1594 Familiar Faces

It was still very early in the morning, so the streets of Bastion were mostly empty. However, someone had already come to the Brilliant Emporium.

As the door opened, a melodious sound spread through the interior of the Marvelous Mimic. There was a beautiful silver bell affixed above the door, its soft and pleasing ringing welcoming the entering customers.

Of course, it was the Sonorous Silver Bell.

Sunny looked up from what he was doing, then wiped his hands on his apron and left the kitchen. There was an elderly gentleman standing at the door, dressed in a patchy enchanted robe. He had messy grey hair, absentminded eyes, and a pair of bushy eyebrows that seemed to have a life of their own.

Sunny suppressed a smile.

"Awakened Julius. You are here early."

The old man looked at him and smiled politely.

"Ah, Master Sunless! Well, I am a night owl. Plus, you know what they say, the early bird gets the worm. Wait... I am mixing metaphors..."

He hesitated for a moment, then coughed.

"Sorry. I seem to remember that you dislike birds. In any case, it is nice to see you on this pleasant morning."

Sunny nodded.

"Likewise. The usual?"

As the old man assumed his favorite spot near the window, Sunny returned to the kitchen. There, he went about making coffee for his former teacher, while at the same time preparing a light breakfast.

'We are running low on coffee beans, indeed. I'll have to visit NQSC this week, won't I?'

While Brilliant Emporium could not contend with more prestigious restaurants in Bastion, hot beverages like coffee, tea, and hot chocolate were Sunny's selling point. That was because he exclusively used the pure water from the Endless Spring to brew them, which made each cup especially invigorating.

He ground the beans, poured the fragrant powder and a little sugar into a copper cezve, then sent a wisp of essence into the stove and placed the cezve on the fire. The stove had been created by him by reversing the enchantment of a long-destroyed charm of his, [Memory of Fire], which made kitchen work much easier.

When the ground coffee heated a little, he took the Endless Spring off the shelf, poured water into the cezve, and placed it back on the fire. Ideally, he should have been using a pan of heated sand instead of open fire, but, oh well... there were limits to how fancy Sunny was willing to be.

While the coffee was brewing, he ignited a second flame and put a pan on it. Then, Sunny opened the icebox and took out a few eggs, butter, and a jar of milk...

The icebox had also been created and enchanted by him, in the best attempt to imitate the luxurious refrigerator he had greatly enjoyed owning in the past. In fact, it was more of a large cabinet than a box, made out of natural wood instead of synthwood. So, in a sense, it was even more luxurious.

There was no ice inside, either. Instead, the enchantment was the reverse of another charm he had lost, [Memory of Ice]. There was a luminous enchantment, too, activated when the door of the cabinet was open. A third enchantment created a dedicated reserve of essence that powered the first two, so Sunny just had to replenish it once every few months.

Breaking the eggs with one hand and putting butter on the pan with the other, Sunny mixed the eggs while slowly blending milk in and poured the resulting mass into the melted butter.

He waited for the omelette to set, then effortlessly flipped and folded it, finally adding some mushrooms, vegetables, and ham. Well... monster ham, to be precise.

Soon, a perfectly cooked omelette and a cup of fragrant coffee were ready. Putting them on a tray, Sunny glanced at Aiko, who was still going over the books, and left the kitchen once more.

Placing the plate and the cup in front of Teacher Julius, he curiously glanced at the book the old man was reading. Its cover was hidden by a leather jacket, but he knew the title from a glance.

It was The Exploration Report on the Tomb of Ariel, by: Nobody.

Sunny was the nobody in question, of course.

Even though he had lost credit for his previous academic papers, it seemed like a shame to just leave all the knowledge he had accumulated in the Third Nightmare go to waste. So, even knowing that it would cause some problems, he published an research paper anonymously.

He kept the existence of the Plagues and everything he discovered in the Estuary to himself, though, concentrating on the unique culture of the River Civilization, and especially on the stories of Weave he had heard from Ananke, instead.

Not only because there were some things that were better left unsaid, but also because some knowledge was simply too dangerous to share. There were very few people in the world who could withstand a mere mention of the Forgotten God, anyway, while many could be harmed by being exposed to it.

However, even with these redacted parts, his report had caused a furor in academic circles.

...It had caused a furor in some other circles, as well.

Namely, among the Great Clans.

There were supposed to only be six people who had ventured into the Nightmare of the Tomb of Ariel, after all. And since none of them was the author of the report... then who the hell was? And how did that person know so much about the Great River?

Needless to say, the existence of the Exploration Report, written by nobody, was under a lot of scrutiny. Which was why even a respected professor like Teacher Julius chose to hide its cover under a jacket and read it in the Dream Realm, as opposed to on his communicator in the waking world.

When the old man smelled the delicious fragrance of coffee, he got distracted from his book and looked up.

"That smell! Ah, I've been looking forward to it all week."

Sunny smiled and pointed to the Exploration Report.

"Are you reading that report again, Awakened Julius?"

The old man looked around and pressed a finger against his lips.

"I am! But shhh! You know this amazing work is supposed to be banned, Master Sunless."

He picked up a fork and sighed dejectedly.

"Such a travesty. The depth of knowledge and wisdom the author of this remarkable work possesses is truly astounding. Their discoveries and insights have truly overturned our understanding of the history of the Dream Realm, especially its later stages. Not to mention the incredible revelations about the origins of the Nightmare Spell they documented! Such a person should be lauded and celebrated, not hunted. Those Legacies are really out of line, this time."

Sunny smiled politely.

"Who do you think the author is?"

Teacher Julius looked thoughtful for a moment.

"A person of utter brilliance and integrity, no doubt! Well... they should be an old fossil like me, most likely. Probably one of the first- generation Saints? Otherwise, I don't see how they could have survived the harrowing depths of the Great River, let alone avoid being found out by the... those who are trying to find them."

He sighed.

"Well, a young man like you won't understand, Master Sunless. Being an explorer is a noble calling, you see. Uh... not that there's anything wrong with making an honest living like you do. Gods know I would have been lost without your excellent cooking skills! Please excuse my outburst. This old man was being impolite."

Sunny chuckled.

"No, no... you are right. Please enjoy your breakfast." With that, he bowed slightly and took a step back. The Silver Bell rang again, announcing the arrival of the next customer...