2429 Secret Party  
  
Effie's home was more cozy than luxurious, which was not what one would expect from the home of a woman who was ruling over half of all humans in the Dream Realm. But then again, it had been built before Godgrave, and her husband had done most of the building with his own two hands - so it would have been strange to expect palatial opulence from their residence.  
  
In fact, the home was quite similar to the wooden farmhouse hidden inside the Black Beast Locket - Aiko had been to the Beast Farm numerous times, so she could attest to that.  
  
Of course, the wood used in the construction and to craft the furniture inside was not at all of the mundane sort.  
  
It was in fact much sturdier than any material ever produced on Earth, gathered by Effie and her husband in the haunted woods around the greater Bastion area. Everything here was built to last.  
  
It had to be, considering that there was a Transcendent child running around the house. Parents usually childproofed their homes, but Effie had to do the opposite - she had to make sure that her home was not entirely demolished by her child. To partial success.  
  
Aiko had always been a transient person, coming and going easily, so the idea of rooting yourself in one spot seemed a little strange to her. Still, every time she visited Effie, she felt like she could almost understand the allure.  
  
Effie had built herself a family, and then built herself a house. Then, she added the former to the latter, and made it into a home. Maybe that was why she was fighting so hard.  
  
In any case, today, Aiko and Little Ling were alone in the large home. She guided him to the dining room and made the boy sit at the table, then wandered into the adjacent kitchen. Looking around there, she called out:  
"So, how have you been, wolfie? Have you been a good boy?"  
  
He swung his legs, waiting impatiently.  
  
"I've been good, Auntie! Oh, but I was a little sad. Mommy was away for a long time this time, because other kids needed her help. She made it back before my birthday party, though! And she brought me a present from the the the Western Kadrant. That's Africa! I read about it in a book."  
  
Aiko finally found what she had been looking for. It would be a real tragedy to stain her luxurious clothes, so she put on a white apron and exhaled in satisfaction.  
"Read it in a book? Since when do you know how to read, rascal?"  
  
As she emerged from the kitchen, Little Ling gave her a pitying look.  
"Auntie Aiko, I am six years old. Of course, I know how to read. I can read books with pictures, and even books without pictures."  
  
He raised his chin proudlу, then deflated a little.  
"Oh, but only in human language. Runic language is too difficult. So, I still need pictures when reading runes."  
  
Aiko blinked a couple of times.  
'Six years is a little too early to know how to read, though. I think? When do children usually start reading?'  
She had no idea. More importantly.  
  
"Huh? Who is teaching you to read in runic language? And why?"  
Come to think of it, maybe Little Ling did need to know runes. He was a carrier of the Spell, after all.  
  
Aiko was suddenly engrossed by the question of how the little boy interacted with the Spell, to begin with. Did it show him runes, even? How would it translate the runes to people who could not read? Would it show them a series of images, instead, or simply narrate every word? Would they simply understand the meaning of the runes despite not knowing how to decipher letters? Was there a way to somehow make money out of this?  
  
Little Ling giggled.  
"Grandpa Julius!"  
  
Aiko snapped out of her reverie, feeling a hint of sorrow as the breathtaking ringing of illusory coins she was daydreaming about faded away.  
"Oh? Who is that?"  
  
The boy smiled, still swinging his legs.  
"My tutor. Mommy says Grandpa Julius is the best!"  
  
'Julius, Julius.'  
  
Was he the elderly academic in charge of the entire Dream Realm Education Initiative?  
  
Damn. Effie did not hold back when it came to Little Ling's development, it seemed.  
  
Shaking her head, Aiko smiled and summoned her luxurious leather handbag.  
"Well, in any case. Auntie was very sad to miss your birthday, wolfie. Uncle Sunny was very sad, too. So, he prepared you a little gift."  
  
With that, she opened the bag and started to produce one item after another. They floated into the air as if by magic, landing softly on the table. First came the ice cream, then the fluffy waffles, fresh strawberries, custard cake with six colorful candles, chocolate pudding, bottles of freshly squeezed juice, more ice cream. Soon, the entire table was brimming with delicious treats. Placing the last item down, Aiko straightened her apron and smiled.  
"Actually, I decided to have a second, secret birthday party - just you and me. Only the bestest of boys get to have one, so here you go. Happy birthday, wolfie!"  
  
Little Ling's eyes were as wide as saucers. He stared at the delicious feast, as if enthralled by it, and then reached for the ice cream with a trembling hand.  
  
Then, however, he stopped and hesitated for a moment. Seeing that the boy was troubled by something, Aiko raised an eyebrow.  
"What's wrong?"  
  
Little Ling lingered for a few seconds, then asked in a tentative tone:  
"Auntie Aiko, I know that this is a secret party, but can we leave a little cake for mommy? Mommy eats a lot."  
  
Aiko's lips shook. Struggling to maintain a calm expression, she pretended to consider for a while, and then nodded.  
"Alright. Your mommy does indeed eat a lot. So, we'll set aside a little bit of this and a little bit of that for her. Thеn, she can share with your daddy too. How does that sound?"  
  
Little Ling did not hear her, though. He was already busy stuffing his cheeks with treats.  
"Shanksh, Auntie Aiho!"  
  
She observed the littlе boy for a few seconds, then sighed and sat down herself. Propping up her chin on a hand, Aiko glanced at Little Ling lazily and stayed silent. The boy was so engrossed by the ice cream that nothing else seemed to exist for him.  
  
Idle thoughts bounced around her head, until one particular one drew her attention. 'Are we really supposed to stay here all day? When did Effie say she would return?'  
  
In fact, Effie had not mentioned anything about how long Aiko was supposed to watch Ling Ling at all. And what was the boy supposed to be doing the whole day? Considering that he already had a tutor, it was unlikely that Effie and his dad allowed him to stay idle all the time. She knew they hаd gently trained him from before he could walk to know how to control his Transcendent strength. He was almost around the age when mundane children went to school now, too. Of course, there was no school in existence that could handle a little Saint.  
  
Eventually, Aiko's eyes gleamed.  
"Hey, wolfie."  
  
She hesitated for a moment or two, then grinned.  
"How about you and I go on an adventure? Well, let's call it an educational trip."  
  
Little Ling raised his head, his face smeared in ice cream and chocolate in equal measure. His eyes widened.  
"An educational trip?"  
  
Aiko's grin widened, too.  
"Sure, let's call it that. Let Auntie Aiko teach you a thing or two."