2431 City Gates  
  
The last stop Aiko decided to make was on the outskirts of the city, far away from the lake.  
  
She and Little Ling rode an open carriage pulled by an Echo, the driver sitting on the bench in a relaxed pose. The boy was looking around curiously, having spent most of his life close to the lake - the street they were following was one of the main thoroughfares of Bastion, cutting all the way frоm the shore to the city gates. There were plenty of fascinating sights.  
  
The gates themselves were not very impressive, though - in fact, there was no gate at all, just a wide open space where the departing caravans gathered before embarking on the perilous journey across the dire reaches of the Dream Realm, and where the battered arriving caravans stopped.  
  
Some of the caravans carried settlers, some carried cargo. Out of the latter, some were loaded with necessary resources that the Domain supplied to periphery cities in the East, while some belonged to entrepreneurial merchants. Servicing the caravans was an industry in and of itself.  
  
So, a lively bаzaar had grown around the gate, with countless stalls, plentiful inns, and shops of all kinds. In fact, the Bazaar was a little town in and of itself, with many pеople living here on a permanent basis.  
  
On both sides of the non-existent gate, tall walls separated Bastion from the wild expanse beyond. the walls were tall, but not very impressive either. In truth, they were barely more than mounds of compressed earth - that was because the construction was still in process, and this was merely a temporary measure.  
  
Bastion was a vast Domain city, and on top of that, it was situated in the Dream Realm - which might have been settled by humans, but not at all tamed. As a result, securing it was a titanic undertaking. The construction of the city wall was of paramount importance, but it was taking time.  
  
Humans were no strangers to constructing great barriers around their cities, but this was not the waking world with its sophisticated technology and expansive infrastructure. Building anything in the Dream Realm was much harder because people did not have powerful machines, automated factories, and enormous smelting plants here. Instead, though, they had Awakened, Masters, and Saints - which was why building a wall around a city as sprawling as Bastion was even possible.  
  
No two Awakened were the same, though, so the walls of Bastion were a bit peculiar. Some of the sections had been built out of compressed earth, some out of stone, some out of wood or metal. Some were even composed of many trunks of towering trees that had fused together, while some were made of thorns and brambles.  
  
A small army of Awakened patrolled the walls day and night, and a larger army of builders was still hard at work turning them into an impregnable fortification.  
  
"Woooow."  
  
Little Ling took in the lively sight of the bazaar with wide eyes.  
  
"So many people! And those Echoes! Wow!"  
  
Disembarking from the carriage, Aiko offered him her hand and smiled.  
  
"Lots of scents, yes? Don't get overwhelmed."  
  
The boy sniffed the air a few times and beamed.  
  
"Yummy! Yummy yummy yummy! Auntie Aiko, can we eat?"  
  
She nodded seriously.  
  
"Of course! In a bit."  
  
With that, she glanced around the bazaar herself.  
  
While Little Ling was busy discerning the most delicious scent, Aiko turned to the carriage driver and pointed to one of the buildings nearby.  
  
"A new inn? Since when was it here?"  
  
'Such a prime spot.'  
  
The driver shook his head.  
  
"That one is not an inn."  
  
Aiko gave him a strange look.  
  
The man was exceedingly handsome and held himself with gallant poise - it was quite strange to see someone so distinguished driving an Echo carriage, to say the leаst. She let out a mental sign.  
  
Well, of course the driver was handsome, gallant, and dreamy. He was Master Quentin, after all.  
  
Aiko knew that if something happened, Little Ling would be able to defend himself better than she could. Nothing really compared with the strength of a Transcendent, child or not, while she was a measly Awakened. Still, she was not going to take Effie's precious son out on the town without reliable protection.  
  
So, Quentin had been demoted to a carriage driver for a day, taking them around Bastion since morning. Of course, the man did not complain.  
  
Reminding herself that he was taken, Aiko suppressed the impulse to bat her eyelashes at him and raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Oh?"  
  
Quentin nodded.  
  
"It's a church."  
  
She frowned slightly.  
  
"You mean one of those weird meditation halls where people definitely do not pray to Nephis?"  
  
He chuckled.  
  
"No, this one is an actual church. Church of the Moon, or something like that. It's a tiny cult. These guys are mostly harmless, too. They used to be a bunch of wanderers, traveling with caravans and offering blessings for safe journeys. Things seem to be looking up for them, though, considering that they've been able to buy this building."  
  
Aiko blinked a few times.  
  
"Church of the Moon? As in, they worship Beast God? The dead one?"  
  
Quentin shook his head.  
  
"No, they just worship the moon. If you ask me, traveling and guidance is more of a Storm God thing. but I am not well-versed in inventing religions, so what do I know?"  
  
Aiko studied the modest church, which did not look any more opulent than the surrounding inns, and pursed her lips.  
  
"Shame. I had my eyes on that location. Gods, these weirdos really do grow like mushrooms. Where are they all coming from, anyway? I have never even heard about cults being a thing before."  
  
Quentin nodded.  
  
"The government used to be strict about it. Plus, it is not easy to muster religious zeal in a world where gods are dead, and the Nightmare Spell exists. But things are different now. Lady Nephis was right to share the truth of what fate awaits Earth with the people, but not everyone can bear the weight of truth. So, people are turning to all kinds of things to soothe their fear. Granted."  
  
He turned and glanced at the distant silhouette of the Ivory Island drifting high in the sky above the city.  
  
"Most are turning to Immortal Flame. Why believe in anything else if there is a literal goddess looking over you from above?"  
  
Aiko nodded.  
  
'Well, or an eccentric demigod looking up at you from the shadows.'  
  
She gave Quentin a long look.  
  
"Still. This Church of the Moon. Did you make a report about it?"  
  
He smiled faintly.  
  
"There are too many tiny sects popping up here and there these days to make an individual report on each one. We've been compiling information to make a batch report after the solstice, though, when things calm down a little."  
  
Aiko nodded again.  
  
"Good. I want to know everything there is to know about these 'harmless cultists'. You know what's at stake."  
  
Quentin studied her for a bit, then sighed.  
  
"Lady Aiko. You know, it would be much easier on us if we knew what it is that we are looking out for, exactly."  
  
She shook her head and looked away.  
  
"Some things are too perilous to know. And some things become more perilous the more people know about them. There is a reason why Boss is keeping everyone in the dark, so just trust his judgment."  
  
Aiko knew more than most, but even she had not been told everything. The threat Changing Star and the Lord of Shadow seemed so wary of was apparently of a kind that should never be spoken about aloud.  
  
"Auntie Aiko! Look! Look!"  
  
Little Ling pulled on her hand, pointing to the road excitedly.  
  
There, a battered caravan was approaching the city.  
  
Aiko smiled faintly.