CHAPTER 15

Under Clear Skies

**alty**

The party bid their farewells to the elders and attending bears and made their way outside, where Elliot awaited them with the reins of three horses in his paws. These were the same horses they had released when first they crossed the mountain into the northern plains, evidently having been found and cared for by the bears while they were away. All but Alton mounted one, and they rode off back to the cemetery where the bird warrior had been awakened. They looked on at the mausoleum where he slept, but did not stop, riding past it and leaving it in the past where it belonged. Alton, thanks to Joanne and his friends--perhaps even the gods who gave him life after death--had already decided to live out the rest of his days with them, as long as they would have him.

They did stop, however, when a bone-dry seagull skeleton flew in front of them, an angry talking skull in its beak. "UNBEAK ME YOU DISGRACEFUL AVIAN! I will NOT be stopped from wreaking havoc on the mortal realm!"

The seagull perched itself on a tombstone overlooking a deep hole, into which the undead bird dropped the evil-looking skull. "Noooo~!!" it screamed pathetically as it fell, in contrast to his more commanding tone a moment ago. "That's what you get for making me chase you all around this place. Go to sleep!" said the undead seagull, using his beak and bony feet to kick dirt back into the hole.

He turned around and recognized the party from several days ago, when the great re-awakening happened. "Oh! Hi there. Uh... most of us went back to sleep like you said we would... except me and him. I guess it only works if you're buried. Anyways, some of the undead people you woke wrote some letters and asked me to give them to you."

The bird hopped over behind one of the tombstones and emerged with a small bundle of letters in his beak. He hopped over and stretched his beak out to Remmy, who retrieved the letters and put them in his satchel. "Thank you," he said. "We'll make sure these get to their kin, best as we can do to find them."

"Thanks. It was nice to be awake for a while, except for dealing with old Murphy here. But now I'm gonna do the same. Toodles!"

With that, the soon-to-be-redead seagull clacks himself away and somehow flies off to his final resting place in the labyrinth.

It was dusk by the time they exited the labyrinthine burial grounds. They happened to stop by the site of their initial campfire at quest's start, where only the charred remains of kindling sat inert inside a ring of stones and a few logs for benches. The kingdom of Altair was only a few hours' ride away, meaning they could either arrive by nightfall, or camp in the wilderness for one more night.

**Night Shyne**

Pierre looks to the princess for an answer. "We're rather close, but our arrival will take us just about to nightfall. You may or may not be rushed straight to bed while tired?"

"Tired? Traveling with all of you? Hardly! Oh, physically perhaps, but within the castle walls - nay, within kingdom town bounds - I won't be physically demanded. Surely we could rest an hour and still make it in time for dessert...though it's better on that front were we to arrive earlier."

"Princess Nagoya, are you by chance hungry?" Alton asks, somewhat concerned.

"Now that you mention it. Not starving but peckish. Would it be too much trouble to make camp enough for a meal?" she asks.

"I'd rather just get back sooner," says Paul. "I'd like to ride on ahead and deliver the message, but can't alone without taking one too many steeds..."

"Eh, we'd be fine," claims Alton. "But perhaps you could continue ahead with the owl?"

"I confess to prefer haste as well," said owl responds. "Only the idea of it being somehow better or non-suspicious to return as one, or out of desire to allow the horse to rest, would stay me." He looks to the crane. "And those are your areas of study more than mine."

**alty**

Nagoya hummed to herself as she examined one of the horses, passing a wing over their back. "Well, Remmy, you're right to think it's better that we stick together, especially as it grows dark. I'm well aware of the situation with roving bandits outside the city. But I'm also certain the kingdom knows we are close. High flying scouts should have been watching us overhead as we rode, and I expect an escort of knights to be headed in our direction, clearing the path of any dangers. Besides, I am in the safest and most reliable company already," she said, gesturing to her companions. "So, in conclusion, there is no need to hurry. Let's let the horses rest and enjoy the last meal of your quest."

"Very good, Your Highness," said Remmy. "Come, Paul, help me with the fire."

**Night Shyne**

It takes Paul a bit of effort, and a bit more healthy fear of overpowering his cast, to safely rekindle the campfire. Handling the food seems more his speed, and make a camping-worthy feast he can.

**alty**

Paul shaved the bark off a bundle of thin sticks and branches he'd collected before skewering the large red snapper provided in the travel rations from the bears. Two salt-cured fish per ration, and one ration per person. The rations also provided berries, mint leaves and mushrooms, the latter being added to the skewers before Paul handed them out.

"Oh, how tasty," said Nagoya, taking a seat next to Pierre on a log and holding her stick over the fire along with him. Joanne and Alton sat on the next log doing the same, and Remmy and Paul were last to sit, the former fixing up the feed bag for the horses.

"Nothing quite like a campfire dinner, is there Princess?" Joanne asked.

"No, not at all. The cool air, the quiet, the isolated bright spot in the darkness..."

"...and a star-filled sky," said Alton, looking up at the constellations overhead. He sighed, his tone growing wistful. "They haven't changed at all, have they?"

**Night Shyne**

Remmy nods. "True, but it's believed they do change...imperceptibly. On a timescale of divine comprehension, or far longer. They move so slowly we could never, ever tell in our lifetimes...even an immortal would never be certain."

Paul leans in interest. "Is it now? I've heard tell that those stars are all but other suns, save for closer lights that move through constellations more. That those are other places, other planes. Other worlds..."

"They are! But seemingly they are desolate places. So far away that scrying them is difficult," Remmy states, "and I daresay I have first-hand experience attempting it. They do all appear circular; which raises questions of the shape of our own world."

"I thought it had been proven possible to travel all around it," Alton asks.

"Correct. It has been proven to be a cylinder. To some, a tapered cylinder, like a barrel, or a full sack of potatoes; all depending whether you believe that evidence." He leans conspiratorially. "Some say it *must* be as round as a sphere. And while I get accurate results calculating as such, I refuse to believe it is a perfect sphere without travel around the north or south pole. And even then, I can believe it to be *slightly* deformed, can I not?"

Nagoya laughs. "Well if it's already rather round and there is such evidence that worlds are all circular, why not believe this one a sphere?"

Paul raises a hand. "I'm more interested in other stars than our own. Have they other planes as well? Have those planes other moons? Other life? Other...magic?"

**alty**

"Other magic? That's interesting, but..." Joanne paused to gobble a shroom from her stick, "...isn't magic rather like... arithmetic? Fundamental rules of nature governing everything, not just our own plane?"

"Exactly right, Joanne," Remmy replied, then paused to blow a flame off his stick and turn it over. "One plus one should equal two no matter where or when you are, assuming we're working with whole numbers. If those assumptions--the variables we understand and rely on--are different than we expect, well... there's possibly no telling how different another plane might look, feel or work. If magic is a matter of manipulating masses and forces, then those are the two variables we need to understand first."

Alton, Pierre and Nagoya crunched on their toasted fish sticks discreetly as the conversation progressed, their attention focused on the one speaking before shifting back to appreciate the tasty morsel.

The burly bird warrior spoke up first. "It sounds like what you're suggesting is there could be a plane of sapient fish, or horses, somewhere out there, living under a green sky instead of a blue one."

Paul offered his speculation next, after gulping down his bite of fish. "A-and perhaps mountains are made of ice instead of stone?"

"Yes!" Remmy exclaimed. "And we may yet only be scratching the surface! It is quite frankly the stuff of fiction, which is not a slight against any of our speculating here."

**Night Shyne**

"Perhaps," suggests Pierre, "the better one understands our own world, the better one can construct a fictional one."

"And the better one can explore their interests by writing how they could change in a world unlike their own," muses Alton.

"Precisely! Now I almost feel like I ought to do such a thing, even as a short story...were I not poor at many social skills beyond necessity, and any characters would reflect that..." Remmy looks off to the side.

"What? But you've been nothing but pleasant this whole time!" Joanne disagrees.

"Maybe I only believe myself poor in that regard. I'm an excellent student and good study, but have had to beat social skills into myself until they stick."

"They've stuck this whole journey," Pierre affirms. "Mayhaps you always had something relevant to speak on: the quest."

"I suppose that did help." He sighs. "Maybe it's a mountain where a molehill belongs. Or an anthill..."

**alty**

Pierre looked pensively a moment at his half-eaten fish stick, then looked up at Remmy.

"You know, my friend, I've only known you ever since this quest began, but it feels like I've known you for much longer."

The swan held his stick over the fire to warm it a little more. "In fact, I remember you once mentioning you had been propped up to take on this quest with me, which tells me you didn't necessarily volunteer. Is that right?"

**Night Shyne**

"True, but had I really wanted to say no, I had a position to say no. I'm glad I didn't though; probably all the better and best, considering the village of owls..."

**alty**

"Yes it was," Pierre replied. "And I think the same way you succeeded on this quest, with unwavering confidence and commitment, so too could you achieve a more mundane and long-term quest for yourself: see the world, and the people in it."

"Even if only to find out whether we live on a barrel, or a sphere!" Nagoya exclaimed. Alton, Joanne and Pierre laughed, and Paul gave off his brightest smile yet.

**Night Shyne**

"Surely you jest. I myself will not partake in expeditions to such extremes...although, I would gladly provide enchanted gear for anyone fearless enough to undertake the frigid climes so close to the poles. Perhaps there is indeed birdkind that lives there..."

**alty**

"Well, in that case, " Nagoya said, "Perhaps I will charge you with assembling that team and sending them off instead? No rush, of course. I would not deprive you of a well deserved vacation first."

The conversation died down shortly after as the remaining fish and mushroom skewers were consumed, followed by the berries and refreshing mint leaves for dessert. Each pair hunkered down together around the fire and let the noise of crackling wood, and crickets, and distance wolf howls lull them to sleep.

**—----**

**Night Shyne**

Remmy is the first to awaken; hushed murmurs cause groaning, as he awakens near the break of day. The sun already above the horizon, he opens his eyes only to get a face full of sun and shut them again. "Please don't be bandits," he grumbles.

"Bandits?" Alton questions from his own lying position. "I should hope not..."

"Quite the opposite. Escorts from the King of Altair; guards. Sorry to wake you..."

"...going back to sleep, wake me when we design to move," Remmy says, turning over and away from the dreadful sun.

**alty**

A petite yawn followed Remmy's grumbling. "Oh my... I confess it wasn't the most comfortable night's sleep, but happy to greet the morning out in the wild. Ah! Father's guards, you've arrived! Come everyone, time to rise. You too, Master Remmy."

Pierre had already risen by the time Nagoya gently shook the owl's shoulders. Remmy moaned in protest, but started to get his limbs under him to stand once the swan and crane happened to block the sun for him. Joanne rose from her coiled mound and collected her staff and pouch while Alton stood up and stretched his bulky trunk with a grunt, and Paul shook off his own stupor to help the owl collect their belongings.

"Please follow our escort, Your Highness," said the tall, decorated pelican knight. "We have a pair of carriages to commute you and your party to the castle. Preparations are being made to celebrate your return as we speak."

"Thank you, Captain Hornigull. We will follow your lead."

**Night Shyne**

All steeds are quickly accounted for. Remmy's protests are so ignored that he threatens to sleep within a jar; Nagoya informs him this would be quite unbecoming of him. And napping in a carriage would be frowned upon if only for the space he would take up...

**—----**

**alty**

After a brief gallop, the Princess' retinue reached the northern gates, already opened with guards posted in front and on the ramparts above. Past it were the two royal carriages awaiting their arrival, large enough to accommodate four average-sized birds each, and around it a multi-species throng hooping and clapping at the long awaited return of the Royal Princess of Altair and the heroes who vanquished the dreaded Storm Lord.

Nagoya and the party waved and bowed their heads at the denizens of Altair as they walked over to the carriages. Nagoya mounted the first carriage, followed by Pierre, Remmy and Paul, leaving Joanne and Alton to have the second carriage to themselves. With the path cleared, save for onlookers on either side, the drivers impulsed their steeds down the winding Castle Road.

**Night Shyne**

Paul sighs. "I feel out-of-place. Like this isn't the trio to go with."

Pierre shrugs. "Seems more a matter of build than duty or share of glory."

"I feel a little like an imposter sharing any of it! But since you all insist..."

**alty**

"It's alright, Paul," Nagoya comforted him. "Your role, though small and late, was significant, and you've made your sincerity well-known to me in the short time we've journeyed together. You have earned your place here. Trust my royal decree, if nothing else," she said in a mock tone, placing a wing over her chest.

"Besides," Pierre interjected, "you have more important things to think about. Like what you'll be doing after today. But for now, feel free to relax and enjoy the celebration. I'm sure your best days are still ahead of you."

Remmy stayed quiet and sitting up, his head bobbing forward as if weighed down by something heavy. Pierre was about to jolt him awake with a wry mention pertaining to the conversation, but seeing Nagoya's sympathetic expression, he decided to give the old owl the short nap until they arrived on castle grounds.

**—-**

**Night Shyne**

The King is there, out in front, in full regalia. And a guard holds an extra sword ready. Pierre sees two looks in his eyes as the carriages approach; one of pride and love, and one of challenge and readiness. "Nagoya. I believe your father would like a second round. Perhaps to test my new sword. Or to take it; it's a loaner, as well as a prisoner."

"He does?"

"That or hugging you are his first and second orders of business, if his eyes and body language tell me anything."

Behind them, Alton too notices the body language. "There, in the guise of a king, stands a very conflicted man."

Joanne narrows her eyes. "Are not all kings men of conflict? Violent ones in conflict with others, peaceful ones in conflict with multiple ideas..."

"True. This is not a normal kingly conflict, however..." Alton elaborates. "He has made up his mind, but has multiple duties to perform. And must decide what comes first. He must command his own attention as well as the rest of ours..."

**alty**

Nagoya disembarked the carriage with Pierre and then quickly ran to her father, throwing her wings around his back and cradling his neck with hers. The King cradled his daughter with his own wings, leaving only their heads and necks exposed as they embraced for a moment, and then released. The Queen followed, embracing her daughter a moment longer before looking to her husband. They nodded to each other in a silent exchange, and she led Nagoya to one side, leaving her swan and his companions before the Crane King.

Pierre knelt in fealty to the tall regent and bowed his head, the others following suit. He clutched the scabbard to his side and removed it from his belt, holding it aloft in front of him. "I return the Princess to you, my King, and the sword you gave me, now bonded with the once-dreaded, now-captive Storm Lord."

**Night Shyne**

The King looks down upon him and smiles at Pierre. "Remain, for now, and I apologize to make you wait. Heroes, present yourself?" With that, all others present themselves before the King, quickly taking a knee but for Joanne. "Firstly, I see the party is larger than when it departed. Alton! The legends fail to do you justice. You look hale and hearty and strong...and I believe you've a big heart to match."

**alty**

"My strength is a blessing from the gods, and so too my friends who have renewed my heart. In either case, my humble thanks to you, my liege."

"I am honored to have such a long lost hero of old give me his gratitude. And now, Joanne, I believe? ... A sojourner who answered no call from this crown, but perhaps the call of destiny, not unlike Sir Alton."

Joanne bowed her torso at the hip, where her anthropoid body became serpentine. "I am honored, great King of Altair. Though my path I chose, I do not doubt that Fate placed the path before me."

"Well said. And as for the choices of Fate and mortals...

**Night Shyne**

Paul, is it...a kind and curious sort who'd do well under watchful eyes and with some tutelage. Not all battles are won with those who know how to fight, and I hear your contributions were essential."

Paul bristles a little at the praise. "Thank you, milord."

**alty**

The King nodded, and finally rested his gaze on the prostrated owl. "Master Remmy, as the senior mage and second inaugural member of this campaign, you have completed your appointed task without a single loss to speak of. Your efforts have not only brought my daughter home, and all of you with her, but also have secured allies along the way. For someone who prefers the company of mages and grand halls of grimoires and laboratories, you have proven yourself a most valuable diplomat. Of course, in respect to your seniority, you have the privilege of training someone else to take such a role."

The King's eyes slowly swiveled over to Paul, before flitting over to Pierre. "Now, rise, all of you. Thank you again for your service and fealty to this kingdom. I now ask that all but Pierre vacate this square."

**Night Shyne**

As the party makes to leave the square - a literal circle of paved tile - Pierre is the slowest to return to standing. "How long has it been? A week, more? Since my rash action spurred this quest-"

"Broke me from my funk. And I could never thank you enough with words..." The King reaches a hand out and takes the scabbard from his guard. "But we are men of action, and actions speak louder." He snaps, and both he and Alton feel a familiar ironskin spell wash over them. "I've less on my mind thanks to you, and had reason to practice. You've been practitioning your art too, and it's for that reason we are here together today. Please, Pierre. Allow us to demonstrate for this kingdom an ounce of the might of heroes and kings."

Pierre nods, and steps back some paces as the King withdraws his sword from his scabbard. "How many touches?"

"One."

The two point their swords. The crowds gasp, but nobody is fearful. Pierre's own teacher, the one he understudies as tutor to, steps barely into the cleared circle in the square at the nod of the King. "You've done your research on me..." Pierre says.

"I could never be prouder of you," the instructor says. "En garde...prêts?" The swordsmen focus upon each other's blades and their own. Pierre hears Paul begin to cheer, but somebody covers his mouth. "Allez."

**alty**

Pierre draws his dragonsword and holds it close, its point aimed at the King. Though confident in his own skill as a swordsman, there was a new tension in the air that wasn't there before, when the crane regent first challenged him. The old bird's eyes were sharp, thin slits now, slicing through him as if to ask, "What are you waiting for, Pierre?"

*Fair question*, Pierre thought, *but a better one is what am I in for?*

He decided to find out. The brave swan fencer stepped forward, then again, closing the distance while keeping his center of mass, back arm extended and head held tall on his long neck. The King decided to test the would-be knight's balance and reflexes first, attempting to catch him off guard by going on the offense: a tap against the dragonsword, followed by a jab towards the swan's neck. He expected Pierre to fall back, but instead the young bird bent his neck to dodge the first jab, feinted left, and then strafed right and smacked the King's sword to one side. For that moment, the King was open to a hit.

Pierre thrusted at the King's waist, expecting to end the duel sooner than their first one. But the King turned his torso right, bringing his back hand around to swat the swan's blade away with his heavy cape. The crane's parry was lightning quick, immediately swinging around to point his sword at Pierre and continue the offensive, this time putting Pierre on the back foot with a flurry of strikes and jabs. Pierre didn't see an opening this time, resigning himself to keep his balance while diverting the King's blade away from him.

**Night Shyne**

*I had him wrong last time. Truly he did not fight his best then*, Pierre thinks, while thinking on his feet. *I was wrong to underestimate him then and right not to do so today*.

He takes initiative and stabs about when the king does to risk a draw, and bait the king to going on the defensive. He succeeds as the monarch steps back from the danger, pulling his sword along with, and Pierre keeps his turn as best as he can think to: pressing the advantage with some precise and some wilder swings and strokes.

And all that does is tire him out as the King more efficiently defends than the hero can attack.

**alty**

Pierre realizes the tactical error and retreats back, allowing the monarch to take the offensive and starting pushing him back. But now, the King began to huff from the exertion, which gave the swan an opening to sidestep away from the edge and swat the crane's blade aside.

Both took a moment to catch their breath, swords held out and in the proper forward stance. In a more casual setting, pausing like this would invite a light exchange of words between two combatants, waiting for each other to get a second wind. Or perhaps that was a more theatrical expectation. Regardless, nothing filled the pause but tense silence and the quick shuffling of talons side-to-side.

The crane gripped the royal rapier in his right hand. A tell that sometimes telegraphs a strike, but then his head and neck shifted erratically forward to the right, carving a jagged ‘Z’ in the air with his beak while the rapier jabbed to the left. Pierre moved back just in time to avoid the tip from glancing his arm, and he twirls his wrist around to smack the blade up.

**Night Shyne**

Pierre sees an opening in the King's eyes and makes a stab for center mass...

The King sees the glint in Pierre's eye and catches the jab with his ornate guard, and then swirls it around and around. Pierre tries to keep his grip as his blade is taken for a ride by a lighter weapon...

The King pulls out his sword in a moment, and in the next he jabs the point forward again, into Pierre's confused hand. The swan lets go of his sword.

**alty**

Pierre felt disappointed in himself that he didn't last longer, at least. Most fencing matches are not lengthy affairs, but given the occasion, his ambition towards becoming a master duelist demanded victory. At the very least, a longer fight would have satisfied the dramatic showswan in him. Embarrassing as it felt, he recognized that he approached the King that day not as a master fencer, but as an instructor's assistant. This humbling served not only to demonstrate the King's vitality and combat prowess, but also remind the swan that he still had a lifetime of practice in front of him.

Pierre knelt down and picked up the dragonsword with both wings. Remaining on his knees and bowing his head, he presented it to his King. "Your prize, my King. You have bested me."

The older crane accepted the amalgamated blade and examined it briefly. He then lifted it upright and said, "You saved my daughter, brave Pierre, and in doing so you have demonstrated your unwavering loyalty to my kingdom. And so, in recognition of your valor and victory over a dreaded enemy," he lowered the blade to tap Pierre's right shoulder, and then his left, "I dub you Seigneur Pierre, Knight of Altair."

**Night Shyne**

Pierre shudders, still, before happy tears begin to form and stream. "Whoever could be more honored than I?"

The king smiles. "The honor belongs to me. You saved my kingdom and my daughter. Made good on your end of the promise and went above and beyond. Stand up, good sir. We have much to do...but today is a day of celebration! Today, tonight, we feast! May there be plenty for the commoner, the worker, the hero, the royal!"

Remmy nods along, nearly nodding off before his stomach growls. He looks at his other companions and they all seem to agree.

"Come, heroes." The king helps Sir Pierre up, and hands him back the sword. "To the armory with this. To the mages with it later, and eventually back to fix the altars. And then...as for the feast..." He walks through the door of the castle, heroes and royals following…

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"...we earned it!"

To the documenting boom camera right behind the facade, and to cheers from all the crew hidden behind it.

**alty**

"Everyone gets one drink on my tab tonight,” announces the actor playing the crane king announces while still in character, "the best way I can ensure tonight is celebrated by all."

The offer was met with whoops and soft downy clapping from both cast and crew. “What, only one,” asked ‘Pierre’, letting his royal accent crack for a moment. “Surely a gracious king can afford two!”

“Watch it, *squire*,” the older crane admonishes good-naturedly, “or I'll insist we do this take *again*.”

The playful threat from the director was met with dramatic cries of woe from the otherwise cheerful, smiling cast. “No no, we're good,” the raccoon pokes his snout close to the camera and then pulls back to reveal two thumbs up and a wide grin, “it's a wrap! Happy hour time!”

**Thank you for reading.**