1590 Epilogue

Winter had grasped the streets of NQSC with frigid fingers, making people on the streets shiver from the chill and hurry to get inside. The sky was distant and cold, full of icy clouds.

In one of the more prosperous districts of the city, a splendid-looking young man was sitting on a rusty bench, cradling a cup of luxurious plant-based coffee in his hand. Despite being dressed in light clothes, he didn't seem to be bothered by the cold. In fact, he looked like nothing in this world could bother him.

The people rushing past the park couldn't help but throw furtive glances at the young man. His expensive clothes, lithe figure, alabaster skin, gleaming onyx eyes, and lustrous raven-black hair... but, most of all, the aura of confidence and subdued power emanating from him... made the young man look out of place.

It was as if he belonged in a marble palace instead of this small and bleak park.

Taking a sip of his coffee, Sunny grimaced and shook his head.

"...Still bitter."

Standing up, he tossed the empty cup into a trash bin and crossed the street.

There, a convenience store invited potential customers to come inside with a colorful sign. Sunny hesitated for a moment, then opened the door and did just that.

The bell fixed above the door rang melodiously, announcing his arrival to the clerk.

Ignoring the clerk, who was staring at him with wide eyes, Sunny looked around the modest store. There were all kinds of food items on the shelves, from cheap synthpaste rations to more extravagant natural snacks. This district was mostly visited by a somewhat affluent crowd, so there was a lot to choose from.

That said, Sunny did not really know what to buy. Despite having been an affluent person himself, once, he had rarely visited stores like this. Most of his time had been spent in the Dream Realm, anyway, and here in the waking world, he would usually either eat at the Academy or cook something up back home.

'Hmm.'

Sunny stared at the shelves for a while, then turned to the window, where a small dining surface was arranged for those who wanted to grab a quick bite right here in the store.

Currently, there was only one person sitting in front of the window. It was a pretty young woman in a neat school uniform, who was absentmindedly eating cup ramen while studying the screen of her communicator with a serious expression. She had pale skin and black hair, just like him.

In fact, one could even say that the two of them looked quite alike.

Sunny cleared his throat and then asked in a neutral tone:

"Hey. What's good here?"

The girl was distracted from her communicator and turned to him, still engrossed in whatever it was she had been reading.

"What?"

Then, she froze, looking at him with wide eyes.

Sunny sighed, already accustomed to such reactions. It had already been a bit bothersome before he Transcended, but now that he was a Saint, mundane humans were often startled by his appearance.

He smiled politely.

"I asked what you would recommend. Is that one good?"

He pointed to her meal.

The girl nodded, acting a little bashful.

"Ah... yes... sir."

'Sir? Well... it's better than "brat", I guess.'

Sunny nodded and went on to purchase himself the same type of cup ramen. Pouring boiling water into the cup, he sat down on the chair next to the young woman — there were only chairs there, to be fair — and looked into the window.

He was unperturbed, but she seemed to be feeling awkward. After a few moments of silence, the girl asked in a shy tone:

"Can I ask, sir... are you an Awakened?"

Sunny glanced at her, then opened the steaming cup of ramen and picked up his chopsticks.

"Oh? Sure."

He enjoyed the spicy smell, then slurped a generous portion of noodles and chewed them with visible delight.

"Wow, you weren't lying. This one is really good."

The girl stared at him strangely, and then suddenly asked in a hesitant tone:

"I'm sorry, but... do I know you?"

Sunny looked at her and remained silent for a few long moments.

Then, he lightly shook his head.

"No... no, I don't think you do. I mean, why would you? I'm quite a memorable person, actually. I doubt someone would easily forget meeting me. In normal circumstances."

While she looked away in embarrassment, Sunny shrugged.

"Why do you ask?"

The girl shook her head.

"No, it's just that you look familiar, sir. I must have mistook you for someone."

Sunny studied her for a couple more seconds, then turned away.

"Don't worry. I won't hold it against you."

He returned to his food, while the young woman finished hers. They didn't speak again for a while, but then Sunny suddenly asked:

"Are you a local here, in NQSC?"

The girl looked at him in surprise.

"Urn... sure? Although I'll be moving soon. My dad, he works for the government. So, with everything that is going on, he is being sent to a new post. We'll be leaving in a few months."

Sunny sighed.

"Ah. I see. Actually, I'll be leaving on a long journey soon, too."

He smiled and put his chopsticks down, then added in a strangely wistful tone:

"...Because I'm far away from home."

Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then shook his head and stood up.

"Well, anyway. Thanks for the recommendation. I'll be sure to repay you, when we meet again."

The young woman looked at him in confusion.

And as she did, a dark serpent flowed from her shadow into the young man's shadow, unnoticed.

At the same time, the shadow of the young man split in two. One remained glued to him, while the other glided across the floor, hesitated for a moment, and hid in the girl's shadow, replacing the dark serpent.

Sunny said a silent goodbye to the happy shadow and smiled.

"Stay safe, Rain. I'll see you around."

With that, he headed for the door.

Startled, Rain rose from her seat and called out:

"Wait... sir? How do you know my name?"

But the strange Awakened was already gone. The bell hanging above the door remained silent, yet the young man was nowhere to be seen. It was as if he had never been there, at all.

All that remained was an empty cup of noodles and lingering feeling of unexplainable familiarity.

And the vivid memory of their odd first meeting.

...Sunny stepped out of the shadows a few hundred meters away and sighed, looking up.

It was time to leave.

White snow was falling slowly from the lonesome grey sky.

[End of part three: Well of Wishes.]

[End of volume seven: The Tomb of Ariel.]