1602 Short, Dark, and Handsome

Effie slowly turned around, just in time to notice the unreasonably gorgeous proprietor of the Brilliant Emporium falling. Three cups of coffee that he had been carrying on a tray were flying into the air in slow motion.

It seemed that he had tripped.

Without missing a bit, the enigmatic shopkeeper regained his balance with a graceful half-step, extended his hand unhurriedly, and caught all three cups on the tray without spilling a single drop.

A moment later, he smoothly approached the table and placed the cups down, acting as if nothing had happened. Then, the nonchalant young man smiled pleasantly and gave her a respectful bow.

"Saint Athena. Welcome."

Effie found herself unable to speak for a moment.

'D—damn. So cool!'

At the same time, Sunny was nothing short of panicking on the inside. 'What the hell?! No, what the actual hell?! I mean... what the hell?!' How could she go and say something like that?!

And right in front of her husband, too!

Did that woman have no tact?!

Glancing at Ling's Dad covertly, Sunny noticed that the young man was looking at him apologetically. He seemed more embarrassed than anything, with no signs of anger or insecurity written on his handsome face.

It seemed that the nameless guy was used to his wife's antics... well, it made sense.

'Why wouldn't he be?'

Sunny had been teased relentlessly by Effie. What made him think that the poor bastard would have had it any easier? If anything, as her husband, he probably had it way worse...

Effie, meanwhile, smiled and said in a reserved tone:

"Oh, Master Sunless. You were here."

It stung a little. The fact Effie used his name instead of a nickname, like she did with her close friends, stung. The fact that she made an effort to act with decorum around him stung, too.

Even not being openly teased by her caused a dull ache in his heart. But, at the same time...

Seeing her healthy and well made him happy. Being around her felt familiar and nice, too... even though he was nothing but a dull, unassuming merchant in her eyes. A passing acquaintance not deserving of a second thought, unremarkable and easily forgotten. Someone not worthy of her time, let alone attention.

In fact, it was strange for her to even remember his name. But that was the best Sunny could hope for.

For now.

He nodded politely.

"Indeed. I took the liberty of making some coffee for you to enjoy while the food is being prepared. Aiko, you take a break and keep our esteemed guest company."

Effie was being uncharacteristically taciturn, probably because she felt uncomfortable around a stranger. She was also looking at him strangely. If Sunny did not know better, he could have even imagined that she was feeling shy.

But, surely, that was impossible.

Bowing again, Sunny turned around and fled into the kitchen.

Of course, he made sure to make his retreat seem calm and dignified.

...As he was walking away, though, he couldn't help but hear Little Ling giggling.

"Hehehe. Clothes are itchy! Can mommy undress Ling Ling, too?"

Feeling his ears burning, Sunny dove behind a door.

'Damnation!'

Right. He had to concentrate on cooking... knowing Effie's appetite, nothing less than a veritable feast would do.

Sunny did just that, manifesting an avatar and several pairs of shadow hands. Slicing, dicing, washing, roasting, boiling, simmering, stirring... he had to do a lot of things at the same time just to distract himself from thinking too much.

Thankfully, his other two avatars were busy at the moment, as well, increasing the load on his consciousness.

An idle mind was a restless mind! So, Sunny preferred being busy.

Nevertheless, he couldn't help but hear bits and pieces of the conversation happening in the dining hall.

"Shortie, is your boss single? I have someone in mind to set him up with!"

"Single? Actually, he's double... I mean, there's two of him..."

"Huh?"

"In any case, leave my boss alone! Every time you people show up, my career takes a nosedive! First in the Bright Castle, then in NQSC... I swear to the dead gods, Effie, if another of my employers decides to enlist and become a war hero after spending time with you lot, I'll take it personally!"

"Ah! Are you still angry at Kai? Actually, he asked me to pass a message to you..."

"Tell that pretty bastard to keep his messages to himself. Unless he wants to help me sue himself for unlawful termination, I don't want to hear a word from him."

"Hehe. Bastard! Bastard!"

"Ling Ling! Don't say that word!"

Sunny shook his head and let out a sigh, thinking that Aiko was being too harsh on Kai.

Actually, Effie and her were not that close. The two of them were on friendly terms and shared a deep bond as the survivors of the Forgotten Shore, sure, but back there, Aiko had lived in the Bright Castle, while Effie had been a huntress of the outer settlement. Their paths had not intersected often.

Another point of connection between them was Kai, who knew the petite girl much better from their days of paying tribute to Gunlaug. Aiko had even worked as his manager after returning to the waking world. So, when he chose to end his idol career and enlist in the military, she lost her job.

As a result, Aiko seemed to be holding a grudge.

Which was a bit sad, considering that she was one of the main reasons why Kai had ended up as a Saint in service of the government, to begin with.

Kai's life could have been safe and comfortable as an Awakened, but he had chosen to follow Sunny and the rest of the cohort into the Second Nightmare, and later joined the Southern Campaign. One of the main reasons he had done that was the shame he felt about not having done anything to help Aiko when she was being harassed by one of Gunlaug's Pathfinders.

The bastard whom Nephis had eventually killed.

So, Kai never wanted to be powerless to help people like Aiko, and Aiko herself, ever again. That was his motivation to seek strength and continuously put himself at risk as one of the government's champions.

'What a messed-up situation.'

The web of human relationships was like that, and sometimes it seemed that people were helplessly stuck in its complicated embrace.

Sunny, on the other hand, had been forcefully freed from that web. And yet... his situation was just as messed up.

He chuckled.

There was no salvation from the human mess anywhere.