

The Care and Feeding of Familiars

By Verna McKinnon

My name is Cathal the Sorcerer, and as most people know, the honor of bonding with an animal familiar is not usually permitted until you are eighteen years old. I have known some lucky mages to be gifted with their familiars as young as fifteen. I envied them. I dreamed about the mystical union between familiar and sorcerer since I was very little.

My master and guardian, Borel, had a magnificent white lion familiar named Torrin, who often watched over me when I was little. My curiosity often got the best of me, as with most small boys. Torrin protected me when I became too adventurous for my own good. Torrin was a very strict babysitter. The humiliation of being five years old and having a four hundred pound lion carrying you by the seat of the pants when you refuse to come in for tea sticks with you. Let's put it this way, I quickly learned the wisdom of obedience under that massive feline. The wedgies I suffered were enough to keep me on my best behavior. Though at night, after a long day of study and magic, I would often curl up with the great cat before the fire, snuggling into his soft, snowy mane, and fall asleep. I never felt so safe in my life, and never will again.

My master's friends had impressive familiars, wolves and ravens were frequent visitors, along with red panthers, giant snakes and other proud members of the animal clans. When I turned sixteen, I was elated when Borel informed me I had been chosen to receive a familiar. Let me explain further-this is a sacred decision. Familiars, being magical, live as long as their sorcerers. We all fall victim to the usual dangers of life-disease, injury, war, etc., but if we survive the outer threats of life, we can live to be a thousand years old, or even longer. Add to this that we usually have the ability to bond only once in life, that choice is important. If one bonding does not happen, it can happen with another familiar, but once it happens, that's it-no turning back. It's a mystical thing, I guess. My master, Borel, is rumored to be over twelve hundred years old, and bonded with Torrin when he was eighteen. Borel refuses candles on his birthday cake for fear of burning down the forest. The world was also in chaos, full of war and evil, so familiars were not so easy to acquire.

After I learned the good news, I couldn't focus on anything else. Each day ticked by slowly until a sorceress named Brina arrived at our door with her familiar, a great gray mountain owl named Fallon.

I nearly bounced off the walls, and could have done so quite easily-I am magical after all. The sorceress, a lovely lady whose age could never be determined by mortal reckoning, smiled indulgently. She carried a mysterious basket on her arm. We knew Brina from rare visits. A tall redhead with wise hazel eyes, she was a very gifted sorceress. I think Borel enjoyed the feminine company for a change. At the time, I was too dense to notice.

I remember asking where my familiar was. Was it a baby panther? A wolf cub? A bear perhaps! I babbled like an idiot.

Brina instructed me to close my eyes. I obeyed. Shivers of excitement ran along my spine. A warm object, hairless and smooth, was placed in the palm of my hand. I opened my eyes to see the mystery.

It was... an egg.

I was a bit confused. I knew familiars were supposed to be babies when they bond, but this was unexpected. Fallon the owl snickered and said I didn't get it.

Brina quickly explained that in order to bond with a bird familiar, it was best to start sooner than with other species. The egg was the offspring Brina's owl familiar, Fallon. This was personal, so I knew I had to impress them. Brina and Fallon said they would remain to help guide me over the next several weeks, from hatching to first flight. My familiar would be a great gray mountain owl, very majestic, to be sure. Right now it looked so...tiny.

The next few weeks my free time vanished. The egg was my sole responsibility. I kept it warm and protected. Under the meticulous eyes of the mother owl, I constructed a nest from grass, twigs, leaves, some of the downy feathers from my pillow, scraps of material, cotton balls, anything I could think of that would be warm and soft. It was a pathetic nest, for I'm not a bird and unaccustomed to such hobbies. I was tempted to use magic, but Fallon insisted to be truly heartfelt, the nest needed to be made the usual way.

The thing about responsibility is there is a price. I could no longer just go swimming or sleep late when I felt like it. When you care for something so helpless, you worry too. Not to mention I was afraid of dropping the little egg and having my eyes pecked out by angry mama owl. Familiar animals do not breed in numbers the way their non-magical counterparts do. This egg was Fallon's first in twenty years. The father owl, Belwyn, was on a journey with his sorcerer and resented being apart from his family. Great gray mountain owls are quite large when they reach maturity and are fierce fighters. So I walked with a little trepidation during the incubation period.

After about three weeks of coddling and nervous anticipation, the big hatching finally happened. I was reading a scroll by the fire one evening; the nest was on the floor next to me, the egg on a cushion of flannel for extra warmth against the evening chill. The flames crackled brightly. I heard the egg shell breaking. A tiny beak poked through the fissures, frantically pecking free from its cocoon.

I panicked.

I cried for help. I must have been a sight. Women must be use to this side of life, and are much calmer about it. I was a wreck. The whole household rushed to my side. Borel gave me a biscuit to soothe my nerves and advised patience. I longed to tear apart the egg to aid in his birth. Breathless, I watched as the little owlet fought its way through the hard armor of nature.

It finally burst free under our eager eyes, fragile body shaking with exhaustion, naked and helpless. Large yellow eyes glared up at me with impatience. The owlet said, "Not much help, are you?"

The accusing manner and utter ridiculousness of it all made me laugh.

The baby owl tumbled over, and I gently picked him up. "You're a cranky little owl," I said.

He glowered at me. "You're not mama."

Fallon glowed with pride. I said I would be happy to name him after his sire and she agreed. His name would be Belwyn.

"Belwyn," I said, "I'm Cathal the Sorcerer."

He was not impressed. "Since when does human boy get naming privileges?" he chirped.

"I'm hungry. Feed me."

Torrin laughed, as only a lion could, "You are going to have your hands full with that one."

"Furry cat has stinky breath," Belwyn said.

It's a good thing Torrin had a tolerant nature.

The next few weeks the demands and needs for Belwyn kept me hopping. He grew quickly, a soft pale down covered his body and he moved with greater ease, though he had a tendency to tumble over. I would help him then, and he accepted my little efforts with stoic pride. Until he could fly, he was dependent on me. He resented that. Belwyn is a predator being raised by a human. He thought I was inferior.

My duties now had a disgusting element. I had to catch all sort of little rodents and bugs for Belwyn. Mama Owl helped with that a bit. She also gave lessons to Belwyn about being a familiar. Owls are nocturnal, though as familiars they're more flexible. I remember feeling despondent too. Belwyn wasn't bonding with me. Not exactly affectionate, he tolerated me when I brought food and water. He didn't want to play, though he liked to pretend to hunt. This amused all of us, even Torrin. We would watch the baby owl waddle around the cottage with downy wings extended and pouncing on toy mice. It gave me hours of joy. Of course, we made sure Belwyn didn't see us laugh.

This was hard for me, because I wanted to cuddle him. I would never admit this of course. Men do not cuddle. Belwyn would never abide such human indulgence-though he was unbearably cute at this age. All fluffy and downy, with round eyes that brooked no nonsense. It was hard not to smile when he was so serious. But until we had the telepathic bond that formed sorcerer and familiar, I could not call him mine.

I did what I could. Predators develop quickly. Belwyn's mind was also razor-sharp. Believe me, there is nothing more opinionated than an owl. He picked up things very quickly, both magical knowledge as well as owl lessons. I would feed him (several times a day. I never saw any creature eat so much) and devote each waking moment to his care. Soon, he would be ready for flying lessons.

But the bonding, that telepathic link, did not happen. I was failing somehow. Belwyn would often stare at me strangely, challenging me. I would often attempt to send my thoughts to him, but he sent nothing back.

I took comfort that I still had some time before my master deemed me a disappointment. One evening I heard them whispering when I was supposed to be sleeping. Brina said perhaps they should find another sorcerer for Belwyn.

I couldn't bear that. I was accustomed to the little fuzzy owlet's moods. Not after all the hard work and care I invested. I also invested my heart.

A few days later, the blow came. They made the decision that perhaps they should find another. There was nothing I could do.

I loved him. But he would never love me.

The last night of their stay, I remember putting Belwyn to bed in his nest. He looked at me with round golden eyes, but said nothing.

I went to bed. I fought back tears of burning disappointment as I lay there until sheer exhaustion took over.

I'm not sure how long I dozed, but realized something warm was snoozing on my chest. I opened my eyes, and Belwyn was nestled on my chest, asleep. One golden eye peeked open, and he spoke to me, "Go back to sleep."

Then I realized he spoke to me through the telepathic bond that familiars and sorcerers share.

"Belwyn, we bonded!" I exclaimed.

"I know. Don't let this go to your head. Now go back to sleep."

"Yes, Belwyn."

"You snore, you know."

"So do you."

That was one of the happiest moments of my life. Caring for familiars is never easy. They are not pets. They use magic. They are often smarter than their sorcerers. But they are never boring.

THE END

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