees beyond, Phaëthon whined in the knight’s ear, “Can I find the gem?”

“No, Prince. Not now.”

Why did the prince want to come in the first place? I can’t be a nursemaid and a knight at the same time, Maldeor thought as he muttered plans to a group of his soldiers. With a nod, they formed into a tight ball prickling with spears and flew directly at the biggest olive tree. An old dove was frantically burying the gemstone in a hollow of the tree. Beside him stood Irene, the bird who had forewarned their tribe.

The knight aimed for the Leasorn gem, but the old dove jumped and kicked Maldeor’s face with his pink claws. Maldeor bit one toe and hung on. The old dove tried to beat Maldeor off, but he was too small to have much chance. One of Maldeor’s soldiers swung a club.

“Flee, my daughter!” the old dove gasped, and died.

“No!” Irene shrieked. Sobbing, she tensed her neck and, with a mighty flap of her wings, dived at Maldeor’s claws, which now held the gemstone. Maldeor whooped in pain. The stone sailed out of his grip, out of the olive tree, and landed a way off, in a sandy ditch. With grunts and *Yahh!*s, the birds propelled themselves madly toward it. Maldeor forgot the dove and scrambled to see. He sighed in relief when he saw that an archaeopteryx reached the gem first. “Yes!”



But it was none other than the prince. Turning in the direction of Maldeor, he lifted the gem up into the air. “*I have found the gem!*” Phaëthon pronounced, gloating.

You little bother! Maldeor grumbled angrily to himself and gripped his sword tighter. He gave a curt order to his soldiers to kill all the doves they could find. The foolish birds would have to pay for their defiance of the emperor—and Maldeor would have to go and get the prince. If only he hadn’t agreed to bring the brat here. As if in answer to his hidden wishes, a dark shadow suddenly loomed from the grove of birches behind the prince.

Now, this was no dove or archaeopteryx. It was the last of the long-lived flying creatures who had four wings. This intelligent creature, neither reptile nor bird, had blundered along in the darkness of the bracken for years and years and years, revealing himself to his contemporary cousins only when necessity called. Lizard eyes staring, he scanned the battleground he had just come across and focused on a young, tender specimen. *A bigger bite than the doves*, he thought. The evil cogwheels in his ancient brain whirled as he calculated.

He sprang into the sunlight, unfurling four wings. For trembling seconds the dinosaur eclipsed the sun, then, lifting its leathery lips, bore down on the fat young prince.

The mouth opened, in went the front half of the prince, and the mouth closed. The prince’s muffled squeals came echoing out of the creature’s nostrils. Six times the size of an archaeopteryx, the monster jerked its neck, trying to swallow.

“Prince, Prince!” Sir Maldeor yelled hoarsely, grudges forgotten, as pure fear flooded his being. What was this? Was the prince dead already? *My knighthood and life are in jeopardy!* He jumped toward the four-winged dinosaur. His soldiers swarmed to corner the new danger as well, but their spears clattered off its scales and did not worry it. Now the fat legs and tail of the prince were kicking between the teeth. Maldeor grabbed one round leg and started desperately pulling.

Phaëthon, in the throat of the monster, was suffocating. *He has little hope*, Maldeor thought, and

tugged at the gemstone instead. He wrestled fiercely to uncurl the stiffening talons, even beating on the prince's foot with his sword, but it seemed of little use. Like any dying bird, the prince's claws fastened tightly to whatever he was holding in an iron clutch.

Maldeor succeeded in loosening two toes, but just as the gemstone wobbled, the dinosaur broke loose, reared on its hind legs, and tipped its head back. Phaëthon disappeared, gem and all.

Before Maldeor could try to slash open the creature's throat and belly to retrieve the prince's body and get the gemstone, a sudden deep groan issued from the winged monster. Its eyes shriveled up like two huge raisins, and, with a horrified bellow, it dropped to all fours and disappeared in a wreath of blue flames.

Sir Maldeor hacked the air as fiercely as he could where the monster had been, but it was gone, along with the prince and the gemstone. He looked back in despair. The dove who had knocked the gem out of his claws was nowhere to be seen. He howled in frustration and panic.

Meanwhile, Irene the dove mourned for her destroyed tribe and her dead father. Between each trembling wing beat, she distractedly wondered where she should head. An image of foaming waves flitted across her mind. The archaeopteryxes never patrolled the southern seaside, except on a rare mission. *Yes, the seaside would be a safe place to go for now*, she thought.

The trip that she made to the sea was an extraordinary one. Where it might have taken a seasoned migratory bird two days, she got there in just one day. Exhausted, she fell into a deep slumber in a crevice within a seaside cliff and did not wake till morning.

She felt wretched with despair. Now she had lost everything. Family, safety, responsibility. She staggered along the sand in the whispering tide, her vision blinding white with sickening grayish shadows.

A few days later, she laid an egg, and her interest in life was renewed. *I won't lose you to the archaeopteryxes, my little one*, she vowed. *I will die for you if I have to*.

The days that she brooded her egg brought the worst sea storms ever imagined. The clouds finally cleared on the day the egg trembled and broke; and a thread of light fell upon the small bird, who was covered with down as delicate as frost.

Irene stared at the hatchling, amazed. Doves never hatched with feathers! The strange little bird turned his face to his mother, and his eyes opened, dark and shining. But baby doves were hatched blind. In the distance the sea wind sang. Winds could be gentle or powerful. Winds could be captured but never for long. Irene cupped her claw around her hatchling's head and whispered, "Wind-voice..."

Still, the hatchling looked a lot like her: red beak, red feet, and an honest little face with a perpetual smile on it. She feared, sadly and bitterly, that somehow the archaeopteryxes would be a threat to her hatchling.

When the four-winged dinosaur awoke in a room with shadowy granite walls, he was diminished in size. He pressed a trembling forelimb to his heart. Nothing was beating.

Before him, misty smoke whirled in a gigantic circle. High up in the very middle of the spinning gray wisps, a voice boomed out. “I am Yama, Lord of Death. Welcome, four-winged creature. You are no longer truly alive, but partially a ghost, and here you shall be known as Yin Soul. You have swallowed a sacred gemstone, a crystallized tear of my opposite, the Great Spirit. It is lodged inside you. This is your punishment! You shall be suspended here in torment in this small space, between the world of the living and the dead.”

The dinosaur widened his eyes. “What? There must be a mistake! I didn’t eat a gem; I ate an archaeopteryx!”

“The archaeopteryx was holding on to a gemstone. It is one of seven that points the way to the magical sword in Kauria, the Island of Paradise. A hero will come to get the sword in the fifth full moon two years from now. When he does, you shall die an utterly painful death.”

Yin Soul yelped. “Can I get out? I don’t want to be here!”

“Only if you manage to reincarnate in the body of a likely hero before Hero’s Day and get the sword yourself will you escape. Otherwise, my realm shall welcome you!” Yama’s voice sent chills through the dinosaur.

In the same mysterious way he had come, Yama dissolved.

There were bookshelves full of dark tomes all around Yin Soul. In the long, agonizing days after his arrival, he devoted himself to learning ways of trickery and deceit. All the while, he scanned the frozen thoughts of dying birds, searching—searching for a victim to pull him out of this wretched place.

He waited bitterly for two years before he finally found one.



Resistance is hatched from oppression.
—FROM THE *OLD SCRIPTURE*

THE DEFIANCE

No empire since the creation of the sword had spread so quickly or so ruthlessly as that of the archaeopteryxes. They were a shrewd, hardy species. The key to their sudden expansion was that they thrived on everything: fruit, seeds, insects, fish, and carrion. Soon most of the other tribes were serving them as slaves or paying them tribute. Even the powerful alliance of the crow, myna, and raven clans had fallen.

Some surrendered and, in return for their lives, agreed to serve in the archaeopteryx army. Only the eagles, in their remote mountain stronghold, lived free, but they were too busy guarding their own liberty to come to the aid of others.

The archaeopteryx empire was divided into six regions: Castlewood, or the Emperor's Wood; the Forests; the Dryland; the Plains; the Isles; and the Marshes. Each region was ruled by one of the emperor's most trusted officers. Sir Kawaka commanded the Marshes Battalion.

Early in the morning on the first day of winter, Kawaka was hosting a dinner for his officers, proudly displaying the treasures he had gathered for the Ancient Wing. A beautiful yellow crystal was his most magnificent tribute. He'd seized it from a tribe of weak little kingfishers only the week before. Wouldn't the emperor be pleased!

"To Sir Kawaka! To Emperor Hungrias! To the expansion of archaeopteryx territory!" The traditional toast rang from the leafless branches of the tree that Kawaka had made into his headquarters.

Below, in a storeroom hollowed out beneath the roots of the tree, a scrawny bird was scrubbing pots. His white feathers were smeared with grime, his red bill and feet blackened by grease. A dark smudge on his face almost covered the slash of red dye that marked him as a slave.

A bored sentry at the mouth of the cave sighed as he lit his pipe. Dubto could hear the toasts and the shouting from the branches above, but he was stuck here guarding this. *What kind of bird was that slave anyway?* Dubto thought. He looked like a dove but was bigger than any dove Dubto had ever seen. He supposed that was why they called the bird "013-Unidentified."

“Who’re your parents?” he barked, blowing smoke rings out of his nostrils.

“My mother’s a dove, but I’ve never seen my father,” the young bird said. His voice was so weak that it was hard to hear above the sloshing of the pans.

So why did a feeble young drudge like this need his own guard? The fledgling barely looked strong enough to attack a greasy pot. Indeed, as the archaeopteryx watched, the white bird slumped over the cauldron he was scrubbing, too exhausted to continue.

“Here, you,” Dubto said gruffly, and tapped his pipe. He didn’t dare risk being seen or heard speaking to a slave with kindness in his voice. “Leave that. I need you to run an errand.”

There was nothing truly urgent that needed to be done. But the slave would surely be the better for some fresh air.

“Yes, sir?” 013-Unidentified said weakly.

Dubto looked around and spotted a small barrel of ale, half hidden under a tree root. “Take that over to the outpost on the edge of camp,” he said. “The sentry needs supplies.”

Take your time, he almost added, but he thought he had been kind enough for one day. After all, the bird was a slave, not an archaeopteryx.

Outside, 013-Unidentified gulped in life-giving air, feeling the tiredness wash out of his sore back. His soul was dazzled by the azure spread that was the sky. He tried to fly, but the heavy cask of ale kept making him tip forward. He was outside! For months now, ever since he’d been captured by an archaeopteryx patrol, he’d been cooped up in the back of that earthen cave, alternately cleaning whatever pots and pans were flung at him and sleeping. He scanned the green-tinted ponds and the cedars looming nearby. *Howling winds!* he thought. *What a murky, frightening land!*

“Over here! The sun’s barely up and I’m cold,” a raucous voice rang out.

013-Unidentified handed over the cask of ale to the sentry, who was perched on the bare, gray limb of a dead tree near the entrance to a burrow in the ground. A clattering came from within the dark hollow.

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