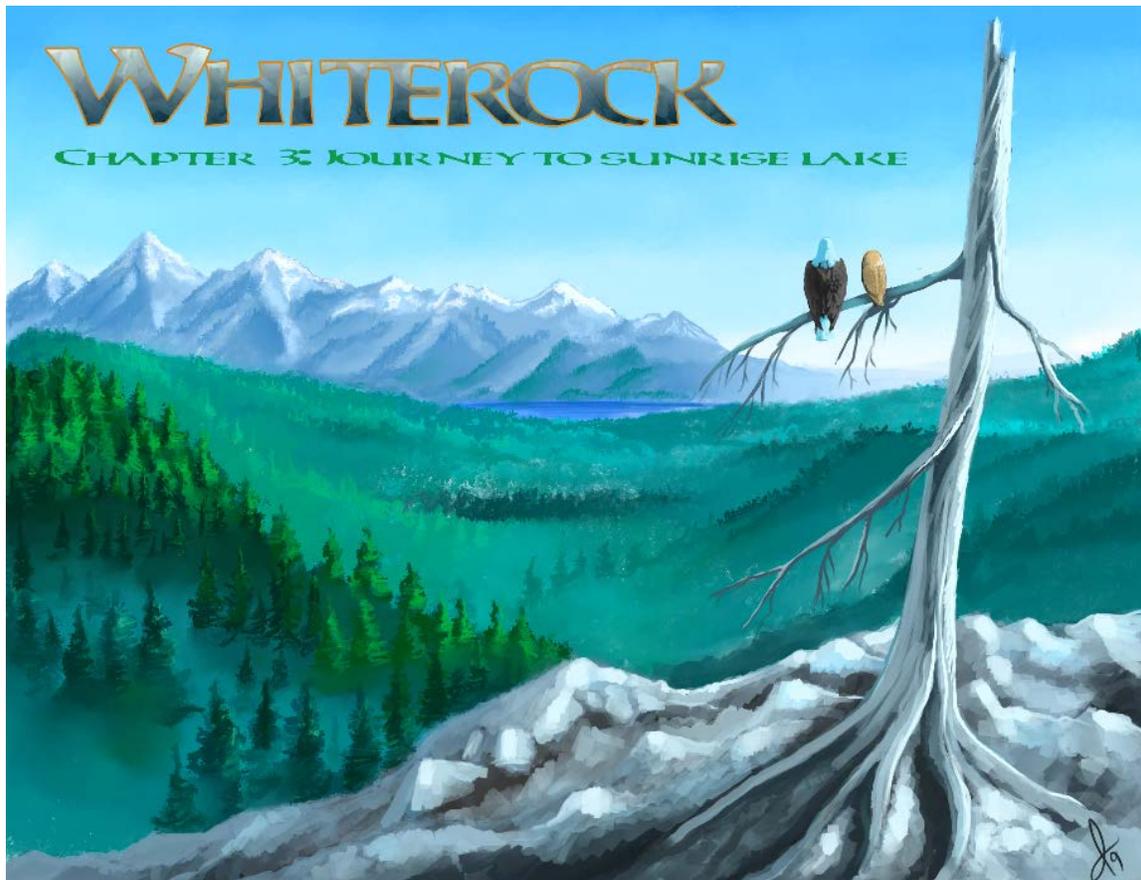


Whiterock

The Gilded Banner

By Hal Aetus

Chapter 3: Journey to Sunrise Lake



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Tristan was excited to be on such an adventure, but also worried. He had not been more than a few miles from the village since he had been apprenticing with Kor. Before that he had only made the trip from his home meadows to the village tree with his father. The world seemed so big and now he and Pepero were set adrift within it.

Tristan was smaller and faster than Pepero but Pepero could go farther with less effort. It made keeping pace with each other difficult so Tristan tended to fly ahead and wait in a treetop for his friend to come soaring by.

By late afternoon they had made it to the eastern watershed and could see the dark blue waters of Sunrise Lake in the hazy distance. Beyond that rose the green wrinkles of the forested coastal ridges. Sharp white peaks stabbed the sky to the north. Tristan waited in the top of a bone-white dead spruce and watched as Pepero soared closer. Pepero lowered his legs, pulled his wings in slightly, and lifted his head. This configuration brought him down swiftly and smoothly with the wind breaking against the wall of feathers he had turned himself into. He dropped below Tristan's level then snapped his wings open and swooped quietly back up to land gently beside Tristan with one easy flap.

Tristan smiled at his friend's knack for flying, "You're a pro, Pepero. That was almost as quiet as my landings!"

"Thanks, buddy, that's a big compliment from a barn owl. Good thing I don't need to be quiet to sneak up on fish though" Pepero replied. Just then Pepero's gizzard growled loudly. "Speaking of which, I could use some fish right now. That's Sunrise Lake down the valley. Looks like we have another hour or so of flying. Perfect! We'll have some supper and sleep with full bellies tonight!"

"Hmm... don't be offended, Pepero, but I'm hoping that I can find something less fishy for dinner tonight." Tristan looked at his toes, "I'm not a very experienced hunter and not much of a natural at it. I think that's why my parents put me with Kor—they figured I couldn't make a living as a hunter like they did."

"Are your parents village hunters?" asked Pepero.

"Mhmm, for the village of Kahnavis." Tristan stared at his delicate, sparsely-feathered toes and small talons. "My feet are weaker and smaller than the other hunters. My parents..." Tristan's voice cracked and trailed off. "I couldn't hunt like my siblings. So, here I am."

Pepero was looking at Tristan's feet too. He shuffled closer to Tristan and bumped him lightly with his left wing so that Tristan lifted his gaze to his friend's face. Pepero smiled and said "Hey, those feet suit you well. You're an artist. So what if you're not the best hunter. How many owls get to make wedding rings for royalty?"

Tristan smiled up at him. "You always make me feel better, Pepro. But everyone expects an owl to be able to hunt." He shifted his gaze out to the blue horizon and said "I guess you're right, though."

"I'm sorry if your parents couldn't see the best in you. Maybe they really do love you but just didn't know what to do." Pepro reached his left wing over Tristan's back and hugged him close. "I can see it hurts you and I won't say it's all ok. But I know one thing for sure. I'm sure glad that we ended up together at Kor's. You're the best friend I've ever had."

Tristan looked back up at Pepro's smiling beak and nuzzled into his soft breast feathers, "That's saying a lot Pepro. You must've met all sorts of interesting birds on your Wander. It sounds like you've been all over Volatalia."

Pepro looked into the distance. "Yes, all the north and all around the coast of the south too. It was fun, sometimes hard, always a bit lonely. And now that I'm old enough to see things different, the loneliness is becoming harder to put over." It was a reference to the swallowing motion that eagles make when they move food from their crop to their stomach. "You're the first bird that has begun to fill that emptiness." He wanted to say more but closed his beak.

A breeze broke the stillness and the dead snag creaked. "I guess we'd better move on." said Pepro. "I've got an idea. I'll get you something special for dinner tonight. When we get to the

lake you'll see an island with a big spruce and an eagle's nest. Wait for me there. It'll take me a while but I'll catch up with you."

Tristan's beak stiffened with concern. "I don't know, Pepro. Are you sure it's such a good idea to separate?"

"You're doing great, Tristan, and I promise that the surprise will be worth the wait!" chirped Pepro, already lifting his tail and relieving himself, a bird's way of preparing to take flight.

"Well, ok, but... please hurry! It's getting late!" called Tristan as his friend out launched out towards the north. Tristan watched Pepro flapping with determination and let out a sigh. "Oh well, I guess he knows what he's doing. He's been around longer than I have." He stretched his wings and headed down the valley with the golden sunshine on his tail.