2432 Dream Realm Caravan  
  
Seeing a caravan coming in was always impressive, which was why Aiko had taken Ling Ling to the bazaar for the last stop of their little adventure.  
  
"Wow!"  
  
The boy was properly entranced.  
  
The Dream Realm was vast, and the network of roads between the nascent human cities was in its infant state. More than that, the wilderness teemed with Nightmare Creatures and horrors of all kinds, so it took preparation and great effort to reach the destination unscathed or reach it at all.  
  
The situation was somewhat better in the West, where the River of Tears served as a medium connecting the Citadels in its basin, but here in the East, the caravans had to be formidable forces to courageous the harrowing expanse of the Dream Realm.  
  
Out there in front of thе city, a long chain of colossal Echoes was moving slowly across the rugged terrain. Each was as tall as a building - the leading beast was especially impressive, towering above the rest, with scarlet scales covering its body and three long horns crowning its colossal head.  
  
The Echoes were clad in heavy armor, each pulling an enormous wagon behind them. The wagons themselves were heavily armored, as well, resembling rolling fortresses. Their great wheels crushed the soil as they turned, and seasoned Awakened warriors kept watch on the battlements, bearing scars of innumerable battles.  
  
The wagons bore many scars, too - some old, some new. Their armor was bent and battered, torn in some places, with the enchanted wood beneath splintered and charred. The Awakened warriors were covered in dust and dirt, their weariness and exhaustion palpable even from a distance.  
  
Even the Echoes seemed fatigued, the colossal chains connecting them to the wagons rattling dully. Still, it was an amazing sight to behold, especially for a child.  
  
"Auntie Aiko! These Echoes are even bigger than me! Oh. I wonder how heavy those wagons are! Do you think I can pull one?"  
  
Aiko glanced at Little Ling with a smile.  
  
"Wolfie. let's not talk about your potential career as a wolf of burden, alright? I doubt that your mom will be happy to learn that her precious baby is dreaming about running away with a caravan to pull wagons. In fact, she might take my head clean off my shoulders if she does. and I want to keep my head firmly attached to my body, thank you very much."  
  
Little Ling giggled.  
  
"Auntie. mommy doesn't have to know, does she?"  
  
Aiko stared at him in shock and outrage.  
  
'What, he knows how to lie now?'  
  
Who taught him? ! Which lowlife was being a bad influence on this pure, innocent boy?  
  
She was going to bankrupt them.  
  
"Your mom might not know, but Auntie Cassie will know. She knows everything, so be a good boy and never lie to your mother!"  
  
Aiko huffed in indigestion.  
  
Little Ling glanced at her and grinned.  
  
"Should I tell her about how we convinced that one uncle to sign an ex - clue - see - wity contract with you today, Auntie?"  
  
She cleared her throat and turned away.  
  
"On second thought, what Effie doesn't know can't hurt her. Your mommy is a very busy person, so we shouldn't burden her with every little detail, should we?"  
  
She raised her hand and hastily pointed forward.  
  
"Look! They're approaching!"  
  
The caravan reached the vicinity of the city. The colossal Echoes stopped, and the wagons came to a halt. The entire bazaar suddenly boiled, innumerable people rushing forward to witness the arrival - since everyone here made a living by servicing the caravans, this was the moment they had been waiting for.  
  
No one rushed to leave the boundary of the city, though. First, the arriving caravan had to be inspected with the help of special Memories and sorcerous tools. It did not take very long, though. Eventually, the guards finished their task and let the tired travelers through. The wagons were brought to the empty space in front of the gates, the Echoes were dismissed, and the long process of unloading the cargo started.  
  
In the chaotic mess that followed, Aiko found an imposing man in monster hide armor and waved elegantly at him.  
  
The man was a Master and the owner of the returned caravan. He had been discussing something with a few of his subordinates, but shooed them away when Aiko approached.  
  
His low, confident voice sounded a little surprised:  
  
"Miss Aiko? I thought our meeting was not until tomorrow. I did not expect you to meet us personally."  
  
She smiled.  
  
"Well, I happened to be in the neighborhood. Why put off something for tomorrow when it can be done today, right?"  
  
The man lingered for a while, then glanced at Little Ling in confusion.  
  
"And this is?"  
  
Aiko maintained a polite expression.  
  
"Oh, this? This is Saint Ling. my dear friend's offspring. Wolfie, say hi to Uncle."  
  
Little Ling grimaced and turned his nose away.  
  
"I don't wanna. This mister smells funny."  
  
Aiko's smile turned a little forced.  
  
"Ling Ling! Don't be rude. Also, don't just go around sniffing people!"  
  
The little boy just shrugged unhappily.  
  
She studied him for a few seconds, then turned to the caravan Master.  
  
"Please forgive his manners. He is usually well - behaved. you know, when he's at home. With his mom. Saint Athena, Raised by Wolves. Steward of the East. Oh, what was I talking about? Right, the special cargo you delivered - I am ready to take it off your hands гight away. Let's say. a thousand soul shards?"  
  
The man studied Little Ling for a moment or two, then smiled widely.  
  
"What a boisterous boy. Sorry, kid. I've been on the road for months. You know what they say about the smell of adventure? Well, it's more of a stench, really. You get used to it, though."  
  
Then, he glanced at Aiko and nodded.  
  
"A thousand soul shards sounds about right. Shall we sign the documents?"  
  
Aiko's smile froze.  
  
She glanced at Little Ling, then back at the caravan Master.  
  
After remaining silent for a few seconds, she chuckled.  
  
"Why, naturally. Time is money, right? Ah, but before that. I wanted to show you something."  
  
She raised her hand, summoning a Memory. At the same time, she moved her fingers to form a shadow sign.  
  
Some distance away, Quentin's eyes suddenly turned sharp.  
  
'Little Ling not liking his smell was already suspicious enough.'  
  
Aiko maintained a relaxed expression.  
  
'but a merchant who doesn't haggle? Ring the alarm!'  
  
Something was very, very wrong with this Master.