1593 Pleasant Morning

Before Sunny went inside, he lingered for a few moments and glanced at the magnificent castle one last time. Then, he slowly looked up.

Out there, high above the tallest tower of Bastion and slightly to the side, a beautiful island was hovering in the sky, bathed in the golden light of dawn. A great pagoda of pristine white stone rose from it, just as majestic as the colossal ancient fortress.

The Ivory Tower.

The wandering Citadel looked harmonious drifting above Bastion like a satellite. In recent years, its lady and her warriors had been sent to defend remote human enclaves on countless occasions, their fame and renown growing with each improbable victory.

The image of the immaculate white tower was slowly becoming a symbol of hope for those besieged by Nightmare Creatures in the Sword Domain.

Which was more than a little bit fitting.

Sunny looked at the Ivory Tower for a few moments, his expression remaining perfectly neutral. Then, he averted his eyes and sighed.

'She has been in Bastian for almost a month now. That is unusual... I thought Anvil would send her to some other godforsaken battlefield by now.'

With that, he went to enter the cottage. Before he could, however, there was a sound of unhurried steps approaching from further down the street.

Turning his head, Sunny saw a petite young woman with short dark hair walking over. She looked sleepy, covering a yawn with a small palm. Unlike most Awakened, the young woman stubbornly clung to wearing modern clothes. Her black slacks and white blouse, admittedly, did not stand out in the eclectic fashion of Bastion.

Here, one was just as likely to meet a person wearing a stylish business suit as a person clad in enchanted armor. The former was even more in vogue, considering that it took some effort to transport material possessions from the other side.

The young woman stopped and stared at him sullenly.

"Hey, boss."

Sunny smiled.

"Hey, Aiko. It's a wonderful morning, isn't it?"

Her expression did not change, but her gaze turned even darker. A moment later, Aiko looked away and sighed bitterly.

"I still don't understand why you insist on opening so early... the sun is not even up yet, for the love of gods..."

Chuckling, Sunny opened the door. He had found Aiko shortly after returning to civilization, which happened about a year ago. Back then, the young woman was barely making ends meet. According to her, her Memory shop went out of business because the main inventory supplier disappeared somewhere in Antarctica.

It was a curious thing.

Aiko seemed to remember that she had had a partner, and even that her partner had been responsible for providing the Memories for the shop. However, her memories were vague at best, and her attention seemed to wander away every time she tried to concentrate on who that partner had been, exactly. She would even forget trying to recollect the details, switching to thinking about something else.

That was how the world covered the glaring hole in existence where Sunny used to be. No one remembered that he had existed, and for events that were too important to be entirely forgotten, a vague and abstract substitute took his place.

Just some guy. An inconsequential stranger. A fleeting acquaintance. A comrade who had perished long ago, their face and voice erased from memory by the passage of time. People vaguely recognized that someone had been there, side by side with them, but as soon as they concentrated on these memories, their minds naturally wandered to other matters.

The same went for the material traces he had left in the world. There was that famous movie, for example... The Devil of Antarctica. It had been inspired by his actions during the Southern Campaign. People knew that the main character was based on a real person, but were incapable of thinking deeply about who that person was.

So, they just assumed that the main character was a representation of the collective heroism of countless soldiers who had perished in Antarctica.

Oh... Sunny was dead, officially. Not that anyone knew or remembered. Therefore, his citizenship status had been revoked, his accounts frozen, and his house in NQSC resold.

In short, not only had everyone forgotten him, but they were even incapable of becoming aware of having forgotten him.

His smile turned brittle.

...In any case, Aiko had been reluctant to pledge her allegiance to the Legacy Clans or the government. She had lost her job as Kai's manager when he enlisted, and the Brilliant Emporium was on the verge of going bankrupt. That was when Sunny found her and purchased the ownership of his own business back from her.

After all, although the countless Nightmare Creatures he had slaughtered while aimlessly wandering the Dream Realm had not given him a lot of shadow fragments, they had provided him with numerous soul shards. He was secretly an extremely wealthy person.

Since Sunny needed a capable manager to help him run the Emporium, he hired Aiko once again. Now, she was playing the role of his assistant... as well as, begrudgingly, assistant cook.

"Come on. The early risers will be here soon."

The two of them went to the spacious kitchen and started preparing for the day. Sunny was preparing the ingredients, while Aiko went over the books with a frown on her face.

"Boss, we are running low on most ingredients. You need to make a trip to the waking world soon."

"Boss, we are not making enough money. We only sold one Memory in the last two months! What even is the point of calling ourselves a Memory Boutique? Give me some funds for a marketing campaign, I'm begging you..."

"Boss, there will be a delivery from the Beast Farm later today. I still have bruises from dealing with them the last time... you do the honors!"

Listening to Aiko nagging, Sunny let out a sigh. Running a business wasn't easy.

Especially while dealing with crafted Memories and desperately trying to not attract Clan Valor's attention.

As he was almost done with the preparatory work, the first customer finally arrived.

It was a familiar face.