2462 Before the Dark Times  
  
It took Sunny some time to remember that the Devil Detective had kept a canister of fuel in the trunk of the archaic PTV. Then, it took him some more time to figure out how to deposit the appallingly pungent liquid into the vehicle, all the while being soaked in rain and cursing under his breath.  
  
Being in the rain actually made him uncomfortably cold. Sunny had almost forgotten the feeling of being powerless in the face of the elements, so it was somewhat of a novel experience for him. Needless to say, he climbed back into the PTV in a foul mood.  
  
Looking at Effie with a deep scowl, he suppressed a heavy sigh and asked:  
  
"Is your mundane alter ego also a sleep-deprived, rage-fueled wreck craving nothing more than an unhealthy dose of nicotine and alcohol?"  
  
She laughed and shook her head.  
  
"Nope. I am basically a shining example of how regular exercise and a healthy lifestyle are good for you. I mean, sure, becoming mundane all of a sudden was a bit disorienting… but actually, I am enjoying myself."  
  
Brimming with vitality, Effie gestured to her toned, tantalizing body.  
  
"It's interesting. I was never both able-bodied and mundane — so, this is a new experience for me."  
  
Sunny's stare turned bitter.  
  
"I see."  
  
Looking away, he started the car and sent it rolling forward again.  
  
As they drove to their destination, he could appreciate the vistas of Mirage City from a new perspective. Sunny knew, of course, what cities before the Dark Times looked like — but only from archival footage, webtoon illustrations, and movie sets. Seeing it all with his own two eyes, and in great detail, was completely different.  
  
He couldn't help but feel put off by how different everything looked. There were no barriers surrounding the city, no alloy towers, no isolation domes around active Nightmare Gates peppered here and there. The air was of course breathable, and the citizens did not seem afraid of the rain, as if there was no possibility of it turning to acid.  
  
The architecture was entirely foreign to what he was used to, and the buildings themselves were many times lower than they were in NQSC — despite the fact that they were built exclusively up, with almost no subterranean levels. There were no layers to the city, just one flat surface with hills and small mountains rising here and there.  
  
Everything seemed so… simple and relaxed, even if it had felt overwhelming and permeated by crushing tension to the Devil Detective.  
  
"How large do you think this city is? "  
  
Effie contemplated for a moment.  
  
"Uh… I think it has a population of around ten million? Twenty-something millions, including the greater metropolitan area."  
  
Sunny's eyes widened a little.  
  
"Twenty million people? That's… that's tiny!"  
  
From the impression he had gotten from the vague memories of the Devil Detective, Mirage City was a sprawling metropolis suffocating in a flood of human sins. However, ten million — even twenty or thirty — was positively a tiny amount. There had been many times more people living just in the outskirts of NQSC, let alone in the city itself, with its population in the hundreds of millions.  
  
Mirage City… was a village!  
  
And despite that, it somehow managed to look crowded. Perhaps because everyone had somehow gotten a PTV license instead of using public transport like normal people did… as a result, not only was the air full of noxious fumes and noise, but the traffic also prevented anyone from getting anywhere in a timely fashion.  
  
People were simply stuck on the road, their vehicles crawling at such a low speed that even the pedestrians could outpace them. Nevertheless, the pedestrians — actual people — were reduced to a subservient species in their own city, fearfully clinging to the sides of the streets to make way for the actual dominant creatures, the PTVs.  
  
And those weren't even cargo PTVs, either — almost all of them were for personal use.  
  
It didn't make any sense!  
  
'Does no one here notice how absurd the citation is? What is the city management doing?'  
  
No… actually, if he remembered correctly, countless people did use a public transport network here — mostly the underground trains. It was just that the network was similarly inadequate and failed to serve even such a tiny population, resulting in overcrowding and unbearably bleak peak traffic hours.  
  
Well, that last part actually made sense. With the primitive technology of the days before the Dark Times and no spelltech, digging underground tunnels must have been a real chore. However, the very reason why they had to be dug underground in the first place was that the surface roads were usurped by personal vehicles.  
  
'Underground tunnels, huh…'  
  
Somewhere far away, one of Sunny's incarnations looked up with a glint in his eyes. Bastion was only starting to develop its own public transport networks, and there was no modern technology or spelltech in the Dream Realm either.  
  
However, there was Sunny.  
  
And Sunny had the shade of Abundance at his disposal. How long would it take the Sacred worm to create a vast network of tunnels under Bastion, to serve as the fоundation of a future metro system?  
  
Not long at all…  
  
'Should I discuss it with Cassie? We'll need some engineers, sure — well, a lot of them — but as long as they remain unaware of how the tunnels will be created and who will create them, it can work splendidly…'  
  
Sunny was distracted for a while, and by the time he came back to his senses, they were already near the ramshackle diner the Devil Detective used to frequent.  
  
If he was generous, the place could be called quaint and unassuming. If he wasn't, though, he'd call it a trash heap masquerading as an establishment where people were supposed to eat.  
  
The diner was small, shabby, and exceedingly sparse in decor. There was no decor to be mentioned, really, just a few cheap tables with similarly cheap chairs. It was mostly used by blue-collar workers, so there were only guests here during the lunch hours and in the evening, when people got off work.  
  
At the moment, the place was completely empty, with the exception of a grumpy waitress who disappeared somewhere immediately after delivering their order.  
  
…The food, however, wаs miraculous.  
  
"Oh gods."  
  
Sunny stared at Effie with wide eyes. Effie was similarly looking at him with an enraptured expression.  
  
There was unlimited clean drinking water. Every dish was made entirely from natural ingredients, with not a single synthetic morsel in sight. The flavors were rich, the side dishes were fresh — and could be refilled endlessly! — and the portions were exceedingly generous. Despite all that, the meal was dirt cheap.  
  
'How is this possible?'  
  
Very few people in NQSC could afford to eat like this, and even those who could would have to pay a insane amount of credits for such an amazing meal. The situation was a little better in the Dream Realm, but even there, most food was still synthetic and being imported from the waking world.  
  
'Am I... in heaven?'  
  
For a while, Sunny was uncomfortably similar to Effie, practically inhaling the delicious food with little to no table manners and ordering more and more of it.  
  
After a while, extremely satiated and feeling sleepy from all the food, he looked at her groggily and asked:  
  
"By the way, why did you insist that we should talk in a private place?"  
  
Effie leaned back, eased her waistband, and patted her flat belly with a deeply satisfied grin.  
  
"Oh, it's nothing major. Just that... we'll probably die horribly if the locals notice us breaking character…"