Aaron was walking through the woods on his way back home. He was tired and cold.

He hefted the pack on his back. It contained what few possessions and money he had left from this long venture. He didn’t know what he was going to tell his wife. He’d sworn up and down that this outing would turn their fortunes around. Now, he was returning almost penniless with even less than he’d set out with. He had to sell his horse just to buy food for himself along the way.

He stopped in his tracks and closed his eyes, feeling the tears coming. ~How can I face them after…?~

He stood there motionless for a long time. He didn’t know what to do anymore. First the bad harvest, and now this…

He didn’t know it yet, but his fortunes were about to take an unexpected turn for the better. It began with noises in the distance, off in the trees. Laughter mixed with the screeches of a bird.

“What in the world…?” he muttered, looking towards the east.

He considered moving on, but his curiosity got the better of him. He headed towards the noise, moving quickly through the foliage. He finally came to a clearing. The ground was barren, like there had been a fire in the past.

What he saw there sickened him to the core.

There were 4 men in ragged clothing and scraps of armor. Bandits, all armed. They were gathered around a large mass on the ground, kicking it and laughing. Aaron moved closer for a better look, hiding behind a tree.

There was a large bird trapped in a net. It must’ve been beautiful once with feathers all colors of the rainbow. Now, an arrow shaft protruded from its breast and blood and dirt covered it. And the worst part was, the poor creature was still alive. Its agonized cries tore at Aaron’s heart.

His blood boiled as one of the men kicked the bird again and laughed boisterously. Righteous fury gripped him.

But he hesitated. These men were armed, and he didn’t have so much as a knife on him, much less a sword. He wanted to help the animal, but…

~Please…~ a strange voice suddenly whispered out of nowhere. ~Please, help me…~

He paused at this. Was he hearing things? He looked closer at the captive and swore the bird was looking straight at him. There was sadness, pleading in its eyes.

One of the men grunted and drew his sword. “Alright, I think that’s all the fun we’ll get out of this beast. Time to get what we came for.”

As the man drew the sword back to kill the bird, Aaron knew he couldn’t just watch this happen. God help him, he had to stop this. He hefted a rock and hurled it at the leader’s head.

“What the…?!” The man stumbled forward, dropping the sword in surprise.

Aaron tackled the man in a fury, delivering punch after punch to his face. The others were too confused to react at first.

Unfortunately, it didn’t last long.

Aaron tasted blood as the man’s mailed fist connected with his left cheek. A tooth fell from his mouth as he fell back. The other 3 bandits dragged him off of their leader. He elbowed one of them in the face, but it barely fazed the man.

His mind raced as the bandit leader rose to his feet and dusted himself off. So, this was it, then. After a long chain of bad life choices, this was to be his end. One last stupid decision, and all for nothing. Even the bird looked resigned.

The leader looked him over, obviously unimpressed. “You got quite the pair to come at me unarmed. You a soldier?”

Aaron shook his head. “I’m a farmer. Please, I made a stupid mistake. Just let me go. I swear, you’ll never hear from me again! I won’t tell a soul!”

“So, just a random hero passing by, then.” The man slowly approached him, looking thoughtful. “You wanna know a secret, my good man?”

Suddenly, a flash of iron and Aaron felt a sharp pain in his chest. He looked down, staring at the hilt of a dagger sticking out of his chest. The leader twisted and Aaron coughed up blood, vision swimming.

The man leaned in close and whispered in his ear, “...I HATE heroes.” He tore the blade out and Aaron was allowed to fall to the ground. The latter could see the blood pooling, and could barely move. He looked towards the bird.

“Take his pack,” the leader ordered. “Then, leave him to rot. If he wants the bird so badly, he can die with it.”

Aaron watched, powerless, as they tore out the bird’s tail-feathers and stabbed it with the same dagger used on him. He tried to get up, to stop them, but he was so weak. Finally, they left.

As he lay there bleeding out, his life flashed before his eyes. It wasn’t much of a life. He grew up on a farm, married young, and had a few kids. His wife was a wonderful woman; they never fought. He wept as he realized they’d never learn the truth of what happened to him. They’d think he’d abandoned them, or worse. He’d never return home and they’d never know why.

Trying to save this bird was the one big thing he ever did with his life, and now, he’d die because of that.

As his world faded, his eyes looked to the bird’s one last time. Its eyes seemed to be glowing. He must’ve imagined it, but it looked like it was smiling at him.

Then, he heard that voice again: ~Thank you.~

Suddenly, immense pain filled him. Fire blanketed him, burning away at his clothes. He thought at first it was Hell, but no. No, this was something else. The fabric fell away, turning to ash as the flames consumed him.

But then, the pain faded away. The fire was still there, but it was warm against his skin instead of burning hot. It was comforting, like a thick, heavy blanket had been draped over him. He felt strange.

His skin began to itch and he watched in wonder as beautiful feathers sprouted from his pores. Red, green, yellow, blue...the same colors as that’s bird’s feathers…

He started to shrink, his body changing shape and proportions all the while. He started to feel stronger, not weak.

His fingers stretched out, the flight feathers growing in. His hands and arms cracked into new alignments, stretching into large wings. Black scales grew on his feet as they grew longer, the big toes migrated backward. Sharp claws pushed out of his new talons. Long, multi-colored tail-feathers extended out of his rump.

Finally, the changes moved at last to his head. His skull cracked, jutting forward, though he felt no pain. His teeth fused together and pushed out of his mouth as a bright-yellow beak. His lips and nose melted, forming the cere and nostrils. His ears disappeared, leaving only ear-holes on the sides of his head. To finish his transformation, his eyes started to change. His eyeballs grew bigger, his irises turned an electric blue from their normal dark brown and expanded to cover his eyes.

He lay there, spread-eagled on the ground, panting. He didn’t know what happened, but somehow, he wasn’t dead.

He blinked, opened his eyes and looked around, confused. His eyesight was much sharper. He could see the ants marching up a tree across the clearing. Finally, he looked at himself. He stared, uncomprehendingly, at his rainbow feathers, his black talons, his broad wings.

~I look...I look just like…~

His eyes flew to the bird he tried to save, and everything fell into place.

The bird was gone. In its place, a pile of ashes in the outline of a bird lay in the middle of a grassy patch. His heart almost split in 2 at the sight.

He covered his head with his wings and sobbed. ~No, no, no...please, I tried to help you…~ Was this his fate? His punishment? To replace the animal he failed to…

~No.~

He paused and perked up. That voice again...where was it coming from…?

~This is not a punishment,~ it continued. Now that he really listened, the voice sounded male. ~You failed to save me, but you gave your life in the effort. There is no sacrifice more noble than to die protecting someone else. You deserve life, not death.~

Aaron slowly rose to his talons, unsteady. He used his wings to brace himself. ~You...you’re that bird…?~ He remembered now. The bird begged him to save him.

~A Phoenix, yes,~ the bird replied. ~You may call me Gideon. They attacked me with iron arrows. I had no defence against it. I know now that I would’ve died either way. You, though...you have a good heart, Aaron. You tried to help me. The world needs more good souls such as yourself who would stand up to evil when they see it.~

Aaron looked at his left wing, realization setting in. A Phoenix...he thought they were only a myth. ~But...I’m no hero. I’ve never done anything noble or heroic before in my life.~

~A hero isn’t one who strives for greatness,~ Gideon answered softly. ~A hero simply acts when they know what must be done. You were afraid but knew what you had to do.~ He paused for a moment. ~Look around you.~

Aaron looked at his surroundings and was surprised at what he saw. Grass all around him, daisies emerging, budding flowers on the trees. This clearing was empty, dead, when he came here. Now, it was as if new life had entered the earth. ~But...how…?~

~Phoenixes are bringers of life. Before a Phoenix dies, they must pass their essence on to another. If they don’t, their power will dissolve into the void, gone forever. I feared I would die without passing my essence on - or worse, that I would have to give it to one of those evil men. Then, you appeared and tried to stop them. If anyone is deserving of this power, it’s you. Our ashes and breath can bring life back to entire forests ravaged by fire, by plague, by drought. In a few years, this clearing will be covered in flowers and berry bushes. Animals will once again make their homes here.~ Gideon paused and continued in a quieter tone. ~Imagine the good you could do in other places with this power. I can see it in your heart: you WANT to help people. You will make a fine Phoenix.~

The bird was right: Aaron didn’t like to see people suffering. He wasted his old life, never seeking adventure or greatness. Now, he had a new life, and he wasn’t going to waste it. He was going to help people in the world. With these powers to bestow life, he could do so much good. He nodded.

But first… ~My family! My farm!~ With everything that’d just happened, he almost forgot about his responsibilities.

~You’d best get going,~ Gideon chuckled softly. ~You have your whole life ahead of you now. I can’t stay forever, but I’ll remain to help you for as long as I can. Being a bird is...very different from being a human. You’ll have a lot of trouble at first.~

Aaron nodded and rose up. His stance was wobbly, but he was able to spread his wings and take flight. It was awkward at first. With Gideon’s guidance, however, he was soon flying with grace, as if he’d been born a bird.

He headed northwest, heading home. He’d be returning home penniless, but with his new powers, they’d never have a bad harvest again. Never again would they starve through winter.

He couldn’t wait to see his family again.

Aaron landed nimbly on their scarecrow. He was more comfortable perching on something than standing on the ground in this form. It felt more natural for a bird.

He watched his wife from a distance. She was pulling weeds from among the corn rows. Corn was out of season right now, but in a few months they’d be growing. She was always diligent.

~Well?~ Gideon asked encouragingly. ~Go talk to her.~

Aaron shook his head. ~It’s not that simple. She doesn’t even know yet that I died.~

~And she won’t know until you tell her.~

Aaron wanted to counter that, but he was right. Aaron had been so happy, so ready to see his family again, that he didn’t give a single thought to what he’d say to them. Now that the time had come, he was ashamed to say that he had stage fright. What if they rejected him? What if they didn’t believe it was him? What if they didn’t even hear him?

Suddenly, he staggered, almost toppling from his perch as a rock hit him.

“Get away from my crops, bird!” his wife shouted angrily at him. “Leave my seeds alone!”

He flapped his wings on reflex, trying to regain his balance. Another rock hit him and he took flight. He perched on a wheelbarrow near her.

She grabbed the pail she was carrying the weeds in, looking angry. “I said-!”

~Mary, it’s me!~

She paused, poised to hurl the bucket at him. She looked around, confused. “Aaron? Where…?”

~Right in front of you, on the wheelbarrow.~

They stared at each other for a long time in silence. The pail fell from her hands. “You’re...but I don’t understand. Why...how are you a bird?”

Aaron sighed and closed his eyes. ~Something very bad happened to me while I was gone, Mary.~

He told her everything, from beginning to end. She remained silent the entire time.

He braced himself for her reaction. He expected her to be angry, to shout at him. He would’ve deserved worse for taking such a stupid risk.

Instead, she fell to her knees and embraced him, sobbing. She kissed him on top of his beak and his heart warmed. “I’m just so happy you’re alive,” she whispered, still holding him. “I don’t know what I would’ve done if you hadn’t come back. You were gone for so long, the king’s…” She paused, suddenly looking worried. “The tax collector! Oh, no…”

Aaron shook his head. ~I found a solution to our problems in an unexpected place.~

He pulled away from her and looked down at the ground. He wasn’t sure exactly what he was doing, to be honest. He’d never actually used his powers before.

~Don’t force it, Aaron,~ Gideon told him gently. ~Take a deep breath and let it out. It’ll come to you when you need it.~

Breathe? He inhaled deeply and exhaled, surprised as a lick of blue flames emerged from his beak. He looked down and coated the ground around him in blue fire.

Mary looked horrified and jumped up. “Wait, you’ll damage the-” She stopped mid-sentence, staring in wonder.

Cornstalks were emerging from the ground around them. Healthy, young seedlings, months ahead of the season.

Aaron looked up and smiled at her. ~Phoenixes are bringers of life,~ he explained. ~And now, I have that power, too.~

She hugged him again, sobbing harder than ever. He closed his eyes, enjoying the moment. Their future together was looking bright.

~Thank you, Gideon,~ he said quietly. ~For everything. You saved a lot more than just my life.~

There was no response. He waited for what felt like an eternity. Slowly, it dawned on him: Gideon was gone.

His heart ached at this realization. The Phoenix had warned Aaron this would happen, but he had hoped it would take longer. He still had so much to ask the bird.

“Aaron?” Mary suddenly asked, sounding worried. “What’s wrong? You’re crying.”

He paused. He hadn’t even noticed the tears streaking from his eyes. ~I’ll tell you later.~ He pulled out of their embrace and looked back towards their house.

“Let’s go inside. You’re probably exhausted.”

Aaron nodded and took flight.

His life had changed so much, but on the inside, he was still the person he always was. Thanks to his efforts, he not only kept his family fed, but their entire village prospered for many years to come. He couldn’t be happier and lived for a very long time.