



By Snothile Dlamini

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Dark silhouettes of branches twisted in the air. All that illuminated the pale sky was the milky haze of moonlight and the faraway lights strewn across the horizon. Somewhere in the entanglement of detritus, an owlet shivered in the winter air. With wide, curious eyes, Avalar stared from his nesting place. The world seen through the cavity in the tree was too inconceivable for this young fledgling; too great for eyes that had only known the bark walls of his nest and the soft feathers of his mother's caress. Where *was* his mother? She and his siblings should have been back from their hunt by now. He stood precariously on the edge of the nest and stretched his newborn wings. He stumbled on the flaky grass beneath and sniffed for his mother's familiar scent. Avalar's throat closed up and his stomach churned. The endless ruin went on for ages but nowhere in the dark depths of the forest could he find his family. With his brown coat ruffling in the breeze, he flew back into the nest and swallowed the fear down. Perhaps they would return at the following dusk.

At dusk, Avalar awoke with a ravenous belly. The cold, vacant nest made the hollow depression in his stomach grow. His coos ricocheted in the air as if calling back to him. Crystals of ice glistened in the sunset as flocks of birds bobbed across the sky on their annual migration. Avalar cowered in his nest, pensive as he gazed up at the courageous birds. He was supposed to migrate with his family. He could hardly fly, let alone venture away into uncharted territory on his own without his mother's guide. He would have to postpone his first migration, he thought. Having a sip of water in the nearby river, Avalar watched the owl staring back at him. He could not recognize the warped reflection in the flowing water.

The following weeks consisted of only endless torment. Avalar could hardly carry the broken remains of his heart. He could've sworn a hole had been dug into his soul. A hole that was once filled by his family. On some nights, he dared to hope that just maybe he'd see them again but he never did.

And he probably never would.

He did not know which to focus on: the vice-like grip that grief held on his heart or the battle for his survival in the brutal winter storms. His once brown talons scintillated with the blue frost coating them, brought on by the gusts of ice-carrying wind that rushed past. How could he possibly survive this?

One day, Avarar was harshly woken by the strident noises that grated through the morning silence. Startled, his head peered through the cavity in the tree and a screech slipped past his beak at the ghastly sight. Green claws, infinitely larger than his own, tore through the landscape, sending all vegetation to the ground with a thud. Trees like his own laid at the mercy of the new predator. Avarar's piercing screams were whispers to the bellows of the unknown beast. It was getting closer. His heart was beating faster. What could he do? There was nothing he could do. It wasn't stopping. Perhaps if he —

The claws dug at the roots of Avarar's tree and with a final wavering cry, the owl leapt up into the air as his own home tumbled to the ground.

He flew for only a brief moment before his wings gave out and he collapsed against a fence. He searched with panic swimming in his eyes for safety but all he found was a fallen hollow log. From inside, he tried to scream at the merciless claws wrecking his home apart but only a pained yelp could snake its way past the lump in his throat.

It struck him how small he was in this petrifying maze of a world. A tiny creature, able to be crushed in only a brief second like an ant in the palm of a bear. One moment there. The next gone. All through the night, Avarar's head turned at the faintest noise, with his lungs barely able to get a deep breath. Dreadfully long hours passed before he could get some shuteye.

With an empty stomach and a log blanketed in snow for a dwelling, Avarar knew he was standing on the brink of his own demise. So he stared up at the starry sky, counting down when he would leap into the air. Every time he got to one, he started over but eventually, he did it.

With his eyes vigilantly open, he soared with the wind. Just as a burst of triumph exploded in his chest, the wind picked up, accelerating his body forward. The small bird lost momentum and all went south. He anticipated the fall long before it came, so when it did, his eyes were shut, bracing himself for the impact. He toppled against a wall and landed into the villainous clutch of a bush. Thorns tore at his skin and his wings seared apart, sending a cloud of feathers into the air. Scarlet stains grew on his brown coat, dripping slowly onto the blue flowers on which he had fallen. Screams shot through the air as the injured bird tried to move his body. Both wings were captured in the wicked grasps of the thorns and his talons lay stiff in front of him despite all his efforts to kick himself back up. All Avarar could do was

desperately call into the empty sky for mercy. He was ready to give up and accept defeat when finally...mercy came.

A door creaked open and out came a young woman, wiping the dust of sleep from her eyes. She searched for a few moments in her garden before finding the owl tangled in the bushes. With a gasp, she marched to the bird and carefully lifted it out of its piteous state. As the thorns let go of Avalar, he weeped, certain they had penetrated deeper than just his flesh. The saviour of a woman held Avalar in her arms, carrying him into her house. He was hit with instantaneous relief when the warmth radiating through the house washed over his quivering figure.

She wrapped a cloth around his bleeding wing and caressed his back with a loving hand. Breathing slowly and heavily, Avalar peered up at the sage green eyes of his rescuer, wanting to find a glimmer of authenticity in her intentions. He couldn't escape even if he wanted to, so hope is all he could do. The woman sat Avalar in a small enclosure and placed a bowl of water and another with raw meat. His beak dashed into both bowls. They were empty in only a few moments. His stomach thanked him for the glorious meal.

Avalar glanced at the woman once again. Her flaxen hair fell gently around her face as she smiled softly at the vulnerable owl. The two shared a moment that made the hole in Avalar's soul slightly smaller before he quickly fell asleep, bathed in the warm glow of the fireplace.

His eyes opened to the new day and found two full bowls again. He feasted on his food with eyes shut in childish delight. How could he have ever lived so long without this?

Weeks passed as Avalar's wing healed and the pain subsided. Each day he woke up with food beside his head and his tender heart grew to love the hospitable lady. All went exquisitely until one day, he gazed outside and imagined what life was like out there. His mother had done it, his siblings had done it and all the other birds in the world had done it, why couldn't he? He flapped his wings beneath the bandage he was wearing, testing to see if they still worked. The lady sitting across the room noticed his movement and walked over to him. She carefully removed the blood stained cloth and lifted Avalar into her arms, placing him on the pavement in front of the door.

Staring up at the darkening sky, Avarar hesitated. He contemplated the dangers that loomed out there and the strenuous fight for survival. Hunting for food when it was no longer dropped into his beak by his mother or waiting in a bowl. Battling against the cruel winter snow and the boisterous thunderstorms. The thought alone made him shiver and he looked away. But somewhere in his conflicted heart he wanted to see it all. He wanted to fly again, even if that meant he would bump into things along the way. Memories of stumbling into a thorny bush flashed through his mind and he took a step back, forgetting his prior thoughts. He wasn't going to do it, he thought. He would stay in the safety of this building, relishing in the everlasting warmth and the omnipresent food. Why would he venture into the vast unknown where dangerous beasts with gargantuan claws roamed? Maybe that's why his family had never returned. Nothing good was out there. But when a group of chirping birds flew past, disappearing into the horizon, Avarar felt that tug on his heart again. He stepped with the woman back into the house but stopped just before the door shut. Avarar summoned his courage and flew into the air with his newly healed wings.

Every flap of his wings took him immense effort but he was flying again. The feeling of the wind rushing past his wings felt less terrifying as it first did and he gloried in the feeling. Looking back at the house, Avarar's saviour waved with teary eyes. He was really going to miss her.

Avarar made it to dusk unharmed, sans the fracture in his heart for once again losing someone he had grown to care about. He searched the land below for any suitable trees to rest the day away and finally found the perfect place. All night he dreamt of sage green eyes and flaxen hair.

When the sun set that evening, Avarar woke up and searched for food. Remembering where he was, he flew into the forest and pride made him coo softly when he caught his first rat. All on his own. He cooed in joy and lifted off into the air, for once sure of himself.

It wasn't easy. Not by a long shot. One day he was chased by some white-crested, yellow-beaked brute with a call of knives, another he dodged hunter's bullets. But after all this, he finally arrived at his destination where the air was warm and the frost on tree branches turned to budding flowers. Below, Avarar spotted a clear stream of water and made his descent. He landed softly on the river's edge and dipped his beak into the cool water,

splashing with exultant coos. As he stared at the reflection below him, he cocked his head in admiration. So *that* was the owl in the water.

The following spring

The woman that had saved Avalor's life tapped a pen against her head, deep in thought. She ran through her list of options for the logo of her new school. Sighing in exhaustion, her head hit the table. It was only when she looked out her window and a familiar figure was perched on the tree that she found the perfect idea. Her lips stretched into a smile and she ambled outside.

Cecilia's school still continues to produce younglings with brave hearts and courageous minds like the great Avalor himself.

THE END