2463 The Lives of Others  
  
Sunny lingered for a few moments, then threw a brief glance at the door behind which the waitress had disappeared. No one else was in the deserted diner, аnd the pedestrians rushing past the dirty window could not hear them.  
  
He raised an eyebrow.  
  
"How so?"  
  
Effie let out a long sigh and poured herself a cup of water before speaking again. Eventually, she leaned back and said in a low tone:  
  
"Well… I don't know how you came about, but I was home — the home of the newly promoted Detective Athena of Mirage PD, that is. A married woman with a loving husband and an adorable kid… a couple of adorable kids, actually, a boy and a girl. Needless to say, those were not my kids and not my husband. So, when he went for a kiss, I was understandably not having it."  
  
Sunny frowned.  
  
"Wait. You were aware of who you really are from the start?"  
  
Effie nodded.  
  
"Yes. We entered the Hall of Imagination… then, my memory is a bit hazy. The next thing I knew, I was standing in a living room, folding laundry. I was alone, mundane, and completely turned around. Before I could really figure out what had happened, I was assaulted by two overly enthusiastic kids who wanted to play cops and robbers with mommy."  
  
Sunny scratched the back of his head.  
  
"What the hell is cops and robbers?"  
  
Effie scoffed.  
  
"It's a local version of Awakened and Abominations, naturally. Anyway, yes, I was never under thе illusion that I was the real Detective Athena. The kids were sweet and adorable, so even though I was weirded out of my mind, I went along with what was happening and tried to slowly regain my bearings while playing with them. That was how I figured out the basic facts about this place and learned to rummage in my counterpart's memories. So, everything went well… until her husband showed up."  
  
Sunny smiled darkly.  
  
"What? Did you smack him when he went for a smooch?"  
  
Effie let out a joyless chuckle.  
  
"No… maybe I would have, but my instincts are still those of a Saint. You know how it is — we need to be careful around mundane people, so the thought of striking him never even crossed my mind. I just dodged away and let him know in no uncertain terms that there would be no smooching, kissing, squeezing, fondling, or canoodling of any kind."  
  
Sunny gave her an exasperated look.  
  
"I don't need the details, you know?"  
  
She grinned.  
  
"Why, not a fan of canoodling? That is not what Neph…"  
  
Sunny scoffed.  
  
"Hey, lady. I am not a fan… I am the artist."  
  
Effie stared at him silently for a few long moments, then threw her head back and exploded with laughter.  
  
"Oh… oh, gods! Did… did you really just say that?"  
  
Sunny raised his chin defiantly and suppressed a smile.  
  
"I did. Not only did I say it, but I also meant every word."  
  
She continued to laugh for a while longer, then wiped the tears off the corners of her eyes and looked at him with a wry smile.  
  
"You know, Shаdow Boy… you are actually not that scary up close, are you?"  
  
Sunny shrugged.  
  
"Not unless you are scared of innocuous stuff like dark demigods who command legions of dead souls and can damn you to eternal servitude, with not even death offering escape… I guess."  
  
Effie grinned.  
  
"Right."  
  
She studied him for a bit, then sighed.  
  
"Well, in any case. The second I refused the affections of that man — the moment I broke character — something very creepy happened."  
  
He frowned.  
  
"What?"  
  
Effie gulped down her water and looked into the distance with a somber expression.  
  
"He… changed. Even creepier, though, was the fact that the kids changed, too. It was not that they turned into some grotesque nightmare creatures or displayed dreadful powers, they just… sort of froze, turned to look at me in eerie synchronicity, and stared. They still looked human, but there was nothing human about them at that moment. I don't know how to describe it, but there was something deeply wrong deep in their eyes. Something empty and utterly alien to what a human, or even an abomination, should be."  
  
Sunny's frown deepened.  
  
"Sounds… familiar."  
  
Effie nodded curtly.  
  
"Yes. It was, indeed, familiar. In fact, I've seen eyes like those before."  
  
She looked into the window, at the torrent of passersby rushing along under a river of umbrellas.  
  
"I saw it during the war, in Bastion. When one of the Others pretended to be Aether."  
  
Sunny's eyes narrowed, and a shiver ran down his spine.  
  
"You mean…"  
  
Effie looked at him darkly.  
  
"Yes. My supposed husband, the adorable kids, the cops on the crime scene, the Black Snakes, the waitress who served us food… and the rest of those twenty million so-called people living in Mirage City... are all Others."  
  
Sunny froze, suddenly ρaralyzed by fear.  
  
It was not often that he felt fear these days…  
  
But the thought of twenty million Others surrounding him from all sides more than deserved the honor of frightening him.  
  
In fact, if Sunny's ability to feel frightened had not deteriorated awfully after more than a decade of suffering all kinds of horrors, he would have been utterly terrified right now. Turning his head slowly, Sunny looked at the constant stream of pedestrians outside the window, the flood of noisy PTVs behind them, and the crowded forest of tall buildings stretching beyond the horizon.  
  
Suddenly… Mirage City did not seem so tiny anymore.  
  
It seemed like a boundless abyss containing unfathomable depths of terror instead.  
  
Effie grimaced.  
  
"Look. You are a Supreme who has become a powerless mundane human. While they… they are the Others who were made into powerless mundane humans. And as long as everyone plays their roles faithfully, they are bound by these roles, unable to be anything but what their characters are supposed to be. Luckily, I resumed acting like Detective Effie in time, and my creepy family returned to being normal as if nothing had happened."  
  
She smiled.  
  
"So, you can understand why I had to be careful when we first met. I was happy to see you, but also, I wasn't sure that you were… you. I kept thinking — is this the real Lord of Shadows, or is this an Other who just happens to look like the Lord of Shadows? I couldn't just ask, since that would mean breaking character… so I decided to play along and see how things go."  
  
Inhaling slowly, Sunny looked back at Effie, lingered for a few moments, and asked in an even tone:  
  
"Are you sure that everyone here is an Other?"  
  
She shrugged.  
  
"Reasonably sure. Naturally, nobody really knows that much about the Others. However…"  
  
Effie sighed and poured herself more water.  
  
"It would make sense, wouldn't it? Clan Valor had always been wary of the Others — that was because the Others sometimes escaped from the Great Mirror. They came from the other side of reflections… from True Bastion. But how did they come to be there, and where do they come fгom? Well, if the Great Mirror in False Bastion is really no more than a reflection of the true Great Mirror, then what if that is where they dwell? They are trapped inside the true Great Mirror, and now, we are too."  
  
Sunny inhaled slowly.  
  
"Yes, that… does make sense, I guess."  
  
Effie chewed her lip, then said quietly:  
  
"It's that damn Demon of Imagination — Mirage, or whatever her name was. She created Rivergate, Bastion… and the Great Mirror. She must have put the Others into the hidden realm inside the Great Mirror, as well. Hell, she might have created the eerie creeps, for all we know."  
  
Sunny tilted his head a little.  
  
"But why would an illusory realm created by the Demon of Imagination resemble an Earth city from before the Dark Times? "  
  
Effie looked around and smiled faintly.  
  
"That is the question, isn't it?"