

Whiterock by Hal Aetus

Whiterock
The Gilded Banner
By Hal Aetus

Chapters 6-10
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Chapter 6: Whiterock

The coastal mountains gave way to graceful slopes of grass and flowers. They flowed downward and outward like a giant soft cloak before abruptly dropping into the sea. Capping one prominent bluff were tall mounds that at first appeared to be stone. But they were regularly spaced, laid out in a grid-like pattern with oddly symmetrical clefts of vegetation between. Their stone-like substance was bleached and crumbling in a manner not like stony cliffs that Tristan had ever seen. They were honeycombed with regularly spaced square holes and some had gaping holes with skeletons of rusted metal bones exposed to the elements. Their bases were mounded with accumulated debris and draped with green brush, vines, grass, and trees. In fact, vegetation was growing on any level surface that was not occupied by birds. Some of the structures at the cliff's edge had completely toppled over in huge slabs revealing hollow interiors. What appeared to Tristan as ropes or vines of various colors dangled from their broken shells and rusted pipes angled and sagged with red streaks of corrosion.

Below the crumbled buildings were brilliant green shrubs feathering the brows of pale cliffs that shown brilliant white in the afternoon sun. Below that was the frothy edge of the sea. The waters were deep, dark blue and stretched off to a hazy infinity.

Thousands of seabirds reeled and darted above the town,

coming and going from every direction. The raucous of their calls could be heard from a great distance as Pepero, Tristan, and Nyx approached from the west. The three circled high above the town and Tristan could see another layer to the complexity of the odd stone structures.

They were caked with thousands of smaller bird-made structures of wood, pebble, glass, and shell cemented together with ash and mud. Tristan recognized the substance as bird cement for he had seen it used in Galinta. The bird dwellings were irregular and most had a roundness to their openings and overall shape that contrasted with the regularity of the squarish caves they occupied. A mixture of three forces were at work here: The haste of avian carpentry, the slow processes of geological renewal, and something else in between that seemed to be contrary to the forces of nature. The mounds weren't bird-made but they were clearly not crafted by nature.

Tristan had heard of enormous pre-historic cities occupied by unfeathered creatures who nonetheless walked on two legs. They were called 'humans' and had something to do with the Awakening. But Tristan hadn't learned that one could still see these cities.

Tristan circled up close to Nyx and nodded at the ruins. "Was this a human city?"

Nyx chirped out "Yes! One of the few with anything still standing." She tipped her right wing and pointed at a cluster of

the tallest ruins. "That's the heart of Whiterock, called Hightown. Down in those canyons between the ruins are all sorts of merchants, cachers, prey sellers, crafters. You can find most anything here. The classy birds live in the tops of the ruins."

Tristan stared down at it and saw faintly, in the grasses and vegetation patterns that radiated outward from the mounds, that there must have been more of the mounds at one time. Faint lines reached out for miles up and down the coast.

As the trio glided out over the cliffs they could see that below the densest part of the town were layers of caves and platforms and connected perchways attached directly to the face of the cliffs.

Nyx called out, "That's Lowtown. It's a busy place since it's where most of the sea trade happens. Birds come from all over the sea to trade for goods from Volatalia. If your gold seller is an albatross, that's probably where he'll be. It's full of drunken birds, mating parlors, and scumbags. Birds with nothing in mind but their own pleasure. You can't trust any of them. We'll have to stick together and be careful."

The wind shifted and an updraft of cool air, rich with the smell of guano and sea life spilled through their feathers.

"Oh my!" Tristan staggered in midflight with an unpleasant expression. He gagged a bit but tried to hide it from Pepro. Nyx saw it and chortled a bit of laughter. "Is that the smell of the sea, Pepro?"

"It is indeed!" Pepero replied, closing his eyes and inhaling deeply. "Awesome, isn't it? Makes me hungry."

Nyx called out, "You said you were going to the Avian Haven? Follow me!" Nyx pulled her wings in close and dropped like a stone.

"Wait!" said Pepero and Tristan in unison, trying to mimic her maneuver. But it was no use, a falcon is built for steep dives, "stooping" as it's called. Nyx grinned big and pushed out her wings and feet a little to slow her plummeting body and allow the others to catch up.

They slipped down towards Hightown, angling towards a ruin of medium height. The base of the building sloped out in mounds of soil green with grass and moss spattered with bird droppings. The walls were made of weathered brick with dozens of square windows that had no glass. On the side facing the ocean, each window had a wooden platform that protruded slightly from the building. The platforms edged back into the windows and were encased at their backs by rounded walls of bird cement and each one had an arched, curtained opening.

One of the openings, near the top of the building, had a flag hanging from its end, lofting in the wind. It was blue with a white star. Two Stellar's sea eagles stood on each side of the opening wearing armor exactly like that which King Vasili's party was wearing at Kor's shop.

Tristan looked at Pepero. "Look! King Vasili himself must be

here!"

Nyx screeched back to them. "A lot of important birds stay here. It's a classy place."

At the very top was a terrace of brick with marble columns. A flag draped down against the wall below the terrace and it bore the black silhouette of a branching tree and crescent moon against a blue background.

The trio fluttered to a stop on the edge of the terrace. An immaculate ring-billed gull was loafing on a black stone. It regarded them momentarily before lazily closing its golden eyes. A crow was hopping, studying the ground with a beak full of stray feathers. The platform was spotless. Soft curtains of silky blue fabric hung down on either side of an arched doorway.

After taking it all in, the three glanced at each other, wondering who would speak first.

Pepro spoke up. "This place... is amazing! Thanks, Nyx. Even with my sharp eyes, it would've taken us a while to find this. What do ya think, Tristan? Should we go see if Penelope is home?"

"That's 'Miss Penelope' if you please!" came a smooth nasally call from within the parlor. The curtains parted and well-groomed magpie strolled out to meet them. Her beak was glossy, smeared with fine oil to make it shine. Her eyelashes were longer than usual and her breast was round and plump. She swaggered her breast and tail as she waltzed out onto the porch

to study her visitors. With narrow sparkling eyes she looked them up and down.

"Miss Penelope!" said Nyx bowing her head slightly. "I am Nyx of Waycliffs. It's a pleasure to see you!"

Penelope flickered her third eyelid and made a pleasant trill. "Ah yes, so nice to have you here. I've not seen you in, what, 3, 4 winters?"

"That's right! Four winters ago when I accompanied my parents to the Council."

"Oooh yes. How are your parents, dear?"

"They are well, very well, still watching over Waycliffs. They send their love."

"Ohh ho ho! Do tell them to come again when you see them. They are always welcome here. And please do introduce me to your strapping young friends here."

Nyx tilted her beak towards Pepro. "This is Pepro, an old friend from Waycliffs. And his companion is Tristan. They are visiting from Gallinta to do some business."

Pepro and Tristan bowed deeply. "Pleased to meet you Miss!"

"Oh from Gallinta are you? Oh, ho, ho, myyy. How is old Kory?"

Pepro stammered. "Uh, um, you mean Kor, ma'am?"

Penelope smiled and fluttered her third eyelids again. "Yes! Yes! Apologize for the familiar expression, but he is such a dear friend."

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Tristan stifled a giggle.

Pepro replied, "Kor, our master, sends his best. He spoke very highly of you and I can see why."

Penelope fanned her tail and shivered her wings with delight. "Ohh myyy! He always made me melt like a lass in her first spring of courtship!" She clucked with laughter and fanned herself with a wing as she turned towards the parlor door.

"Please do come inside! I want to hear all about your adventure and all about dear Kory. Miss Schreider! Oh Miss Schreider! Tea and treats for four, right away!"

"Yes, madam!" came a flat metallic reply from another magpie within.

The three walked in through the curtains and gaped at what they saw. There was a long mirror across the back wall and crystals hanging in chains across the high, white-painted ceiling. There were candles in the center of each wall with crystal glass lanterns around them that diffused the light elegantly. A round, polished dark table stood to the left of the doorway and an open window above it afforded a view of the sea. Surrounding this was a circular red-upholstered perch. Soon a slim magpie walked in from a side room carrying a basket in her beak and another strapped to her back. She stopped at the table and set down the basket from her beak. Her head darted backwards and out of the basket on her back, she retrieved four china cups. From a pot in the beak basket she poured tea into the cups

and then laid out a golden cake beside each cup. She adjusted the cups a bit and Penelope said "Thank you, Miss Schreider."

"You're welcome madame. Will there be anything else?"

"Yes!" Penelope said with a smile. "Please close the doors before you go and don't let anyone disturb us."

Miss Schreider shuttered the front door and left the room through a side door, closing and latching it behind her.

Madame Penelope swiveled her glittering eyes back towards her visitors and whispered "Now! Enjoy your tea and bugbread while you tell me everything!"

Tristan watched Miss Penelope bite off a bit of her bread, dip it into the tea, and swallow it daintily. "Uh, yes, madame. Master Kory, uh, Kor, is doing very well. We both feel very lucky to work with him."

"Oh, come on, dear. I know that he's a grumpy old bird to his apprentices. I know him very well. Relax. We speak the truth here behind these doors. Does he eat well?" She looked them over. "It looks like he's taking good care of you two. Is he still... single?" She inhaled a bit and batted her eyelids.

Pepro followed Penelope's example and licked his beak after swallowing a piece of the tea-soaked bread. "Mmm! That is quite tasty."

Penelope smiled expectantly.

Tristan cleared his throat. "You're right, ma'am, he's a tough teacher. He demands the best from us but when he gets the

best, he is very generous." Tristan thought a moment about Kor's love life. He and Pepro saw the way the raven's eyes would sparkle when a female corvid dropped in or flew by. It was one of the few things that would divert his attention from the forge. His beak would dart up at the underfluffies of a passing maiden crow and small feathery "ears" would rise up briefly on the top of his head. On more than one occasion he came in to work a few minutes later than usual with a skip in his step and his feathers neatly oiled, shiny, and smelling of sweet grasses. But Tristan and Pepro never mentioned these observations to anyone but each other so Tristan smoothly replied "And, yes, ma'am, Kor is single. But, you know Kor. He is all business around us. He seems married to the forge more than anything."

"Hmm... yes, that sounds like Kor. He is such a sweet-talker and a warm-hearted soul underneath that soot but so serious about his trade. Alas, for a time, I had hoped I could make him serious about me!" Penelope dipped a piece of her bread into the tea and swallowed it. She sighed, "Ah well."

Tristan motioned to Pepro. "Pepro! Give her the message from Kor!"

"Oh yes! It's right here." Pepro shrugged his head down and brushed the scroll case and necklace off from over his head. He picked it up in his foot and pulled off the wooden plug with his beak. He pulled out one of the two scrolls that said "Penelope" on the edge and offered it to Penelope. She excitedly hopped

onto the table and spread the scroll out with her feet.

Penelope read the note intently, beaking the words silently while she smiled. After a bit she sighed and closed her eyes. After a quiet pause, she opened her eyes again and said. "You must be my guests, please!"

"Ma'am we have money" said Pepero.

"No, I won't hear of it! You are on an important mission for Kory and I'm happy to help. Besides, I know what an adventure this is for you two and you work so hard all the time. You deserve to have the best time while you are here and we will provide it!" She resumed reading the letter.

Tristan, Nyx, and Pepero looked at each other with smiles.

Penelope inhaled sharply. "You need to see Perry, do you? You're in luck, I guess." There was a flint-sharp edge in her voice. "He's probably in town right now. I can point you in the right direction. He hasn't been welcome at my place for quite some time." She dipped her beak in her tea curtly, her head feathers bristling.

Nyx cocked her head and opened her beak as if to speak when Penelope erupted into a torrent of words.

"We kicked that low-life out after he brought his louse-ridden floosies here and wrecked one of my rooms! It took days of scrubbing before we could get rid of the bugs and those disgusting, oily vomit stains on the floor! Ugh!" She closed her eyes and reigned in her temper. She continued more calmly. "You

best be careful hanging out with that worthless bag of fish fodder!"

Pepro and Tristan responded together, "Yes ma'am! We'll be very careful."

Nyx asked, "Is there anything you can tell us about Perry that might help us find him? Or deal with him?"

"He's well known here and was once a respectable member of the community. With his unique talent at finding treasures at sea, he could have become very successful. Something happened, though, about 10 winters ago and he's been a vagabond ever since. He comes to town weighted down with magnificent things. But he sells them with poor judgment and squanders his earnings in the breeding parlors on loose hens and strong drink. The polite gossip is that he had a secret love, someone of some importance in fact. But it's probably just gull droppings. You'll most likely find him at one of the seedier brothels in Low Town. If not there, you'll find him in jail at the Peacekeeper Citadel. You can't miss it. It's the big white rock at the north end of town."

Miss Penelope hopped back to the floor and slanted her eyelids in a consternated glare, as though she had a growing headache right between her eyes. "I really hate to send you down to that dreadful place. I could recommend another source for your gold."

"Thank you, Madame. But Kor was very specific."

"Well, if you must. But please keep your wits about you down there. Stay together. Stay sober. I suppose dear Kory knows what he's sending you into." Miss Penelope stopped talking then and dipped more tea into her beak. Tristan could read that she was clamming up, perhaps embarrassed that she had been talking too much or just weary from conversation.

"Thank you, ma'am. That's very helpful. Master Kor said that you were a good friend and someone that we could trust."

The sparkle returned to Penelope's eyes. "Oh, did he now?" She smiled the corners of her beak and puffed her chest. "Wait! I didn't finish the letter did I?"

Tristan and Pepro spread the edges of the scroll for Penelope to read it.

Penelope opened her beak in a broad smile and her eyes sparkled. "Screeee! Kory's coming here! You've all been invited to the Royal Bonding!" She pattered her feet on the floor and covered her beak with her wings.

Penelope's joy was contagious. Tristan, Pepro, and Nyx smiled at each other.

Penelope caught her breath. "The place is booked up tighter than a colony of bank swallows but you will stay here, even if I have to put you up in my own residence!"

The three bowed and Tristan said, "Most generous, ma'am. I will let Kor know and I'm sure he'll be excited to see you."

Penelope fanned her face with a wing. "Hmm... Yes, Kor,

dear Kory, oh my." She panted with a smile and sat down on her haunches.

Pepro spoke. "Ma'am, we noticed Stellar's eagles standing guard in front of one of the rooms. Is King Vasili staying here?"

"Why indeed he is! He just returned this morning. He's here with some of his nobles and the Princess. Do you know him?"

Pepro's eye lit up. "Why yes. Well, we met him a couple of days ago when he commissioned Kor."

"Oh he's such a splendid fellow, isn't he?"

"Yes, and very generous. Do you think he would mind visitors?"

Penelope closed her beak in thought. "He's probably resting after his long flight here. And I know his dinner plans include meeting with Governor P'tilo in his suite. He's been dreadfully busy with his wedding plans. His security has been tight too. If he knows you, there's no harm in trying to visit. But tomorrow would be better, dear.

"But now we need to get you to your room! Miss Schreider!" Penelope cried out with her eyes darting to the shuttered door.

"Yes, Madam?" came a magpie voice from close on the other side.

"I knew you were there listening you old gossip! But I'm in too good a mood to care. Hurry, now, fetch up a room for these special visitors. One of the family suites. And please let the

kitchen know that we'll be having a falcon, a barn owl, and a bald eagle as dinner guests."

"Yes, Madam, right away!" was the reply followed by a scurrying of claws on the floor.

Miss Penelope turned to the trio. "Schreider is quite the stealthy listener. Every gossip in town envies her. But she really is a top-notch hostess. I couldn't run this place without her. She'll return in a moment to show you to your room."

Chapter 7: Promise

A few floors below the two Stellar's sea eagle guards stood proudly, the blue and white standard of Maamyrskyt fluttering below their platform. Inside was the grandest suite of the hotel with multiple rooms for roosting, preparing food, bathing, and entertaining. The walls were fashioned of wood that had been rubbed smooth with sanding stones and painted white. King Vasili napped in the rearmost roosting chamber, his door closed and watched on the outside by another Stellar's sea eagle.

In another room there were two more eagles sorting through garments while a third rested its breast on a scribe's bench. The bench was much like the saddle that Kor used for his drafting table. This eagle scribbled occasionally as the others recited the inventory.

In another room two white-tailed sea eagles were busily plucking quail and humming a tune while they worked.

The front parlor was stacked with bundles of fine furs, bulging flasks, and packages wrapped with blue and gold laces. There were two scribe's benches where white-tailed eagles were scribbling away on scrolls while three other Stellar's eagles with cargo packs were being unloaded by helpers.

In one of the large roosting chambers, behind closed doors, Princess Vouli stood with one of her companions. The companion was the Stellar's sea eagle with the scarred left eye that was with her at Kor's.

Blue-tinged light streamed in from a south-facing window made of shards of bottle glass. It reflected off the floor and cast crazed blue and white patterns on the faces of the two birds as they stood facing each other. They stood more closely than friends or acquaintances and their quiet attentiveness could only mean secrecy or intimacy.

Princess Vouli's head feathers were fluffed softly and her eyes were relaxed. She spoke softly, "It's time for me to go, Tuli. When I see you again, things will be different."

Tulivor clenched his thick lower jaw and his pupils constricted slightly as he squirmed with emotion. He had been staring at Vouli's front, the characteristic gaze of a subordinate male. But he couldn't help himself any longer and looked up at Vouli's face.

Vouli's soft expression didn't change. This level of acceptance made Tulivor's emotions surge harder so he averted his eyes and looked back to her breast. "I... I'm so proud of you, my Princess. Please, may I speak familiar?"

Vouli reached out a wing and lifted Tulivor's beak so he looked at her face again. "You know, Tuli, that you can always speak your mind with me in private. It's just the two of us."

Tulivor swallowed hard and his third eyelids relaxed across the front corners of his eyes which glistened with moisture. "Since that awful night when your mother died, I've done my best to raise you, to teach you, to train you. But you've exceeded

all that I had hoped. And you've become such a strong, beautiful example of the best of our species. You are everything our kingdom desires. You are everything we need. I can scarcely believe that I am involved in something so great. So vital to our future." Tulivor choked and closed his eyes. A single tear dropped onto one of his facial bristles and clung there.

Vouli smiled and reached forward with her beak. She opened it and turned her head sideways to clasp beaks softly with Tulivor. She licked his beak tip and he churred with a high content trill.

Vouli hugged close to Tulivor and pressed her soft throat against the top of his head. "You've taught me well, Tuli. I've always looked up to you. You're hard as steel in combat, quick as lightning. I could have no better teacher. And you've been my closest friend. My confidant. The only time I see softness in you is when we are alone together. And it grounds me. Completes me. The only pain I feel is when we must be apart. That is why, when this is all over, I want you as my mate."

Tulivor's body vibrated as he chattered out a series of soft squeaks. It was the excited love chirps of a mated male eagle, rarely heard outside of the nest. A special utterance reserved for matters of family. He struggled to hold it back.

Vouli smiled and pet his back with a wing. "That's it, my love. I love you and you love me. I know you never sought power. You contented yourself with training me to be the ideal leader.

You adhered to the natural order of our kind. You've never asked for anything for yourself in return. Only for me to be the best I could be. For that selflessness, you deserve to be at my side. I want you to sire my offspring."

Tulivor pressed his head up against Vouli's and hugged her back with his wings. He inhaled the clean smell of her plumage, laced with fresh tincture of yellow cedar from her bath earlier in the day. "It has been my pleasure. I will serve you till I die. I will be honored to be your mate and serve the kingdom at your will and pleasure. I will be honored to raise our chicks."

Vouli closed her eyes and hugged Tulivor tightly, her own eyelid seams moistening. She whispered in his ear, "Are you all prepared to take care of our remaining business?"

Tulivor inhaled and drew strength from his warm mate. "Yes, my queen. It will be done with ease. And I'll meet up with you tomorrow night."

Vouli hugged tight again and sighed. She opened her eyes and the blue and white light from the window sparkled in them. "Excellent. Then together we'll prepare the army. And come the new moon, we'll take back what is ours!"

Chapter 8: Loss

Pepro, Nyx, and Tristan joined Miss Penelope for dinner that night and ate a fine meal. There was fresh salmon for Pepro, a fat tree squirrel for Tristan, and a small duck for Nyx. These were classy selections and, while raw, they served pre-plucked and sliced in neat lines to facilitate eating while carrying on polite conversation.

The conversation went on for over an hour after dinner as Tristan, Pepro, and Nyx answered Penelope's questions and she learned about their backgrounds. She had a keen knowledge of many officials and well-known families in Volatilia Unitum, especially the Northern Region of which Whiterock was capital. When Pepro mentioned that he was from the Northern Region and that they had stayed at Sunrise Lake, she gasped a little and stopped Pepro short in mid-sentence.

"Are you related to Perro the renowned Fisherbird?"

Penelope asked with her beak open and her eyes wide.

"Yes, ma'am. He's my uncle, on my father's side. He taught me how to fish after my father died and my mother disappeared."

"Oh, goodness! No!" Penelope croed. Her soft beak corners drooped and her facial bristles sagged.

The mood immediately fell. The three glanced at each other and at her as she wiped her eyes indelicately on her shoulder feathers. "Oh, you poor dear... I'm so sorry."

"Oh, ma'am, I appreciate the sentiment. My pa's death was a

long time ago, though.”

“Young master, it’s sad that your father died but I was referring to your uncle!”

Pepro suddenly straightened his body and his white brow feathers fluffed with concern. “Excuse me? Ma’am? what’s happened to Uncle Perro?”

“Oh dear! You don’t know?”

Pepro’s heart thumped loud enough to be heard and his eyes were wide. “Know what?! Please tell me immediately!”

“I’m so sorry to be the one to tell you. He apparently died while on official business.”

Pepro’s peppery eyes glistened. “Uncle Perro? He’s... he’s gone?”

Tristan and Pepro locked eyes and Tristan pushed into his big friend’s feathers to hug him tight. Nyx wrapped a wing over his shoulders too. Pepro’s eyes quivered and teared up. His predatory stare was transfixed on Penelope.

“I’m afraid that I don’t have the details. About two full moons ago, Regional Governor P’tilo, hosted a gathering of representatives from all the villages of the Northern Region. We were having dinner, right here in this very ballroom, when a pigeon, an official courier, arrived with an urgent message. Well, he wouldn’t say what it was about, of course, being official business. But, well, uh, one of our hostesses had...” Miss Penelope fluttered her third eyelids and cleared her

throat. "Uh, well, she had spent some private time with P'tilo that evening and managed to find out from him that Perro had been on a secret mission and had perished." Penelope stepped back from her perch and walked over to a neatly folded cloth, which she picked up with one foot and wiped her beak and eyes upon. She walked back and offered it to Pepero but he just stared blankly at the doorway as though looking to the horizon.

Penelope continued, "A few days later, after they confirmed the story, an official announcement was made. I'm surprised you didn't hear even way out in Galinta."

Pepero blinked his eyes and swallowed and his gaze returned to the table. He slicked his feathers down and stepped back from his perch, shrugging off the hugs of his friends. "I. I'm. Excuse me, I need to be alone now. I'm sorry." He walked quickly to the doorway and disappeared through the curtain to the outside rooftop.

"Oh that poor dear" Penelope said. "I know some about his family, and yours, Miss Nyx. All the important birds pass through my doors at one time or another. His parents were in the service of the Great Council too."

"What? Really?" Nyx said, astonished.

Penelope replied, "Oh yes. And, yet, for all their noble service, so much tragedy befalls their family. And always the oddest circumstances."

"What do you mean?" asked Nyx.

"Well, his father died in a forest fire, which are rare on the north coast. And this one came up out of nowhere! There were no thunderstorms that night."

"You're right! I was a chick at the time and saw it. It surprised all of us too."

Penelope looked down into her empty teacup, "And then the poor thing's mother disappeared. And she had been a soldier of some kind."

Tristan looked at Nyx with his head feathers compacted and his eyes wide. "A soldier? I don't know if Pepero knew that. He's never mentioned it to me. But he doesn't know very much about his parents either."

Penelope continued, "And then his uncle, a treasured hunter and teacher, dies on a mysterious mission and there's no body recovered for his Release Ceremony."

Tristan and Nyx both looked down as though they'd lost their own parents. The Releasing is a custom among civilized birds where the bodies of the departed are burned and friends and family celebrate their transition to the Beyond by telling stories and singing songs about their life. After a long night of celebration by firelight some of their feathers are scattered from a high hill to mark their reintegration with the Earth.

Nyx turned. "I should go be with him."

Tristan blocked her path with a wing. "Nyx. I know you've known Pepero a lot longer than I have, but I know him pretty

well. He needs some time to process this alone before we tell him the rest. He's too nice to say it but he needs space sometimes."

Nyx fastened her dark eyes on him, clenching her beak with anguish. "You do know him well, Tristan. And you're exactly right." She sighed, "And, we need to get your mission accomplished too. It might just be more than he can bear right now. I guess this news can wait."

"We can tell him together on the return journey." Tristan promised.

They thanked Miss Penelope for her gracious hospitality, and the sad, but important news and returned to their room. Pepero was not outside on the ledge when they departed Penelope's company but later on he returned to the room. He was greeted by Tristan and Nyx at the door.

Pepro's yellow beak was wet and tinged with pink and his eyes were swollen around the edges and moist. "I'm sorry, I just had to get out of there. I guess I thought I was over my parents, but sometimes it kicks me in the gizzard and I have to go and cry."

Tristan hugged into Pepero's fluffy chest. "It's ok. We love you Pepero."

Pepro hugged Tristan into himself. "It might not be so bad if I knew what happened. Now even Uncle Perro has just up and disappeared." He choked. "Like everyone that means anything to

me."

"You're not alone, Pepero. I won't leave you."

Nyx met his gaze and gave a falcon whine, "You know I'll always be here for you too, Pepero. Remember that fall day we spent together? You were leaving on your Wander and I was starting my migration south."

Pepero nodded.

"We promised to always be friends and help each other. I'm here for you now and if and when you want to look into this more," she looked at Tristan solemnly, "I'll be by your side too."

Pepero didn't have much to say after that. He just hugged his friends tight for a while until a bell rang out four times in the night. It was midnight.

Nyx cocked her head. "Do you want to stay here, Pepero, while we go and look for Perry?"

Pepero pulled Tristan closer to himself with a wing. "No, not on your life! I need the distraction. And, Lowtown sounds like a crazy place so you're gonna need me. Besides that, after yesterday's close call I'm not letting Tristan out of my sight!"

Tristan's beak corners fluffed and his eyes narrowed in an owlish smile.

Pepero hugged them once more. "You're my friends and my family. The only family I have left. No way I'm letting you down."

Chapter 9: Low Town

As Pepero, Tristan, and Nyx glided out over the town, hundreds of burrows and windows were aglow with the flickering light of candles, torches, and lanterns. They outlined the haphazard spires of the ancient buildings and the canyon-like remains of the streets. But none of these compared to the brilliant glow of Low Town. All along the ledges stood glass-encased lanterns of various colors. Tristan was in the lead, using his better night vision to study the crowds of birds and find their way to the north end of the row. On the way they discussed that the best place to start might be the jail. If he wasn't actually in jail then perhaps the deputies would at least know where best to find him.

They skirted along, some 50 wingspans above above the lip of the bluffs riding the gentle, lifting sea breeze. The breeze was warm with the smells of birds, fish, and fermented beverages. The ledges and brightly-lit cavities below were crowded with many species of birds but the great majority were seabirds. Shrilly piping voices rose to their ears accompanied by the thumps of drums and the clanging of metallic instruments. There were strings, drums, bellows fitted with reeds, peck bells, and all octaves of bird calls. Although a discordant mix at this distance, the music was universally fast, loud, and thrilling and birds were cheering, dancing, and gyrating around within the loudest establishments.

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Instrumental music was practically unknown to Tristan although there was a woodpecker in Galinta that had a particular talent for stroking a stringed instrument, similar to a small harp. Accompanied by a crow bard with a talented voice, the effect was dreamy. But the music here was very different. It was loud, sharp, and stirred him on a different level. It didn't conjure sleepy scenes of beauty like the woodpecker's did. Instead, it made his tail rock and his heart beat faster. He liked the new sensation.

Tristan was so fascinated by the music that he almost collided with a gull. He saw the white mass of feathers at the last fraction of a second and was able to snap roll under the gull as it swept in from his right. The gull flailed into an exaggerated half roll and slurred back "Hey, watch it ya crazy drunk!"

Tristan indignantly shook his head. "Hey, I'm not the one that's drunk!" But the seabird had disappeared into the dark without turning back.

Nyx and Pepro giggled and soon all three were laughing loudly.

But then they reached the north end of the cliffs and the music faded and establishments were less lively. A few burrows bore the crescent moon sign of a hotel combined with various insignias. A few earthen hollows were unmarked and shuttered and a few gulls napped in groups on the top of the cliff. Finally at

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the end of the row, at the very tip of the point, there was a tall column of pale rock that was nearly separated from the cliffs. This rock formation, known as a sea stack, was the result of erosion of softer rock from a headland. Soon the pillar would be completely separated and eventually, hundreds or thousands of the years in the future, it too would collapse into a small island after its mother bluff had long receded away. For now, the broad, flat top of the circular column was connected by a thin arch of rock to the path that led along the main strip of burrows in Lowtown. Around the sides of the rock pillar were small entrances and, near the top, a ledge with several arched entrances. One of the larger openings glowed from lamp light within.

The top of the sea stack was flat except for columns of rock, each capped by the bust of a bird holding a glass-encased oil lantern in its beak. Each bird was different and bore a stern pose. At the center was a large statue of a gull, assembled from many smaller rocks carved carefully to fit together. It's face looked to the east and its graceful wings spread. In its beak was an oval shield bearing a large star at the top and two smaller stars below it. It was a depiction of the North Star, known as the star that does not move. In Volatalia, it meant the stability and order of the new nation of united birds.

Two enormous black-backed gulls stood under the wings of

the gull. They wore red vests and small leather packs on their backs.

"That's gotta be the Peacekeeper Station!" shouted Tristan as he adjusted his course and flew towards it.

"Tristan!" Nyx said as she swooped up beside him. "These guys are no-nonsense. You'll want to be straight to the point and don't tell them more than you have to. They have a way of poking their beaks farther into your business than you want them to."

Tristan nodded and then swooped down and landed on the platform while the other two loitered on a nearby rock.

One of the entrance guards looked at him sternly. He was a head taller than Tristan and easily twice as heavy. His chiseled beak was far longer than Tristan's too. He squawked abruptly "What's your business?"

Tristan tried not to be intimidated. After all, he had done nothing wrong. "Sir, I'm looking for Perry, an albatross."

The massive gull flicked his peppery golden eyes up and down Tristan. "What is your business with Perry?"

"Well, sir, it's private business." Tristan said without flinching.

"Then what concern is it of mine?" the gull replied, leaning his beak forward and sniffing the air around Tristan.

Tristan could see that he needed to change tactics. He blinked slowly and fluffed his feathers. "Well, it's important

business, I can assure you, and it might help keep him out of trouble for a while."

The gull cried out a hearty laugh but kept its eyes serious. "That bird is nothing *but* trouble. What you say is not possible."

"Sir, is he here in your jail or shall we seek him out in town."

The broad-chested bird sighed. "No, lad, Perry isn't here—yet. No doubt before sunrise we'll have to drag him in and deal with his carcass. You best be looking for him in the bordellos yonder" the gull motioned with his beak towards the busier part of Low Town. "He's been in town for a quarter moon so he's bound to be running out of items to trade. That means he'll be in the less pleasant places."

"I see. Thank you, sir."

The gull abruptly poked his beak into Tristan's breast causing him to jolt back. "But! You birds best stay out of trouble! Yep, I see your friends over there. And you smell like you just came from Miss Penelope's. Stay close to the likes of her instead of getting robbed down here. Perry is a nuisance and a waste of fish guts. You don't want to fly in his wake and land in jail yourselves so my advice is bank clear of that ambergris. You're not the first to try to straighten him out!" The gull shook his head. "Some birds are just hopeless, son."

"We'll stay out of trouble, sir. Thanks for the advice."

Tristan turned to go.

"Young owl!" The gull called more softly. "You might start at the Musky Murre... It's one of his cheaper favorites. Good luck." Tristan looked back and nodded then flew back to his friends.

Pepro greeted him first "Tristan! That looked intense!"

"Yeah, that gull didn't look friendly!" Nyx said "...or helpful."

"Like everyone else, he warned us to stay away from Perry but I offered to him that we might actually be able to help keep Perry out of their feathers for a while. That seemed to ease his mood." Tristan blinked. "He said we should try the Musky Murre. Do you know which place that is, Nyx?"

"No. I guess we'll just have to drift along the row and find it."

Chapter 10: The Dance

The three flew back down the uppermost row of cliffside hollows dodging birds that were flying every which way. Halfway down they found a cluster of particularly crowded burrows. The sleek black faces of common murre and guillemots poked out from openings above and below the large main burrow entrance. They were tittering and calling in thin whistles at the crowds while raucous music was blasting from the main hollow. The sign above the main entrance bore the slim pointed silhouette of a murre's beak and face with a winking eye and squiggly lines above its forehead.

It was so crowded that there was no place to land so they settled onto the trampled earthen ledge a short distance away. The crowd was dense and bustling so that Tristan paused, wondering how they would ever work their way into the burrow.

"This must be the place but it's crazy!" Tristan screeched. "Pepero! Maybe you can press your way in and we can follow behind you. I think that if we mix and mingle with the crowd and look like we're enjoying ourselves, we'll be able to get in there."

"What if we don't see any albatrosses?" Pepero asked.

Tristan shouted back over the tumult, "I've got an idea about that. Let's get in there first and see what we find."

So the three pressed into the flock with Pepero at point, parting the crowd. They waggled their beaks to the beat of the fast music. It wasn't long before they were swaying their tails

and strutting in time. Nyx rhythmically bobbed her head and flicked her wingtips in a groove that perfectly matched the mood of the crowd. At one point she fluffed her belly feathers and fluttered her tail at a high point of a song and a small cheer rose up from the crowd around her.

Tristan and Pepero swayed shoulder to shoulder and slid their feet to the music also. It wasn't perfect and they bumped into each other and burst out in smiles and giggling. They realized what Kor had meant by telling them to 'have fun.' Tristan pressed into Pepero's front and they spun around with their partially unfolded wings pressed together.

The crowd parted with eyes and smiling beaks turned towards the three in admiration. The ledge reverberated with the sharp slap of stamping feet, most of them webbed, and the band grew even louder in response. Tristan, Pepero, and Nyx pushed their breasts together and weaved back and forth in a slow circle to the time of the beat. The crowd closed back around, everyone bumping and cheering and slapping their feet along until the song ended in a frenzy of drum beats too fast to keep up with. A few crashing metallic sounds and the piece was over.

A slower tune drifted out and the noisy crowd quieted down, some continuing to dance, others pushing inside and dipping their beaks into troughs of strong-smelling drink or pairing up in the center of the room to dance close together. Tristan noticed a few pairs break away and disappear down a tunnel at

the back of the hollow or slip off to the side to preen and bill each other.

As the trio followed the crowd inside they could see the band. It was a quintet of crows. One had a rack of flashy metal strips of different lengths. Another plucked and stroked a tall, harp-like instrument. The third and fourth softly brushed skin drums with their wings. Tristan saw that these two had variously sized drums circled about them and they worked them simultaneously. He marveled at the cooperation and timing it required. There were also various types of drum sticks nearby but the current song was soft and required a delicate touch. The fifth crow softly warbled out a tune about youth and summer courtship.

Pepro leaned his beak into Tristan's face ruff, "This is great. I've not danced much before. It always felt clumsy and awkward. I had to think about it too much. But I feel so natural dancing here with you."

"I love it too. I didn't expect it to feel so good." Tristan sighed, "I guess we'd better look like we're looking for 'business' though, if you know what I mean."

"Heh, yeah. There's a snowy owl in the corner that's been watching everything. Maybe she's in charge. Maybe you should strut your stuff for her."

Tristan was enjoying the energy of the dance hollow and the chance to engage in adult activities, in whatever way he saw

fit, for the first time in his life. His confidence swelled in his breast as he bounced to the music and made his way towards the fluffy white madam in the corner.

As Tristan approached the snowy owl, she opened her beak and showed her lovely pink tongue through her pure white facial fluff. Her yellow eyes were half-closed, forming sultry, black-rimmed yellow crescents. She leaned forward and teased Tristan's face bristles with her beak. He could smell sweet grass and lavender on her feathers. He didn't expect such a warm welcome but he acted the part and leaned into her preening and churring. As he bent his head downward to accept her preening, he saw that she wore a black, silky ribbon around her left leg. He had noticed some other birds wearing these too and assumed that it must mean that she was part of the establishment. That would explain why she was acting so friendly. For the sake of their objective, he played along.

"It's been ages since I've seen such a fine young owl come in here" the snowy said in a low, smooth voice. She was wider than Tristan and twice his weight. Her warm feathers pressed against his breast and she gently held his beak in hers. He could smell her hot, salty breath mingled with the other perfumes on her feathers. It was pleasant and he felt his tail tingle. He immediately understood what the attraction to these places must be for Perry. He felt like he was the center of this owl's affection and was about to be carried off to new levels of

pleasure.

The owl's voice was low and throbbing. "I'm Miss Snowdrift, but you can call me Snowy."

Tristan smoothed his voice and replied, "Mmm... I didn't know about you or I would've been here sooner." He pressed his beak into hers and pressed his breast to hers.

She churred again and licked his beak. She tasted warm and clean and a tingle swelled up from his throat as his brain went fuzzy with desire. He thought to himself *This isn't real love, but it feels really, really good. But I've got to keep my wits! I have to flatter her so maybe she'll tell me if Perry is here.*

"Oh, by the Great Owl, you're so..." Tristan sighed, "...soft. Like your feathers are made of softest cloud." He pushed his beak into hers again and his eyes sparkled. "And your beak is as hot as the coals from our forge, I'll wager. I'm melting into your feathers."

The snowy extended her wingtip down Tristan's back and he arched it in genuine, thigh-tightening pleasure. Snowy pushed her beak into Tristan's ear feathers. "Young one, you don't have to flatter me. I can read you like a book." Her wingtip swept under his tail and tickled his vent, which puckered in response.

Tristan's dark eyes shot open and he jolted with a bolt of unexpected pleasure. Snowy licked his beak and chattered low and quiet, taking humor in Tristan's easily stimulated sex drive. "I love the inexperienced ones, such as yourself. I'll teach you

plenty." She sighed long, blowing hot breath deep into his tingling ear canal. "...and I'll give you my special, introductory price, deary."

Tristan's beak sagged open with a throaty moan. He certainly felt his youthful sex drive revving its engines deep in his loins and he wanted to give in. He gathered his will and licked his lips. "Mmmm... that sounds wonderful, Miss... but..."

The snowy owl finished his sentence, "...you're looking for someone."

Tristan's eyes opened and he stared back, "Is it that obvious?"

The perceptive white owl didn't change her seductive expression. She whispered, "Only to me." She rolled her head ever so slightly to the side and grinned. "Would be my pleasure to help a fresh young owl such as yourself. Who are you looking for?"

Tristan whispered back, "Perry."

"Ah, yes. Well, he's a regular here for sure." She wrapped her wing around Tristan's head, tipping it back while she preened inside of his left ear slit. Tristan felt his vent pulsating and his knees going weak. This snowy was really, really good at pressing his buttons. She whispered on, "He doesn't like guests disturbing his fun, you know. And we..." she sighed "...guarantee a good time here at the Musky Murre. But if you play along with me, young one, I'll get you and your friends

in to see him."

Tristan turned and slipped his tongue back into her beak and felt himself falling ever so slowly and pleasantly backwards under her fluffy embrace as she leaned into him.

Pepro and Nyx were watching from across the room. "She's seducing him!" Nyx chirped in irritation.

"Don't worry. He knows what he's doing." Pepro smiled, "And if he doesn't, well, he's having a lot of fun doing it!"

Just then, Tristan looked over to them and jerked his head to motion them over. They wended their way through the crowd and came upon Tristan and the snowy embracing. She was preening his head as he spoke to them with his head feathers disheveled and his beak glistening with Snowy's saliva.

Nyx's eyes pulsated and Pepro giggled. Tristan cocked his head, not knowing how silly or aroused he looked.

Pepro caught himself and cleared his throat with a serious look. "What did you find out, Tristan?"

"Perry is here and Miss Snowdrift will get us in."

"Please, please, deary, call me Snowy. And, yes, for a price," she winked.

Nyx chirped and snapped her beak. "Price?"

Tristan looked surprised. "Mmm, will a copper do it?"

Snowy's face went bland and her eyes narrowed. "A copper per bird."

Tristan said, "Let's slip into the back then, I don't want

everyone in here to see me pulling money out."

Snowy replied, "Yes, well, don't look now, hon, but did you happen to see the puffin over there watching you?"

In the corner of the room was a squat black and white bird with a parrot-like beak of flashy orange and yellow. His cheeks were round and his eyes bore natural black markings around them that gave him the look of a sad clown. He bobbed stiffly to the music and occasionally dipped his bill into a drinking trough. Then he glanced nonchalantly over at Miss Snowdrift. At that same moment, Nyx briefly locked eyes with him. He quickly looked away and clumsily dipped his beak back into the trough.

A bald eagle with a clean, crisp white head was perched behind the puffin and as the trio looked back to their conversation he smirked and shook his head. He said to the puffin, "You've got a lot to learn, Ano!"

"Hmpf! I know exactly what I'm doing, Aetus! You'll see!"

Aetus chuckled and stepped down from his perch by the trough. He leaned closer to Ano, acted as though he'd say something, but then swung his gaze back to the trio in the corner who were now staring back. He waved back and then strutted outside.

Ano looked at the trio, then at Aetus, then back at the trio nervously before finally ducking behind the trough.

Back in Snowy's corner, Tristan asked, "What does he want?"

"That fool is Anoitoftero, Ano for short. He's a creepy admirer of one of my hens and general snitch for the Peacekeepers. Did you visit them yet?"

Tristan nodded.

"Then he's probably tailing you to see what you're up to. Perry's not supposed to be here. They banned him from the strip last week and so he's been hiding out here night and day."

A thrill went through Tristan's breast. This was turning into an interesting adventure for sure. "What should we do?"

She looked back over to Pepero and Nyx. "You two need to be in this too. Come closer here and look like you're, well, in the mood to mate. If we get the crowd excited they'll block that busy beak from following us while we slip away."

Pepero wrapped a wing around Tristan's shoulders and drew him away from Snowy's warm embrace. "Excuse me, sir, but may I have this dance?"

Snowy smiled and made a low churring giggle, "That's the idea! And, he's all yours, handsome eagle."

Snowy made a loud wavering hoot and the music fumbled to a stop. The lead singer looked at her. She called out, "Hey, Ree! Play me 'Fire Dance!'" No sooner did her words get uttered than the singer turned to the players and lifted his wings. The drummers picked up their hardest sticks with their beaks and poised themselves. The singer tapped his foot rhythmically and

the players bobbing their beaks in sync. Then the drummers exploded into an energetic introduction. With a deep boom the whole band lurched into a galloping tune that put the crowd in an uproar of dance.

Pepro pulled Tristan to his breast and the two pressed together and started to beat the floor with their feet. They locked their eyes into a solid gaze of mutual admiration while their feet trod back and forth as though they were one bird with four legs.

Nyx stood and admired them for just a moment before Snowy tugged on her wing. "Hey, hon, look like you're having a good time!" Nyx smiled her eyes and pushed her wings under Snowy's as the two started to dance.

The crowd hooted and cheered and pressed around to gawk at the foursome that was developing. Whenever Snowy danced, it demanded attention. They parted and congealed into a circle around the attraction, dropping copper coins at the feet of the dancers.

Snowy called out above the tumult. "That's our cue, darlings, to offer them something in return. I'll give you a third of what they throw down so make it a good show!"

Nyx chirped, "A show? You mean— *underfluffies*?!"

Snowy dryly chuckled. "Yeah! Underfluffies and more!"

"But, but I'm not like that!"

She was interrupted by Snowy hugging her into her fluffed

breast. Snowy buried Nyx's dainty head in her fluff and shook her feathers rapidly back and forth to a moment of quick music. When Nyx emerged from the pillow of fluff, her dark eyes were staring into space and her beak was agape. Slowly a smile formed on her face and the crowd cheered and more coppers hit the floor.

Tristan nipped and licked at Pepero's beak. The crowd cooed their approval and Pepero opened his beak and pressed Tristan back into a deep dip while giving him a passionate beak kiss. Tristan had never been intimate with Pepero but he liked it. He felt the same wash of tingly excitement he'd felt moments before with Snowy. His wings went limp and the crowd cheered. More coppers clattered against the stones of the floor.

Miss Snowdrift spun Nyx around as she swayed and shuffled her feet to the music. She raised her white tail slowly and a low cheer went up from the spectators. She raised it higher and the crowd cheered higher. She lowered it and the tone sank lower. It was a game she had played before and the gazes of a hundred birds were riveted to her tail, hoping to see something special. She shook it side to side and teased their voices up and down with her vibrating underfluffies. Then she swung Nyx to her right side and shouted, "Do it with me honey!"

Meanwhile, Tristan and Pepero jaunted and spun close to each other keeping good rhythm with the music. In a way, the two had been dancing with each other for weeks in Kor's shop. It was a

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small space so they had gotten accustomed to sliding past each other and anticipating each other's moves, all to the rhythm of pounding iron and wooshing bellows. They pushed their necks to each other and rested their beaks on each other's shoulders, their eyes closed. They read each other's intentions through their pressing bodies, their feet skipping and tapping quickly while their interlocked upper bodies swayed together.

Nyx stood side-by-side with Snowy, their feet stepping in a box-like pattern together, their tails pressed together and pointing at the crowd. They swung them up and to the right, then down, then up and to the left then, down. Snowy said "You're learning fast, darling. Now press your tail up against mine... that's it! And shake it! Shake it!"

Nyx followed Snowy's directions and smiled. Her parents would likely drop their feathers if they saw her doing this. But the response of the crowd was invigorating. She loved the power of teasing.

"Now raise your tail slowly while you shake your butt. that's it! Now lean forward and shake it while ya look back!"

They leaned forward, each looking back with smiling beaks and half-lidded eyes. They shook their fluff harder and the crowd cheered higher. Coins bounced and rattled so they lifted higher and higher, jiggling to the fast beat while the crowd's cheers climbed in scale. Finally the frenzied pitch of the song reached a climax and they jutted their tails straight up and

exposed just a hint of their pink vent skin to the cheering crowd.

The booming cheers, shrill seabird calls, and clattering drums beat against Nyx's upturned belly and it made her unexpectedly excited. She shook her butt fluff and squatted down, along with Miss Snowdrift, like a solicitous hen. The crowd kept cheering and calling, even when the band had stopped. As they slowly stood and lowered their tails again the crowd kept cheered and tossed more coins. The puffin in the corner was completely obscured now by the boisterous, thick flock.

Snowy churred sweetly next to Nyx's right ear feathers while smiling at the crowd. "Verrrry, very good, hon. I believe we gave them something new."

Tristan had added to the spectacle by leaning back under another deep kiss from Pepero. He was clearly in bliss, melting in Pepero's wings. This was no act and the crowd could see it. For a moment, Tristan and Pepero forgot about the crowd, feeling only the closeness of their bodies and the unity of their breathing, as though they were one bird. It was like the calm of a remote island where just the two of them existed while the rest of the busy world was far, far away.

At this point, Tristan felt a nudge from the foot of Snowy and Pepero felt one from Nyx. The two pulled away slowly, the taste of each other lingering on their tongues. Tristan wanted to say he loved Pepero right then and there, but the noise was

deafening.

Pepro's heart fluttered from the look that Tristan was giving him combined with the fading embrace. The two looked to Miss Snowdrift and Nyx, who had a playful smile on her beak.

"What?" said Pepro.

"Now's our chance, lovebirds" Snowdrift was plucking the coins from the floor. "Right this way!" and she swayed her fluffy hips towards the tunnel at the back of the hollow.

Ano jumped onto the edge of a drinking trough, swaying his head back and forth to try to peer over the crowd and keep track of the trio. But he couldn't see through the thick crowd much less hope to penetrate it. Suddenly, a wing shoved him from behind and he fell face first into the trough of seaberry wine. He sputtered and shook wine from his nares, spattering it on the nearby birds who then raised a ruckus. He looked about and saw the same bald eagle who had chided him earlier, smiling in the doorway.

Ano leaped out of the trough and fluttered his wings, trying to get over the crowd but he only bounced off their backs and sank into the mass of birds all the while screaming and kicking.

Tristan, Nyx, and Pepro followed Snowy up the back tunnel until the crowd's cheers faded behind them. The burrow was dimly lit with small candles and there were side burrows here and there, some open and some closed off by wooden doors or

curtains.

Tristan saw inside one open hollow and there was a soft nest of moss and downy feathers with a dinking trough. Another one had a funny looking perch with thongs and bells dangling from it. As he passed one of the closed rooms he could hear the excited whines and churrs of a peregrine falcon copulating. He looked at Nyx and her eyes were wide and her beak corners were flushed.

Snowy poked open a double doorway at the end of the tunnel. Inside, was a burrow lined with bleached driftwood panels stained purple with lavender. Bundles of dried lavender hung on the walls and filled the room with their sweet scent. There was a nest in the center of the room and a shiny copper basin in one corner. She closed the doors and latched them.

Snowy dropped the copper coins onto the wood planks of the floor "That was quite a show you put on." She counted out 10 and presented them to Tristan with her beak. He looked surprised but she spoke back through her clenched beak, "Youngin' you made it well worth my while." He shrugged off his necklace, opened the leather pouch with his toes and then held it out for her with his beak. She dropped the coins in put the rest in a bentwood cedar box.

Snowy walked to a corner and pressed her beak into the edge of a panel. It pivoted and revealed a pitch dark passageway beyond. "Listen, I have no doubt that we'll have a 'surprise

inspection' by that deputy. You, lovely falcon, should stay here with me while the other two go on up and see Perry. He's right up that burrow in our secret suite."

Tristan hugged Snowy's fluffy breast and licked her beak sweetly. "Thank you, Snowy."

Snowy grinned and stroked a wing down his back. "That, my dear, is proper payment too. The honest appreciation that only a pure, young soul like yourself can show. I see that you and this..." Miss Snowdrift's eyes flowed over Pepro from beak to foot, "...handsome, and lucky, young eagle have something special between you. True love isn't seen around here much. Be proud of the special bond you have." She focused her rich golden stare on Tristan, "There's a secret exit out of the back of the suite. The hens can show you the way out. You take good care of yourself and come back to see me sometime." She patted him on the tail, "Good luck to you both!"

Pepro looked at Nyx. "Are you ok with this?"

"Of course, Pepro." She leaned in and pecked his cheek. "If we get split up, I know my way around. I'll meet up with you back at Penelope's."

Pepro ruffled her nape with his right wing and then turned with Tristan up the dark passage. Snow whispered to them, "Pull the cord twice, pause, and once more. That's the code for someone to let you in." She swiveled the panel closed and the passage went completely black.

