

In Adam's Fall

by Jayge Carr

They cut off my wings.

It had started like any other day, waking high midst green scent and leafy softness, not alone; laughing and loving and playing, soaring and diving, squabbling amiably over which tree had the juiciest fruit or which of the females present had the highest arched wings.

I saw the trap, but saw it too late; and then I was aware of nothing, until I awoke the second time that day, helpless while they finished, and I was crippled.

I had heard of them, of course, winged news travels swiftly, heard of the strangers, the aliens who had appeared suddenly, between a sunset be and a sunrise, who had done many strange things - most recently the catching and mutilating of some of our people.

What were they to me, I thought, these strangers? (Though I knew and called friend more than one among those taken.) These strangers meant nothing, and less than nothing, to me.

Until they caught me, and crippled me.

I hated them.

The alien kept his face averted as he worked, but once I caught a glimpse of pity and envy mixed with dark anger in those strange round eyes.

Soon, too soon, my bonds fell away. There was no pain, no scars - no wings.

The bottom surface of the alien's nest hurt the tender souls of my feet. I supposed I would grow used to it eventually, the hardness beneath, the loss of the freedom of the air.

I limped, and my calves ached.

"Take it easy at first," the alien said, his voice rumbly, strangely accented, his face aimed over my shoulder. He was far taller than I, broader, wingless, his head aureoled in sunset glory. "Lean on things, don't move about too much. Get used to ground-walking, moving about on your legs. It's not at all like shifting about on a tree branch. But go slowly at first, don't push yourself too hard."

"Why?" I had meant to keep silence, but the question foamed out of me, a thirst for knowing that had to be quenched. "Why did you do this to me, why must you mutilate us so?"

For the first time the alien faced me eye to eye, his head bent. "I can't explain it, youngster. You couldn't understand. But believe me, it's your own good."

"Good? My good? To be crippled?"

"Your good, I said, youngster. Your people's good," the alien was fierce. "I'm a medic, youngster, a healer, and I've seen more

suffering, more tragedy than you can imagine. And I know, sometimes, there must be hurt to cure."

"Cure? But there was nothing wrong with my wings, nothing!"

"But there was, youngster. There was. Our computers said so. Your wings make it too easy, make lotus-eaters out of you. You need to struggle to advance, you need-"

My hands gripped his shoulders, felt warm flesh under strange wrappings. "Give me back my wings!"

"I can't, youngster. What's done can't be undone - but - I'm sorry."

I heard truth in that deep rumbly voice, and bowed my head, and shuffled about as they directed me. One of them spoke long and enthusiastically about something he called farming, and pressed small objects he called seeds into my hands. Others gave me tools and strange devices. But I let it all slide out of my fingers as soon as I passed out of the aliens' compound.

I limped away, not knowing where I was going, not caring, my abused feet carrying me where they willed.

With my wings I was safe, nothing to fear but the rare jawack or perchance a spiting slith. But on the ground, prey to every crawling predator...

I didn't care.

I came to a quiet pool, and bathed long, scrubbing with sweetmud to cleanse the alien stench from me.

There Elluvee found me, staring unseeing into the green depths. She fluttered down beside me, folding her wings, iridescent brilliance, around her. Elluvee, my sweet, my lithe green darling, my lady of the wind and the cloud.

We cried together, and loved, for the last time.

After, she offered to go to the aliens, that we might be together again.

I refused. I would not have her crippled like me, for the sake of a generous impulse.

But I knew, even as I warned her of how I had been trapped, that there was no safety for any of us, anywhere. But she must not give up even a day of wholeness for me. Who knew, perhaps the strangers would leave as abruptly as they had come.

But they didn't.

I was lucky. I got a scar, and then two, but I learned, and survived. Many of us didn't. I hated the aliens, and longed for the gay careless freedom I had lost, and my hatred grew, and grew.

Then Elluvee was caught, as I had been.

Someone brought me the word. We cripples were slowly learning to help each other, to survive. The winged ones, our once-selves, our brothers,

didn't need, didn't bother. In the air, groups larger than three or four drew danger. On the ground, groups could be a protection.

I hurried, through woods, across scented meadows. What I had learned in pain must protect Elluvee, until she, too, could learn.

She came out of the door, the shining door, and she limped slowly on her unaccustomed feet, her pride dragging in the dirt.

I met her, and her eyes stared past me, unseeing. I shook her shoulder, frightened. Others I had seen, like so. If the fierce ones do not take them, their souls wither away, and their bodies follow.

"Elluvee, Elluvee, it is I, Jantzu! I will help you. It is bad, bad, I know, dearest, but I am here, I will help, you will learn, I said softly, with emotion.

Her eyes were wide, dark, staring blindly ahead.

"Elluvee!" Slowly, slowly, her head turned, her eyes met mine. There was no anger or fear or hurt in them, only emptiness.

"Jantzu," she said; then, sadly, "No."

Just that, no more.

All my pleadings, all my fine words went for nothing. There is a cliff, below it a savage, foaming river, on its height a tree that bore her favourite fruit. She asked me to climb the tree, to fetch some of that fruit. I thought - Presence forgive me - that she was curing, that she would accept, would learn as others had learned.

I was back down, the fruit in a woven vine pouch, when I saw her nearing the cliff's edge - and knew.

It was far, too far, but I ran, I ran, cursing my foolishness in leaving her alone, even for so short a time. She was poised on the verge, and she turned, and smiled, and said, "Farewell, Jantzu." And dove.

She was so slender, so light, she almost flew by wind and will alone. And then she fell, and fell, until the water took her.

And again my hatred of the aliens grew, though the full extent of their cruelty I was yet to learn. Elluvee was gone, but there were other females among the groundlings, and loneliness is a heavy burden. Since we found greater safety in numbers, we were much together, and one Caveen and I found pleasure in each other's arms, comfort from loneliness.

The clutch was born without wings.

I asked about among the other groundlings, and all the clutches born to those crippled by the aliens were the same.

Most of the parents had, in pity preserved their offspring from our cruel life, wrapping them after in spicy drylla leaves and returning their husks to the Presence.

But one of mine reminded me, somehow, of Elluvee, and I couldn't bear to lose them.

They died anyway, poor mites, one by one. Caveen and I quarreled, each blaming the other, and we parted.

I went to the aliens' compound.

The others thought the infants' lack of wings but natural, since we had all lost ours. But I knew better. My own sire Tzubannl had lost one of his arms to a jawack, and yet had lived to sire me. And I had two good arms.

The shining door opened, and I entered.

A voice came out of nowhere. "Do you need some help?"

"I - I would speak with the one who took off my wings."

"Oh, no, birdboy," the voice was firm. All about me were featureless flat surfaces, palest green, even the door had disappeared into green. Yet there was light, and somehow, the voice. "There aren't enough of us that we can let you in to cut somebody's throat."

"I wished only to speak." Could these aliens, with all their strange powers, die? As animals died, as we died? "I have questions that I need to be answered."

"I'll bet!" The voice, like all the alien voices, was deep, rumbly, accented. Yet I could hear plain, his disbelief, incredulity.

A different voice spoke. "I'm Democritus Sung. What did you want to know?"

"I - I - you are not the medic! Let me out of here!" I crouched, trying not to scream, to pound myself futilely against the strange hardness that was neither trunk nor leaf nor honest ground. The light, the voices out of nowhere, the strange flat green hardnesses - when I had been here before I had been protected from the alienness by my own shock - now I was close to blind panic.

"Easy, son, easy," soothed the second voice. There was a tingling in my nostrils, and I was suddenly calm, in control of myself again. "Now," the voice said, "what questions did you want to ask?"

"I - I -" It was hard, to speak to no one, to hear only voices answering. "I would know why."

"Wheel," said the voice, "you don't ask easy ones, do you? What makes you think a medic could answer, could explain better than any of the rest of us?"

"Because of what I saw in his eyes. I think he would answer me, with truth - and patience. And - and - there is something else I would ask, only that one could answer." I hesitated. "It is a - a thing close to me."

An odd sound, like wind whooshing through a glade. "All right, son. You can come talk to me. And if I approve, you can speak to your medic. Just wait where you are, someone'll come and bring you to me."

My escort was black, black of skin, of fur, black of eye. Even his teeth

and the inside of his mouth were black.

He led me through a labyrinth, until at last he stopped at a door and said to it, "Here's your birdboy, chief."

The door opened, and I entered. The alien was standing at a wall that was open, so I could see the country beyond. We must have been high, because as I walked toward him I could see even to the distant haze that was the Ice Mountains.

"A lovely land," he said. He was slight compared to the others, only a head or so taller than I, that head a polished smoothness, golden brown.

"Until, you came," I answered.

"Yes, the serpents in your garden." He made the windrushing sound again. His face was furless, too, the eyes shaped differently than the others I'd seen. "I'm Democritus Sung, by the way, or just Sung, if you can't remember all of it. No medical problems, are there? Back hurt you? He moved aside, stared at my back, shoulders, arms. "Looks clean enough. Neat job."

"Yes." I couldn't keep the bitterness out of my voice.

"Boy... no, not boy, I shouldn't call you boy, you're an adult."

"My name is Jantzu."

"Jantzu, then. You're small, Jantzu, your people are small, and it's hard, when dealing with a race as small as children, to avoid treating them as children." His mouth twisted. "A bitter lesson, you'd've thought we'd've learned it by now. But you want to know why, and I'm going to tell you, try to make you understand, as best I can. Sit down, make yourself comfortable. Can I offer you something, food, fruit juice, or water to drink?"

"It is my soul that thirsts, not my body. How does one sit?"

"Wheel, I'm not sure you can. Your body's not built for it. Ummm. Can you do this?" He lowered himself onto a padded surface, his legs folded neatly beneath him. "This is called the lotus position. Those of my people who can accustom themselves to it, find it quite comfortable."

It was comfortable.

He spoke long, and earnestly, but many of the words he used were strange, and I understood him not. Oh, he would stop and explain, or try to explain, what the words meant, culture, computer, niche, specialization, ethnology, and so many, many others. He spoke of people called Mead, Goodall, Miramatsu, and their wisdoms, which he called equations, or sometimes laws.

But though I understood not the bits of his sayings, I caught the theme, the soul. He thought we were going die, or worse, something he called degenerate.

But all die.

Yes, he agreed, all individuals die. But a people can die, too. Your people, as a people, will die. You are dying now, as we speak.

"Stop mutilating us," I retorted "and we will stop dying."

He shook his head, and turned it away. When he finally faced me again, his eyes were red and wet. "I wish there were some other way," he said slowly. "And I wish I could make you understand. I would feel so much better, if even one of you understood."

"I understand this much," I spoke as slowly, as solemnly as he. "You are not doing what you do out of sheer cruelty. You feel there is a compelling reason, even if you cannot explain this reason so that I may understand it. But that does not alter - many have died, from what you did, either from grief or inability to survive, here on the ground. Did you know this, when you began this - this evil?"

"Yes." His eyes shone.

"You knew," I repeated slowly, "that some would die. That many would die. Yet you did it anyway."

"Yes!" He gripped my arm hurtfully. "We did it that your race, as a race, would live." He spoke more softly, as though to himself. "The ends never justify the means, and yet - and yet - and yet! The alternative was unthinkable! We couldn't just go, sin by omission, leave an intelligent race to to - to wither and die away."

I said nothing, only thought of Elluvee, sailing proud under the golden sun - and Elluvee as I had seen her last, empty-eyed, death-seeking.

After a bit, he made the windrushing sound again, and said, "You had something personal you wanted to ask the medic. Which one was it, I'll call him."

"I don't know his name, but he has fur the colour of sunset."

"Oh." Something amused him.

"Wait a bit."

I waited.

"Hello, son." The hair was still sunset glory, but the eyes were smiling I instead of angry. The medic brushed my cheek with his hand, a brief greeting.

"He's got something to ask you, Merce. Something personal. I'm going, so he can ask in private. You know where the booze is."

"If this is your idea of a joke, Crito...."

"Nope. His idea. And no joke, I'd say. He's probably safe, but I'll leave the comm on. Yell if you need help."

The medic got a transparent gourd full of amber-brown fluid and drank long and noisily. Then, mouth a thin, hard line, legs straddled, he faced me. "O.K., let's hear it. What did you want to ask me?"

"When you cut off my wings, was - that all you did?"

It didn't seem to be what he had expected to hear; he frowned,

considering, mouth drawn into a tight knot. Then he took another long drink of the dark fluid and said, "What makes you ask?"

"I have sired younglings. They have no wings."

"You have no wings."

"Because you cut them off. And did other things. This bone here," I gestured to my chest, where the heavy bone that supported my wings had been altered, made lighter, "and my legs. But how could you make such changes on children I was yet to sire?"

"You don't know what genes are, or the helix, or DNA. So how can I explain how they can be altered?"

"All my children?" But the answer was there for me to see, in those light expressive eyes.

The medic bent, shortening himself so that our heads were level, touched my cheek again gently with his hand. "I don't even know your name."

"Jantzu."

"Teach them, Jantzu. Teach them. They won't miss what they never had, as you do, as you must. And with their children, the worst will be past -"

I drew back. "They died."

The medic flinched. "Oh, Jantzu."

Water rolled out of the light eyes. "I have lost children, too. That's part of the reason why I volun - never mind." White teeth worried his lip. "Think, Jantzu, think. Why did they die?"

"You killed them. You took my wings away so couldn't care for them properly. You -"

"No!" The medic stood towering over me. "Think, Jantzu. Why did they die?"

"Why? A hundred reasons. Without my wings, I couldn't build a proper treetop nest for them; I couldn't keep them warm enough; I couldn't get enough ripe fruit; I couldn't -"

The medic turned away and leaned against a vertical hardness, shoulders shaking.

I had one last question, though I already knew the answer. "You did this to all you caught, their wings and their children's also."

Muffled. "Yes."

"Since you could do all this, why not just the children?"

The medic whirled, grasped my shoulders with huge, hurting hands. "Because you would have killed them, in pity, because you would have known they couldn't survive, without wings. And if we had simply cloned - if we stolen orphaned infants, and raised them ourselves, away from you, they would have reflected our ways, not yours, they would have felt kin to us, not you. They would have rivaled you, rivaled the winged

ones, and not felt brother to them, as you do now. And if they didn't kill the winged ones of directly, they would do indirectly, because they would be more efficient, as you will learn to be more efficient."

"Rival the winged ones? When I am dead, with no children living to follow me, how can there be talk of rivalry?"

"Think, Jantzu, think. You have learned to survive, and you can learn to help your children to survive, too. I took your wings, Jantzu, you can't live as if you still had wings. But you have your mind, and your hands, and your feet. Your life has changed, and you must change. Change, and learn, and most of all - think."

"Did your people be winged once, also?"

"No. But many times, in our past, our lives have been changed, and it has been adapt or die. And sometimes, some of us, large groups of us, died. You must work out your own way to live, on the ground, Jantzu. We will help. As much as we can. Our answers cannot be yours, what is right for us may be all wrong for you. Find your answers, Jantzu. We want you to live, you, and your children, and your children's children."

"Would you give me one of those that stills one's limbs at a distance, to protect myself with?"

His head moved back and forth. "No Jantzu. When the charge expired, how would you protect yourself? No, you must learn, how to protect yourself, by yourself. But there are those among us, who can teach you how to fight, what the vulnerabilities of other animals are, how to make -"

"And meanwhile, you will catch those of my winged brothers that you can, and serve them as you have me and so many others."

"Yes!"

"Knowing that of those you so treat, half will die within a day and a night?"

"So many? I hadn't realized -"

"And of those that live, many are bodies only, moving about, their spirits dead within them."

"Jantzu, it must be. We will help, whatever way we can - but - it - must - be!" Very low. "Please learn, Jantzu. Or it will all have been for nothing!"

Winter came.

We wingless ones could no longer fly to follow the warmth. Some tried to follow our winged brothers, painfully, on foot. A few even made it back to rejoin those who stayed.

We learned. Many of us died, but the survivors learned.

Many things we learned; to make crude shelters, to dole out our food instead of gobbling it all when we had it, to wrap ourselves in the furs of the animals we killed. Yes - we learned to hunt, and kill. For when the trees stand naked and barren, and the bushes are buried under shrouds of snow, what else is there to eat but the animals?



We learned to kill each other, too.

We had to gather together, in groups, to survive. We had to defend ourselves against hungry predators, and eat; and it took many, to hunt, to trap - to kill.

We quarreled. With wings, if two should disagree over some minor matter - though this was rare because there was always plenty for all - they could simply fly away from each other. But crowded together we were, in crude shelters, cold, hungry, frightened, where arguments could fester, could grow, could flare into killing rage.

We learned to kill, and we killed.

I killed.

There was a male that first winter who had no female. And he looked at mine with hungry eyes, and it seemed to me that she returned those looks. So I fought him, and killed him. And I cut a long stick, and beat her with it, so she would learn to keep her eyes on me, and none other.

The clutch was born while there was still white on the ground.

But it lived.

Other clutches were born to the groundlings, at odd times. (Another change made by the aliens, breaking the birth-pattern of our flying brothers?) Many of them lived, too. Some of the parents wanted to give their clutches mercy, as had been done previously. But I wouldn't let them. I had to kill a male who defied me, and his female became my second female. Many grumbled at this, for we still had more males than females, and so some males had no females. But my females were mine, and any male who wanted one must fight me for her.

In the air, I couldn't have enforced this. In the air, one didn't own, not things nor people. But on the ground, a chipped stone knife, furs for warmth, food, a shelter, a female - these were precious, could be held, would be fought for. Ground life was different.

We grew in numbers, slowly. We died, many of our younglings, despite all our care, died, and the winged ones learned to avoid the aliens' traps. But nonetheless, we grew.

I became a leader, one who decided. Sometimes I returned to the aliens' place, to learn. I spoke oftenest to Crito Sung, who was their leader. But I never saw again but once the sunset-furred medic. He stopped me in a corridor and said, "Greetings, Jantzu. How fares it with you?"

"Well enough, medic," I answered. "My children live now, most of them. But my hatred of you and your work remains unquenched."

My escort, pale as the first had been dark, said nervously, "What are you doing here, Mercy? You know what the old man said."

"But Jantzu and I have - known each other a long time. And you've your big gun to protect me, and Jantzu knows it. I'm glad you prosper, Jantzu."

In a sense, it was true. I had then four females, all comely and good

breeders. When kills were divided, if I wasn't present, a choice piece was held back for me. I was a leader. But I yearned for what I had lost.

Strangely, I found it easiest to speak of this, not to my fellows who had lost their wings, but to a youngling born wingless. What drew us together I couldn't say, for she was too young to give pleasure or clutches. But her mind held great understanding.

It was she who devised long pointed thorns to pierce the skins, and bits of sinew to weave them together, to make fitted wrappings instead of knotting the individual skins on. And she who devised a variation of our woven vine pouches, with great holes in it, to catch fish from the rivers and ponds. And she who tried, over and over, to make wings of skin and branches for me, to replace those I had lost. And she who tumbled out of the sky, to lie broken and dying.

Her death was but one more to add to the aliens' account.

I thought they would leave, when we ground - dwellers were many, and prospering. But they did not. They closed their doors to us, but still the winged ones must fly wary in our land. Many of them left permanently for safer lands, but some stayed stubbornly on, laughing lightly as they do. avoided the traps.

At last we made the wings, great clumsy unmovable structures. They gave us older ones a taste, so we could climb a tree or cliff and float gently down. A few of the ground-born tried them and abandoned them. But for those of us who remembered...

And still the aliens did not leave, until we began to plan and scheme how we might destroy them.

We had learned much of killing, by then. But what served amongst ourselves, or against animals with naught but natural defenses and desperate cunning, might not be enough against the aliens, whose powers we knew not the limits of.

So we thought, and practiced various methods secretly.

We had weapons. Knives, spears, throwing clubs. But central to our plans was a plant sap, which we dried and used as fuel for our fires. But we had discovered that if the sundried lump was sealed in clay and baked, when the covering was broken its contents burned unceasingly, of itself, no fire needed, when the air and moisture got to it.

But we needed the help of our winged brothers, to get inside the aliens' compound. And they wouldn't give it.

Why should we? they asked. The strangers have not harmed us.

We pleaded, argued, pointed out the eternal threat the aliens represented. They only laughed and flew away.

Finally we did the only thing left to do. We caught a winged one and left her tied near the aliens' compound. Help us, we told the others, or we will catch many more.

Losing their wings was the one thing they feared. So they agreed to help.

Our plan was simple. The winged ones launched a band of us, wearing our artificial wings and carrying the fire-pots. We would drop them and land, and in the confusion caused by many small fires, we and the other groundlings waiting impatiently would attack.

But we didn't know that the strange material of the base would itself burn.

Those who went in first, who hadn't the prudence or the fear to sheer away or run away, burned also, if they couldn't escape or weren't helped to escape from the holocaust. Not one of the aliens had time to escape.

The strange material burned savagely, fiercely, swiftly.

By evening, cautiously reconnoitring winged ones flew over and reported that nothing was left but ashes and burnt bodies.

When the ashes were cool, some of us went in. I found them together, Crito Sung and the medic with the sunset fur. They must have been in a partially sheltered area, their bodies were unburnt, they had died from heat and smoke.

How peaceful their faces looked, though they must have known that death was close. They lay side by side, arms about each other.

We sent them properly to the Presence. It was only when we removed the remnants of their wrappings to shroud them in drylla leaves that we discovered that many of the aliens - including the sunset-furred medic - were female.

So our lives were our own again, our world our own again... and yet ... and yet..

There was a great discussion. We had discovered, by accident, and then by purposeful action, that the clutches of winged mating with wingless were all wingless. But, if those of mixed heritage mated with the winged ones, full half of their clutches were winged; and the clutches of those winged, whatever their partner, were always exactly as the pure-bred winged ones. And among the clutches of mixed to mixed, again some were winged, not half, but one out of four or five. And the clutches of these winged, too, were like the pure-bred winged.

So, by careful breeding over many generations, we could eliminate the wingless ones, return to what we had been before the aliens came.

I argued against it.

Wingless ones are fighters, winged ones are not.

Suppose the aliens came again, to catch and mutilate. Suppose others came, with worse intent.

Denying wings to our children's children was a monstrous cruelty.

But necessary.

And somehow, as I spoke, as I won others to my side, as I stole from my children, under stress of necessity, what had been stolen from me, I seemed to see the sunset-aureoled medic - smiling.