

ARAS - THE EAGLE From "Dainavos Šalies Senų Žmonių Padavimai"

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Far, far away, where the sun rises, there is a mountainous land. Its mountains are so high that none of our people have seen such even in their dreams, mountains on whose slopes no man ever walked, no animal ever paced, no bird ever flew. Only the free eagles had their aeries, and nested there.

In a rocky hollow amid those high mountain tops that served as an aerie grew a young eagle. When he was very young and his wings weak and still bare of feathers, before he could rise and careen through the vast arena of the blue sky, higher than the highest mountains where the strongest eagles soared, he was wont to think to himself:

"When I am big and strong, I too, like the older eagles will soar high."

Thinking thus the eaglet rejoiced he was an eagle, and anxiously awaited the time when he would fly high beyond human sight, where ordinary birds could not attain.

The days passed; the eaglet's wings strengthened, and he did fly beneath the blue sky, where only the big and strong eagles flew. But the eagle did not rejoice in the fact that he could fly high into the blue. Often, perched on some hoary mountain top, preening his mighty wings, and turning beneath the azure sky, as the sun traveled its westward course, he was wont to think:

"When I get stronger and accustomed to higher flight as are the older eagles, I will rise still higher, to a height no eagle yet has reached, where no eagle has yet soared. I will find the path from earth to heaven. Then all will praise and acclaim me, that never yet has there been such an eagle, that could fly so high, so much higher than any eagle has flown, and that has found the path from earth to heaven. And all living things will come to ask me to show them that path."

Thus did he commune with himself, and so thinking he chuckled happily, feeling strength growing in his breast, and fearlessness in his heart. Aye, there was nothing in the world that this eagle would not undertake, this eagle of eagles!

Among the mountains where the eagle lived, there was one mountain higher than the other mountains. This mountain among mountains was like the eagle among eagles.

While the mountains were plain and serene and in shadow, his snowy top still shone brightly as the sun's rays sank in the vast soft west. Not the smallest cloud nor the slightest mist was on the crest, and the other mountains slept far below, hidden in dales, or, covered with trees, were at rest and peaceful — but when the high top became overcast, when veiled in mist and lanced with lightning — then tumultuous became the scene, terrible the mountains. The tempests wakened, and thunderingly chased away the mists from the mountain tops: the storm gods rode the gales, and all fled before them. Frightened people sought shelter; and animals ran for cover and birds hid. The sky was darkened, and the storm, born among the high mountain tops, roaring and devastating all before it, broke forth from the narrow mountain passes into the wide, smooth plains, where it found room to roar and expand.

This was the mountain top selected by the eagle as his abode, and there his wide wings darkened the eternal snow as he soared in the rays of the sun. And the mountain was angered: its forehead furrowed, its glittering face became

overshadowed. No sooner did it become overcast than the tempest woke, there was great tumult and the eagle's path was dark with mist; so that he could not fly as high; no shadow cast his wings, so that he could not darken the sun, and his pride in achievement was lost.

"Oh hide thee, eagle, where no storm rages, where no rain falls, where no tempest affrights. The mountain is angry. He sends forth the avenging storm. Hide thee eagle, and find for thyself shelter. Behold, all other eagles have taken refuge."

Majestic was the eagle, he did not fear the storm. His heart had long sought battle but found no opponent. He spread his mighty wings and flew where the waves roared, where the storm howled and snarled, so that he could wrestle with the tempest, the tempest armed with lightning and in league with the thunder.

"Oh, eagle, ruler of the long winged ones! Hard and furious is thy battle. The tempest plucks thy feathers, the billows thy wings break, the rains will beat thee down." And the storm carried the eagle perforce, against its will, carried it over vast plains, where it would do its will unhampered.

Violently and long the tempest raged — out far, over the fields, seas and forests it flew carrying the eagle. Oh! Far from the high mountains was the eagle carried, far beyond where people lived. The eagle, blown and buffeted, became fatigued and descended to the ground for rest. A net was at the place; he was entangled and was caught, and his captors placed him in a large and beautiful queen bee's cell. (The cell held many other birds — tame and wild. There were thrushes, hens, geese and turkeys).

And this bee-cell, with the many birds, was placed in the most convenient and beautiful place. The people rejoiced that they had captured an eagle, the eagle of eagles. And they fed him with the choicest foods and to drink they provided the coolest and most refreshing spring water. But the eagle refused it all, beating itself against the cell wall. With his talons he tried the bars, snapping and beating his wings.

The eagle severely injured itself, and still would not desist; his beak was split, his talons torn, blood flowed from his wounded breast and his wings were bruised and mangled, yet he still tried to free himself. For no eagle could be anything but free; confinement or servitude is not for them — death comes first and is preferable.

The gawking fowls wondered seeing that men tried to conciliate and humor the eagle, and at its indifference. They were amazed and could not understand.

"How ungrateful!" said the thrush. "If people only treated me as they do the eagle, I would sing to them day and night."

"What ails him?" asked a duck. "They feed him with the best there is, whatever heart could desire. If he were not so proud, they would not, even keep him confined. So what if he lived in the mountains, are things there better? Could he find as dainty food there?"

"Everything is better where one longs to be," interjected the cock. "But what can he do now, crippled and injured as he is?"

"Ga-ga-ga! What can he want! What could he find yonder neath those cold skies? Puddles such as we have here are not common in the hills. My sisters under the skin who do not belong to these parts, come from far away for the mere pleasure of wading in our marshes," commented the duck.

"They say that the mountains are cold and that eternal snow reigns there," said the swallow as it flitted by. (Swallows travel far and see much.).

"Of what can he be so proud, what can he boast of?" asked the turkey. "If he only had a beak like mine, to say nothing of my other attractions."

"Or a tail such as mine," interrupted the peacock. "Or spurs. Well, his talons are nothing to brag about, my own are no worse. And no one hears me bragging about my crest. Though I have a good reason to."

"Neither can he crow 'ku-kere-ku'," said the cock.

"Certainly no, most certainly not," hastened to aver the hens as they looked proudly at the cock.

"A crest! Do you call that a crest? Singing? Do you call that singing? Suppose you could quack as well as I do. Perhaps your neck is as graceful as mine?" ironically commented the drake, and from the ducks in the drake's retinue went up the shout, "The truth is indeed with you."

"Nonsense! If you are better, the people would feed you better. Take my case: they even feed me milk!" Proudly the turkey raised himself, shaking its wattles and spreading its tail. "Even the dog fears me. I am braver and more daring than any of you!"

And the imprisoned fowl begun to argue and quarrel, and they probably would have begun a fight, when their keeper came with food. At once they all forgot their quarrel and ran to get the grain. But, being fed, they again gathered about the eagle's cell, and criticized him for being egoistic and for his unseemly pride.

But he did not hear them; he paid no attention to the food, nor drank water. He was sick unto death, both in body and spirit; his strength had left him. In a corner he perched, brooding, blood flowing from his injured breast, and then he died! When freedom ends, then dies the soul. The world knows that the eagle is born free, and he will die before submitting to bondage. His lifeless body can be imprisoned, but not his spirit: that can never be degraded, his dignity never lowered.

The eagle died thinking only of his mountains, and of the sun, while ye, geese that ye are, derided and ranted. Know he did not even know you were there, pitiful slaves to custom and opportunity.

Oh, ye men, ye evil men, why did ye slay the eagle? No eagle will be servile, even if caged with golden bars, and fed the food of the gods, his spirit is above all.

O men, you have slain the eagle, the eagle of eagles.