2427 Transportation Situation  
  
Aiko was in a great mood as she hailed a carriage, which was her preferred method of moving around Bastion. Moving around Bastion was somewhat of a complicated matter, actually. There was already a grand project in the works to simplify it - special tramways meant for street cars were being embedded into the main streets, strengthened by primitive sorcery. The rails were cast from a special alloy that allowed them to channel essence, while the trams themselves were enchanted to move by absorbing it.  
  
Now that the Rivergate Hydro had gone operational, though, there were talks of discarding the magical street cars in favor of good old-fashioned electric trams. Aiko suspected that, in the end, both types were going to be implemented, with enchanted tramways serving as the thoroughfares of the public transport network while more mundane ones would branch out from them as satellite outlets. The first street car was supposed to be launched quite soon.  
  
Before that happened, though, citizens of Bastion had six main ways to get around the city. The first one was to use a ferry and cross the lake. Naturally, that could only get one to a different location on the lakeshore - however, considering that the city surrounded the lake like a ring, it was often faster to travel by water before continuing on foot than to make the entire journey while never leaving the land.  
  
The second way was the simplest - it was to use your own two feet. However, Bastion was an enormous city, so one could literally walk for days without ever reaching their destination in case they needed to travel to a distant part of the city. Naturally, Awakened hаd a great advantage over mundane humans in that regard, but even they would be hard-pressed to simply walk everywhere.  
  
The third way was much faster, albeit somewhat inconvenient. It was to hire an Awakened rickshaw - those came in all shapes and forms, from individual or two-seat carts to heavy wagons capable of carrying a dozen or more passengers. Their speed and capacity depended entirely on the puller's personal strength, and while most Awakened sought better opportunities, some saw owning a rickshaw as a safe way to make modest amounts of money.  
  
The fourth way was a more comfortable, luxurious, and prestigious version of the third - it was to hire a carriage pulled by an Echo. There was no Beastmaster in Bastion, and therefore no army of enthralled abominations to serve as the engine of civil infrastructure. So, Echoes were the next best thing. Sadly, despite the fact that there were numerous times more Awakened in the world these days, most of whom were waging war against the Dream Realm on numerous fronts, there were still not enough Echoes out there to make this mode of transportation widely accessible.  
  
Only affluent people had the means to hire an Echo carriage. Luckily, Aiko was one such person. So, she preferred to hail a carriage, even if there was a faster way to get to where she was going.  
  
That faster way was to ride an Echo mount. Not all Awakened had Echoes, and even fewer had Echoes that could be ridden as mounts - however, owning one was quickly becoming the epitome of class, prestige, and flare. It was to the point that impressive Echo mounts were not only widely sought after, but also cost more than powerful combat beasts at times. Owning an especially impressive mount could make an Awakened famous and admired by the masses in an instant.  
  
Aiko could probably get herself a pretty, stylish, and utterly magnificent Echo mount or two, but she did not like riding them at all. Why would she want to toss and rattle on the back of a towering beast? Not only would that ruin her masterfully tousled hair by actually tousling it - the horror! - but it would also wrinkle her clothes, not to mention limiting her wardrobe. 'Thanks, but no thanks!'  
  
The last way of getting around Bastion was quite peculiar and, strangely enough, in competition with personal Echo mounts in terms of convenience. Not only that, but it was easily accessible to every citizen, Awakened or not. That method was riding a bicycle.  
  
Bicycles were not very complicated machines, so nothing prevented them from being used in the Dream Realm. Citizens of Bastion had developed a great appreciation for bicycles, actually - most were still imported from the waking world, but some were already being crafted right here in the city. Aiko would know, since she had invested heavily into bicycle manufacturing herself. She had invested in innumerable enterprises around Bastion, actually, but the bicycle business was one of her golden geese. So, she loved them a lot. which did not mean that she was inclined to use one as a means of transportation, and for a very easy reason at that.  
  
Aiko could make a bicycle fly. but she had no idea how to ride one. The entire thing mystified her to no end.  
  
'Should I ask Boss to teach me?' That'd be a funny story to tell her grandkids one day. if she survived to tell the tale.  
  
In any case, Aiko managed to hail a carriage rapidly. Climbing into the soft seat, she told the driver where she wanted to go and leaned back, enjoying the view and the warmth of the sun on her face. She even started to hum a happy song quietly, feeling that her day simply could not get any better. She was still humming it when the carriage suddenly shook and came to an abrupt halt, as if hit by an earthquake.  
  
Then, an enormous yellow eye appeared outside the window, staring at Aiko with sizzling intensity.  
  
The driver reeled back on his seat, shouting in fear and indignation:  
  
"An an Echo?! Who let their Echo run wild, dammit?"  
  
Letting out a sigh, Aiko opened the door and floated out of the carriage.  
  
"Language!"  
  
Outside, an enormous wolf sat on the ground, towering above the carriage like a small mountain of white fur. Its tail was wagging wildly, making the ground shake a little with each strike. The wolf's tongue was hanging sideways from its mouth, and it was panting happily, staring at Aiko with gleaming eyes. She glanced at the driver and frowned. "That is not an Echo. Can't you see? That is the venerable Saint Ling. Watch your tongue in front of a child, mister!"