1591 Years Later

There was a rustle, and a gentle breeze caressed Sunny's face. He awoke slowly, allowing himself to enjoy the sweet moments of comfort and peace that dwelled on the edge between dream and wakefulness. His bed was soft, warm, and cozy… today, it was especially hard to abandon its familiar embrace.

After a while, he sighed and opened his eyes.

The sun was yet to rise, but the sky outside his window had already started to brighten. The wind blowing from the lake made the curtains flutter, filling the modest bedroom with the delightful smell of freshness. Even after all these years, Sunny was still sometimes startled at how clean and pure the air of the Dream Realm was.

He took a few deep breaths, rubbed his face, and rose from the bed.

His room was not very large and not very luxurious. However, it was very cozy. There was a bed, a nightstand, a case with various books crowding the shelves, a writing desk, and a simple dresser. The furniture was made out of natural wood, crafted with affection and care. There were a few decorations added here and there, as well as plenty of signs of the room being well lived-in.

Well, of course it was. He had been spending his nights here for a long time, after all..

Putting on simple clothes and summoning the Nebulous Mantle, Sunny yawned, tied his hair back, and left the bedroom. He splashed some water in his face, then went to the kitchen and brewed himself a large cup of strong, fragrant coffee.

Finally, holding the steaming mug, he left the house and sat down on the porch, intending to enjoy his coffee while watching the sun rise.

It was rather hard to get his hands on coffee beans in the Dream Realm, but today, Sunny wanted to pamper himself. It was his birthday, after all.

He was turning twenty-six.

…Of course, no one in the world knew that.

Taking the first sip of his coffee, Sunny smiled slightly and looked up. A few of the brightest stars could still be seen, shining in the pale lavender expanse of the morning sky. Just at that moment, the gentle sun finally crested the dark line of the distant horizon, imbuing the sky with a beautiful golden radiance. The soft twilight of dawn was imbued with a hint of bright daylight.

He watched the sun rise while enjoying his coffee.

Despite the beautiful sight, Sunny felt a bit of melancholy. He looked down with a wistful smile.

...I am older than mom was when she passed now.

It was a strange feeling. When Sunny was a child, his mother was the definition of an adult to him, and adults were magical creatures who possessed wondrous and incredible powers. But now, he was an adult himself, which was why he was able to realize… that his mother had been a kid herself.

She was gone, but both her children were alive and doing well. There was precious solace and consolation in that fact, so Sunny did not feel too sad.

Well, alive was a given, but he wasn't too sure about doing well. During these last four years, he had gone through a long rough patch… and had even done a few very stupid things. Still, it was looking better now.

This peaceful morning he was able to enjoy was proof.

Sipping on coffee, Sunny watched as sunlight finally reached the lake and reflected on its clear surface. The lake was vast and picturesque, so calm that its surface was like a mirror.

A grandiose, magnificent white castle rose from the lake, with vermilion flags fluttering on its many towers. It almost seemed too beautiful to be real, like something from a fairy tale. But, of course, it was truly there.

The beautiful castle of white stone was Bastion, the Great Citadel of Clan Valor, where the King of Swords held his court. It was also the heart of a populous city that had grown around the lake in the last four years.

After the Sovereigns had revealed themselves, most of the remaining civilian population of the Southern Quadrant — around two hundred million people — was evacuated directly to the Dream Realm, divided between Bastion and Ravenheart, and gradually funneled into lesser Citadels. Later, the Dream Gates were opened in the other Quadrants, and even more mundane people received a chance to relocate into the Dream Realm.

Even if few understood the true meaning of these events, the gradual exodus of humanity from the waking world had already begun. For now, most of those who left were from the fringes of society — people who did not possess citizenship, and therefore did not receive their share of the scarce resources needed to live a proper life on the dying Earth.

But Sunny knew more than most. He had no doubt that, sooner or later, everyone would leave… if they were given enough time. As the years passed, the situation in the waking world would gradually turn worse and worse. There would be more Nightmare Gates, more powerful Nightmare Creatures, and less space for humans to exist. Until the entire world was swallowed by the Dream Realm.

Granted… humanity was growing stronger, too.

The Chain of Nightmares had been like a turning point in history. Before, the number of Awakened in the world was relatively limited… there were a hundred thousand Awakened or so, a few hundred Masters, and a few dozen Saints.

After Antarctica, these numbers changed. By now, there must have been no less than a million Awakened out there, with several thousands of Masters and more than a hundred Saints guiding them all to fight against the Nightmare Creatures. The balance of power that had been maintained for decades was finally broken, and humanity set out on the path of no return.

There were hundreds of millions of mundane humans residing in the Dream Realm, too. Many lived in the sprawling cities surrounding the three Great Citadels, but most had settled across the lesser Citadels scattered around the human-controlled regions of this dangerous world. Dozens of towns had popped up here and there, all developing swiftly.

Of course, life in the Dream Realm was not easy, and people had to go through a period of adjustment before becoming accustomed to this new, harsh reality. But since most of them were either refugees or from the outskirts of the overcrowded siege capitals, they were no strangers to discomfort. Instead, the lives of many had only improved after leaving the waking world behind.

They could not return, anyway. Or rather, they could not return without risking their lives. The moment a mundane human entered the Dream Realm, a Seed of Nightmare was planted into their soul. However, that seed would not bloom, summoning them into the First Nightmare, unless one of two conditions had been met. One of the conditions was stepping back into the waking world.

The other was leaving the territory of the Domain to which they had pledged their loyalty. As long as the Sovereigns willed it, their mundane subjects were protected from the ravages of the Nightmare Spell.

This was another reason why the number of Awakened had increased so much in the last four years. Those who wished to challenge the First Nightmare could simply request it from the great clans instead of waiting to be infected by the Spell. Many of them even survived.

Sunny took another sip of coffee and turned his head, looking at the lively city that had grown around the beautiful, calm lake.

Of course, it could not be compared to a vast human hive like NQSC. However, there was still a startling amount of people here, at least a dozen million of them or so. Another million or two lived in the castle itself.

Building a city like that in a short amount of time was a great undertaking, but with thousands of Awakened participating in the construction, all possessing inhuman strength and powerful Aspects, it happened surprisingly quickly. Now, the city looked neat and tidy, with two- or three-storied houses lined along lovely streets.

The houses were built from white stone, their roofs covered by colorful red tiles. There was plenty of trees and greenery, as well, with parks, gardens, and water features placed harmoniously here and there.

Modern technology might have been hard to use in the Dream Realm, but nothing prevented the city planners and architects from using the vast accumulated knowledge of humanity and all the processing power of the waking world to do all the preparatory work in advance.

In short, Bastion looked very pretty and picturesque. It was also usually quite lively.

This early in the morning, however, most people were still asleep, which was why Sunny was able to enjoy his coffee surrounded by peaceful silence.

…Oh, he owned a house in Bastion as well. More than that, it was a house many would be jealous of.

Although not as prestigious as being able to live in the castle itself, his property was on the very shore of the lake, with its back windows opening straight to the water.

It was an elegant one-story cottage, which was seemingly built from brown bricks, with a sloping tiled roof and a tall chimney. There was a small garden in the back and a neat lawn in front of it, with herbs and flowers growing in ceramic pots.

Since it was situated at the end of the street, few people ever passed by.

If they did pass by, however, they would have seen a modest sign hanging above the door of the cottage.

It read:

"Sunny's Brilliant Emporium: Café & Memory Boutique"