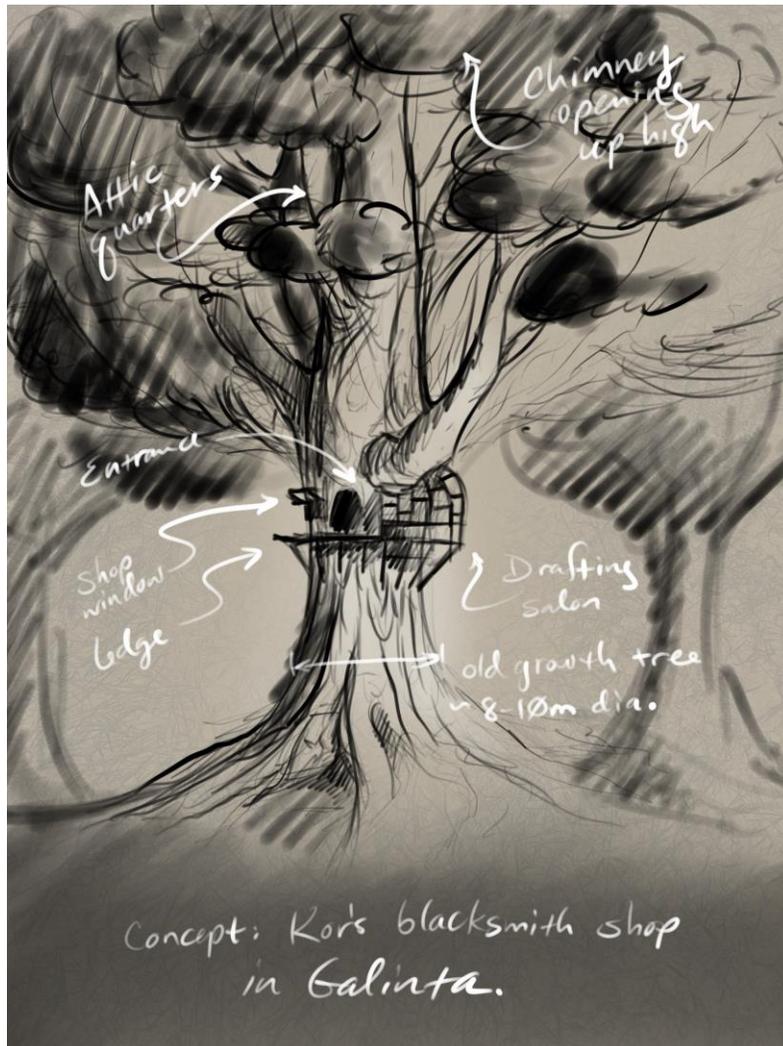


Whiterock

The Gilded Banner

By Hal Aetus

Chapter 1: The Commission



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A thin layer of puffy gray clouds hung in the sky over a valley of broken forest and prairie. Bright beams angled low from the sun's orb hanging low over the clean western horizon, casting long shadows and golden outlines to the grassy slopes and the broad trees along the river at the bottom of the valley. Songbirds sang with springtime vigor even as cool mist gathered over the creek that meandered between reedy banks and groves of oak trees dripping with fresh leafy buds.

One of the trees was especially broad and a thin ribbon of grey smoke curled up from its heart while an orange glow flickered within a wide, round hole in its trunk. The silhouette of a raven was carved in a wooden sign that hung above the hole. Its eye was a smooth stone of red onyx circled by a setting of gold. The birds of the avian nation knew that this was the insignia for Kor and his blacksmith and jewelry shop.

A wooden platform extended out from the hole. To the right a crudely a windowed room blistered out from the trunk. The irregular windows were made from a multitude of glass shards of red, blue, green, and clear arranged in whatever way seemed most convenient to the builder, creating no particular pattern, and framed by carved bits of wood. The low sun blazed into the colorful bubble and illuminated the shapes of two creatures moving within. The dark and feathery forms spoke quietly in barely intelligible English heavily decorated in chirps, growls, and grating squawks.

Inside, Kor the raven sat with his belly on a saddle-like chair, his hocks resting on the foot pegs leaving his tail out behind him and his feet free for his work. Straightedges secured a piece of tea-colored parchment on a drafting table under him while he sketched with both feet simultaneously, each grasping a triangular shaft of charcoal. Soot and sing marks gave a grizzled edge to the black bird's thick nasal bristles. His brows, furrowed by concentration were thin and revealed patches of blue-grey skin beneath, scarred from years of exposure to extreme heat. His eyes were bright but squinted in the dim light as the sun faded. He darted his beak upward to twist a knob that lengthened the wick in an oil lamp burning above his head.

An enormous Stellar's sea eagle stood near and watched intently. He wore his dark feathers like the stately cloak of a monarch. They were punctuated by patches of crisp white like fresh snow on dark stone. His beak was the brilliant orange of an arctic sunrise, capped by a glacier of white forehead feathers and ending in a stout, sharp hook. Orange-rimmed, golden eyes peered out commandingly from under broad ocular ridges.

Kor flashed his white third eyelids and cocked his head. "King Vasili, Your bonding ceremony is in a week?"

The eagle spoke in deep woody tones outlined in thin high notes and clipped by hard consonants. "Uh, yes, Master Kor." The eagle squinted his eyes and his smiling beak corners flushed.

"I'm so very sorry to be coming to you this late. It's hardly worth explaining except to promise that I will make it well worth your time. I will pay you three times your normal commission, yes?"

Kor's picked up a nearby clay jar with his beak and tipped it back until a liquid dribbled down his maw. Pungent vapors of fermented seaweed and alcohol spread forth as he set the jar down and his eyes creased in a smile. "I appreciate that, sire. Agreed! I am honored to be of service." The warm light of the lamp had grown brighter so Kor resumed his furious two-fisted sketching.

"Dear Margerit's insignia will be this flower." The eagle pulled a small five-petaled pink flower from a leather satchel and dropped it on Kor's drawing table. "We call it Summerstar. It blooms in summer on the moss that lines our nests."

Kor paused and glanced at the blossom. "Very lovely."

"Miss Margerit will be a summer blossom in my nest, a cheerful flower to my kingdom, in even the darkest season. I want her ring to reflect this, yes?"

Kor grunted low and resumed scratching away with his pencils.

"The bonding ceremony will be the greatest ever seen. And well it should be! Our two nations, all enlightened birdkind, will be one step closer to being united. Glorious!" The stately eagle picked up another jar with his beak and tipped back a

swallow of the strong-smelling drink. He exhaled deeply as he set the jar down. "I want you to come too, Master Kor. Please. Be my special guest. I insist!"

Kor paused and tipped his head. "Honored, sir, honored. I will be happy to attend."

Off behind Kor, in the shadows of the darker room that made up the rest of the tree's enormous hollow, two soot-dusted birds quietly hopped and climbed to the shelves using their beaks to put away tools and half-finished projects from the day. Rain had fallen all day long, ending only an hour ago but Pepero and Tristan had barely had time to notice the weather. There had been steady work since dawn and they stepped outside only briefly to relieve themselves or fetch coal.

Pepero, was a five-year-old bald eagle. At this age, his head and tail were nearly all white although some brown spots remained under the smudges of ash from the forge. The rest of his feathers had transitioned through various awkward annual stages of mottling to finally solidify into their present dark shade of brown-grey. His beak was a bold yellow and his eyes a rich gold.

Tristan was barely a year old but wore the plumage of an adult for barn owls grow up quickly. He was light golden brown over most of his body with a white, heart-shaped facial disk, black eyes, and cream colored feathers under his wings, tail and lower body. A peppering of grey and

black dotted his back and nape creating an excellent camouflage if he were to roost on stony cliffs or scaly trees like his wilder cousins. Though only a year old, he was plenty old enough for to be independent from his parents and even to consider nesting. But that was far from Tristan's mind.

Tristan and Pepro were apprentice blacksmiths, a trade that could provide well for them for the rest of their lives in the civilized bird society of Volatilia. Both were considered mature by their own species' standards. They could live on their own, take mates, and in this relatively new avian society, they could do, or be, pretty much whatever they wanted. All that limited them was their determination and ability.

Kor was a gruff old raven with shiny dark eyes and a strong, sharp beak matched only by his keen mind. He was a hard master, but fair. The two were eager to earn his approval for his standards were high. The rare affirmation of a job well done was like the warmth of sunshine on a rainy day.

Kor had been visiting with Vasili since before the rain stopped. Tristan and Pepro didn't dare interrupt or inquire what about what was being transacted. They stuck to their work and did their best to look busy. But it was getting late, even for Kor, and Tristan and Pepro were starting to run out of things to do. But they dared not look idle or Kor would

find something undesirable for them to do.

"Tristan!" whispered Pepero from behind the forge, his hushed voice seeming too loud over the dying hiss of the coals.

Tristan stepped out of the shadows and peered towards Kor to make sure he wasn't watching. "Yeah Pepero?"

Pepero shook his white head vigorously and spun out a cloud of grey ash. His yellow beak was smeared with black. His forehead feathers flared and his pupils widened with concern. He struggled to keep his screechy voice to a whisper. "I've swept and put tools away. I'm going to shovel out the forge but then what do we do? What do you think they're talking about?"

Tristan replied quietly "I don't know. Some commission I'd guess. I'm out of things to do too and I'm hungry." His wings sagged as he looked back in Kor's direction. "I guess it's my turn. I'll just have to go ask Kor if we're done."

Pepero used a foot shovel to clean out the forge slowly while watching out of the corner of his eye as Tristan walked towards the drawing room.

Tristan had gained more confidence in the past month. Kor would be more receptive to someone that was sure of themselves, even if he didn't agree with them. Tristan remembered this as he gathered his courage. He made his way past the shelves at the back of the shop and came into view of Kor and the mysterious guest.

Neither bird noticed as Tristan drew closer to the circle

of light around them. Tristan's heart raced as he took in the huge eagle's presence. Vasili's flickering glare, without even being fixed on Tristan yet, sent bolts of fear and awe into his breast. He could see that the two were busily engaged and Tristan felt like he was intruding. He was about to turn and leave rather than press his query but his gizzard growled loudly and Kor glanced over his way.

"M-Master?" Tristan called, with what seemed like too loud a voice. The eagle followed Kor's gaze to the slender barn owl. Tristan felt too conspicuous and shifted his feet. The eagle's fierce stare and proud gaze made Tristan's heart flutter. "I'm, uh, I'm so sorry to bother you, master. Will we be needing the forge any longer today?"

Surprisingly Kor did not scowl or grumble. He looked back at his customer amiably and said "Please, allow me to introduce my apprentice, Tristan. Tristan, this is his highness, King Vasili, from Maamyrskyt a land across the sea and he has come to commission us for some special bonding jewelry."

The eagle's face illuminated with a broad smile and his talons clicked and scraped on the floor as he stepped closer to Tristan. He was several times larger and seemed to have no personal space. Tristan took a step back, his heart pounding and his tail shaking. Just as he was about to take another step back, the eagle bowed his head down, looked at his feet for a moment and then rose again saying "I'm so pleased to meet you,

Master Tristan!" His lifted eyelids and infectious smile added warmth to his proud stare. "Let me greet you in the manner of my kind!" He briefly tapped each side of Tristan's beak with his own and then hugged him with his huge wings. The eagle's words, though heavily accented, engendered trust while his mannerisms projected warmth like a fire on a gray day. Tristan relaxed immediately in the fluffy embrace.

As the eagle released him, Tristan bowed and chirped, "Your highness! Pleased to meet you!" Then he noticed two jars and a skin bag on the table, the kind of bladder used for holding strong drink. He could see that the corners of Kor's eyes were softened and moist. The old bird was drunk.

Kor slurred, "Tristan, yes, you and Pepero may retire forrr the night." His expression iced over for an instant. "And get your sleep for I have an important job for you both tomorrow!"

"Yes master! Right away!" exclaimed Tristan, his chest fluffing up and his eyes smiling.

"Oh another apprentice? Bring him out here! Where is he hiding?" bellowed the gregarious eagle. Pepero heard this and peeked his dirty white head from out of the shadows. "Oh, my! You could be a distant cousin! Come in here, young one!"

Pepero stepped into the light and bowed his head courteously "I'm pleased to meet you sir!" But before he could lift his head, Vasili was tapping his beak sides and hugging him heartily.

"You are strapping for a young bald eagle, Master...?"

"Pepero, sir! At your service!" His head feathers fluffed as he smiled with pride.

"Good! Good! I want all of you to be a part of this! My pair bonding to Margerit! She will be the flower of my nest!" said the eagle loudly, his beak swung back so high that he staggered slightly. He caught himself and chuckled. "Young masters, please take the remains of this flask to celebrate tonight. And here, have these fresh capelin from my homeland carried here today! A fellow fish eagle like yourself will find it most excellent!" He gestured to a bundle on the floor.

Kor's eyes glittered and his mellowed beak nodded approvingly. He glanced at Vasili. "The king and I have more to discuss here. Finish your chores and be on your way!"

"Thank you sir! Good evening to you!" exclaimed Pepero and Tristan in unison. Tristan picked up the flask in his beak and Pepero reached for the bound fish. The two skipped back into the shop with their gifts leaving Kor and Vasili to finish their business. The chores were done quickly and the two flew up to their room above the shop with their treats.

High above inside the hollow there was a loft where Tristan and Pepero roosted and shared space. It was warmed by the forge during the day but in the back of the loft was a small opening to the outside with a swiveling hatch that could be opened for air. Whatever the weather it was always the perfect cozy place

after a long day's work.

Pepro arrived first in the loft with Tristan right on his tail. "Oh my my my, Tristan, we are soooo lucky!" Pepro said as he picked open the twine tying the package.

Tristan landed with the bladder of drink in his beak. He cast a skeptical eye at the fish as Pepro opened the package. The fish were plump and shiny with eggs leaking from some of them. Obviously these were close to spawning. "Ewww, they smell very oily. I'm not so sure about eating those. We barn owls sometimes will catch fish but I've never seen fish like that!"

Pepro's eyes were wide and his beak was watering. He was not discouraged by his friend's reluctance and he grasped one in the middle and it sputtered tiny eggs onto the floor. He ripped the front half of the small fish off and gulped it down. As it slid down his gullet his eyes rolled back and he sighed "oooohhh..."

Tristan's expression lit up "Heh, I haven't seen you look like that since Kor said 'Good job' to you the other day."

Pepro chuckled "This capelin is so fresh and tasty..." he gulped down the remaining half of the fish. "Mmmm... you've got to try it!" He continued to eat as Tristan stood and studied the flask.

The flask was a soft bladder made from a young seal stomach-- tanned and watertight. There was a cork tied to one end. Tristan held the neck of the flask in one foot and nipped

the cork and pulled it off with his beak. He took a tentative sniff and furrowed his eyes. "This smells really strange! But it's something special so I guess I should try it." He grasped the open end of the flask in his beak and tipped his head back. The flask glugged and a splash of seaweed-scented strong alcohol chugged into his throat and down his front. His eyes shot open and he fumbled forward, coughing, and nearly dropped the flask down into the shop below. He hung his head, coughing and wheezing with his tongue protruding and throat burning.

"Are you ok?" Pepero asked as he gulped another fish. The strong smell of dank seaweed wafted to Pepero and he sniffed and studied the scent. He could appreciate another more penetrating vapor within the smell.

"What *IS* this?" Tristan rasped.

Pepero smiled his eyes with familiarity, "Oh! I'll bet it's fykialkol!"

"Fykiawhatsit?"

"Brandy made from fermented seaweed."

Tristan frowned. "It's strong! And it tastes like, like..."

"Like the sea!"

"Worse than sour mouse guts."

Pepero giggled. "Understandable. I guess you've never been to the sea so you wouldn't know what it smells like." Pepero took the flask in his beak and tipped back a large swallow then exhaled briskly "Whew! That's strong! Mmmm..." He leaned back on

his haunches, his crop half full of fish, his fish scale-encrusted feet before him, and a warm glow on his beak. "I've only tasted this once before. It sure reminds me of home by the sea." He offered the flask back to Tristan.

Tristan held the flask in a suspicious foot, unsure if he wanted to sample it again. "What's the sea like, Pepero? I mean, I know there's lots of water, but what else?"

Pepero's eye ridges cocked in a warm, reminiscing way. "Oh, Tristan, I hope you can see it someday. The winds that come off the ocean strike the cliffs and lift you so that you can soar back and forth for hours with barely a flap, all the while bathed in the delicious smells of all the good things to eat. Fish dart around under the waves below you and you can just pick the fattest, nicest ones." Pepero took another swallow and his eyes grew more sparkly. "And when you are hungry, you just glide down and take one from the water or sometimes goodies just wash up on the beach."

Tristan was picking at one of the fish. "Hmmm... this fish is very fresh but a bit strong and oily for this bird." He nibbled up some of the tiny clear eggs. "These eggs aren't as bad." He looked up with a clump of the caviar stuck to his beak tip. "I'm not sure I'd be as excited about eating from the ocean as you, my friend."

Pepero's beak corners were tinged with rose amongst the usual yellow. He smiled his beak corners slightly and delicately

licked the fish eggs from Tristan's beak. Tristan giggled and let him finish.

Then Pepro sat back further, leaning against the wall while his eyes closed and the alcoholic fog took him back to his beloved homeland "...sometimes, when it is clear, and the sun sets or climbs in the morning, you see every color that must exist. The water and sky can be so still sometimes that you can't see where one ends and the other begins. Other times the water is deep blue and still other times it gleams so bright you have to squint your eyes." Pepro's eyes furrowed tighter then relaxed. "Just imagine when storms come straight at you with no hills or trees to slow them down. Oh Great Awakening! The waves get as high as mountains and crash with a loud boom against the rocks. Trees snap and fall in wind that pushes you stronger than a rushing river. It's impossible to fly so you hold close to a strong tree for dear life. Afterwards, lots of creatures, killed by the storm, wash up on the shore and provided us with good things to eat for days." Pepro swallowed and a gaseous burble came from his stomach. "I loved storms... exciting and scary... but delicious after. The sea, the storms... they make a big bird feel very small... glad to be alive."

Tristan took the flask from his inebriated, homesick friend and took another sip and winced, but didn't cough, this time. "Someday, Pepro, you'll have to take me there. I'd like to experience it with you."

Pepro smiled and his head wobbled. He opened his eyes in two dreamy slits and reached out his right wing to hug his friend, "Come 'ere, Tristan!" He wrapped it brusquely around the owl who staggered and fell into Pepro's embrace. He squeezed the barn owl tightly and remarked, "Mmmmmfff! I love you, friend!" Tristan kicked and squirmed a bit to get a breath of air but then Pepro relaxed his grip and Tristan sank into Pepro's fluffy wing pit.

Tristan smiled. "I like you too Pepro." Pepro had been an apprentice for 6 months and Tristan had arrived shortly after. The two got along famously from the start and Pepro had patiently helped Tristan learn his new duties. It hadn't been long before Tristan was carrying out all the duties that a bird of his smaller stature could do but he found that he had a special talent for detail and artistry. Kor recognized this and had begun to teach Tristan about crafting jewelry while he taught Pepro about forging heavier tools, armor, and weapons. There was only friendly competition between the two apprentices as they held each other in high regard. Indeed, it was almost impossible to separate the two and they almost constantly worked or recreated side-by-side as a team.

"I'd just L00000ve to show you around my home" said Pepro, his eyes closed again as the world spun around him. *Brrrrruukk!* Pepro belch loudly from his crop and licked slowly licked the roof of his mouth.

Tristan lay there quietly enjoying the glow of the alcohol and the warm feathery embrace. It was very quiet except for the gentle creaks of the tree trunk around them and their own relaxed breathing. "Are there owls where you are from?" asked Tristan. Pepero was silent for a moment then he snored loudly and let his breath out in a chortled, content chirp. "Aww... my friend, you had a long day" Tristan whispered. He snuggled into Pepero's side and listened to the eagle snoozing and digesting his belly full of fish. The only light was coming from the single candle on the wall but Tristan didn't want to get up and put it out. He daydreamed about the ocean but it was difficult since he had never seen it for himself. He had seen large lakes though so he tried to picture one that reached out to the horizon. He imagined soaring in an updraft, huge waves beating the land below him, and schools of fish and flocks of birds. Imaginings turned to dreams as Tristan fell asleep, and the candle burned low through the night as he cuddled into his best friend.