2433 Swindling a Horror  
  
The Caravan Master - whoever or whatever he was - shifted his gaze, looking at the Memory forming on Aiko's hand curiously.  
  
"That is an unusual Memory, Miss Aiko."  
  
Indeed. While most Memories formed from sparks of light, some were different. The Memories crafted by the spellsmiths of Fallen Valor, for example, manifested in a whirlwind of scarlet sparks instead. There were stranger ones out there, as well, even among those Memories bestowed upon Awakened by the Spell. Those were usually quite special, albeit not always more potent than the rest. The Memories crafted by the Lord of Shadows after his supposed death, however, always appeared like a torrent of darkness.  
  
Aiko smiled.  
  
"Well, you know how the Spell is. It likes to be fancy sometimes."  
  
The Caravan Master chuckled and glanced at her with the same curious smile.  
  
"Indeed I do. We, merchants, have to know these matters by heart - people assign additional value to the strangest things, after all. A flashy Memory can cost ten times the price despite not offering any additional benefits. I prefer my Memories powerful rather than flamboyant, personally. but that doesn't mean that I wouldn't want to get my hands on a couple of the latter, and sell them for a fortune." He laughed.  
  
Aiko's smile was a little forced by then. The Caravan Master seemed perfectly human.  
  
That was the creepiest part, really. How flawlessly he blended with the crowd, no different from any other person she had met.  
  
But Aiko was convinced that he was not, in fact, human. That was what made her skin crawl more than encountering the creature itself did.  
  
"But what Memory are you so eager to show me? You wouldn't be summoning a weapon, would you, Miss Aiko?" There was no threat in his voice, and yet, Aiko suddenly felt cold.  
  
She raised an eyebrow.  
  
"A weapon? Goodness gracious, surely not. What am I going to do with a weapon in these heels?"  
  
She wasn't lying, either.  
  
Her stilettos were indeed not what one would want to wear in a ferocious battle. Granted, Aiko could float and fly as she wished, so that wasn't an issue. Still - she was a lover, not a fighter. Well. the "lover" part wasn't going so well for her, to be honest, but that was beyond the point.  
  
'Who cares? I love money! Now that's true romance.'  
  
Finally, a hand mirror made of polished silver appeared in her hand. It was quite a stylish little accessоry, etched with gorgeous patterns and inlaid with finely carved pieces of obsidian. The Caravan Master studied it carefully.  
  
"Not a weapon, after all."  
  
He glanced at her and smiled.  
  
"Still. it seemed that I've been discovered. How vexing. I thought I performed the role of this human well. I even came while the Star is gone, and the Shadow it casts is gone with her."  
  
Aiko shivered.  
  
'Not a human, then.'  
  
Her suspicion, unfortunately, had turned out to be correct.  
  
'How did this thing pass the inspection, dammit?'  
  
What stood in front of her was not the Ascended merchant she had been supposed to meet. Instead. it was a vessel of the Great Terror, Skinwalker.  
  
The forces of humanity were currently locked in a losing war against the detestable creature in the Eastern Quadrant, where it was supposed to be contained. The fact that a vessel of Skinwalker had made it all the way to Bastion, past every countermeasure put in place to prevent just that eventuality. Was concerning. Actually, it was frightening.  
  
Aiko forced out a smile.  
  
"Whatever do you mean?"  
  
With her other hand, she pulled Little Ling closer.  
  
The vessel of Skinwalker studied her for a few seconds, then smiled politely.  
  
"I am curious. How did you see through my charade?"  
  
Aiko felt an impulse to mock the Nightmare Creature, even if she was powerless in front of it.  
  
She could have told him how Little Ling had disliked his scent, and more importantly, how he completely failed to understand what kind of people merchants were. in front of Aiko of the Shadow Clan, of all people!  
  
The distressing creature had been steadily improving its ability to mimic human behavior, cunningly making one countermeasure invented to contain it after another meaningless - but it still failed to truly fathom what it meant to be human. It couldn't. All Skinwalker could do was imitate humans while not truly understanding what it was imitating. in a sense, it did the opposite of what the practitioners of Shadow Dance were supposed to do. Not that there were numerous of those, even with all the training.  
  
In any case, Aiko really wanted to gloat.  
  
But why would she explain what exactly it was that the Skinwalker had done wrong to the creepy bastard? So that it could learn from its mistakes and perform better next time?  
  
'Yeah, no. I am not giving this thing a heroic monologue. After all, I am not a hero. I am a babysitter. For today.'  
  
Little Ling hugged Aiko, sensing that there was something wrong. Some distance away, Quentin was cautiously making his way toward them.  
  
Returning the Skinwalker's smile, she glanced at her hand mirror.  
  
"Let me finish explaining about this Memory first. I summoned it for a reason, you know?"  
  
She turned the mirror this way and that, casting bright reflections on the cobblestones.  
  
"This here is a prototype of a Memory my boss has been developing in his free time. Communication is a serious problem in the Dream Realm, actually. Sure, the Immortal Flame is already working on a solution - a Dreamscape for the Dream Realm, or some such. Making it safe from all the horrors of this world is proving to be a problem in and of itself, though. Hence, we came up with our own solution. Ah, if only there was a way to mass-produce them! But I am getting off topic."  
  
The vessel of the Skinwalker tilted its head.  
  
"Communication? Are you hoping to commune with me, Awakened? Unity. community. yes."  
  
Aiko coughed.  
  
"Thanks. but you are not my type, sorry. Sadly, it's not like I can do anything against you, can I? I mean, I am a mere Awakened, and you are a Great Terror. What am I supposed to do?"  
  
Oh, but I do feel the need to inform you of something.  
  
She pointed to Little Ling, who was clinging to her.  
  
"This here is my dear friend's child. And my friend is a real she-wolf when it comes to protecting her boy. Coincidentally, today, we learned that everyone in this city loves his mom very much. Do you know why? Because she is Saint Athena, Raised byWolves, Steward of the East. the War Beast. You should know her well, considering how numerous of your vessels she has destroyed."  
  
Aiko drew Little Ling closer and covered his eyes with her hand.  
  
Then, she smiled radiantly.  
  
"Right, returning to the Memory. It has a really awful name, so I'll spare you the pain of hearing it. I mean. I am perfectly capable of coming up with a awful name of my own! Today, let's call it."  
  
Aiko paused for a moment and then said in a solemn tone:  
  
".Call Mommy."  
  
And just as she did, something thundered in the sky above them.