

She Fades with the Fire Birds

“It was said that the Birds had once been the chosen.”

"Chosen what?" asks Pillepae.

He looks up at me with his big brown eyes. I smile, laughing. How can I resist such a cute face, especially when he doesn't even reach my waist? He puts his small hands on my knee and says "Mama?"

“The chosen people Pillepae.”

"But birds are not people, Mama."

“Not like us, no, but the Giver of Life cherished them.”

"What happened to them?"

“Oh, look, there's a bird,” I exclaim softly pointing up into the tree.

And he looks up to see the little brown bird, a sparrow. Darling little thing; it flies so quickly. The sparrow comes down to the ground. Pillepae starts bopping up and down, his hands held up at his shoulders, and he takes some bread and tosses it to the bird. He is so eager that he scares the little bird away with his squeals.

“Pillepae,” I laugh to myself.

He turns to me, still beaming, "These birds, Mama?"

“No, they were great big birds, made like angels or fairies to fly light and free, and they soared in the skies ablaze with color!”

"Green?"

That is his favorite color.

“Reds, oranges, golds, yellows, and sometimes, glorious deep purples,” I say.

I try to smile and hope my son does not see the effort it suddenly takes.

Clavus comes from out of the house and hands me my glass. I take a sip but it tastes bitter. I must, however, drink it.

"Baba," Pillepae says, "do you know of the Great Birds?"

Clavus kneels down, his face coming closer. Oh! He is so beautiful to me; I want to rise, and go and hide my face in the house: To cry. To hide my tears... He puts a hand on his son's shoulder.

"Yes, I know of the Great Birds."

He sits down on the ground by my feet: there is only one chair out here. Clavus brings Pillepae onto his lap, and holds him. Pillepae is more calm, more of wonder now as the sparrow returns.

Father and son are quiet. Clavus says: "Shhh, we don't want to scare him."

I look at him, my love. He was my first love. He is my last love. He has a gentle face. Behind his large dark eyes, passion lies like a mystery breathing and beating beneath his skin. His face is shaven except for the mustache. When he is deep in thought he touches it, bringing his fingers around the smooth, dark hairs, and to the corner of his mouth, brushing up, then down, again and again, slowly--till he remembers not to and stops.

The gesture he did the other day ... month... year... hour... minute?

Time no longer matters...it does, and it fades like the Great Birds. I don't know when it was that he did this, but the memory is clear:

I was arranging flowers in a vase, feeling full of joy and expectation. Clavus came from the room off the hall, caressing his face, deep in thought.

"Aria, would you come here for a moment? I have something to tell you."

He then turned away from me and went into the day room. It was brightly lit as the day, and is always full of living green and blossoming plants.

I followed him down the hall, my joy and love...yes it was flowers, and the flowers had brought me joy. He had given me the flowers, a gift, for no reason but to give them.

I sat down on a couch across from him. We were still close enough; I could forward and touch his hands. He was framed by the window and green garden outside.

"Aria," he began as I sat down, "The Diviner has just left. He told me the results."

I looked at him. The concern on his face told me the rest. The joy, like the daylight does at sunset, faded, but with no glorious colorful display.

"Mama!" cried Pillepae, interrupting my thoughts, but that is good. There is no point in continually recalling that memory.

He points to the far end of the yard.

"A Crow," Clavus tells him softly.

I feel the bird. It gathers my attention to it. Power. Deep black, rich power in that bird--no, not evil black power, but color black, mysterious.

I feel it. And then...as it beats its wings and launches into the air, I feel how it goes. The jump of longing, the spirit in symphony with muscles, bones, feathers, blood, and air. The air in my own lungs and my spirit join in.

I wonder if it felt me take off with it? Like the Great Birds did once, or would have. The Fire Birds.

"Are the Great Birds as big as that?" Pillepae asks.

Clavus laughs, "No, they were huge!" he says and spreads his arms wide. "Huge!" He throws his open arms around his son, laughing. Pillepae squeals in delight.

"Where did they go? I've never seen one," he says after their antics.

"They..." I begin. "We will show you this evening, if they can be seen," I say.

"How about a dinner picnic on the hill?" Clavus suggests.

"Yay!" cries Pillepae and the sparrow that had been hopping closer and closer for the remaining crumbs flies away. We go inside to get ready.

I am in the kitchen, and I wrap the bread in paper. I place it on the table, and open the covered dish. There is still little enough meat, if I add some cheese and fruit with the bread I can provide a good meal. I put them into the basket. My hands begin to tremble as I remember why we are going to the hill and what we are going to try and make Pillepae understand.

Clavus comes in with the lamp, and puts it next to the basket. I cannot look at him, so turn and begin pouring juice into the flask, but I'm trembling. I feel the juice drop and flow down my hand. The juice is red like blood.

Clavus takes them from me and finishes pouring.

I turn away and dry my hands, looking out the window. I can't look at him. Red. The sky. The Great Birds were sometimes red.

He holds me from behind, and I turn and hug him.

"I love you," he says softly, gently, cautiously.

I release myself, and begin to cry. Everything is so measured. Everything is so careful, now.

"I wish he were wrong," I say to Clavus in his chest.

"Oh, Aria, so do I, but the Diviner knows his work. I..."

We hear Pillepae running down the hall.

"Baba! Baba! Mama! I found it!" he cries, and vaults into the kitchen. The picnic blanket is trailing behind him.

Clavus and I laugh.

Pillepae is beaming. He runs back to the door, blanket trailing behind him. It catches a chair. We both move for it, and Pillepae keeps running only jerks the blanket harder. Clavus catches the chair and rescues the chair and blanket. Smiling to me, he says sternly, "Pillepae! No running in the house, and pick up the blanket from the ground."

Pillepae looks surprised, but gathers it up to himself as he goes out the door.

"What if they're not there," I ask Clavus.

"Then we will only tell him about them. There are clouds out, though. There should be some sort of sunset."

As we walk, my breath comes deep and hard. I feel weak. Luckily Pillepae is big enough not to be carried and still young enough to get tired quickly. We can stop without getting him worried about me. I used to walk far without becoming so tired. I look at Clavus carrying the basket and lamp. I am carrying only the blanket.

He smiles over at Pillepae who is running about chasing a bee.

Once, when going to my mother's house because I was with child, Clavus had walked beside me on this same path, holding my hand, carrying my sack in the other. He had turned to me and said, "I'm going to miss you."

He had put down my sack and gathered my hands to his chest.

"I won't feel you hair here." He pressed my hands to his chest. "Or your hand at my breast when you lay your head on my shoulder and listen to my heart beat."

"No, Clavus, you won't, but I'll be back and lay my head here," I had said, placing my other hand on his right shoulder as I moved closer to kiss him.

I wonder if he is thinking that now, or trying not to, for this time I won't come back. Is he so earnest in watching Pillepae so he won't have to think about how I'll not be there?

It is two hours before sunset as we sit down on the hill, facing west under the only tree. Pillepae runs wild, looking at this creature or that mushroom. He even brings me an odd looking beetle, and Clavus has to divert him away from me. Pillepae does not understand that I do not appreciate insects as he does. Clavus can, and so listens to him. Then the bug flies away and Pillepae runs off again.

We sit here, I leaning against Clavus, smelling the clean air and him. It is so good to be beside him. His scent is like some subtle herb that a Diviner has burnt in a fire to hypnotize me and make me love Clavus. I drink in the way his heart beats, the deep murmur of his breath as he speaks.

"Aria!" he says, suddenly serious.

"What, Clavus?"

"I wish we were young again, no child. I'd take you right now, make love to you, show you how much I need you. ..."

He does not finish, but I can hear in his words and read in his eyes: "Maybe then you won't go away."

"But Clavus, I'm not old. The boundary lies only with our roaming child," I say caressing his thigh.

He bends his head down and kisses me passionately.

My own passion dances with his. Somehow matched together, understood by both of us: each other's passion. It is why I love him.

I do not tell him when he finishes the kiss that he has just given me what I need most: to feel wanted, needed...he has told me, showed me.

We sit together quietly a while, and watch Pillepae try to catch a rabbit. He laughs, humored by our son.

"I will have him to remind me," Clavus says.

"Of?"

"You. The dream we had of living a life together. The hope, the promise, the possibilities."

"To remind you that we did, Clavus," I say. "We did build a life together."

He holds me tighter.

Pillepae comes running back. "I'm hungry," he says.

I lean forward to the basket. "Let's eat," I say cheerily. Pillepae will sleep like a rock tonight, I think, and smile softly to myself.

"Where are the Great Birds?" he asks as he sits down with his sandwich.

I look up. There are a good many clouds, but not too many.

"They'll be here," I tell him and look down at him.

"Let me tell you about them," says Clavus.

"Mama! Mama! I want Mama to tell me," Pillepae cries.

"O.K., O.K."

I hesitate for a moment and then begin.

"The Great Birds, Fire Birds, once lived beyond the plains in great cliffs and mountains. They lived in great big caves. Each day their attendant, a young woman or man, would wake up and watch their eggs, and then they would go out and fly all day."

"Why?"

"Because of the joy in their hearts..."

"Why?"

"Of having life by the Giver of Life, that they had been created to experience the sonhood or daughterhood of the Lover of Life, Giver of Life."

"So they didn't do no work?" he asks, put out because Clavus works hard all day for us, and I work hard watching him and to keep us all clean, fed, and healthy.

"Oh, they did work," says Clavus.

"What kind?" Pillepae asks, looking up at us both.

"The old, or sick, or dying would go to them," I tell him.

"People?"

“Yes, you see, Pillepae, the Fire Birds were so close to the Giver of Life that they brought the people closer to the Giver so they might have new life. Sometimes the sick or thought to be dying came back.”

I pause for a moment, to try and think of how I would tell the rest.

"Then they didn't do a great job!" snorts Pillepae.

“What do you mean?” I ask, a little surprised at his anger.

"If the people only sometimes came back, then they didn't take the others to the Giver of Life!" he says rolling his eyes, angry.

"But no, Pillepae, that is exactly what they did, for all of those who didn't come back!" says Clavus.

Pillepae looks up at Clavus distrustfully.

“You see Pillepae,” I explain, “all who went to the Great Birds received the Gift of Life. It only didn't come out the way you think.”

I took him to me and pointed to the sunset.

We are fortunate, Clavus and I, for the sunset is beautiful. The clouds did look like great winged birds, Fire Birds, Great Birds.

"Those are the Great Birds," Clavus says gently.

Pillepae gazes in wonder.

"Those aren't birds," he says.

"No, not exactly," Clavus agrees, after looking at me for a moment, knowing that I could not speak.

"Things changed. The Great Birds died, but they were given new life," he said, "flying eternally, more ablaze than ever. When sun sets and day dies, the Birds fly too, with all those they carry to the Giver of Life."

“Pillepae,” I urged, “all who pass away fly with the Birds. They all join in the celebration of the Giver of Life. They are celebrating life. Only now they are closer to the Giver. The Birds were chosen. The Lover of Life chose to bring them even closer.”

"We may not see the Great Birds as we did the sparrow this morning, but...they have something else now, a life we do not know till we pass away."

Clavus adds.

“Or die,” I say gently.

Pillepae looks again towards the sunset, long and perhaps confused. Clavus and I are too tired and afraid to tell him more. We did not know when...

I look at the clouds and colors. The crows fly against the sky. I feel them soaring; this tremendous feeling of soaring.

What will it be like to be with the Great Birds?

I look at them, the man and the boy.

Pillepae rises from my lap and goes to his father.

I look at the clouds. They were fading.

I was fading.

And there is this tremendous soaring of the birds in the sky.

Clavus and Pillepae walk hand in hand up to the hill, alone. They stop and Clavus kneels beside his son beneath the lone tree.

"Baba, she's there?" Pillepae asks pointing at the colored clouds.

"In the sky?" Clavus asks startled out of his own sad thoughts.

"With the Fire Birds."

"Yes, with the Giver of Life, Lover of Life."

"When will she be back?"

Clavus pauses, and finally lets the tears quietly roll down his cheek. "She won't be back. Perhaps one day we will be with her."

"But we can see them every day?" Pillepae begs in hope.

"If the weather is nice." His words are gentle, honest.

"And the Birds will take care of her?"

"Yes, they will take her to the Giver of Life, who will hold her close."

Silently, Clavus held his son on a hillside where he had once held his wife, they watched the day and the Fire Birds fade away.