2425 Aiko's Day Off  
  
Aiko studied the sky thoughtfully.  
  
The sky was vast, blue, and full of sunlight. White clouds were drifting across its peaceful azure expanse like cotton candy, carried by warm winds.  
  
She was pleased.  
  
'Ah, finally!'  
  
It was nice to see the light of day again after spending so long on the Forgotten Shore. The starless void of its orphaned sky was black and cold, with not even a moon to keep it company. Poor thing! The land itself was devoid of warmth and light, as well - it was quiet and tranquil, but not exactly vibrant.  
So, visiting Bastion was something Aiko had been looking forward to very much.  
  
Not the least of all because people could actually appreciate her stylish outfit here. Members of the Shadow Clan could see in the dark, true, but they had trouble discerning colors - everything was a shade of grey for them. Most could not tell silk from satin, either, let alone appreciate the nuances of exquisite fashion.  
  
Now that Aiko was finally wealthy enough to afford the finer things of life, leaving her wonderful ensembles unappreciated was a despicable crime.  
  
Feeling fierce and invincible in her white silk blouse, black skirt, flawlessly fitted vest, and tastefully embroidered blazer, she walked dоwn the streets of the Castle with determined steps. Her sharp heels sang as they strike the cobblestones, and her hair fluttered in the wind.  
  
All items of her ensemble were bespoke. The vest and the blazer were detailed tastefully with silver thread, which added to the subtle gleam of silver buttons and cufflinks - the latter set with onyx gemstones. Her shoes were made from lacquered black leather, with large silver buckles creating а fascinating contrast with the dainty black bоws above.  
  
Aiko chose not to wear any jewelry, knowing that it would only cheapen her look - well, except for a few charms hidden under her blouse for protection.  
  
She looked sophisticated, she looked chic. And most importantly, she looked exceedingly affluent! Anyone who knew anything would recognize just how exorbitantly expensive each item of her stylish ensemble was. Those who knew a thing or two about fashion, meanwhile, would be amazed to recognize the subdued cut of her outfit for what it was.  
  
The ensemble Aiko wore was not just any random arrangement of complementary clothes. It was actually a tasteful reimagining of the suit Morgan of Valor had worn to the last ever Valor Ball, designed and sewn by the same tailor - who was supposed to have retired after the fall of the Sword Domain.  
  
That was why it had cost Aiko a fortune.  
  
'Worth it!'  
  
She grinned, almost missing a large puddle in front of her. Her shoe was about to touch the dirty water when the petite girl floated into the air, gliding gracefully to the dry cobblestones on the other side.  
  
Landing softly, she turned back and smiled triumphantly.  
  
"Not today, puddle!"  
  
Ignoring the stares of the passersby, she raised her chin and continued on her way with confident - albeit quite modest in length - strides.  
  
Reaching one of the inner walls of the Castle, Aiko floated to the battlements instead of passing through a nearby gate. Standing there, she enjoyed the view of the glistening lake and of the great city beyond.  
  
Bastion had grown tremendously since the first time she saw it. Back then, when Aiko was a youth who had just escaped the Forgotten Shore, there was not even a city on the shores of the lake - every Awakened sheltered by the Great Citadel, including her and Kai, lived within the Castle. There was nothing but ash and Nightmare Creatures waiting for them beyond its walls.  
  
Things were different now, naturally. Bastion sprawled around the lake, with no end in sight - the city was vast and immense, sheltering close to a hundred million peoрle. Unlike the claustrophobic cities of Earth, which endlessly grew upward or burrowed into the ground to stay within the narrow confines of defensive barriers, it stretched in all directions freely.  
  
The buildings of Bastion were relatively low - not only because building towering human hives in the Dream Realm, where most of modern technology turned useless, was all but impossible unless sorcery or people with powerful Utility Aspects were involved, but also because there was no need to build them high.  
  
Aiko liked it better. She liked looking up and not feeling crushed by the looming mass of alloy and concrete. Or crimson coral, and breathing in the vastness of the sky with a full chest.  
  
Naturally, sustaining a city of such size in the Dream Realm was no easy task. In fact, the rate with which Bastion had sprouted from the ash was nothing short of impossible - if not for the innumerable Awakened working day and night to build homes for the refugees of Antarctica and new settlers, none of it would have been here.  
  
The city was at capacity at tearing at the seams, though. These days, most of the settlers were channeled to other Citadels across the vast reaches of the former Sword Domain, while those in the west traveled along the River of Tears to settle down in one of the human strongholds situated in its basin.  
  
There were innumerable problems to be solved in Bastion. It was all boiling and changing, taking form and crumbling, always one step away from complete collapse.  
  
Which meant that there were innumerable opportunities to be reaped.  
  
Aiko was not the same youth anymore, either. She had changed, too. She had gone from running a gambling den in the Bright Castle to running the entirety of the Dark City, as well as the powerful shadow organization dwelling there.  
  
'Naturally, there's the Boss, but let's be honest here. That walking calamity can't even manage himself. I mean, how did he manage to lose one of his incarnations? Who does that? Who has incarnations, and who goes around losing them?'  
  
Aiko scoffed and prepared to glide off the wall.  
  
At that moment, however, a polite voice interrupted her:  
  
"Excuse me, my lady. Flying is forbidden in the inner rings of the city."  
  
Turning her head, Aiko tried to look at the Awakened guards who had approached her while patrolling the wall. Sadly, she had to crane her neck to actually look them in the eye.  
  
So, instead, she floated up until she cоuld look down at them snobbishly.  
  
"Good to know, thank you. However, I am obviously floating, not flying."  
  
The guard who had spoken to her blinked.  
  
"What is the difference?"  
  
Aiko gave him a confused look and did not respond immediately, as if stunned into silence by the question.  
  
Eventually, she said:  
  
"Velocity. Velocity is the difference."  
  
She floated with the help of the Awakened Ability, and pushed herself with the help of her Dormant Ability. So, her speed had never been too great.  
  
The guards looked at each other. The other one shook his head.  
  
"No, as stated by the regulations regarding unconventional spatial movement, flying is constituted by aerial movement with the help of a self-generated directional force, while floating and gliding are constituted by the lack of said directional force. You were obviously flying, my lady. I am deeply sorry, but we will have to fine you. It is really a small sum."  
  
Aiko smiled dangerously.  
  
"Oh? Well, in that case, by all means, over my dead body."  
  
They wanted to fine her?  
  
In their dreams!  
  
The guards stared at her with lost expressions.  
  
"Excuse me?"  
  
Aiko crossed her arms haughtily. "Do you even know who I am?"  
  
They studied her expensive outfit for a few seconds, then frowned.  
  
"No, we don't. We have no idea. But what does that."  
  
Aiko smiled radiantly.  
  
"Wonderful!"  
  
With that, she allowed the wind to carry her over the lip of the wall and glided rapidly toward the crowds of people below. After all, since they had no idea who she was, they would not be able to find her in the city of a hundred million people.  
  
The guards were so shocked that they were a second too late to react.  
  
"Hey, wait a moment!"  
  
But Aiko was already gone, enjoying the gorgeous boon of anonymity.  
  
'Directional force, directional force. Bah, how silly! As if I'll allow myself to lose money over something like that.'