

Wings

by Vonda N. McIntyre

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Long after the last visitors had left the temple, after time had begun to pass almost unnoticed in a deep, unrippled stream, a shape appeared, far distant, unrecognizable through the thin-film watered-silk patterns of the auroras. It ignored the passages between the light-curtains, which led eventually, slowly, to the only structure on the hills, the only thing on which they could focus. As the shape pushed through the membranes, they roiled darkly, discolored, touching and attaching again. The keeper of the temple could follow the angry violet path of their healing, and his own wounds ached in sympathy. He hugged his long arms closer around his bony knees, and watched the approaching shape with great, reflective eyes, slowly blinking.

The keeper had been alone for so long that his isolation had become a habit; for a moment, he hoped the shape might be a wanderer, lost but needing to continue, so he could point it a direction and send it on its way. He could see, by then, that it was a person. Its progress was direct, purposeful. The keeper wondered how it had found its way, without following the labyrinth. The sky was obscured among the curtains.

He saw that it was tired. It neither faltered nor staggered, but came quite slowly. As it approached, the auroras seemed to impede it. It broke through the final veil, stumbled, fell against the low wall, reached to cross it, failed. The keeper could only see its hand, two black fingers and thumb, tips of silver claws, against gray stone.

He rose and limped across the courtyard, walking faster than when he wished to conceal the limp. A pulse beat in the wrist he touched, too slow, too weak. His hands lingered, touching delicate bones through thin bands of muscle and mole-smooth skin. He rediscovered the sensation of touch, the friction of fur as short as it can be against the same, the warmth of contact. It had been a long time since he had touched another person, even in greeting. His heartbeat quickened.

The thin shape breathed twice, shallowly, quickly, as he touched it. He saw the unnatural angles of its broken bones, and turned it over gently, caressing, so he could pick it up.

He drew back, guiltily. This person was a youth, barely a youth, one who had not yet made a decision.

His hands were more gentle as he picked the youth up-- gentle, as one carries a child.

He placed the youth on his own hard bed outside the temple. The collapse must have been from pain. The long third finger of the left hand was broken, and the wing it supported lay crumpled like a smashed ion sail. The keeper opened the dark wing, pulling long frail fingers away from the back of the arm where they had tried to fold. No bone had pierced the skin, nor were the soft membranes torn away or even cut. The wing might heal. The keeper set himself to straightening the bones.

He hoped that care would overcome lack of knowledge, and prevent the youth from being crippled. When he was almost finished, he realized he was being watched. He glanced up.

He managed not to look quickly away. The youth had pastel-green eyes that made his well-formed face ugly. The keeper looked back at the youth's broken wing, as if that were the natural thing to do. "I've done the best I could with thy hand," he said, speaking as one speaks to children and youths.

"I tried to fly over the auroras." The tone was defiant, proud, expecting castigation.

"That is dangerous," the keeper said mildly. Above the temple, the atmosphere was as confused as the

light-curtained passages.

"I hoped I would be killed."

"Deep despair for one so young."

"It's dying," the youth said. "Everything's dying."

The keeper saw that the youth was half-irrational from pain and exhaustion. "Sleep," he said.

"Don't you believe me? Didn't you know? You're supposed to be a seer."

"Thou art very cynical."

The youth did not answer, turned away, tried, clumsily, to flex the splinted wing.

"It is less solid than the earth," the keeper said. "Thou shouldst be gentle."

"Why did you help me? Why should you care?" the youth cried in confusion, hatred, grief.

"Go to sleep," the keeper said.

He moved inside the temple to perform his duties. They were few, and empty tradition. The god had departed, long before its last, ridiculed worshippers, as gods always do. The keeper knew that, and allowed himself no illusions about his status. It was his by chance and luck and response to pain, not divine gift. He poured libations to a memory, to a real god, the soul of unconscious things, not outgrown but driven away.

When he had finished his rituals, he returned to the youth, who slept the healing sleep. The keeper felt the throat-pulse and temperature and found neither sufficiently elevated. The precarious, rapid metabolism of their species had to accelerate when called on to heal. The keeper hunched down beside the bed, newly concerned. The youth's fine wide broken wing lay stretched open across the gray stone courtyard, useless as insulation, losing heat. The keeper did not stir for quite a long time. Finally he moved, painfully, and lay down on the narrow pallet. Quite chastely, and with some guilty reluctance, he enfolded the youth in his own one good wing. Then he, too, slept.

Much time had passed since anyone had come to induce prophecies, to wait as he hunched before the altar, sleep-watching, tranced. Now, lying beside the youth, he could feel a vision at the edge of his mind, but it was too distant and too weak to grasp. All the youth's resources were focused within; none were left for resonances. After exhausting himself struggling toward the vision in sleep, the keeper only dreamed. He awoke with memories of close, beckoning stars and high thin air, and a twisting sense of loss. He had dreamed of flying with his mate, so high that below them the earth curved away, yellow and brown and white-wisped with clouds. The sky was purple and gold in the daytime, shading to pale blue on the horizons, black and silver at night. He had loved his mate, but she was dead, and he had loved the night, but it was beyond his reach.

The keeper lay still, unwilling to move and renew his pain. But he must; his own warmth had helped a little, but the youth's body needed food to maintain itself.

The keeper's supplies were not well suited to providing sufficient energy. No one brought meat anymore, and he could not hunt. He was crippled, fit only to serve an abandoned god. He lifted his wing, folded it silently, and rose, to prepare seed paste and broth. He moved slowly, masking pain with caution, and the appearance of grace. Before, when people had come, his manner toward them had been equally graceful, and the children had lost their reticence after only a little while. The adults preferred to pretend apprehension and fear, for they came to the temple to keep their excitement high, to combat impatience, as they would glide over a live volcano or chase a whirlwind. Sometimes the fear could be real. If they stayed long enough, he might tell them their deaths with enigmatic visions they would not recognize until they were imminent. That was the way of seers. But the people were gone; they did not need him anymore. They had not really needed him for a long time, and perhaps they had never needed him at all.

The keeper carried the broth outside and held the shallow bowl to the youth's lips. The youth, half-awake, eyes half-open, seemed not to notice the vegetable taste. The keeper felt the thin tight muscles and smooth skin against his supporting hand, but at the same time saw the ugly eyes again. They were like the soft jellied plants or creatures that grew in the dark, and died in the sunlight. He envied the youth's wings, but pitied the eyes. His patient could never fly much higher than the clouds without going blind.

The youth muttered incomprehensibly and flailed at the keeper's hand so the nearly empty bowl clattered across the Stone paving. The keeper sat back on his heels, but the youth was asleep again. After a little while, the keeper lay down on the pallet again and opened his good wing. He slid his hand across the youth's chest, slowly, gently, following sharp lines of ribs, soft skin. The youth shifted. Suddenly guilty, the keeper clenched his touching-fingers into a fist, and lay rigid.

* * *

Among the auroras, one day was indistinguishable from the next. The curtains of light screened out the sun and brightened the darkness. Without darkness or light as a rough guide, the keeper had no idea how long the youth slept. He only knew that his time became more difficult. He could not avoid touching the youth, who needed to be fed and kept warm and clean, and whose wing's tendons and muscles would contract without massage. He worked hard over the youth, trying to ignore his feelings, trying to control them.

Yet, who would know if he drew his hands along the thin body, half-extended the short silver talons, drew narrow lines of love against the skin? He could embrace the sleeper, extending both his wings, and no one would pull away at the rough contact of tattered webbing. Children fondled and explored each other's androgynous genitals-- why should he restrain himself? Whispered words might influence a decision yet to be made, words and the persuasion of experienced hands, even through sleep. And if the youth awakened, what right could anyone so ugly have to object? Who else but a cripple would take such a mate? Who was left to care?

He opened his eyes against his fantasies, and felt ashamed. The auroras-- his pride, his prison-- throbbed just beyond the low stone wall.

When he felt most cynical and most alone, he sometimes calmed himself with assurances that he was the most worthy of his people, strong enough (for was he not alive?) to afford kindness and even mercy. Yet of the few crimes his people recognized, the action he contemplated now was the worst.

He had been lonely for a long time. He had understood his solitude, but never accepted it. He was a proud thing, despite his wounds. He might have been bitter and cruel, or vain and futile, but he had even been too proud for that, too proud to allow despair to change him even when there was no one left to see. Now he began to fear that his strength and pride were near exhausted. Attracted, despite the ugliness of the pastel eyes, the keeper could feel himself falling in love. He forced himself to begin thinking of the youth in the masculine. When the youth... when *he* awoke, that could be even more influencing than treating him as sexed while he was asleep, but his awakening would force the keeper away from his fantasies.

And perhaps the youth would approach him, in the way that was right and proper, and then the fantasies would no longer be needed.

* * *

He knew the bones had knit, well or badly, when the youth's temperature sank toward normal even while he covered him. He folded his wing and rolled away, unwilling to be so near when the youth awoke. He got up, slowly, and limped into the temple.

Later, finishing his duties before the ancient altar, he heard a stirring outside.

The youth, awake, was pulling at the splint. The keeper squatted down beside him and pushed his hand away.

"I'm healed, aren't I? Or I wouldn't have woken up."

The keeper, in his fantasies, had forgotten or discounted the youth's hostility; he was taken aback by it now. "I hope that thou art healed," he said evenly. He removed the splint and gently stretched the wing. The web was soft, and cool. It was almost as hard to take his hands away, even though the youth was awake. The line of the bone was clean, sharp under skin, light. The bone was unscarred, still hollow. "Thou must move it several days before requiring it to bear thy weight."

The youth touched the break with his other hand, stood, and opened his wings to their wide full span, reaching. He smiled, but the keeper could detect a slight sag in his wing, a weakening of unused muscles, a contraction of tendons. "I think thou wilt fly again," he said, and it was the truth.

The youth suddenly dropped his wings, staggering, smile gone, weakened by his mild exertion so soon after awakening. All his bones protruded; his body had half-starved itself, and would need time to recover. The keeper reached up, steadied him, but the youth winced when the flap of wing that did not fold brushed against him. The keeper glanced up; after meeting his gaze, the youth looked away.

"We should, perhaps, be tolerant of each other's weaknesses," the keeper said, cruelly, hurt.

"Why? Nothing forced you to help me. I don't owe you anything."

The keeper levered himself to his feet, walked a few steps, stopped. "No," he said. "I could have let thee heal with thy bones twisted." He heard the sweep of wings opening slowly, wing tips brushing the ground.

"I would have died," the youth said, as if he had committed some crime by living.

"So they thought of me," the keeper said, facing him, "when they left me on the hunting plain for the scavengers."

The youth said nothing for a time. The keeper wondered how he had survived infancy: someone must have cared a great deal, or no one had cared at all. He must have been fiercely protected or virtually ignored until his sentience awoke and he was too old to expose. Letting him die would have been kinder than leaving him to live as an outcast.

"And they left you here. Why do you help, instead of hating?"

"Perhaps I'm weak, and cannot stand the sight of pain." The youth glanced up, purposely looking straight at the keeper's eyes, holding his own gaze steady. His expression was quizzical. They both knew the keeper would never have lived if he had been weak. It was the youth who looked away first, perhaps from a habit of hiding his eyes so people would tolerate him.

The youth opened his wing, one long finger at a time. The webbing was so smooth, so glossy, that the auroras reflected off it, scarlet and yellow, like flames. "It hurts," he said.

"Still, thou must move it. It may help if I aid thee in stretching it." He opened his own broken wing a little, showing the bones pulled out of shape by shortened tendons. "I knew what should have been done while I slept."

The youth looked at the wing for a long moment, fascinated, horrified. "Please fold it."

The keeper pulled his fingers against the back of his arm, bending his elbow so they would fit. The torn flap hung loose.

"I'm sorry."

"Never mind."

* * *

Their conversations were crystalline. The keeper would have preferred to cease touching the youth completely, but he needed to help with the wing, and he refused to allow himself to take out his disappointment on a person. He had hoped his own deformities might cease to matter; that they did not was hardly the youth's fault. The revulsion in him was perhaps less than in others, and perhaps growing weaker, but still present, undeniable, unavoidable.

The keeper began to believe that he himself might as well have died. He had been strong enough to break his fall, strong enough to crawl under a thorn bush away from scavengers, strong enough to sleep eleven days and live. He remembered waking up, peering out through barbed twisting branches at the people hunched watching him and listening to his prophetic mutterings. One held laths and another funeral veils, waiting to brace his wings open and launch him if he died. Even then, with his skin stretched taut over his starved bones, he had been strong enough to crawl toward them, to make a purposeful move to tell them that he would live, that they could rightly help him and take him as their seer. But he was not strong enough for this loneliness and desertion.

* * *

A shrill squeal roused him from a doze, leaving him half-awake, confused, exhausted. He heard another sound, a cry abruptly cut off. He folded his wings and moved into the courtyard.

He found the youth sitting against the wall of the temple, sucking the neck vein of a rabbit-deer so freshly dead that one hind foot still trembled in a muscle spasm. "Where didst thou get that? Animals never come past the auroras."

The youth began, delicately, to pull the small animal apart at the major joints. "Maybe it thought you'd tell it its future." He extended his silver claws and began to shred the meat from a narrow bone.

"I do not mock thee."

The youth worried the carcass with his hands for a time. He looked up, and the auroras caught his eyes and brightened them horribly. "Didn't you hate them when you realized they were going to leave you behind? Didn't you want to slash them and tear them and demand what right they had to pretend you didn't matter?"

After a moment, the keeper said, "I grieved."

He had walked into the temple and stood near the back wall, before the stone figure that was crumbling with age and neglect. The keeper was the first in centuries to offer it anything even resembling belief. Slowly, painfully, he had relaxed his wing-fingers, until the scarred membranes lay half-folded around him. "Why did they help me?" he had cried. "If they did not need an oracle, why did they help me, and if they needed one, why did they leave me behind?" But the old god had made no answer, for if the keeper's belief were real, it had not been enough to call the god back.

"I grieved," the keeper said again.

He expected disdain, but the youth looked down and stroked the stained pelt of the rabbit-deer. "Our world is grieving, too," he said softly. "They stole the spirit out of it, and sucked all the life away. All our people ever did was try to escape it, yet it mourns."

The keeper touched his shoulder, gently. "It must seem lonely to thee. But in time-- "

The youth made a sound of disgust. "There isn't any time. I hope... I hope they have to turn back. I hope they have to come running back to this world they loathed, because they'll find it dead and wasted and unfit to sustain them, and they'll die."

"There will be no turning back in this generation. I dreamed the deaths of some of those who left, and there will be no disaster. The ships will continue, at least through our lifetimes."

The youth stood up, walked a few steps, taut-muscled, angry, spread his wings, allowed the tips to dust the stones. His claws were still bloody. "You'd have everyone substitute your fantasies for their own."

"They are all I have to offer, anymore."

"But they weren't enough for our people, and all you do is grieve." The youth turned and folded his wings against his arms with that graceful smooth snap. "Something will happen, someday, and they'll have to return. They'll spread the sails and catch the rays of some distant sun, and they'll feel grateful that they have some place to come home to. But they never bothered to look at it, they only cared about ways to leave it. So now it's dying, and when they crawl back there won't be anything left."

The keeper realized what the youth was saying. "Thou must have had delusions in thy sorrow and pain," he said. "A world cannot die."

The youth glared at him, and his gaze did not shift, as if in anger he could forget his shame. "This world is dying. If you would sleep and attune yourself to it, the way you did for people, you'd see it. Or come outside your prison and look around."

"I never leave the temple grounds."

The youth closed his eyes, resigned. "Then sit and wait, until the auroras die too." He left the keeper alone, and walked away with the tips of his beautiful wings trailing in the dust.

The keeper wanted to dismiss the youth as unbalanced, but nothing was that easy. It was true that their people had cared more for the sky and the nearby stars than for the world they rested on. It was only natural that this be so for a people who could soar so high that the ground curved away below them,

admitting without defense its smallness and insignificance. Only natural for a people whose children make toy gliders with lifting wings by instinct. The stars were so close, they hung in the sky calling, hypnotic. The keeper and his mate, in their ion boat, sailing past the bay between the world and its moon, had navigated by sight and feel alone. And he had seen the ion ships, when the idea was still a fancy, in visions. Before the first was even finished, he had seen the thousand of them, carrying all the people, spread their huge sails and catch the sun's rays and begin to move, very, very slowly, toward a star the passengers already knew had planets they could touch their feet to and leave again.

His people had known much of stars. But he could not say that the world was not dying.

After a little while, he stood up slowly and went to find the youth. "What dost thou mean to do?"

He reached down and picked up a small stone. "What is there to do? I almost wish you had let me die." He hefted the pebble, as if he would throw it into the auroras. The keeper flinched, and saw him hesitate. He thought he would still throw it, but the youth lowered his hand and tossed the pebble back to the ground. "If I knew what to do, I'd do nothing."

"There are still people-- "

"You and I may be the last, for all I know. Maybe all the others have killed themselves. I'd have it lonely to deny the rest a sanctuary."

"Must we both be lonely?"

The youth turned his back, hunched his shoulders. The keeper thought he was offended by the implication. "I meant no impropriety-- "

"Traditions are as dead as the god in your temple." He shrugged his wings. "You would have me stay."

"I would ask nothing."

"You'd hope."

"One cannot control one's dreams."

"I'll stay for a while."

* * *

Later the keeper slept, alone in the close and oppressive darkness of the temple. He expected a vision of the youth, alone in some future that did not include the keeper. He had never seen any part of his own destiny in his prophecies; that made him strangely afraid that no one could ever stay with him. He did not believe he could influence the future. Perhaps the future must influence him.

He saw his world, for the first time since he had come to the temple, and he saw that the youth had been right. Skeletons of rabbit-deer lay scattered on the hunting plain, and the vines that climbed the rock pinnacles of nests shriveled and died. Even the thorn bushes, which could grow where nothing else lived, dried, crumbled, burned. The death of their world would be slow, but the places he saw, deserted, were dying. He could not truly tell, but he thought he would die first. His visions had never frightened him before; now he came out of sleep screaming.

Soft wings rustled beside him. "Did you dream?"

"I did as thou asked," the keeper whispered, lying very still.

"And I was right."

"Yes."

"Is anyone else alive?" In the darkness, the young voice was fervent.

"I saw no one," the keeper said.

"Ah," the youth said, satisfied.

"I am not omniscient."

"You'd see what's important."

"Other people were left."

"They had nothing to keep them alive. Not your strength, nor my hate."

"Thou hast made us too unique."

"I hope not," the youth said. "I think your vision was right, and your hopes are wrong."

The keeper sat up, unwilling to sleep again. "I will never know."

"It would hurt you to know that truth." The tone held compassion that sounded strange after the exultation in death, but the keeper was grateful for it. He watched the shadow of the youth move across the stone floor to the entrance and stand in the wavering light. He rose and followed him, stopping close behind him in his shadow. The youth began to talk, slowly, tentatively. "When the last of them left, I followed them as far as I could, until the sun was so bright I thought I'd go blind... I couldn't see them, but I don't think any of them looked back."

"They did not," the keeper said, and the other did not question his knowledge. "It isn't the character of our people to look back. I think they'll never need to."

"And if they don't-- my determination is foolish?"

The keeper spoke very cautiously, afraid to go too far. "Perhaps. Or futile. Thou wouldst deny thyself rather than them."

"I will... think about that."

Behind him, the keeper nodded to himself. "Wouldst thou eat?"

"All right."

* * *

The youth had not noticed the food while he was sleeping, but awake he had found it less than pleasing. "I'll go out and hunt as soon as I can fly again," he said.

"I'm used to this. The auroras make a long path for thee to walk."

"It's better than staying here."

"I'm used to that, too. But hunt, if that is thy wish."

"Soon?"

"Yes. It is almost ready."

"It's still stiff."

"Thou must stop favoring it." He sipped at his broth. "I will massage it again."

The touching was very much like the motions of love. The keeper could not remember touching any person before this youth since the night his mate had died. They had been flying. She was aged, but still beautiful, and she had decided to die.

It was the way of things. He had chosen her, and made his decision by his bond to her, when she was adult and he, not yet "he," was youth. Half a lifetime before, she, not yet "she," had courted and had bonded with another male, and in time he had aged and died.

Now, she did not wish to grow helpless. She would do what their people had always done, and forever would do, when it was time to die. And he would accept her decision, and carry her veils, as the mates of aging ones always had, and always would. Their children, one youth, one newly adult, bade her farewell. There would have been three, but their second was born with a twisted wing, so they had exposed it.

They flew together for a long time. No clouds obstructed their view of the hunting plain. Had they been hungry they could have feasted on warm meat and fresh blood, but this last night together they did not hunt. They drank thick salty wine and soared higher, giddy. She brushed her wingtip against his cheek, dropped back and down and caressed his chest and belly. She laughed, and made lewd and joyous remarks about whoever would become the next member of their long marriage line. She wished him happiness, and pulled a silver veil from his ankle band. He garlanded her with others. Defying her infirmities, she flew higher. He followed her, feeling the air grow thinner, dangerous, and suddenly cried out in ecstasy.

He had never flown so high. He had heard about this from others, but no one could ever have seen, before, the colors behind his eyes. In reflex, his pupils contracted to pinpoints. He strained upward. His mate cried out to him, "Do you see?" and he called, "I see!" and she said, very softly, it seemed, "Be careful, my love, for I am blind." He looked toward her voice. Very dimly he could see her, tiny, higher than she had ever gone before, higher than he had ever seen anyone fly, wide-eyed against the radiation,

the veils seeming only to drift beside her. He saw her wings begin to stiffen, and he knew that she was dead.

As another shower of subatomic particles exploded themselves in his eyes, brighter than any spark through the shielding of their ion boat, he realized he had flown past his wings' ability to carry him, and he felt himself begin to fall.

When his struggle against the vertical wind ripped his wing, perhaps he should have allowed himself to die. Fighting, he slowed his fall, but in the end the earth had grasped and shattered him.

"Keeper-- "

The word, and a touch on his hand, brought him back. He glanced up, startled. The youth's face showed apprehension, irresolution. He drew in his wing-fingers, folding the smooth membrane. "It's not stiff anymore."

"I was remembering," the keeper said. "Thy words gave me hope, and I... I am sorry-- "

"It doesn't matter." He let his touching fingers and half-exposed talons linger on the keeper's hand. "Nothing should be forced to die twice," he said. "If we continued our people, the world would kill our children, or the children would kill the world again."

"Thou art not fair," the keeper said. "Some expression of my memory has frightened thee, but I asked for nothing."

"It's true that I'm frightened." He touched the keeper's throat, slid his hand to his shoulder, down his arm, back along the wing-fingers, and this time he didn't wince. "Of your kindness and your strength."

"I do not understand thee."

"I'd change for you, I think."

The keeper sat back, reluctantly, away from the youth's hands. "Then thou wilt leave?"

"I must."

The auroras led the youth on a long, twisting, directionless path to the hills. Outside, the thorn bushes should have been flowering. The youth stood at the edge of the temple's guardians and looked out over the land, at the brown and black thickets of twisted, dying branches. The wind blew hot against his body, and nothing moved as far as he could see. He felt death, and with it an ugly triumph that had ceased to give him pleasure. He glanced back, and almost turned, but reached high instead and snapped open his wings. The wind caught the webbing. He could feel the place where his bones had broken, and hesitated.

Disgusted by his fear, he launched himself from the top of the hill, slipped sideways in a current, angled up, and flew.

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After the youth left, time passed strangely; it might have been a long or a short time later that the old breaks in the keeper's bones began to ache constantly. He had begun to age, and once aging started in his people, it progressed rapidly. His sharp sight began to dim. Only cowards and weaklings lived long enough to go blind naturally. He knew he should allow himself to live no longer, but still he did nothing. He did not wish to die on the earth, and he dreamed of dying properly, radiation-blind, flying.

He felt gentle hands that roused him from a doze, or perhaps it was all a dream.

"Keeper, I am back."

He raised his head and looked calmly into a face made ugly by its eyes. "It is thou."

"No more," he said. "Not 'thou' for a long time."

The keeper seemed not to hear. "Hast thou seen everything die, then?"

The other supported him, and he smelled fresh blood. "No. You were right. There are others. Around them, the earth lives." He held the warm body of a small animal to the keeper's lips. "Drink it," he said. "Last time I was selfish."

Blood ran hot in the keeper's throat; he had almost forgotten the hunt. "Why art thou here?"

"For the same reason I left."

"How long has it been?"

"A year."

"Ah." Dark eyelids closed over darker eyes, tired. "It seemed longer."

"It seemed very short, to me."

The keeper did not speak or move for a long time. "I am dying. Will you carry my veils?"

He saw that the old one, half-dreaming, thought he could still fly. "I will. The stars will touch you." He gently lowered him. "I'll build you a glider, keeper," he whispered. He lay down beside him to wait, and opened his wing across him. He hoped the keeper could still feel it, and know the presence of one who loved him.

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