2426 The Fine Nuances of Printing Money  
  
Bastion was too vast now to travel across it on foot - granted, Aiko's destination was not far from the lakeshore. Leaving the ferry, she thought about hailing a carriage, but then stumbled upon a shop window and became enthralled, staring at the displayed items with gleaming eyes.  
  
It occurred to Aiko that she had made a terrible mistake when choosing her outfit. Living in the darkness of the Dark City must have messed up with her fashion sense, after all. She had gotten so used to only seeing the world in shades of gray that she neglected to add a splash of color to her ensemble! 'Ah, what an oversight!'  
  
Aiko was utterly mortified.  
  
'That red scarf. those ruby cufflinks. those shoes with scarlet soles!'  
  
No, no. She couldn't. After all, her outfit was an homage to the criminally underappreciated icon of fashion, Morgan of Valor herself - not a shameless imitation. Morgan had those breathtaking vermilion eyes, which held the entire ensemble together. That was why her outfits went well with red accents and ruby accessories!  
  
Aiko, sadly, did not have vermilion eyes. Her eyes were brown, so.  
  
'Blue? Green? No, those won't go well with silver. Pink? How about purple?'  
  
Shе glared at the store window, almost burning a hole in it.  
  
In the past, when Aiko was poor and destitute - long before her Awakening, even - she had spent many hours in front of shop windows like this one, staring at gorgeous things that she knew would only be hers in her fantasies.  
  
But now, she was not one for window shopping.  
  
Why stare at windows when she could buy anything she wanted in the shop, or even buy the shop itself?  
  
Walking inside the boutique, she gave the staff a neutral look. The professionals immediately evaluated her clothes, accessories, and general appearance. A moment later, their expressions changed, and bright smiles illuminated their faces.  
  
"My lady! Welcome!"  
  
Aiko allowed a corner of her mouth to curl upward.  
  
'Ah. Being rich is really the best.'  
  
Then, she raised her hand and pointed to a shelf.  
  
"This. And this. And this one, as well. Also that one, and that one, and that one over there."  
  
She lost track of time. After a while, a mountain of colorful boxes was in front of her, and the smiles of the staff grew so wide that their faces were on the verge of cracking.  
  
"That would be one hundred coins, my lady."  
  
Aiko produced her coin purse, untied it, and emptied it onto the counter.  
  
The clerk's eyes glinted sharply.  
  
Hers did, as well. Now came the important part: haggling!  
  
Of course, as civilized and refined people, they were not going to haggle over the price of purchased items.  
  
Instead, they had to haggle over the price of her money.  
  
Aiko pointed to her coins.  
  
"As you can see, these are prime-condition Ravenheart coins. So, I am willing to pay fifty of those."  
  
The clerk smiled pleasantly.  
  
"Ah, but the quality of recently minted Ravenheart coins is not as superior as it used to be. Even if it was, surely, they would not be twice as valuable. Possibly a tenth more valuable, at best. I am very sorry to say this, my lady, but I can't surrender these gorgeous things to you for less than ninety of these coins."  
  
Coins minted in Bastion and Ravenheart were supposed to be identical, containing a set amount of soul essencе. But the way they were minted and infused with essence was not completely precise. Different mints, and even different batches from the same mint, produced faintly different results. Ravenheart coins were generally more valuable, although that too depended on numerous factors.  
  
Aiko raised her hand and shook a finger.  
  
"Oh, but your eyesight must not be sharp. It seems that you failed to notice that these coins over there are not merely Ravenheart coins. They are in fact Song Domain coins in pristine condition. Come to think of it, I think I failed to notice that as well. My, how silly of me! So, I am willing to part with forty of these gorgeous coins."  
  
The clerk's face paled in fear.  
  
How did fifty coins turn into forty? Wasn't she supposed to increase the price, instead?  
  
Worst of all, he could not even dispute this tiny girl's logic.  
  
Apart from the coins minted in Bastion and Ravenheart these days, there also remained coins minted by the fallen Song and Sword Domains. Their quality was not that superior to the modern coinage - in fact, it was inferior in most regards. And yet, they were quite a bit more valuable, for no other reason than that they were much rarer.  
  
Since the two Domains had only minted money for a few years before disappearing into the annals of history, there would never be a new batch of Song and Sword coins produced by humans. Their number was limited, and rapidly plummeting - after all, essence coins could be consumed to get a boost of essence in a difficult situation. So, their rarity alone inflated their value.  
  
People were peculiar creatures that way, seeing value in things that lacked it simply because other people would not be able to possess them, as well.  
  
The clerk gulped.  
  
"F - forty? N - no, I couldn't. After all, we are all Bastion natives here. Those pesky Song coins are not welcomed here?"  
  
His voice did not sound confident.  
  
Aiko smiled triumphantly.  
  
"Money doesn't stink, you know. But actually. I bet carrying all these coins would be cumbersome for you. How about I pay with something else?"  
  
Suddenly, a different coin appeared between her fingers. That one was larger and heavier, entirely black, and etched with a symbol of a coiled serpent.  
  
The clerk's eyes widened drastically.  
  
"Is that a shadow coin?"  
  
He reached forward with a trembling hand.  
  
Aiko grinned, retracting her own.  
  
"Indeed, it is. So, how about I pay with only one?"  
  
The clerk hesitated for a few seconds.  
  
If the old Domain coins were valuable, then Shadow Coins were extremely so. Nobody knew where they came from and who was minting them, but everyone wanted to possess one - that was because they were not essence coins.  
  
Instead, they were fragment coins. Consuming them did not grant Awakened essence, and instead granted them a soul fragment - or even a few, if the coin was of a high denomination.  
  
Of course, there were easier ways to obtain soul fragments. Purchasing a soul shard, for example, was far more attainable than hunting down the elusive shadow coins. But it was exactly that elusiveness, that mystique, and that great rarity that made them true treasures.  
  
The Shadow Coins, of course, were produced by the Dark Castle - the Marvelous Mimic - and did not cost Aiko anything. All she had to do to get them was keep the Mimic on a steady diet of distressing Nightmare Creatures, which was a great way to make money out of thin air.  
  
The clerk accepted the coin with greed in his eyes and forced out a polite smile.  
  
"Wonderful, my lady. Please visit our establishment again. Oh, do you need help carrying the boxes to your carriage?"  
  
Aiko grinned.  
  
"No need."  
  
Summoning a gorgeous purse crafted from black leather, she opened it and placed the first box inside. The box was larger than the purse, and yet, it disappeared without a trace.  
  
The second box did, as well. And the third. And the fourth.  
  
Before too long, the mountain of boxes vanished completely.  
  
Tying a vibrant cravat around her neck, Aiko smiled in satisfaction.  
  
"Well, then. Goodbye!"  
  
With that, she dismissed the purse and left the shop in complete exhilaration.  
  
Of course, she did not forget to gather her coins from the counter first.  
  
'Now. I'm off to see Effie!'