2451 Mirage City Noir  
  
Sunny dreamed a nightmare.  
  
In that nightmare, he lived in a dying world where grotesque monsters were real, people possessed supernatural abilities, and humanity was on the verge of being snuffed out by the encroaching darkness. The world was one vast battlefield, and every day, countless lives were lost in the bloody battle for survival.  
  
Sunny himself was one of the strongest people in that world, having clawed his way to the pinnacle of power through mud, blood, heartbreak, and thorns of betrayal. He was buckling under the crushing weight of responsibility and carrying the cruel burden of his own past sins.  
  
…He also had a smoking hot, stunning, drop-dead gorgeous girlfriend.  
  
Sunny could somewhat accept the existence of monsters and superpowers, but that last detail had really clued him in to the fact that it was all a dream.  
  
'Ah…'  
  
He was woken up by the blaring sounds of the alarm.  
  
"Wake up, Sunny! Wake up, Sunny! Wake up, Sunny!"  
  
'Shit.'  
  
Grabbing his phone, he fumbled to turn the alarm off and then sat up, looking around with groggy, bloodshot eyes.  
  
His room was dark and messy, full of stale air and empty bottles. The TV was on, showing a colorful commercial for Valor Group's new extravagant mall. The young CEO was cutting the red ribbon in front of a cheering crowd, his simple smile blinding the camera…  
  
Sunny stared at the TV for a while, deep darkness nestling in his eyes, then tossed his phone at it. The screen shattered, and a net of cracks distorted the smiling face on it, making it seem as if he was staring at a broken mirror.  
  
Sunny was suddenly wide awake.  
  
"Ah, no! Shit!"  
  
He jumped off the bed, sending several empty bottles rolling across the floor, and hurried to the TV. The screen of his phone was cracked, as well, but luckily, it was still in working condition. Sunny checked the time and the date, then let out a relieved sigh and slowly stood up.  
  
Still reeling from the damn nightmare, Sunny muttered a few curses and walked to the window. Opening the shutters, he grimaced from the light and looked outside.  
  
The dim lilac radiance of the early dawn washed over his pale body — his toned muscles, a scattering of scars decorating it like badges of dishonor, and a frightening tattoo of a black serpent coiling around his arms and torso.  
  
...Not exactly what one would expect from a decorated police officer, but Sunny had lived a tumultuous life before finding the straight path.  
  
Outside the window, the city was obscured by a curtain of rain. Cars were rushing to outrun the morning traffic, leaving trails of scarlet glow in their wake. Here and there, red neon crosses stood out against the twilight sky like beacons for lost souls, and all around them, countless shops and restaurants were opening their doors like temples to greed and gluttony.  
  
Above it all, glass skyscrapers stood like towering cathedrals. There, in the bowels of conglomerate offices, dwelled the real power.  
  
The streets were grimy, the apartment buildings were decrepit, and the people were worn down, confined to the narrow pavements by the traffic while walking to their destinations with glassy eyes.  
  
Something about it all seemed strangely off, as if the world of his nightmares was much more real.  
  
'...There aгe no barriers surrounding the city.'  
  
It was such a strange thought, and yet, Sunny could not get rid of the feeling that there were supposed to be enormous air filtration barriers on the horizon.  
  
But what for?  
  
'I must have really lost it.'  
  
In any case, the sun was rising above Mirage City.  
  
It was time to face a new day...  
  
Today, Sunny made a reluctant effort to look presentable. He took a shower, shaved, and found the least wrinkled clothes he had. Black jeans, a gray t-shirt, and an inconspicuous jacket… the clothes hid his sharp edge, but thеre must have still been something in his gaze, because a drunk loitering at the back of the building reeled back from just one glance.  
  
Sunny watched him stagger away with a cold, somber expression. The man seemed like a genuine drunk, but one never knew… it paid to be careful.  
  
Once the swaying figure disappeared around the corner, Sunny climbed into his old, battered car and put the key into the ignition.  
  
As he drove along the city streets, he could not help but think of the dark, desolate coastal highway of the Antarctic Center. No… that had happened in another nightmare. This was reality, so why was he thinking about such dreadful things?  
  
The radio was playing a catchy tune, reminding him that, apart from having a smoking hot girlfriend, he was also friends with a genuine pop star in those dreams. On top of that, he owned a thriving business, lived in a castle, was watching over a lovable little sister, and… played the flute?  
  
'What the actual hell...'  
  
Dreams were truly a bizarre place.  
  
Sunny was not really a person with a rich imagination, though. How did his subconscious even imagine all these things?  
  
Shaking his head, he stopped at a traffic light and struggled against the paranoid feeling that every driver on the road was staring at him.  
  
Some time later, Sunny reached his destination... it was a prestigious psychiatric hospital on the outskirts of the city.  
  
Locking his car, he walked across a small park to the entrance and showed his pass to the security guard. Many affluent people received treatment in this seemingly idyllic hospital, so security was really tight here — the stunning building was no different from a fortress, really, and there were many places inside where regular people like himself weren't allowed.  
  
As for Sunny himself, he was not an affluent person. However, he was a civil servant in a situation that put the higher-ups in an awkward position, so they sent him here for mandatory psychiatric counseling.  
  
That had been months ago. And today… today, gods willing, was going to be his last session. If everything went well, he was going to be reinstated and return to work. And just in time — Sunny had a feeling that the bastard he had been pursuing for so long was going to strike again, soon.  
  
As Sunny was let inside, he caught himself on having used the word "gods" — plural — and frowned.  
  
'Get a grip, damn it.'  
  
He could not mess up today.  
  
Soon, he found himself sitting in a comfortable chair and facing his therapist.  
  
His therapist was some kind of big deal in the shrink world despite being relаtively young. She was quiet and extremely professional, so despite the mandatory nature of their relationship, Sunny did not dislike her a lot. The woman just sort of sat there silently while he talked about whatever was on his mind most of the time, so there was little to dislike.  
  
Well… there was one thing.  
  
His therapist really had no business being so goddamn beautiful. It was surreal, really, how breathtaking she was — not to mention distracting.  
  
Her skin was pure white alabaster, her eyes were like two onyx gems, and her features were almost inhumanly flawless. It was as though she had not been born, but actually cut from stone by a mad sculptor. As a result, what should have been beautiful looked a bit eerie, instead... haunting, even.  
  
Her usual lack of emotion only made the overall impression more disturbing.  
  
Meeting her indifferent gaze, Sunny forced out a smile.  
  
"Good morning, doc."  
  
She looked аt him evenly…  
  
And then smiled softly.  
  
The smile transformed her face, making it utterly tantalizing, almost painful to look at. It was like looking at something holy... a living saint, maybe.  
  
"Good morning, Detective. Would you like a coffee?"  
  
For some reason, Sunny felt a sense of profound wrongness when he heard the hauntingly beautiful therapist talk.  
  
Also, for some reason, he felt compelled to answer her question honestly.  
  
Sunny shrugged.  
  
"Sure. Why not?"  
  
...Like every other calamity in his life, this catastrophe started with the smile of a beautiful woman and a cup of coffee.