

## Short Story: Only the Birds

Trees spread across as far as the eye can see beneath the afternoon sun. In the clearings that cropped up between the emerald green, crystalline wolves darted in and out of the shade, chasing moss-covered deer for their meals. Plump, black birds with webbed feet gathered in the winding rivers and ponds, warbling cheerily as they rooted through the mud for grubs and worms.

In one of these clearings stood a simple cabin, and behind it was a small garden, laden with frilly leaves, blue fruit and yellow tubers. A fence around it stood guard against the hundreds of puffy silver rabbits that lurked in the undergrowth, waiting for the gardener to forget the gate just once.

Rows of grimy glass jars balanced on the posts of the fence, each reflecting the bright sun where the dust refused to settle. A lazy green beetle wove around them, searching for a potential meal.

### **Boom!**

A burst of white light struck a jar and scattered it across the ground, forcing the beetle to flee back into the protective trees. From behind a wall of barrels laden with preserved fruit, a boy wearing simple brown clothing popped out and ran to the glass shards, carrying with him a small rifle loaded with a energy-filled crystal in its chamber.

He shuffled the glass around the short blades of grass with a shoe that was little more than a leather sock. He sighed and leaned against the fence, allowing his frizzy blonde hair to flop over his green eyes. "Can't ever do anything fun..."

The door of the cabin creaked outward, and a lean man with gloves stuffed in his pocket emerged. He studied the boy for a moment, then scratched the dark blonde stubble across his chin, looking down. Finally, he smiled and walked up to him, leaning against a post himself.

The man noticed the glass on the ground and said, "Practicing with your new rifle, Erik?"

The boy sighed and replied, "Yeah...."

The man frowned. "You don't *sound* like you're having fun."

"Dad, it just that...that I want to do something more useful than shooting jars," Erik added. He held up the rifle and continued, "I could be out shooting ajax in for dinner, or shooting one of those lagos that keep trying to come in. Why won't you let me?"

His father looked up for a moment. "Mostly because I wasn't sure if you'd harm the garden, or accidentally shoot someone coming along the path." He picked up a shard of the jar and tossed it in his hand. "Though, judging from this, you've gotten better since your birthday. I think you might be ready to help me out."

Erik beamed and stood straight. "Really?"

His father nodded. "Yep. The wellings have been eating the new plucard I've planted, and it's not like they need any more food." Turning aside, he muttered, "Pudgy black birds..."

Erik saluted with his rifle and stamped his foot. "I'll watch for any wellings and have them for dinner if they come down!"

His father laughed and tussled his hair. "That's my boy!" He walked back to the door and said, "I'll be getting my gear ready to fish at the river. Be careful!"

"I will! Erik shouted, returning behind the fruit barrels and peeking between the gaps.

The father chuckled and gently shook his head. "Might mistake a welling for a visawk, but I'm sure he'll do fine." He closed the door, leaving Erik to his watch.

Erik scanned the skies, attempting to pick out the lumbering flocks of birds from the fluffy white clous that filled the azure background. He didn't flinch when the green beetle returned to the jars, nor when a puffy silver lagos peeked its head out from the fringes of the deciduous woods. Nothing diverted his attention for even a moment.

A 'V' of black blobs warbled away as they dipped lower, seemingly toward the garden. An enormous one lead the group, flapping slowly as it led the rest with its gust. Erik gasped and took aim at it. "You're the one eating all the plucard..." When the flock of wellings dipped low enough, Erik pulled the trigger, and a shining white burst boomed through the table and struck the largest bird across the wing, punching a hole through the feathers. The wellings sattered as the leader faltered and fell.

**Waaaaauugh!!**

Erik paled as the bird grew larger as it spiraled toward the garden, wrapping its wing around it to protect itself. Pale grey plumage became visible as loose feathers floated off, and in the fleeting moments before the crash, Erik swore he saw arms lifting up to guard the head.

The exceptionally large bird made a sizeable crater in the plucard patch on impact, then after a moment still, spread out its wings and groaned.

Erik dropped his rifle and crept around the barrels, attempting to peer through the dissipating cloud of thrown-up dirt and dust. When it settled, he saw that the bird had the shape of a man, albeit with black talons for feet and hands and a broad pair of broad wings on its back. A loose red tunic adorned his chest and a light pair of shorts held up on his legs. His grey feathers met at a point on top of his head, and his large yellow beak lay buried in the dust over an arm.

Erik's father burst through the door and yelled, "What in Solus' name happened out here?" He noticed the bird man and gasped, then turned to Erik.

Erik pointed at the bird man and stuttered, "I-I thought he was big welling up in the sky, so I shot him and—"

His father ran down the steps and toward the bird man. "He's no *welling*! He's an Aeran!" He flipped the Aeran onto his back, noticing his slow breathing and swelling arm. "He's broken his arm. We better take him inside." He held the Aeran up by his shoulders and shouted, "Take him by the legs and lift!"

Erik nodded and held onto the Aeran's claws, stunned to see such a being. They carefully hefted his light frame up the stairs through the open door, into the kitchen just beyond.

The modest kitchen had only a hearth with a warm flame, several shelves with greens and spices, and another with dishes. Beyond was a basic table and cluster of chairs, and beyond that was a

pair of couches stuffed with straw. Besides the front and back door, two other doors connected to the room.

As Erik and his father lowered the Aeran on the couch, he father said, "You're lucky you didn't hit him in the chest or he'd be a goner!"

"What happened, Cyrus?" A woman's voice asked from behind a closed door. She emerged, with a pallet and sewing needle in hand. She wore a plain green dress and held up her auburn hair with a ribbon. She kept looking down and sewing as she added, "I hope nothing landed in the plu—" She looked up and nearly dropped her sewing material. "What *happened* to that poor Aeran?"

Cyrus gently folded the Aeran's wings together and replied, "Rea, get me a sling, and Erik, find some sticks so I can make a splint. He fell after accidentally being shot down by Erik's rifle." He set the Aeran's arm straight, at which he sharply breathed in.

Rea pursed her lips and frowned at Erik, who sheepishly shrunk back. "I'll talk with you later. Just do as your father says." The boy nodded and rushed back outside, while Rea returned to the other room.

The Aeran's eyes opened, but only to a squint. He saw Cyrus' blurry face for only a moment, then blacked out.

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As the blue of the sky mellowed to orange, as the welling settled into the mud for the night, and as lags returned to their burrows, candlelight emerged from the cabin's windows. Savory smoke floated into the night sky, releasing the scents of their evening meal.

Within, the unconscious Aeran stirred, then groaned. He shifted and held up his head, wincing. He opened his eyes and adjusted to the light, seeing that he was inside a home and no longer outdoors.

He instinctively stretched his arms, but seethed and immediately pulled back his left arm, which now sat in a sling. He stared at it dourly, then sat upright and stretched his back, puffing out his feathers, then stretched his wings and gave himself a good shake. Once his feathers smoothed, he inspected his wings, finding one still in fine condition, and the other with a charred hole through the feathers.

He sighed and began pulling others feathers through the hole, and only after turning his head did he notice the blonde boy sitting on the other couch with a rifle sitting on his lap. He stared at him, watching his every move with curiosity.

The Aeran looked back at him, then at the hole in his wing. He sighs again and says in a tenor voice, "I saw this coming, you know."

Erik blinked and leaned forward. "You did? How?"

The Aeran finished preening the damaged portion of his wing, then said, "Aerans have a degree of premonition. Some can see many years into the future, while others can only see a few seconds." He scratched the back of his head and added, "I saw the rifle fire probably an hour before it happened, but as my premonition tends to vary in time, I had no idea when to expect it."

Erik looked away and held his arms close. "Sorry for shooting you down..."

The Aeran waved his free claw. "All is forgiven. It's not the first time I've been shot down, and I doubt it'll be the last." He grimaced and whispered, "Last time I got captured by a bunch of thugs wanting to steal my mail."

Erik cocked his head. "Mail?"

The Aeran nodded and unstrapped a belt made of woven vines from his waist, then held up a sizeable bag closed with a metal latch. "Many Aerans are mailmen in Brium, you know. We're able to travel faster than most land creatures, and we don't have to worry about blocked routes unless a storm is in the area." He laughed and shook his head. "Ah, silly me, I forgot to tell you my name." He held out his free hand. "My name is Almus. Pleasure to meet you..." He trailed off, looking to Erik to finish.

Erik reached out to Almus and shook his hand. "Erik. Erik Deemuson."

Almus nodded and leaned back in the chair. "I suppose we wouldn't have met unless you shot me down."

A smile crept across Erik's face. "I guess not."

The back door opened, and Rea pushed through with a basket full of yellow root vegetables and leafy greens. She huffed and set the basket down on a counter, next to the hearth and the stewpot simmering above it. "Managed to salvage what I could from the garden. A shame that happened, really, and—" She noticed Almus and cried, "You're awake! Oh, thank Solus!" She rushed to his side and clasped her hands together. "I apologize for what my son did! He was told to shoot down any wellings that passed by the garden, but I never thought he'd go and shoot *you* down!"

Almus again waved his hand and replied, "We've already talked, and I fully understand what happened." He lowered his head and closed his eyes. "I'm just sorry for crash-landing in your garden. Those plucards stood no chance."

Astounded, Rea lowered her hands and cleared her throat. "Er...I'm Rea Deemuson. It's good to see you're alright."

Almus nodded. "I'm Almus." He perked his head up, then opened his mail bag and riffled through the letters. "Deemuson...I seem to recall a letter being address to you." He clacked his beak for a moment, then pulled out a letter with a wax stamp. "Aha, here you are!" He held it out to Rea, who accepted it.

Rea studied the envelope and beamed. "Oh, it's from my sister Kaira! I wouldn't have known I got it until I went to town tomorrow!" She shook her head and said, "Excuse me, but will you be able to fly on your own? That hole in your wing is rather large, and you broke an arm in the fall."

Almus spread the damaged wing, showing the feathers marginally covering the hole. "While it isn't ideal, I can still fly with it. I'll just have to go on leave once I make it back home." He gingerly held up his arm. "As for this...well, I don't need claws to fly. I'll be fine." He stood up and rolled his shoulders, then marched toward the door. "Well, I best get going. I have mail to deliver, and I'd rather not press on you for any longer."

Rea struggled for a reply, unsure of what to say. But Erik stood up and exclaimed, "Would you like to stay for dinner?"

The Aeran paused, not turning around. "What are you having?"

Rea soon replied, "Vegetable soup, with some steamed kramon. My husband, Cyrus, is out fishing for some. He should be back soon."

After a moment of silence, Almus turned around and nodded his head. "It would be an honor." Erik and Rea both smiled.

Later, after Cyrus returned and the food was finished, they all sat around the table, with Almus choosing to sit on a log from the woodpile outside. Each had a steaming bowl of rich, brown stew with floating chunks of yellow and green spread throughout. Also in front of them was a plain white fish, staring blankly at the ceiling.

They all bowed their heads, and Cyrus said, "Dear Solus, please bless this meal that it may nourish and strengthen us, and that it may help us recover from ailments and injuries. We thank Almus, your servant, for understanding our plight, and for remaining with us this night. *Sumere*."

"*Sumere*," everyone else repeated.

Cyrus and his family began cutting and eating their fish and sipping their soup with their spoons, as typical people would. Almus, on the other hand, held up the bowl of soup and carefully tipped it down his beak. Once he finished, he began cutting bits of the kramon off with his claws and picking them off with his beak, swallowing the chunks whole. As Erik ate, he watched Almus, intrigued by the bird's unique way of eating compared to him.

Rea took notice and set down her fork. "Erik, it's rude to stare," she scolded. Erik quickly turned away and focused on a chunk of red in his soup.

Almus finished swallowing and said, "Oh, it's perfectly fine. I rarely eat with anyone but fellow Aerans, so I can understand if someone is confused by the way I eat." Erik silently sighed with relief and returned to eating.

After a few minutes of silent eating, Rea said, "Kaira said in her letter that her daughter was getting married in a week, and she invited us to come to the ceremony!"

"That's great news! I'll make sure to have a carriage ready to leave in a few days." Erik sighed and rolled his eyes, unenthused.

Almus laughed and nodded. "I'm sure it will be a joyous union."

Later that night, after bellies were filled and dishes were cleared, Almus once again approached the door. He faced the family and bowed his head. "Thank you again for the meal. It is rare that I take the opportunity to eat with the families I serve."

"We just wanted to make up for your rough landing," Cyrus replied.

Almus once again waved his claws. "It is no trouble. I can still fly and finish my duties before I return." He stepped outside and stretched his wings, preparing to fly through the night.

Erik hesitated for a moment, then broke away from his parents and asked, "Do you really live in a big tree far away?"

Almus paused, staring at the sky. He lowered his wings and turned to face him, then stepped forward and kneeled. With his free hand, he carefully reached inside his shirt and pulled out an emerald-green, spiralling leaf threaded by a string. It's greens constantly shifted through the many partitions of the leaf, and sparkles occasionally appeared on the surface.

Erik and his parents studied it in wonder, entranced by the magical leaf. Almus gently twisted the leaf around his claws, cascading the colors together. "This is my most precious possession: a living leaf of the Ulhaeya tree. Almost all my kind live in its boughs, harvesting from the pools of soil it creates for us, and making our homes from the branches it sheds." He tucked the leaf back into his shirt, making the Deemuson family focus their attention back on him.

Almus sighed wistfully. "It is more massive than the largest human city, and it has existed since the beginning of the world. All Aerans share a deep connection to the Ulhaeya; we preserve it, and in turn, it preserves us." Almus set his hand over his chest and bowed. "Thank you for asking, young Erik." Erik smiled back, feeling his chest grow light.

Almus stood straight and turned back around, then spread his great wings. He flapped and quickly gained height despite the gap in one wing. He flew high over the trees, joining with a flock of cackling black crows as the sun dipped behind the horizon.

Once Almus was only a black dot, Erik continued watching as he asked, "Do you think we'll see him again?"

Cyrus shrugged and replied, "Hard to say. He seems to be the postman for this area, but since his wing and arm has to recover, it might be a while."

There was a pause, then Erik calmly asked, "Will I ever get to see that tree?"

Cyrus and Rea looked at each other, then Rea smiled and set a hand on his shoulder. "Erik, your Aunt Kaira lives in the Eastern Cove, and she sometimes wrote to me about the beauty of the tree that grew on an island in the center of it."

Erik gasped and spun around to face her. "You mean we're going to go see it?"

"While we're at the wedding. It's only a few days away now," Rea replied with a laugh.

Erik threw a fist in the air and ran past his parents into one of the adjacent rooms. "I'm getting ready!" He grazed the butt of his rifle, making it clatter to the floor as he dove into his room.

Cyrus and Rea both laughed and held each other close. "I guess it was a good thing that Almus came down to see us," Cyrus said.

"Even if it wasn't intentional," Rea added.

Far above and beyond their home, Almus made minute adjustments to his flight as he looked back at the fading yellow light behind him. He faced forward again and hummed to himself. *'I am glad I saw the good that came with being shot down,'* he thought. The crows broke away from him, and as he approached a large cluster of brightly-lit houses and streets, he thought of Erik once more. *'I plan to see you again in the coast, to introduce you to our beloved home.'*