2430 Auntie Aiko's Lessons  
  
"Good afternoon, Ms. Aiko... oh? And who is that little fellow by your side?"  
  
"This is Transcendent Ling. Wolfie, say hi."  
  
"Hi, mister!"  
  
"T - transcendent. Ling? Saint Athena's heir?"  
  
"Sure. Why?"  
  
"B - but... why is he with you, Ms. Aiko?"  
  
"Well, why else? I am his favorite auntie. Right, Ling Ling?"  
  
"Right! Auntie Aiko is the best!"  
  
"So, about the contract we discussed last month. If I remember, the price you insisted on was a little on the heavy side. Something about my lack of credentials?"  
  
"What? No, no... ahaha, that must have been a clerical error. Those darn clerks, always making errors! Obviously, the offer you initially put forward was more than fair, Lady Aiko!"  
  
"It was, wasn't it?"  
  
"Indeed! So... should we redraw the contract right now?" That one went well.  
  
"I hope you don't mind. This cutie is my close friend's boy. I am rarely in Bastion, so hе insisted on following me around."  
  
"Auntie took me on an educational trip!"  
  
"..."  
  
"Excuse me? Are you okay?"  
  
"This is... this is Saint Ling."  
  
"Oh, so you know the rascal!"  
  
"Then... your close friend is..."  
  
"Effie? Ah, sorry. I think you call her Saint Athena here. Or was it War Beast? Raised by Wolves? Steward of the East? Honestly, she has so many titles these days that I get confused."  
  
"Mommy is the best!"  
  
"S - sorry. What can I do for you, my lady? Oh, and for you, venerable Saint Ling?"  
  
"You see, I have heard that your club is very exclusive and only allows people of immaculate standing to become members. My standing is not too notable here in Bastion, so I would not want to impose."  
  
"No, no! What are you talking about, Lady... Aiko, was it? Please. May I offer you and your young companiоn some refreshments while I fill out the paperwork? How does VIP membership sound? No, what am I talking about! VVIP membership it is."  
  
"Thank you kindly. Oh, but I did not think you had VVIP members?"  
  
"We do now!"  
  
"How wonderful. What is it, wolfie?"  
  
"Auntie, ask mister if they have ice cream. Ling Ling thinks that he will be very refreshed if he eats ice cream." That one went even better.  
  
"Welcome! How can I help you?"  
  
"Good day. My young friend here kept insisting on getting ice cream."  
  
"Well, you certainly came to the right place. So, would you like to buy our signature ice cream?"  
  
"I would like to buy your ice cream shop."  
  
"...Excuse me?"  
  
"Auntie Aiko! I want pistachio flavor!"  
  
"I see. That will be your ice cream shop and one cone of pistachio ice cream, please. Can I pay in cash?" That one went wonderfully, too!  
  
Some time later, Aiko and Little Ling were sprawled on a bench in a small park, enjoying two cones of ice cream. The sun was shining high in the sky, and both of them basked in its warmth, tired and deeply satisfied.  
  
Little Ling licked his pistachio ice cream, let out a content sigh, and glanced at Aiko.  
  
"Auntie, can I ask you a question?"  
  
Aiko shrugged.  
  
"Sure, go ahead."  
  
The boy considered his words for a moment.  
  
"This was the best educational trip ever, Auntie! But was it really educational? Grandpa Julius usually gives me lessons, homework, and tests. That's education!"  
  
Aiko smiled faintly.  
  
"Was it educational? Of course, it was! Listen, wolfie... your mom and dad - and Grandpa Julius as well - can teach you many things at home. But there are some lessons that can only be learned outside. Today, you were supposed to learn one such lesson. Can you tell me what that lesson was?"  
  
Little Ling scrunched his face in concentration, remembering where they had been, whom they had talked to, and how those conversations had gone.  
  
Eventually, he offered in a hesitant tone:  
  
"That everyone loves mommy?"  
  
Aiko grinned.  
  
"Exactly! The lesson you were supposed to learn today is that having friends is more important than having money."  
  
Little Ling looked into the distance thoughtfully.  
  
"Oooh..."  
  
Aiko nodded.  
  
"Because if you have the гight friends, you can make way more money!"  
  
The boy gave her a dubious look. She bit into her ice cream, enjoyed its smooth texture and rich flavor, then swallowed and raised an eyebrow.  
  
"What?"  
  
Little Ling stared at her for a second more, then sighed and looked away.  
  
"Nothing. It's just that... I don't think you're really suited to be a teacher, Auntie."  
  
Aiko looked at him in indignation.  
  
"What? Why?"  
  
The boy sighed again.  
  
"Maybe I should ask Grandpa Julius to give you lessons, too."  
  
Aiko scoffed.  
  
"Who is going to teach whom? Let me tell you, wolfie. I had the best tutors in NQSC when I was your age. Well, before my family went bankrupt. Money is important - you have to have money to get educated, first!"  
  
She shook her head and looked around.  
  
The neighborhood they were in was close to the lakefront, so she knew it well from before the war. It was close to a ferry station and near one of the main streets, as well - foot traffic here was excellent, and the location offered easy access to several popular landmarks. More than that, one of the runic tramways was set to be built just outside the small park. That was the reason Aiko had purchased the ice cream shop on the corner. Not only was it going to bring in good income, but having a covert safe house here would be quite convenient for members of the Shadow Clan operating in Bastion.  
  
Granted, the neighborhood had become less picturesque since Aiko left the city. She had never seen graffiti here before, for example, but now several were marring the walls of the surrounding buildings.  
  
Little Ling was staring at one such questionable art piece, as well.  
  
"Auntie Aiko, what letters are those? Auntie Spell is not translating them."  
  
She blinked a couple of times.  
  
'Wha-'  
  
What the hell was he talking about?  
  
"First of all, the Nightmare Spell is not your auntie. It is ancient, so at best, it's your grandma. Grandpa? Anyway, don't put me in the same category as the Spell, please."  
  
She frowned.  
  
"Secondly, don't go around reading graffiti. Those are usually bad words! What will happen to me if you learn a bad word on my watch? Goodness gracious. Your mom will kill me."  
  
Little Ling blinked a few times and looked at her with wide eyes.  
  
"Auntie Aiko... what are bad words?"  
  
Aiko froze.  
  
"Huh?"  
  
Clutching his melting ice cream, the little boy leaned forward excitedly.  
  
"Bad words. What are they?"  
  
She coughed.  
  
"What, you have never heard a bad word before?"  
  
Little Ling shook his head energetically.  
  
"Nope! But! Now that I know that they exist, I really want to learn! Grandpa Julius says that learning is a noble calling! Will you teach me?"  
  
Aiko gulped, suddenly feeling cold despite the warm day.  
  
"You... eat your ice cream before it melts, wolfie. Forget I said anything."  
  
'Oh, no.'  
  
Effie was definitely... definitely going to kill her.