1839 Last Days of Peace

Pale sunshine poured through the open window, and a gentle breeze made the curtains flutter. Sunny opened his eyes slowly, laying comfortably in his opulent bed. The subtle sounds of the city waking up washed over him, bright and lively on this peaceful morning.

He yawned, then slowly got up.

Today was like any other day in Bastion. There were some changes about the mood on the streets of the young city as of late, but mostly, it was the same. The Brilliant Emporium was also the same — except for one detail.

There was a hand-drawn sign standing in front of the entrance. It had been there for the past few days, attracting plenty of attention.

The Sign said:

"Closing soon

\*Temporarily

\*\*Farewell discounts for everyone! Best waffles in two worlds!”

As a result, Sunny had earned quite a lot of coins in the last day or two. The Brilliant Emporium seemed to have gathered a loyal audience, and the regulars were both sad to see it temporarily close doors and in a hurry to visit it one last time.

But today...

Today was the last day.

So, Sunny wanted to make it perfect.

Reaching the kitchen, he was surprised to see that Ajko was already there. The petite girl usually liked to sleep a lot — if it wasn’t for the job, she would have Iazed around in bed until noon. But today, she was there before Sunny.

He looked at her in surprise.

"... I’m not seeing things, am I?"

She grinned.

"Of course not, boss! What are you talking about? I have always been dependable, punctual, and diligent!”

Sunny looked at her with doubt.

"Dependable, punctual, and diligent... do you even know what these words mean?"

Aiko nodded energetically.

"Of course, bossl”

He stared at her some more, then sighed.

"Well, whatever. Start preparing the ingredients."

The petite girl made a fist and floated up a little.

"Yes, boss! I love you, boss!"

He shuddered.

Aiko had been like that after realizing how profitable a war could be to an establishment dealing with Memories. Her eyes had not stopper sparkling since. Sunny could practically see all kinds of nefarious schemes forming in her twisted little head.

'At least someone is happy...'

He manifested an avatar and went about welcoming the first customers.

A few familiar faces visited the Brilliant Emporium that day.

Early in the morning, he guided Beth to her usual table and brewed her some coffee. The dark circles under the young woman’s eyes were even more pronounced than usual, and she seemed to be partially asleep.

Sunny was a little touched that she made time to visit the Brilliant Emporium on its closing day despite that.

"Here's your coffee, Miss Beth. Thank you for coming to say goodbye."

She stared at him tiredly, then blinked a couple of times.

"Huh? Goodbye?"

Sunny hesitated for a moment.

"Yes? We are closing today... temporarily."

Beth frowned.

"Oh, really? I didn't know. I haven’t left the lab in a week... no, wait, what day is it today? In ten days?"

Sunny looked at her silently, not knowing what to say. His pleasant smile froze a little.

She sighed.

"Well... it’s a shame. I really grew to like this place! Good luck to you, Master Sunless... in whatever it is that you are going to do next."

His smile widened a little.

"Good luck to you as well, Miss Beth. I really hope that you succeed. But, please... take care of yourself. Your life is precious, too."

She sipped her coffee and smiled with a hint of bittersweet sadness in her eyes.

"I know. After all, there was someone who paid a great price to save it. So, I have to live well..."

Shortly after, Sunny served Teacher Julius breakfast and tea. The old man seemed strangely down, looking in the window with a distracted look.

Sunny hesitated for a few moments, then asked politely:

"Is something bothering you, Awakened Julius?"

The old man perked up a little.

"Ah, Master Sunless. It's nothing much... I’m just feeling old these days. I was born before there was even such a thing as the Nightmare Spell, you know. A youngster like you might not understand..."

He looked in the window and sighed.

"The world keeps changing, and old fossils like me can't keep up. Maybe it's time for me to retire."

Sunny sat down across from him and chuckled.

"What are you talking about, Awakened Julius? You, of all people, must not retire."

Teacher Julius raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? Why? Right... you probably don’t know, but my course has never been very popular. I am usually lucky to get one or two students to attend... they are always the best students at the Academy, of course, but still! It’s a bit..."

Sunny shook his head.

"It is because the world is changing that you must never retire. Think about it. Wilderness survival might not have been very in demand before — but it was only useful to a handful of Awakened before, as well."

He gestured to the quiet street outside.

"Now, there are many more Awakened out there. There are mundane people living in the Dream Realm, too. There are roads being built between new cities and trade routes being established. We are notjust surviving in the wilderness anymore — we are trying to conquer it. So, experts like you will become more precious than gold very soon."

Teacher Julius stared at him with a strange expression for a while.

Then, his eyes glistened.

"You think so?"

Sunny nodded.

"Of course! ”

The old man was suddenly full of energy and smiled.

"No... but you are right! The development of civilization is like a conquest of the wilds. Now that civilization is developing in the Dream Realm, youngsters like you will need someone with a bit of sense to guide them. I might not have a lot of sense, but I do know a thing or two about the Dream Realm. Let's see... Ijust need to change my approach a little..."

It was the same infectious enthusiasm Sunny was familiar with. Smiling, he quietly left Teacher Julius to contemplate and left to serve other customers.

At some point, Kim and Luster entered the dining hall.

They seemed a little disheartened to see the Brilliant Emporium closing its doors.

Luster shook Sunny's hand and gripped his shoulder with a strangely emotional look on his face.

"I think I know why you have no choice but to do it, Master Sunless. Those damned rumors…”

The young man's eyes were almost glistening with tears.

"But, for whatever it is worth, I want you to know that, for me... and many others like me... you are a hero. A true hero! Princess Nephis, damn... I admire you so much, Master Sunless! Please, teach me your ways!"

Kim silently grabbed him by the collar, pulled him back, and gave Sunny an apologetic look.

"Please ignore my idiot husband, Master Sunless."

Lustern looked at her, hid a smile, and grumbled:

"No, I‘m just saying. Can‘t I admire a virtuoso? It’s purely academic interest... ”

Sunny coughed, then guided them to a table.

As they were sitting down, Luster looked around and asked in confusion:

"By the way, Kimmy... where’s Quentin?“

She shrugged.

"He was walking Beth home. So, it will probably be just us two, today."

Feeling something stir a little in his heart, Sunny smiled with genuine mirth and walked away to help prepare their food.

He put extra effort to make sure that these two enjoyed an unforgettable meal. Later, Sunny heard soft whimpers coming from outside. Opening the door, he saw a peculiar scene.

Aiko, who had left some time ago to run an errand, was floating in the air with a panicked expression. Little Ling was hugging her leg tightly, hanging on it like a monkey.

Huge tears were falling from the little boy‘s eyes.

"No! Auntie Aiko can’t leave! Ling Ling won’t let her go! ”

Giving up in despair, Aiko stopped trying to float away and awkwardly patted him on the head.

"It’s... it's alright, puppy! I'm not leaving yet! But if you don't let go... I won’t be able to walk! Ouch! M—my leg!"

Ling's dad finally managed to pull his son off her, hugged him tightly, and gave Sunny a helpless smile.

"Sorry about that..."

Nevertheless, Little Ling's tears were dried up soon. The boy was fully preoccupied with a bowl of ice cream... but he still insisted on holding Aiko's hand and refusing to let her out of his sight even for a minute.

His father sighed.

"Are you really leaving?"

Sunny glanced at him, then smiled.

"Yes. Well... for a while. Hopefully, we’ll be back one day."

Little Ling’s dad looked a little sad. The two of them were on friendly terms and spent quite a bit of time together due to the cooperation between the Beast Farm and the Brilliant Emporium. Sunny felt a bit touched to know that he would be missed.

"In the meantime, please take care of your family. Most people do not know, but you should be aware that we are in for some tough times."

His former soldier nodded somberly.

"I know. I will... you take care too, Master Sunless."

Sunny gripped his shoulder for a moment, then went over to the table and patted Ling Ling on the head.

The little boy looked up at him and smiled shyly.

"Uncle!"

Sunny smiled, as well.

"I'm sorry, Ling Ling. This is the last bowl of ice cream I'll be able to treat you with for a while."

Little Ling's tiny face instantly turned downcast.

His doleful expression was both incredibly cute and comical.

"I... I see..."

Sunny sighed.

"But when I return, I’ll give you two... no, three entire bowls of ice cream. And a huge mug of hot chocolate. And even a cake."

The little boy’s eyes widened.

"Really?”

Sunny nodded.

"Of course! In the meantime, take care of your mom. She looks tough, but she is actually a huge softie. You need to treat her well."

Little Ling grinned.

"Ling Ling treats mommy the best!"

Then, he giggled and added with excitement:

"Mommy is huge! Uncle said so!"

Sunny's expression faltered.

"No, wait a second, don’t say that. Most importantly, don’t say that I said that. Not huge... a huge softie. Repeat after me, Ling Ling. Softie... softie..."

But the little boy was already distracted by something else and refused to listen. Looking at him, Sunny paled a little, and then sighed.

'Maybe it’s a good thing that I am leaving Bastion... I need to get the hell out of here before Effie hears that!’

There were more customers after that, as well.

A lot of female customers, in particular, were sighing as they threw secretive glances at Sunny. He was even worried that there was something wrong with his cooking today, but Aiko simply rolled her eyes and assured him that everything was fine.

Sunny could only carry on in bewilderment.

'I guess people get really attached to their favorite cafés... ’

But then, eventually...

It was time to close the doors.

It was already dark by then, and the young moon was slowly rising in the sky. Sunny remained on the porch for a while, looking at the city and breathing deeply. He had grown used to the seen of Bastion in the past year, without even knowing that he had.

In hindsight... it had been a wonderful year.

But now, it was time to leave.

He sighed.

'I'm going to miss this.'

With that, Sunny turned around, walked inside, and closed the door behind him.