

**Excerpt from *Uplift* by Jessica Mann**

The Nutcrackers were on the shore bathing. Warmer weather had brought with it dust and mites that made their feathers uncomfortable and scruffy. They had come down to the gravel shore, where the water was shallow and heated by the sun. The young birds were hesitant at first, it seemed so unnatural to launch their bodies under the water. “It’s too cold!” Donius protested.

“Don’t you want to be the best flyer you can be? Well, what do you think does that? Feathers!” said Mother. She leaped in to show them the way, and the three young ones laughed to see their mother splashing around in the water. She hopped back onto shore, dripping, and said, “See? Not so bad.”

Finally, they all jumped in, flopping their bodies around the shallows as they flapped wildly. Once they were used to the sensation of water, they found it enjoyable, whistling and shrieking with pleasure, as rainbow-filled droplets cascaded around them.

Glancing along the shoreline, Columbina’s eye was caught by a heavy-set bird roosting on a dead snag overlooking the water. At that

moment, the bird swiveled his head and he saw the group of Nutcrackers. Columbina said, “Look there! That big bird. He is looking at us.”

Father glanced up. “Ignore him,” he said, shaking droplets from his eyes. But it was too late. The bird let out a loud, long rattle and took off from his perch, flying right toward them. He landed heavily on a low, bent aspen and gazed down eagerly at the Nutcrackers.

“Who do have we here, now?” Halcyon said in a gruff voice, cocking his head to get a better look at the birds. “New brood of Nutcrackers, eh? Come up and talk to Halcyon, why don’t you?”

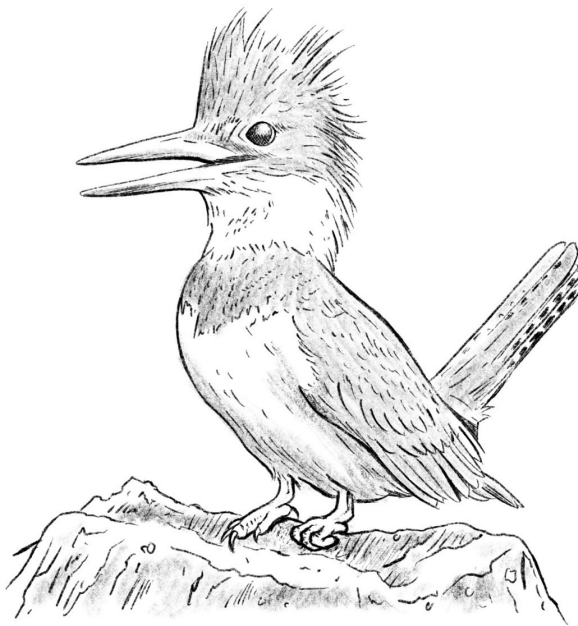
“Halcyon Kingfisher. I see you have made the return trip,” said Father, stepping forward and puffing out his chest feathers in the way Columbina had seen him do when he wanted to look larger.

“Oh, it’s Fraxi, right? Now Halcyon remembers. Forgive me. My memory, it is not so good as yours.”

“Fraxinus. My name is Fraxinus. And yes, these are my young ones,” said Father. He scowled, looking at his wet and bedraggled offspring. Not quite the upright birds he would have liked to introduce to Halcyon, whom he had known for some years. But still, he was proud

of his family. “And you, Halcyon? Still no mate again this year?” he said, pointedly looking around.

Halcyon made a wry face but otherwise ignored him. He raised the feathers of his crest and looked past Fraxinus, at the three young birds peering curiously at him from behind their father. “Would you like to hear stories, hmm, from Halcyon? Tell you the things he has seen in the Southlands, far, far away. Amazing things beyond your imagining.”



*Illustration by Steve Habersang*

Limber, chilled from the bath, gave a shudder, and Donius looked at Father uncertainly. Columbina gazed at this new bird with curiosity. He looked so different from them, with his stumpy tail and short legs. His eyes were huge and bright, and along with the small patch of scruffy white feathers next to his eyes, he looked almost comical next to her elegantly streamlined parents.

“No, thank you, Halcyon,” said Father.

“But Halcyon was speaking to the little ones. They would like to hear scary tales, no? Of monsters and Tall Ones. Such fearsome creatures! Maybe one day they will come for you!”

“We must go now, we have things to do,” said Father, more firmly.

“Sure you do. Halcyon knows. Pecking at the little brown seeds, oh yes, much more interesting.” He rolled his eyes and pantomimed a scratching motion with his foot. Then he laughed, a loud rattle, and winked at the small group of young birds gazing up at him with wide eyes.

“That is enough!” said Father, jerking his bill angrily. “We will waste no more time on this conversation.” He cawed a quiet signal to

the brood and the five Nutcrackers lifted into the air in quick succession, rising away from the lake. Columbina glanced back to see the strange blue bird one last time, but he was gone.

The Nutcrackers flew off a short distance before descending into a small stand of pines in the full sunshine, where Mother announced it was time to preen after bathing. Each bird tilted his or her gray head down to carefully smooth each wet feather in turn. Columbina slid her beak idly over a few feathers but could not contain her curiosity. “Father, why did we not stay and talk with the big-headed bird?”

Donius hardly even looked up, just made an exasperated sound, and Limber glanced over, as Mother and Father stopped their grooming and looked at each other for a quick moment. “Columbina, we do not associate with folk like that,” said Father.

“But why? He seemed friendly. I only wanted to hear what he had to say, about the distant lands. And did you see his foot? It looked crumpled.”

Suddenly interested, Donius piped in. “Do you think he injured it fighting monsters in the Southlands?”

Father shook his head. "It is always the same with those bank diggers. They are coarse and boastful. And it was no monster that got Halcyon, but his own kind. What does that tell you of their clan?"

"His own kind?" said Donius, incredulously.

"You must remember that there are many winged ones," broke in Mother. "We are a proud clan, the Valiant Ones, and known for our intelligence. The Hummingbird clan are the brave warriors of the sky. But some beings are different. Lesser. That is the way it is. We do not associate with those."

A puzzled look came over Columbina's face, but she was silent. She opened her bill to speak, then quickly snapped it closed. Her parents had gone back to their preening, and Columbina knew what she was about to say would displease them. "Mother," she said hesitantly, "you told us about Red Hawk the Trickster. How he put himself above others. You said those who put themselves above others had far to fall."

"Yes, this is true," said Mother, glancing up, her head twisted over her back.

"But don't we put ourselves above others? Saying others are lesser. How is this different?"

“No more questions from you!” snapped Father, swiveling his head toward her. “You are young, you must learn. We have a place in this world, and that bird is not in it. One day you will understand.”

“Now, look at you,” said Mother. “Your feathers are a mess, you cannot fly like that.” She leaned towards her and ran her bill along Columbina’s wing, smoothing the twisted strands of a long black feather until they locked into a perfect, continuous line. “Better. Now you do the rest.”

Columbina dipped her head and began smoothing the barbules, watching her family out of the corner of her eye. But she was thinking about the sky-blue bird and what he had seen in faraway lands.