

Nephyr fidgeted with his wings, his face warm as he stared at the two female birds cleaning up after his nighttime accident. He had been left to lie on the adult sized changing table for a few minutes, a snug strap over his chest ensuring that he wouldn't try to make an escape—though he could've easily undone the seatbelt-style buckle and climbed right off of the table. He wasn't going to do this, though. It was humiliating enough that his crush, Natalie, was present, witnessing, and now partaking in his punishment; trying to struggle or resist would just make him look worse. Difficult though it was going to be, the peregrine falcon knew that the best course of action would be to submit and allow the two ladies to have their way.

“...and it fits just like a regular bed, see?” spoke Evie, a red-tailed hawk, Nephyr's temporary caretaker, and the eldest of the trio. She'd taken Natalie—the prettiest golden eagle that Nephyr had ever laid eyes on, though he'd yet to work up the courage to say so to her face—under her wing, so to speak, and was tutoring her on how to take care of a baby. Albeit one of a larger-than-average size. A clump of blankets and bedding lay at her talons, along with an unfortunate plush bear who'd been caught in the splash zone, destined to go into the washing machine. “And then the blankets go on right over the sheets, nice and neatly. I like to organize all the plushies and pillows to make everything look pretty, but we can do that later. We don't want the little one to get a rash because we're taking too long to fix his bedding.”

The falcon let out a soft whimper, clutching his plushie Mordecai the Second close to his chest as he stared down at the sopping diaper still taped around his waist, the leaky culprit of his soiled bed. He curled his talons as he heard Natalie say, “Oh yes, of course! We don't want little Neph to get too fussy—and I'm so excited to learn how to change his diaper.” Nephyr couldn't tell if the eagle was genuinely excited or just putting it on a bit thickly. She'd mentioned something about how she was gaining community service hours by being Evie's apprentice, so perhaps she just wanted to seem a little more interested than she would otherwise be. But she and Nephyr had known each other for many years, and he knew that she often laid her heart bare on her sleeves. It was very possible that she was elated by the fact that she was about to help Evie change his diaper.

“I bet you are; it's a lot of fun! And therapeutic, I think, but that might just be me,” Evie chuckled, gathering up the soggy bedding. “I'm going to go throw these in the wash and wash my wings; care to occupy him for a few minutes?”

“Sure thing, madam,” replied Natalie. She walked over to the restrained falcon, her claws gently scraping against the carpet underfoot.

Nephyr clutched his stuffed bird tighter, trying to avoid looking his crush in the eyes. He heard Evie's footsteps receding as she left the room. He tried to think of something to say, but no words came to him.

As luck would have it, Natalie was the first one to speak. Resting a wing on his bare tummy, she said, "Neph, hon...look at me, please?"

The falcon took a shaky breath, slowly turning his head to meet the other avian's gaze. He felt his heart flutter a bit as he looked into her topaz eyes. He clicked his tongue. "N-Nat I...I-I'm s-sorry..."

"Sorry?" echoed the eagle, slowly rubbing his tummy back and forth, a feather occasionally brushing against the waistband of his soggy nappy. "Whatever for, hon?"

Nephyr licked his beak. What *was* he sorry about, exactly? "U-um...th-that you have to s-see me like this, I-I guess..."

"Well, I'm certainly not sorry," Natalie replied, giggling a little. "I think you look very cute, sweetie. In fact, didn't we go over this already?"

The falcon nodded meekly, feeling a shiver run up his spine. She'd never called him 'sweetie' before... "W-well...I-I suppose we did, yeah...b-but still. I feel ridiculous."

"Don't say that," she cooed, moving her free wing up to stroke his cheek. "Sure, maybe this is all a little unorthodox, but it doesn't make me think anything less of you. I know that being here wasn't a choice that you made—"

"I-it kind of was, actually," Nephyr interjected, quickly elaborating, "I-it was either, um, th-this, or serve a p-prison sentence and have it on my r-record. A-and either way, it was my own dumb m-mistake that got me here. S-stealing money."

"Well, we all make mistakes, Neph. You're learning your lesson, and I know that you're a good person. It doesn't make me think any less of you as my very good friend." She smiled down at him, holding his wing in hers. "As for your sentencing decision, I think it was a bit of a no-brainer. Who'd want to have something so petty following them around forever?"

The falcon nodded slowly, trying to feel a little more relaxed. This was his closest friend; there was no need to feel nervous around her, even if his situation was less than ideal. "I-I guess you're right, y-yeah...I-I mean, better to be a baby than a jailbird, right?"

Natalie chuckled. “Right! I can’t imagine being a big baby is all that bad, especially when comparing it to that alternative.”

Nephyr snorted. “Easy f-for you to say. You’re not the one w-wearing a leaky diaper.”

“Well, maybe it’s not *all* bad,” the eagle clarified. “I mean, getting to just relax and have fun while everyone around you takes care of the adulting stuff? That doesn’t sound like a half bad idea to me.”

Nephyr furrowed his brow. He wanted to be honest with his friend, to tell her that, for some reason, he actually *was* starting to enjoy all of this. At least, up to a point. The accompanying embarrassment was a rather critically unwanted factor. Moreover, he also wanted her to say more on her opinions of the matter, but he didn’t get the chance to make this inquiry. Evie had entered the room once again, stepping over to stand next to the eagle.

“Alright! I’m so sorry about the wait, baby boy! Let’s get that bottom into a nice and fresh little diapee, shall we~?”

The falcon’s blush returned, and though it was concealed by the black feathers on his face, he was certain that his shyness still showed in his eyes. Both of the girls were looking down at him, waiting for his response. Nodding sheepishly, he managed to stammer, “Y-yes, p-please, mama.”

Natalie’s face lit up as she turned to Evie, while the hawk pulled a few items from the shelf of the changing table. “Ooh, he calls you ‘mama’? I thought he was just dreaming earlier! That is so cute!”

Nephyr hid his face in his wings, embarrassed, but Evie simply giggled. “He sure does! I might not be his actual mother, but I’m certainly his mama. And you can be co-mama, if you’d like to!”

The two younger avians exchanged a glance, one playful and one deeply bashful. To Nephyr’s relief, his friend simply said, “I’ll just be a student for now, I think. Having two mamas might short out little Neph’s brain.”

The falcon let out an indignant chuff as the other two shared a chuckle at his expense. Meanwhile, Evie had laid out a fresh diaper, wipes, and powder, and had already rolled him onto his side to undo the tape just above the base of his tail feathers. “Alright, Natalie, this is the first step for changing diapers. Always undo this tail tape first, but make sure to hold a finger here...and here...until you coax the little one to roll onto his back again. Like so.” A wing on his side gently dragged

him to lie on his back once more. He clicked his beak as he hugged Mordecai tighter, trying to ignore how intently his crush was observing Evie's work. "Next, undo each of the four tapes on the front, and it doesn't really matter what order you do them in—"

"M-mama, I don't th-think I..." Nephyr interrupted, moving one wing to the waistband of his diaper, trying to stop her from getting to the tapes that held it in place. Evie tilted her head, gazing at him inquisitively. He gulped, glancing between her and Natalie. "I-I don't want N-Nat to, um...s-see me...there..."

"But I've seen you there a few times now," Evie replied calmly, trying to shoo his wing away. "There's nothing to be embarrassed about! It's just your body as nature intended it, after all. It's all a part of the changing process, and it's best to get used to it right from the start."

"Y-you seeing it is...different, c-cuz you *have* to, w-with being my caretaker," the falcon protested, his face hot. "B-but Natalie a-and I have been friends f-for a really long time, a-and it's just too...p-personal."

"If the two of you have been friends for that long, shouldn't that make it easier?" countered Evie.

Nephyr shook his head, fighting back a chirp of frustration. "N-no...yes...I-I don't know! B-but I don't want her to s-see me naked..."

"Are you going to be fussy, little Neph?" Evie asked, a hint of sternness in her voice. He didn't answer, only staring up at his caretaker with defiance in his eyes. "Just as well! Alright, Natalie, Nephyr has graciously volunteered to help give you a crash course in one of the more difficult aspects of taking care of a little one; *fussy* diaper changes. This'll be a bit easier since there's two of us, but there might come a time where you have to do it solo, so it's good to learn the techniques now."

"What do you need me to do?" Natalie asked diligently, her tail feathers wiggling eagerly. She really was excited to help change his diaper...

Nephyr opened his beak to say something, mildly furious that his requests and concerns were being completely ignored, but Evie was quick to talk over him. "The key is to get the little one distracted while we clean him up. And I have just the keys to do it. Heh. Ahem! See those down there on the bottom shelf?"

A grin spread over Natalie's beak as she followed where the hawk was pointing. Nephyr, still strapped to the changing table, couldn't see what the object in question was as she bent down to grab it. "I know just what to do with these."

The falcon felt a little bit nervous about what the two ladies had in store for him, and his wing had begun drifting up from his diaper towards the strap over his chest, just in case things swiftly got out of hand—not that he ever thought Natalie would try to hurt him, nor would Evie, for that matter. The movement of his wing was more a self-preservation instinct than anything. However, his trepidation was soon replaced by confusion as his friend revealed what the mysterious object was. Standing up again, she was now holding a set of large, cartoonish, plastic keys. Attached to a green ring, there was a key in red, yellow, blue, and purple, and they all clinked against each other surprisingly loudly for being made of hollow plastic.

Natalie wasted no time in holding the keys a few feet above Nephyr's head, shaking them gently as she let them dangle there, making them rattle clink together. There was a gleam of pure delight in her yellow eyes. "My younger siblings always loved these little keys. I'm sure that you'll love them just as much, Neph!"

Nephyr blinked several times, looking between Natalie and the toy keys. "N-Nat, I—"

"Come on, sweetie, try and get the keys! Show us that you're a big birdie and get the keys!"

The falcon gulped, thoroughly embarrassed at the way his crush was speaking to him. He felt extremely small as he lied there, his uncomfortably cold and wet diaper sticking to his feathers, staring up at the rattling and shaking keys. Natalie lowered them a few inches, beckoning him to try and grab at them. The sound they made, though minorly grating at first, now seemed almost...inviting. As if he were a bee who'd caught the scent of pollen. He suddenly found it impossible to take his eyes off of the keys, and before he knew it, one of his wings was reaching up towards them...when they were suddenly yanked away by Natalie!

"Ooh, so close!" giggled the eagle as Nephyr lowered his wing, looking at her with confusion—and perhaps a small amount of disappointment that he hadn't been allowed to snag the toy. "Come on, try it again! You can do it!" Again, Natalie dangled the keys above his head, shaking them to draw his attention to them.

"I-I...uh..." he stammered, finding it strangely difficult to form a coherent thought, let alone a sentence. The two of them were treating him as if he really was a baby; it was something that he was mostly used to by now from Evie, but the fact that Natalie was falling in line so easily and swiftly made him feel...odd. It was as though he was compelled to listen to her, to do what she wanted him to do.

And right now, that meant trying to grab those jingly, jangling keys.

Nephyr's wing shot up towards the toy, moving quickly to try and catch his friend off guard. But she was quicker, easily moving the keys just out of reach and playfully lowering his wing back down. The falcon stuck his tongue out in concentration, again trying to reach at the shaking, clacking keys. Lying down proved to be disadvantageous, as he couldn't move as accurately or decisively as Natalie could standing up. Still, this didn't dissuade him from starting to use both of his wings, a soft giggle escaping his beak as he continued to try and snatch up the keys. He hardly noticed the tapes of his diaper being undone, nor the rush of cool air as the droopy garment was unfolded.

"First things first, you have to get the little one wiped good and clean," Evie said, speaking very softly to Natalie, as if trying to avoid breaking Nephyr out of the key-induced trance he'd fallen into. "Since his feathers are all black, it can be tricky to see whether or not he's completely clean. As such, there's no harm in going back for another wipe down, just to make sure. Here's the pattern I like to wipe with."

Nephyr felt a cold wipe dabbing and rubbing at his private regions, and his legs spread slightly out of reflex, allowing his caretaker to clean the harder-to-reach places. Still trying to bat at the keys, he didn't realize that his diaper was being changed until Evie lifted his legs up by their ankles, using a fresh wipe to rub his soggy butt clean! The falcon's blush returned as he tried to make eye contact with Natalie. The eagle had surely been playing with him all this time, teasing and taunting him with the plastic toy, keeping it just out of his reach...no, she wasn't. She was making sure that he couldn't get to the keys while she shook them around, but her focus was intent on Evie, watching her every move very closely. She'd managed to not let Nephyr grasp the toy without even looking at his upper body, and he really was trying his best to snag it! This knowledge, along with the fact that his private regions had been fully exposed to his friend, made him want to curl into a ball and hide his face in his wings...

But the keys were still dangling above him, tantalizingly shaking and clacking. Natalie had said that managing to grab them would mean that he was a big bird. It was a silly proposition...but maybe, just maybe, it would actually make him feel that way. Or, at the very least, make him feel like he was still in control of *something*.

"...just tuck them there, and roll up the diaper with them inside, like so." A loud crinkling of plastic signaled that Evie had pulled the wet diaper out from underneath his bum and was working on rolling it up. "Next, we...oh dear, I think our baby boy is getting fussy again."

Nephyr, though he didn't realize it, was making soft grunting, huffing sounds as he tried to grab the keys, as if he were becoming upset that he couldn't reach them. The belly strap was very effective at not allowing him much movement. Only half aware of what his caretaker had said, he let out an ecstatic chirp as Natalie lowered the keys, just long enough for him to yank them from her grasp—which was unexpectedly loose. He grinned and played with the keyring with both of his wings, admiring his prize, overhearing Evie saying something about another technique that he really liked a lot...suddenly, his legs were moving up and down, back and forth, as though he was piloting a bicycle. He wasn't moving them on his own, though...he looked past his keys, his eyes widening as he saw Natalie staring back at him, a smile plastered across her face. She was no longer standing right next to him, but had moved to the foot of the changing table. Holding her wings curled around his flexible talons, she had begun pedaling them back and forth, just as Evie had done the previous day—or was it the day before? His mind was so foggy, he just couldn't remember. But the way his legs were moving, prompting a healthy blood flow through them and the rest of his body, it made him feel so very relaxed. And his friend's soft, yellow-eyed gaze was soothing, comforting...just like his mama's was...his keys clattered softly as he dropped them just above his shoulder, as if he'd suddenly become too tired to hold them.

“Told you he loves it,” Evie whispered, winking at the eagle. “Now, onto my favorite part; a fresh diapering!”

The hawk went over, in detail, how to diaper an oversized hatchling like Nephyr. First, the diaper was unfolded and slid in place, the tail tape refastened—for which the falcon had to be rolled onto his side once more, causing a brief pause in the talon pedaling, but Natalie resumed it as soon as she could. Grabbing the bottle of baby powder, Evie expressed the importance of making his undercarriage “look as though it had been hit by a blizzard, not a flurry, since there was so much plumage,” and soon made her work reflect her instructions. The sweet smell produced by the powder was just as soothing as what Natalie was doing with his legs.

Once the blizzard had alighted upon Nephyr's crotch and bum, his fresh diaper was pulled up between his legs, the front spread out along his waist. The design was familiar to him, as he'd worn one just the previous day; a light blue diaper, decorated with pastel green owls that didn't fade when wet. Evie emphasized the importance of fastening the lower two tapes before the two on top to Natalie, mentioning something about how not doing this may have resulted in the leak sprung the previous night, admitting that it may have been her own mistake after all. After

adjusting the diaper to make sure it rested comfortably around the falcon's waist, Evie gave it a soft pat, resulting in a few clouds of powder escaping the leg holes. As she unbuckled him from the changing table, she smiled and said, "There we are, all finished! What do you say, baby boy~?"

Nephyr gulped as he sat up, the talon pedaling having ceased once his tummy strap was undone. Feeling dazed and clutching Mordecai tighter than ever, he stammered, "Th-thank you f-for changing my diaper, m-mommy."

"You're welcome, sweetheart—but don't forget about Natalie!"

He furrowed his brow, glancing between the two birds. "B-but Nat wasn't the one who ch-changed me..."

"True, but she did help by making sure you didn't get too fussy. So she deserves just as much credit as I do!"

Nephyr locked eyes with the eagle as she stood at the foot of the changing table, her wings clasped as she grinned, waiting expectantly for her friend. She gave a subtle nod of encouragement. "Um...th-thank you for...helping mommy change my d-diaper, Nat..."

"No problem, babycakes," giggled Natalie, stepping to his side to give him a tight hug. It was an embrace that he veritably melted into, pressing his forehead against her shoulder, squishing his plushie in between their bodies. He felt a tear roll down his cheek, though he wasn't quite sure why. True, he often cried when he was under stress or feeling exceedingly awkward or embarrassed; he'd gained the reputation of being a crybaby for virtually all of the schools he'd gone to. But while a sense of embarrassment certainly lingered in the air for him, it was very mild compared to what it had been when he'd first woken up to discover Natalie's presence. But now, pressed up against her, feeling her warmth, her wings stroking along his back...he couldn't describe what he was feeling. It was as though he was happy, sad, anxious, shy, excited, and elated, all wrapped up in a tightly compressed ball of emotion. He quickly, inconspicuously wiped the tear away on Natalie's shirt and hoped it wouldn't be noticed, not wanting to be asked about it. The hug, though it felt longer, only lasted for a few moments, ending as Natalie helped him down from the changing table. It felt great to not have a sopping wet sponge in between his legs anymore; it felt like he could actually walk again without worrying about an excessive amount of waddling.

"You two are awfully cute together," chuckled Evie. "Anyway! That's the basic rundown of a diaper change, Natalie. If you'd like to, I'll let you take the reins



for the next changing session. I'll be there to help guide you along, of course; I wouldn't expect you to do something flawlessly after only seeing it done once."

Natalie nodded, squeezing Nephyr's wing in hers as she cast him a sly, sidelong glance. "I'd be happy to, Evie." He felt his heart lurch. "But since that won't be for awhile—unless Neph *really* needs those diapers—what will we do in the meantime?"

Feeling indignant at such an accusation—or at least the implication of such—Nephyr opened his beak to affirm his toilet training capabilities, but as usual, Evie was quick to speak first. "Well, I was going to go and start getting breakfast ready for us. Oh, any allergies, Natalie?"

"No ma'am, but I can run out and grab something—"

"Oh, tut tut! If I'm feeding the baby boy, I'd be more than happy to feed my protégé! You're my guest, after all. Anyway, while I go and get that ready, perhaps you can help Nephyr get dressed? Anything in that closet there is fair game. And once he's dressed, would you mind occupying him until I call and say that the food is ready?"

"It'd be my pleasure," replied the eagle, winking at Nephyr. "Let's go find you something cute to wear, alright, little one?"

"U-um...y-yeah," answered Nephyr, unable to come up with much of any other reply as he was tugged toward the closet. After telling Natalie to call her if they needed anything, Evie left the two of them alone once again, heading off to the kitchen to prepare them a meal.

Humming to herself, Natalie let her friend stand idly by as she opened the closet, rummaging through the impressive assortment of boyish and girly clothes—though the majority were of the latter descriptor. This was something that the eagle quickly took notice of. "Hmm, there's a lot of girl stuff in here. I bet you'd look cute in a dress; whaddaya say, Neph~?"

The falcon let out a nervous tweet, shaking his head. "I-I uh...d-disagree..."

"Aww, I'm just playing with you...mostly!" giggled Natalie, continuing to look through the hanging clothes. "But you need something more comfortable than a dress first thing in the morning, I think, especially these super frilly and ruffly ones. Lemme see if I can find you something comfy and cozy..."

Nephyr licked his beak, watching Natalie finger through the outfits, any one of which he could potentially end up wearing now or sometime later. “Y-you’re uh...really taking this all quite seriously.”

“Sure am! I wanna work hard for those community service points, and you know I don’t like leaving stuff half done. So, if that means having to treat you like a hatchie, then that’s exactly what I’m gonna do.” Her tail feathers twitched as she pulled something out of the closet. “Ooh, isn’t this just adorable! What do you think, Neph?”

Wringing his wings shyly, he examined the garment that Natalie had chosen for him. It was a short-sleeved onesie with four button snaps around the crotch, which were open as if to signal that it was just waiting to be worn. The bodysuit was primarily red, but only by a narrow margin; it was dotted with squares in all sorts of colors, from red, to pink, to green, yellow, brown, purple, white, and orange. Inside each of these squares was a yellow letter—of a darker shade in the case of the squares which were also yellow—and with them, a cartoonish representation of an animal that corresponded with the letter. There didn’t seem to be every single letter of the alphabet on the onesie, but Nephyr could make out an A for alligator, B for bear, H for hippo, F for ferret, D for duck, E for elephant, and a few more. All of these animals were, almost unsurprisingly, wearing what appeared to be cloth diapers, in the style of what he’d seen on cartoon television shows many years ago. The alphabet animal squares were tightly packed together, but left enough leeway for a few graphics of crayons and stars to be visible in the margins.

Nephyr initially wanted to shake his head, to reject the onesie in favor of something less childish, like a simple, solid-colored romper. But this desire lasted for vaguely a heartbeat. The falcon soon realized that he didn’t just like the onesie’s design; it would be safe to say that he utterly adored it.

“I-I like that a lot, Nat,” he said, nodding happily. “I-I’d love to wear it, please.”

“Wonderful!” giggled the eagle, looking the onesie up and down. “No zipper in the back...I guess you just tug it on like a shirt, then. Seems simple enough! Alright, babycakes, lift up your arms for me—oh, you’ll have to set down your plushie for a moment. Ooh, put him on the beanbag chair, just to make sure he doesn’t hurt his tushie or get stepped on accidentally.”

A shiver ran through Nephyr’s body as she called him that word again. Babycakes. It was much different from ‘sweetie’ or ‘sweetheart’, and even had a

different feel than just ‘baby’. Again, he couldn’t fathom why it made him feel the way that he did, as if he wanted to melt into a hug with the eagle, to have her wrap her wings around him and never let him go...yes, he had a sizable crush on her, but it had never felt so profound before. He cleared his throat and nodded, realizing he was just standing there and staring at Natalie, and hurriedly set Mordecai the Second on the beanbag chair that she’d indicated to him. Once the plush was situated comfortably, he lifted up his arms, angling them forward to help push them through the sleeves of the onesie when Natalie scrunched it up and started putting it on the falcon.

Slipping it on past his head, she gave his tummy a gentle tickle before pulling the onesie down the rest of the way. She got on her knees to fasten each of the buttons, resulting in a series of four strangely satisfying popping noises. His diaper, though mostly hidden from view, left a noticeable imprint in the fabric of the bodysuit, and the rustling noises it created whenever he moved were amplified as well. However, just the fact that his diaper was now obscured from immediate vision made him feel relaxed, as if he could now pretend that he wasn’t wearing it at all.

The only thing on display was the somewhat tight onesie, which was something that he could most certainly live with.

“Th-thank you for helping, Nat,” Nephyr said, struggling to keep an excited trill out of his voice.

“No problem at all, hon!” Natalie chirped in reply, standing back up and returning his stuffed bird to him. “It’s a bit of a snug fit, but I don’t think your diaper will burst through even when it’s wet. Hehehe~ How does it feel? Is it comfy?”

The falcon nodded, preening Mordecai’s head fluff. “Very c-comfy. I always liked kinda tight c-clothing, honestly. It’s like...I dunno, a perpetual hug, i-in a way.”

“And everyone knows that babies need to be hugged regularly!” crooned his friend. “So, c’mere, ya big softy~” She stepped forward and pulled him into a hug once again, and it was one that he happily returned. It made his chest feel warm and bright, made his tail feathers swish with childlike happiness. But, despite how wonderful it made him feel, he wasn’t upset when the eagle broke away. The promise of future hugs remained, and that was more than enough to satiate him for now.

And, speaking of satiating, he was beginning to get rather hungry, as testified by a rumble of his belly. The two of them exchanged a glance and shared a laugh. “I-I’m getting hungry. I hope breakfast is r-ready soon.”

“Same here,” admitted Natalie. “Something smells good! But I have to occupy you until the food is ready, so...hmm, let’s see...something that little baby birds would want to play with...”

Both birds looked around the room, looking for something that would distract them from their rumbly bellies—Nephyr directly, and Natalie by proxy. There was a rather large toy set of a castle next to the toybox, equipped with all sorts of dolls and furniture. Though they both noticed it at once, Natalie seemed to decide to spare him from the embarrassment of playing with such a set; she, at least, didn’t seem bent on making him act like a girl. It was rather refreshing. Instead, she strode over to examine the large, light purple toy chest, holding it open with one wing as she rummaged through it with the other, moving carefully to try not to disrupt the impressive amount of neatness and order within. Nephyr waddled over to stand beside her, peering over her shoulder. He’d taken a brief look into the container the previous day, just long enough to confirm that there wasn’t much of particular interest. Whatever she picked out for him would be better than the castle set, though.

“How about these?” asked Natalie, pulling out a pair of foam swords and a plastic shield. “We could have a play fight! There’s plenty of open space in the room, and we can move over stuff like that beanbag temporarily. And your little plushie can be the damsel you have to save!”

Nephyr chuckled at the thought, but shook his head. “I-I’m not really in the mood f-for that. O-or for anything that involves a lot of, er, m-moving. Um, s-sorry.” He actually quite enjoyed swordplay—one of his favorite videogames revolved around it, and he had a small collection of real swords at home, but they stayed on their wall mounts and weren’t actually sparred with.

“Nothing to apologize for!” Natalie assured him, putting the toy weapons and shield back in the toybox. “I suppose playfighting is out of the cards for a little baby like you, anyway. We don’t want you to get hurt!”

The blushing bird let out an indignant huff, pouting and answering, “I-I’m notta baby, though...”

“Oh, yes you are!” giggled the eagle, turning around to face him for a moment. “I may not have the nose of a wolf or a cat, but I still have a knack for sniffing out the little babies!” Grinning coyly, she leaned close to him, resting her beak against his neck. Feeling flustered at the sudden approach, Nephyr could only stand there and continue blushing as, after drinking in his scent for a moment, Natalie pulled away and said, “Mm...yup, just as I thought. You’re *very* little.” Without giving the

falcon a chance to defend himself, the eagle turned back to the toybox and, with an interested chirp, extracted a toy intended for a much younger demographic; a stack of multicolored rings, the bottommost ones rather large, but growing gradually smaller as they neared the top of the white pedestal upon which they sat, held in place by a yellow spire. “How about these? This could be a fun little game!”

“I-I don’t see why not,” said Nephyr, a little surprised at how he answered with almost no hesitation, especially given the belittling exchange they’d just had. He told himself that he’d just wanted to agree to something before Natalie tried to push one of the talking toys upon him; those would’ve certainly gotten his feathers in a bunch. “I’m n-not sure if it’ll occupy me until b-breakfast, though.”

“That’s alright! We can switch to another game if it ends up getting too boring,” replied the eagle, taking a few steps towards the center of the room and sitting down upon a colorful playmat. Nephyr followed suit, his diaper rustling underneath his bottom as he put weight on his backside, holding Mordecai tight against his belly. “Close your eyes for a moment, babycakes.”

The falcon, though confused by the request, nodded and did as he was asked to do. His face warm by the repeated nickname, he listened to the sound of clattering, followed by hollow, stiff plastic clinking against plastic, albeit not at all what the toy keys he’d left on the changing table had sounded like. When he was given the green light to do so, he opened his eyes again to see that Natalie had dumped the rings off of the stand and shuffled them so that they lay randomly strewn out around the pedestal. Though initially befuddled at why he’d had to keep his eyes closed for such a seemingly insignificant ordeal, Natalie’s next words clarified exactly what she’d had in mind.

“Alright, little Neph. Make your...hmm...babysitter-slash-big-sister proud by showing her that you can put the rings back in order!”

Nephyr cocked an eyebrow, moving his legs to sit crisscross and setting Mordecai the Second in his lap as he examined the rings. It was, of course, too simple to even consider it a puzzle. There were six rings, and not only was it easy enough already to distinguish which was larger or smaller, but they were also color coded to form a rainbow. The largest, purple ring would go on the very bottom, followed by blue, then green, and so on until the red one was last to go on the pedestal. However, he knew that Natalie wasn’t trying to question his intelligence. She was trying to get him to loosen up a little and play with her.

She wanted him to show a small side of himself. The side that he'd been trying to repress, to try and deny its existence for the last handful of days because of the anxiety and confusion it created within him. His desire to embrace this bizarre, second childhood that was being thrust upon him, warring with the need to rebel against and resist such embarrassment. Natalie, of course, was completely unaware of this mental struggle of his, and therefore wasn't trying to provoke it. All she wanted was for him to play along and pretend.

And Nephyr wanted to give it his best shot.

Licking the rim of his beak, he reached for the purple ring. Lifting it up, he fumbled with it for a moment—his wings were rather shaky—before letting it slide down the yellow stand, giving it a gentle push as it snagged towards the bottom.

“That’s right, purple goes first! Good boy!” praised Natalie, making Nephyr feel warm. Not just on his face, but his entire body. “Think you know what goes next?”

The falcon tilted his head, starting to reach for the blue ring...but instead altered his course and pointed at the yellow one. “That...d-dat one?” he asked, softly and sheepishly.

“Ooh, good guess, but not quite!” answered his friend, unable to hide a tone that betrayed her excitement about him playing the role of a baby. Or, perhaps, a small toddler. “Look closely at the other five rings. One of them has a color that’s very similar to blue. Can you tell which one it is? I’ll give you a hint...it’s not this one.” She pulled the orange ring aside.

Nephyr rubbed the underside of his beak, his eyes narrowed in thought as he pretended to deliberate for a few moments longer. He felt a little silly, acting like a fuzz-for-brains child, but he wanted to see this through for as long as he could stomach it. He picked up the blue ring. “I-It’s dis one!” Forcing out a soft giggle, he pushed the ring onto the pedestal, on top of the larger purple ring.

“Great job, sweetie!” Natalie applauded him, ruffling his head feathers. Moving the orange ring back to its earlier position, she asked, “Now, do you want a hint for the next one? It’s a little bit trickier this time!”

Pretending to examine the remaining toys closely first, Nephyr let out a huff of frustration and nodded. “Y-yes ple...pwease. Um, d-dis game is h-hard.”

“It is, but you’re doing great so far!” the eagle assured him. “Now, this next ring is a mixture of two colors. One of those colors is blue, like the ring you just put

down. Do you know which of these four colors can be made with blue and one other color?"

Squinting, Nephyr poked a few of the rings. "Is it...dat one?" He pointed at the red one.

"Nope! But you can mix blue and red together to make purple," Natalie informed him with a chuckle. "Try again!"

"Hmm...ooh! It's gween!" he chirped, picking up the ring and putting it on the stand. "You mix bwue and yewwow t-to make gween. A-and since yewwow is the other c-color, dat's the ring that comes next, I-I think." He followed the green ring with the yellow one, releasing a tweet of happiness as he proved his own hypothesis correct.

Natalie clapped for him, seeming just as happy as he was. "Way to go, little one! Just two more to go! Can you show me which one of these is bigger?" She held up the final two rings, the orange and red ones. Putting on a game face of intense concentration, Nephyr's gaze flitted from one to the other, trying not to linger on the eagle's face in between for too long. He reached for the red one...and, at the last second, picked up Mordecai and used his soft, fuzzy wings to snatch up the orange one instead, placing it with the others, and following with the red on top.

"I did it!" giggled the falcon. "We did it!" he corrected himself, holding up his stuffed animal in front of him like a newborn lion cub. "Go team Mordy! Teehee!"

"You sure did! It was great teamwork!" affirmed Natalie, gently moving aside his hard work and well-earned victory. "You sure know your colors and sizes very well! Can I quiz you on something else, perhaps?"

Nephyr nodded eagerly, feeling proud and confident—a pair of emotions quite unusual for him, and not something he'd felt since well before his punishment began. Puffing out his chest, he said, "Yes you can! A-and I's gonna do great! Cuz I-I's the smartest birdie e-ever!"

The eagle grinned, looking ready to put the claim to the test. "Alright, then! Let's see just how well you know one of the hardest things for hatchies to get memorized...your ABCs! And it just so happens that we have a great way of figuring them out!" She wiggled a finger in front of his beak, then moved it down...and alighted on his tummy. She was pointing at his onesie; specifically, at one of the colored squares upon it. "What's this letter and animal, baby boy?"

Looking down at where she was touching him, he giggled as he saw the purple square she was indicating. “Dat’s easy! Dat’s da letter A, for Alligator!”

“Mm-hmm! I wanted to start you off easy...here’s a trickier one!” She moved her finger towards a red square.

The falcon stuck his tongue out as he thought. “Hmm...dat *is* twickier...dat’s da letter H...Oh! And dat’s a hippopopotatomus!”

Natalie let out a squeal of laughter, giving Nephyr’s beak a gentle bop. “You’re so adorable, Neph~ How about this one?”

“D, for ducky!”

“And this one?”

“F, for...for...ferret...” Nephyr trailed off, his wing moving to his mouth. His stammer...it was gone. It wasn’t the first time that it had disappeared before; just the previous night, during a conversation with Evie, it had vanished for a few moments. Now that he’d noticed its absence, he was sure that it’d come back with the next thing he tried to say, but he wasn’t concerned about that. Rather, he was again perplexed at why it had gone away when it had. It only happened when he felt deeply relaxed and comfortable, which was certainly a rarity. And now, again, it had disappeared when he was acting like a very small child...a hatchling...

“Sweeties!” came Evie’s voice from outside the nursery, disrupting the falcon’s thoughts and making Natalie pause as she went to point to another square on his onesie. “Breakfast is ready! Come and eat up!”

“On our way, ma’am!” the eagle called back, standing up and helping Nephyr get up, too. “We’ll continue our quiz later, babycakes. Let’s go and get our tummies nice and full! Sound good?”

Nephyr blinked a few times, holding Mordecai in one wing and Natalie’s wing in his other. He felt dizzy, confused...but happy and peaceful. He nodded and smiled shyly, promising himself that he’d explain his thoughts to his crush some other time, if not later today, assuming they had some more privacy...or perhaps he’d do it in front of both of the ladies, to show his trust towards his temporary mama...it was something that he had to think about, but not on an empty stomach. “Y-yeah. That s-sounds great, Nat.”

*To Be Continued*



