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English 218

Bro. Richards

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Short Story: Fallen Wings

Under the bright morning sun, beyond the coarse coastline along the shifting tides, a few dozen houses cropped together. A low wind blew through, throwing mist up onto the bare sand. Cawing and quacking echoed from above, while an occasional crab scuttled back and forth out of the waves. Away from the coastline and toward an islet in the center of the wide cove grew an enormous tree over half a mile wide, with massive roots digging deep into the soil and sea. Large boughs stretching high into the sky splitting into hundreds of branches, all large enough for a man to stand comfortably on the soil the top bark contained.

A black shape flew high in the skies—an aeran. His claw-like feet hung behind as he flapped the great red wings on his back. Dull red feathers covered his body, from his legs and arms to his chest and head. He wore a loose shirt and pants of finely woven gray moss, strong enough to withstand the snapping wind above.

He drew closer to the tree and clacked his matte yellow beak in satisfaction. A brown moss bag fluttered at his side, beating against his yellow clawed hand. He joined others of his kind returning from their destinations, with some also bearing boxes, bags, or other such things from their customers. Multicolored feathers, clothing, beaks, and claws made the flock, paired with many sizes and shapes. Many more flew between within the canopy and around the trunk, hopping between the homes made from discarded tree branches to taps ingrained in branches yielding fountains of fresh, sweet water. Others cultivated diverse crops in the soil of the branches, while some dove into natural holes in the trunk to rooms made in the deep bark of the marvelous tree.

At the end, the red aeran entered a large plaza, the center of the tree where the eight central boughs all connected. Constant chatter echoed throughout the tree as crops were cared for and deliveries were made, alongside the many other tasks that had to be completed throughout the tree.

The red aeran joined the fray and flew above the plaza and followed the south-eastern bough, weaving through the branches as they progressively got smaller and the environments became progressively less crowded. This continued until he ended only large enough for two men to stand side-by-side. At the end, a cylindrical structure made from a solid length of branch stood two stories tall, hollowed out and carved with simple symbols across the bark.

Arlen entered through the open door and exclaimed, "I'm home!" The room was simply made, with one half devoted to a kitchen and pantry, and the other to a set of covered chairs and a table. A staircase wove along the walls to the second floor.

Arlen stood next to the table and inspected a note resting on it:

'Arlen, I've gone to get fruit. Sim hasn't come out today. Talk to him, please. ~ Heleen'

Arlen set the note down, then turned back around, noticing a red scarf hanging from a pole next to the door. He frowned and shook his head. "Simwell..." He crossed the room and ascended the stairs, coming to a hallway split into two rooms. He came up to the door on the right, which had several black feathers pinned to it with sap.

He knocked on it and said, "Sim? I know you're in there." He waited, but no response.

He pushed the door open, where a small black Aeran with a yellow beak and claws sat on a straw bed facing a window. The aeran wore gray moss clothing, completely closed from the back. No wings emerged from it.

Arlen paused, then watched the window and saw other young aerans flitting through the branches, laughing as they went off to do their chores. He sighed, then said, "You can't stay inside forever, Sim."

Sim slouched forward, lowering his head. "Why not? It's not like I can be with them anyway. Not since..." He winced and sat straight, then sighed and slouched forward again.

Arlen stared at his son's bare back and grimaced. He clenched his clawed hand, then relaxed and sat next to Sim. "You've barely seen them since the attack; they miss you. You were a dear friend to them, and I often hear their parents ask about you when I leave for my mail deliveries."

Sim crossed his arms and turned aside. "I was friends with them because I was the best skynut player. Now I can't even play."

Arlen held a hand on the side of his face. "Sim—"

"It takes me over an hour to get to school when I could be there in ten minutes!" Sim exclaimed, standing up.

Arlen frowned and said, "Simwell—"

Sim threw his arms out and shouted, "I can't even go with you to deliver the mail—like I'd even want to, after what they *did to me!*"

"Simwell, enough!"

Arlen towered over his son, holding his wings over his shoulders as he breathed heavily. Sim shrunk back, eyes wide.

They stared at each other for a moment, then Arlen turned and stared at his wings. He looked down and lowered his wings. He sighed and pinched the bridge of his beak, then turned away from Sim

and started toward the door. “Just...just stop. You can’t keep thinking like this.” He held the doorknob, then added, “I don’t want you to give up on your dreams. I want you to fly, fly higher than the clouds. You can do it.” He faced Sim with sad eyes. “Just not like this.” He shut the door, leaving the young, black, wingless aeran, alone.

Sim stared at the door, then sat back on his bed. He held his head in his claws and closed his eyes. Minutes passed, and voices seemed to ring in his head. A cold, dark night, the smoke of a campfire, and the jeers of drunken men:

“Wha-what are you doing? Let go!”

“Come on, aeran-boy, let’s see those wings of yours!”

“Ever wondered how one looks like without them?”

“No, stop! Stop!”

“Always wanted to find out. Hand me your sword!”

“Make a nice, clean cut!”

*“No! Please, no! No! **No!**”*

Sim’s eyes snapped open. He gave a shuddering sigh, resting his head in his hands. *‘Dad said they didn’t know what they were doing...that justice would be brought to them...’*

Sim looked back up, back at the other aerans soaring through the branches. The muscles in his back tensed as if to spread his wings.

His missing wings.

He gripped the edge of his bed and hoarsely said, *“But why me?”*

The door creaked open. Sim growled and said, "I'm *not* going outside!"

"Well, that's a shame to hear, young Simwell."

Sim cocked his head curiously and turned around. Standing in the doorway was a gray aeran wearing a long green jacket over white clothing. A golden loop encircled his neck, with a small leaf hanging from it.

Sim's beak gaped. "E-E-Elder Rarin!" He hastily stood up and said, "W-What are you doing here?"

Elder Rarin smiled and folded his arms, keeping his great gray wings tucked behind his back. "I wanted to see how you were doing, obviously." He suddenly frowned and said, "You've been neglecting your studies. I understand what you recently went through, Simwell, but a month is quite long enough." Sim tried to object, but Rarin raised a black claw and continued. "Even with a lack of wings, the Ulhaeya tree is a place where all aerans can live in peace. You shouldn't dwell on the past like this." Sim held his claws behind his back, keeping his eyes trained on the floor.

Rarin lowered his hand, then approached Sim and wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "As elder, it is my duty to ensure the wellbeing of all aerans—including you." He smiled and stepped away. "I've got a task for you." Sim's head perked up; he waited patiently for Rarin's request.

Rarin peered out the window, toward the ocean faintly visible below the many branches. "I want you to fetch me a fish."

Sim furrowed his brow. "Wait...what? Why?"

"You've been saying you can't do anything. Let's see you catch a fish." He turned to face him, clasping his hands together. "I'll watch you every step of the way. I want to see if you are as held back as you think you are."

Sim held up a claw to protest, but Rarin's stern look told him to hold his piece. Sim stood for a moment longer, then exited the room and descended the stairs, restraining his complaints all the way down. He looked behind him and saw Rarin waiting patiently.

Sim threw the door open and scowled as he walked down the path. *'How am I supposed to catch a fish?'*

He continued toward the trunk of the tree, following the winding curves of the bark. When the descent grew too steep, he carefully clambered down, finding the grooves and knots littering the surface to be perfect climbing points. For the better part of an hour, he descended, avoiding the massive trunk filled to the brim with activity and instead of climbing down the surface to the carved stairwell embedded on the side. Through the entire way, not once did Sim see Elder Rarin.

Finally, he reached the gnarled and knotted roots, digging deep into the soil of the isle and into the sand beneath the tides. Aerans glided in the air currents above, watching below for the many species of fish floundering below. At some point, they would dive down and scoop their feet under the water and snatch a sizeable fish, then toss it up to their hands and fly it back to one of the many baskets nestled in a root.

Sim glanced up with his shoulders sagging. *'I know how to fish...but I can't do it like that.'* He rubbed his shoulder. *"...Not anymore."* He looked all around, searching for some means to fish. Logs, branches, shells and fish skeletons decorated the shoreline, while far out, toward the distant coasts of the cove, boats floated along, laden with nets and spears and the shouts of human sailors.

He narrowed his eyes, focusing on a boat. *'Wait...'* His eyes went wide, then he clapped his hands together and shouted, "That's it!" He snatched a stout, straight stick from the ground along with a chipped shell, then proceeded to shave the tip of the branch off in cascading spirals. After several minutes, it became a fine point.

Sim tossed away the shell and ran along the coastline, searching. He came across a sizeable log and set the branch on top, then proceeded to push it toward the water. With considerable strain, he managed the feat, then leaped on top before his leg feathers could get wet. He pushed himself out into open water with his makeshift spear, then watched under the surface, waiting.

He waited and waited, all while the other aerans fishing returned to their baskets and flew them back up to the trunk plaza, leaving Sim alone at the roots of the tree, both above and around him. Even still, he kept focused on the water, waiting for his target.

Finally, a fat, lazy gray fish swam up to scoop a clump of green into its mouth emerged, barely looking this way and that. Sim held the spear high, then in a split second, struck the fish and pulled it up to the log.

As it wriggled and squirmed, Sim held it up and shouted, "I did it!" In its last dying limps on the spear, Sim began to roll with the log, all the way down into the water with a splash.

Sim gasped and flailed his arms, keeping a tight grip on his prize. *"Help! Please, help!"* he cried, kicking and thrashing in his attempts to keep his head above the water.

Two sets of claws suddenly grabbed his arms and effortlessly pulled him out of the water and into the air. Sim panted heavily as he looked all around and finally up, seeing that it was Elder Rarin, chuckling heartily.

He looked down at Sim and shouted, "Well done, my lad! Well done! I knew you could do it—even if you got a bit wet!" Saltwater dripped off Sim's sodden feathers and clothes as they descended, being driven off by the strong winds surrounding them. Sim remained silent, too shocked by the chill of the water to respond.

Rarin dropped him back on the coast, then helped him to sit on a root. He sat next to him and laid his hands on his lap. "Rest for now. We'll walk back up when you're ready."

Sim's head perked up. He faced Rarin and asked, "Wait...you're not going to fly?"

Rarin gave him a curious look. "Of course. I often walk to where I need to go." He looked up and stared at the aerans soaring through the branches. "When you fly, you have to put so much focus on where you go and how you move. The wind crowds your ears and drives away the smell, and you must be focused on your destination." He leaned back and closed his eyes. "But when you take the time to walk...the sweet pollen...the rustle of the leaves...the ridges of the bark...all minute things that you could never appreciate in the air." He looked down and picked up a fallen leaf, considering it. "As elder, I want to do more than simply live around the tree...I want to live within it. For this, I can appreciate the land dwellers all the more."

Sim blinked, thinking. He stared at the fish he caught with his spear, then up at the branches of the tree. In these moments of peace, he focused on what Rarin described: the leaves, the pollen, the wind—the sheer beauty of the tree he called home.

He relaxed, and a smile crept across his face. *'He's...right. When I flew, I was always in a rush to get where I needed to go. When I walk, I go slower...but I can see so much more.'*

Some minutes later, Rarin took a deep breath, then stood up. "So...what did you learn?"

Sim —caught off-guard—replied, "I...I don't...I don't need wings...to be useful."

Rarin nodded sagely. "Exactly right. Our wings are a valuable gift, but they do not define us as a people. Don't let it get you down." He steadily walked toward the spiraling staircase up the tree, waving for Sim to follow. The young aeran did as he asked.

They continued through the tunnels in the bark, through the vast plaza, and over the great boughs. For the first time, Sim could appreciate the magnificence of what the Ulhaeya tree had to offer. But all the while, the nagging sadness kept returning to him. For every time he raised his head to see some old sight made new, he lowered his head, crestfallen. *'I don't need wings...but I **want** them...'*

They both reached Sim's home roughly an hour later, due to Sim having to keep pace with Rarin's elderly gait. He gave the young aeran a quick lookover, then scraped one his neck feathers, making a layer of salt on his claw. "I'd have you go over to the spring to take a bath, but there is something important I must show you." Rarin pushed open the door, revealing the scarlet-feathered Alren sitting at the couch with a small, moss-covered basket at his side.

He craned his head up from the basket toward the other aerans. He noticed the enormous fish nagging by the tip of Sim's spear and exclaimed, "You did it!" He laughed and stood up, then embraced Sim, ignoring the salt covering his son. He pulled back, carrying a layer of the substance on his clothes. "Now we have a meal for your little friend."

Sim cocked his head in bewilderment. "Little friend?" Alren stepped away and gestured to the basket. Sim slowly approached it, while Rarin followed, remaining a few steps behind.

Sim kneeled at the foot of the couch, studying the basket. The moss blanket squirmed, and a shrill squawk came out from it. Sim scrambled back, then faced his father in astonishment. Alren proffered him to continue.

Sim turned back around cautiously, then slowly pulled away the blanket. Sitting in the basket was a puff of white feathers with a sharp, black beak, tiny black claws, and two tiny wings. It squawked curiously, staring up at Sim with bulbous yellow eyes, then at the fish's, squawking even more voraciously.

Sim's beak hung open. Rarin sat next to Sim, pulling the fish off of the spear. He punctured it with his claw, pried off a piece of meat, then offered it to the chick. It snatched it and wolfed it down, then squawked for more.

Rarin smiled and continued to feed it another piece. "This is a visawk chick. After hearing about what happened to you, I got in contact with a human friend that lives in the north. He gave it to me only a day ago." He stroked the chick's crown feathers and continued. "In just a few months, it will grow taller than this house, with a wingspan wider than a bough." He turned to Sim and offered him the fish. "With training and feeding, it will be *your* wings."

Sim faced Rarin in shock, then closed his beak. He looked down at the fish, then back at his elder. He whimpered, then wrapped his arms around Rarin. Tears streamed down his face as he quietly said, "Thank you..." Alren cried as well, hiding his face with a hand.

After only a few moments peace, the chick squawked and scraped at the basket, gawking at the fish. Sim pulled away and laughed wiping his eyes. "Still hungry, aren't you?" he replied, sniffing.

Rarin nodded sagely. "Indeed. He'll eat his weight in fish every day, even as an adult." He nudged the young aerans shoulder. "I'll fix you up with a proper boat."

Sim laughed again, taking the fish and holding a piece up for the chick. "Now I see why you had me get that fish." Alren and Rarin both laughed as Sim continued to feed the visawk, and Rarin explained to them both how to properly care for the aeran's new wings.