PROLOGUE

**Alty, with input from Night Shyne and Willri**

In ancient times, the gods formed this universe out of the darkness. They pulled all matter from a deep, dark hole in the empty cosmos, stretching and extracting both rock and gas from the black wound and out into the expanse. When they finished, and all of space was filled with dust, pebbles and clouds of color, they sealed the pure-black hole like a tear in fabric, and then they worked the boundless matter into stars and planets, and those into constellations and galaxies: the multitude of lights we see in the night sky. Thus began the First Epoch, the birth of worlds.

Our world was whole and young, then, divided between air, land and sea. Each realm hosted its own menagerie of creatures, both sapient and feral, and they organized themselves into kingdoms and nations. As they spread to their borders, each kingdom--Air, Land and Sea--either cooperated peacefully or came to blows for control of the world, over the course of the Middle Epoch. Towards the end, the Land and Air Kingdoms united against the Sea, the latter raising the former's land masses into the air save for one: a great volcano, the mother of the Land, once submerged but then exposed when the lands were lifted.

In retaliation, the Sea used the volcano as a weapon and as a foundry for dark, twisted creatures. They cast their magicks into the planet's hot, boiling blood and fashioned violent, chimeric creatures that flew, swam and burrowed, unleashing them onto the world as a last desperate measure to turn the tide in their favor. The volcano's maw bled dark and thick in those days, as did the maw of the terrible beasts who fed on warriors and children alike.

The gods saw the world being torn apart by war and abominations, and so they decided to intervene. They sent a mighty Holy Beast to each realm charged with the task of ending the war, diminishing each realm by a third, and eradicating the beasts. They returned the foul beasts to the volcano, their bodies pulled taut from where they clung and siphoned back down into the molten earth at the heart of the volcano. Once the warring had ended and the realms reduced by a third, the three Holy Beasts split their bodies into several stone guardians and scattered themselves across the world. Resting on sacred Altars, their enduring presence ensured that the world would not shatter again, and no more foul beasts would emerge to prey on the innocent.

Now, in the Third Epoch, the wars are a distant memory. Many species involved were either wiped out or went into exile, including the fabled Owl Kingdom that lifted the lands from the sea. Now we enjoy peace, many able to forget the horrors of the past, but even today, old magick and ancient grudges still roil in dark places. Hidden... underground. One day, they will emerge again, and it will then be our responsibility to deal with them; a reminder and a test of our commitment to peace.

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Our world hangs in space like a marble, wisps of white covering patches of green surrounded by blue. Spinning ever so slowly, it shines by the light of the Sun amongst other marbles floating in the black.

The marble stops and begins to grow larger as it comes closer. With a god's-eye view, you peer into the clouds as they approach and envelop you. The cloud is thick with moisture and loud with the sounds of thunder and roaring beasts; a wolf, a tiger, a bear, and something else--something deep, grinding and terrible. A flash of lightning fills your vision with white, and then falls away to reveal a great kingdom, besieged by an even greater storm. Winds howl and lightning strikes the damp earth, briefly illuminated the darkened skies. The storm seems to last for hours, and the denizens taking shelter spy frightful shadows dancing through the clouds with each strike.

After some time, the rains stop, though the skies remain dark. Light begins to break the cloud cover. A scream rings out through the halls of the Crane King's castle, and is suddenly silenced by a rolling peal of thunder ripping through the stormy sky. The light it emits blinds, and its sound deafens and travels far, far away...

***ALTAIRED BEAST***

CHAPTER B{R}EAK 1

**Night Shyne**

The crane queen tries her hardest, but cannot console her husband. All seems lost to him, as she tries to reassure him; they can gather their resources and send an army to retrieve what was stolen, or even pay ransom if demanded. But he cannot be consoled, cannot refute or accept any such claim.  
  
A white-dressed fellow rushes in, demanding an audience with the peacock king, and this snaps him from his stupor. For someone to be here...to have gotten past his guardsmen...he must be powerful or persuasive. Someone with something worth listening to. And the sword in his hand isn't made for hurting...ah, that explains the white, he's dressed as a fencer.  
  
The fellow takes off his helmet to reveal the head of a handsome swan. "My liege. I have heard of the princess's disappearance, and dare not ask you to waste time. I came straight to you, to ask that you might allow me to bring your daughter back, as a lone hero or as part of a group. Please...she means so much to your people."  
  
"You came straight from fencing class?"  
  
"I'm but an understudy instructor, but I was best in my class."  
  
"...I simply must clear my head, but I know this. A simple sword fighter could not possibly accomplish such a mission, alone or as part of a group. You must be *exceptional* before I even entertain the notion… that said, you have valor and spirit. I daresay the rumors haven't permeated all of town, let alone the kingdom; yet you come here so soon? You deserve a chance to prove yourself! And I need to blow off some steam. Guards! Two of you and I against this fencer. A shallow cut, a single tap of the sharp...and that is all. Mage! Ironskin, four of us."

The king stands up and draws a seemingly ornamental sword from beside the throne, and his wife watches dreamily as two birds and their employer make their approach on the swan...a bare spark of youth and vigor returning to him.  
  
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*'The king is weak, must not exercise, but his swordplay is stronger than even my instructor. Or perhaps he is merely angry…'* thinks Pierre, the swan, having cut three men with his épée.  
  
"...what would you take as a reward, should you succeed?"  
  
Pierre hesitates not. "The chance to get to know your daughter better. You do not shelter her. She has learned kindness and generosity from the education of your elite, mingling among the middle-classed commonfolk, supporting their businesses, and listening to their stories. She sponsors the peasantry, donating sums reasonable to her but vast to whole communities. I have met her a number of times, and I must be one of many who may pine for her… but in respect to her and her parents, I have never overstepped my bounds."  
  
The king looks at the queen, as a better reader of the heart of a person. She nods. "Come back alive from even defeating *one* of the monsters and I'll hire you as part of my royal guard. There you'll have plenty of chances to see her. You'll have done work my men won't have to, after all. Return triumphant and I shall personally have you assigned as her personal guardsman and guardian, with only her authority to remove you."  
  
Pierre nods and takes a knee. "It would be my honor."  
  
"Still… going alone would be suicide. I shall contact the mage court and have them send a champion of their own to go alongside you. And you should be outfitted properly for the occasion." He turns to a scribe, a messenger pigeon. "See to it that he can leave, well-rested and well-equipped, first thing tomorrow." He turns back to the swan. "Find yourself a lodging on the south edge of town. Wake there and set off immediately with whoever undergoes this quest with you. Anything not supplied by nightfall, you'll find in the morning. If you choose to back down… take nothing that is not yours."  
  
Pierre leaves to go and find such a place, and the king's mask of confidence loosens as the spectator absconds… but at least now, there is hope for his daughter. "Little Nagoya will be just fine..."  
  
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Pierre exited the castle and made a straight line past the royal courtyard, due south. His destination was the guild district, a section of the king's city occupied by several local and foreign-spanning guilds, one side of which was the city's southernmost wall. Pierre passed the grand marble fountain that divided the courtyard into four gardens, each section representing a season and each dividing line pointing in one of the four cardinal directions. Only other avian species crossed his path in the royal district, as well as in the merchant's district, where he bought his first round of equipment and provisions, but the poor district showed him a different side of the kingdom: he crossed paths with refugees, immigrants, and mostly homeless creatures of several races.  
  
Avian, reptile, and mammalian subjects made up the outlying districts: Guild, Traveler's, and Wharf districts, one adjoining the other. Many of these faces Pierre recognized as the ones the princess spent time and charity on, the reminder only strengthening his resolve to commit to this quest. Sparing some of his coins to a small band of needy kobolds, he exited the poor district.  
  
By the time he reached a busy intersection in the Guilds district, it was dusk. It didn't take him long to spot the entrance of an inn amid the foot-and-tail traffic of the district's diverse denizens. Pushing open the door of the seedy, saloon-like establishment, he approached the owner by the bar and asked for a room and a light meal. Finding a table to wait at, he looked around at the other inn patrons: lizard grapplers throwing back pints of porter; a couple of old gulls barely touching their mugs as they stared at an empty corner; and a couple of fennec rangers inspecting their belt pouches laid out on the table.  
  
Pierre wondered to himself, of the faces here, which he could trust to accompany him. Perhaps it would be best to first wait for the mage assigned to him. The King did not specify where to meet them, so naturally the swan assumed the mage would find him soon enough.  
  
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Night came and went, and there was no sign of the mage. Pierre ate his breakfast, wondering if they had been delayed or gotten lost; then again, perhaps it was as the peacock-adorned regent assured him: Whatever is not provided by nightfall will be provided during the day. It was then he realized that, other than most probably an avian in a typical mage's robe, he had no idea what they might look like.  
  
Dressed in the upper-district livery of a sword instructor-in-training, it also dawned on Pierre the looks he had been getting from the odd patron scattered about the inn's dining floor. Aside from the attention of those he could see, Pierre had an odd feeling he was being watched from the shadows. Someone he hadn't seen yet had their eyes on him intently... to his right. Lifting his mug to his beak and feigning a double-take in that direction, he attempted to surreptitiously spy the voyeur only to find an empty booth. He felt a chill... he was certain someone was there. Could it have been the mage he'd been expecting?  
  
"Looking for someone?"  
  
The voice came from the opposite direction Pierre had been looking. He turned his head like a rubber band snapping back into shape and found himself looking at a female snake standing tall above him. Dressed in a light traveler's vest over a dark-green lady's tunic, and crowned with long, flowing golden locks, the green snake looked at him with expectant deep-blue eyes. She held what looked like a traveler's walking stick with the top wrapped in leather.  
  
Pierre regarded her briefly before answering, "... who are you?"  
  
"Oh! Well, I'd be happy to tell you," she said as she helped herself to a seat, coiling part of her tail around the chair and sitting at eye-level with Pierre. "My name's Joanne. I'm a sojourner on a tour to see the wide world. You looked like you were waiting for some company, so I thought I'd be neighborly and offer you mine."  
  
Pierre hid his discomfort at the sudden uninvited guest. He didn't want to reveal his purpose for being there to a stranger, but he also couldn't help but indulge in his own curiosity about the casually dressed sojourner.  
  
"That's... very kind of you, Miss. If you don't mind, I am very curious to know more about you."  
  
"Aha! I'm flattered. Please, ask away."  
  
"Are you here on business or pleasure?"  
  
"I'm looking for work, but at my leisure."  
  
"Ah. Any kind of work in particular?"  
  
"Oh, any job that pays better than waiting tables or tending inns."  
  
"Have you considered a bounty hunter's guild?"  
  
"Very enticing! But I would need someone to vouch for me. Would you happen to know anyone?"  
  
"I may have some connections... but what should I tell them about you?"  
  
"*Ahhh~*, well," she said as she scooted her chair closer to Pierre's, putting her back to the bar and placing the staff across the table. Unwrapping the leather bands on the tip revealed an opaque grey crystal. The snake woman placed her hands over the crystal until a bright orange-yellow strand grew at its center. It turned the crystal from a dim grey to a dimly glowing crimson before she quietly drew the inner flame out. The strand of fire snaked through her fingers and spiraled around her wrists before she sent it back with a wrist-flick and a pointing index finger. The thin flame returned to the crystal, and it receded back into the grey color it had before.  
  
"I see," said Pierre. It was a demonstration meant not to draw the attention of the proprietor, who didn't want any practice of magic to disrupt their business; but the skill with which she freely guided the fiery strand without burning herself was not common. Surely, this must be the mage that the King had sent for.  
  
"Then you're the one I've been waiting for," Pierre said finally to the snake-mage, who returned him a playful wide-eyed smile. "Oh… *am I*? Well, I'm just delighted, then! I knew there was something special about you, Mr. Knight! Now, what job have you got in store that you need a master magician for?"  
  
"..."  
  
Doubt squeezed Pierre's chest like a vice as he stared at her dumbfounded. Had he made a mistake? If this were the mage he was waiting for… they wouldn't have asked such a question.  
  
**Night Shyne**"...what?" asks the snake, noticing clear discomfort.  
  
As if just on time, someone makes their way to the table with a sack. "Recruiting already? You really don't waste time. I really must apologize for wasting yours, and not being here sooner, but I was the only selection they were thinking of and my sleep schedule had to be wrangled before I could be of any use in the daylight. Er, you are Pierre, right?"  
  
Pierre turns and quickly nods at the horned owl, dressed in...well, similar to the typical robe he had been imagining, but clearly modified for better movement. "I am. I accept your apology."  
  
"I am Remmy." There's a shake of hands. "And this is?"  
  
"We haven't met well enough to not have each other at a disadvantage, until you called me by name," said Pierre, "but I believe the more the better."  
  
The snake deflates just a little bit; now knowing that, while the swan was indeed waiting for someone (and it was good to get that part right), it wasn't her. Oh well. Not like she was fooled for long, over an honest mistake. "I am Joanne. Two mages and a knight, I presume? What kind of task are you expecting to perform?"  
  
"A heroic one," offers Remmy. "One I intend to get just a little more help for. Have you heard about the princess?"