2466 Changing the World  
  
The Mirage City Center for Troubled Youths — a charitable organization set up by the Valor Group to help delinquent youths find their place in society — was situated some distance away from the ramshackle diner.  
  
Sunny remembered how to properly fuel the Devil Detective's archaic PTV and stopped at a gas station, then checked his mental map of Mirage City аnd hesitantly plotted the course.  
  
As they drove, the quaint vistas of the ancient city slowly ceased to look so odd. He was getting used to the odd architecture, the abundance of noisy PTVs, the lack of quarantine zones, and the flat nature of it all.  
  
The people were the strangest, though, even if it took him a while to reаlize what that strangeness was…  
  
It was the lack of fear.  
  
The people of Mirage City all had their worries, of course, but their eyes lacked the subtle alertness that all humans of the waking world shared. A Nightmare Gate could open in front of them at any moment, after all; a Sleeper who had slipped through the cracks could turn into a Nightmare Creature and go on a rampage.  
  
The humans of the waking world had grown accustomed to the constant threat of a sudden, senseless death and did not allow it to interfere with their lives. But that fear still left a mark on them.  
  
Here in Mirage City, though, there was no such threat. People were not immortal, but all the dangers they faced were mundane — they did not suffer the existential dread that the inhabitants of reality did, and were not ruled by a great and sinister power they were powerless against… the Nightmare Spell.  
  
Sunny wondered what it would have felt like, to livе in a world that was free of the tyranny of Nightmares. To live without fear…  
  
'They would probably invent fears of their own, and live in a prison built of those.'  
  
Effie looked at him for a while, then asked in a lazy tone.  
  
"Hey, partner. I've been thinking…'  
  
Sunny suppressed a groan.  
  
That didn't bode well.  
  
"About what?"  
  
Effie lingered for a moment, then shrugged with a grin.  
  
"It's just that, wasn't this adventure supposed to prepare me for becoming a Sovereign? But instead, I ended up becoming mundane — three whole Ranks further away from Supremacy than I used to be. How come Kai gets to battle dreadful fallen deities, but I am stuck fistfighting third-rate thugs while dodging the advances of an Other who thinks that he's my husband? That's just… not fair!"  
  
Sunny gave her a sidelong glance. "This adventure is indeed meant to help prepare you for the Fourth Nightmare. But Kai and you are different people. What you need to learn is different, too."  
  
She raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Oh? And what is it that you think I must learn?"  
  
He exhaled slowly.  
  
"Well, about that… actually, I am not too sure. You are a deceptive person, but in a different way from me."  
  
Effie stared at him in confusion for a while, then exploded with laughter.  
  
"Me? A deceptive person? What are you talking about… I am an open book!"  
  
Sunny scoffed.  
  
"This is exactly what I am talking about. There are two of you, really — there is Effie… Raised By Wolves… a cheerful and easygoing woman who glides through life without taking anything too seriously. This is who everyone meets. But beneath it all, there is also Athena, Born From Being Eaten Alive, an astute and calloused person who had to fight desperately for each step she had taken in this world. This one, most people fail to see… but I know that she's there."  
  
Effie studied him for a few moments, then whistled and looked away.  
  
"Wow. You are hopeless, you know that?"  
  
Sunny raised an eyebrow.  
  
"No, I don't. What are you talking about?"  
  
She chuckled.  
  
"I mean, you just can't imagine that an astute person can be cheerful and easygoing, can you? Listen, you morose killjoy… you're entirely wrong. There is only one of me — I am not hiding behind a false facade of cheerfulness, I just know how to enjoy life, even if it seems too bitter to swallow at times."  
  
Sunny smiled faintly.  
  
"Too bitter to swallow… it's all food metaphors with you, huh?"  
  
He remained silent for a bit, then shrugged.  
  
"Point is, Kai lacks confidence in himself. But you don't — on the contrary, you know exactly what you want, and you are not afraid to get it. In fact, I think that this is exactly the problem. You have already gotten everything you wanted… you've built the kind of life for yourself that leaves you entirely satisfied. So, you are not desperate enough."  
  
Effie raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Me? Not desperate enough? I feel desperate way too often, partner. Every time I look at my husband and at my son, I feel desperate to protect them — because I know all too well what is coming for all of us."  
  
Her voice had turnеd somber, losing its usual carefree tone for a short moment.  
  
Sunny shook his head.  
  
"That is the thing, though. A Sovereign is someone who can reshape the world to fit their will — so, all Supremes are born from a desperate wish to change the world. Otherwise, where would their determination to reshape it come from? But you… you don't want to change the world. Rather, you want to make sure that the world maintains its shape, because it already fits you. You are the only person I know who is truly satisfied with their life, and that… I am not sure if that is enough."  
  
Sunny was suddenly reminded of a conversation he had had with Effie a long time ago. He had shared his desire to be stronger than Nephis, and Effie told him that he would never be stronger than Nephis unless he found conviction. That was one of the reasons he had undertaken a perilous journey to Antarctica, in the end…  
  
What he was telling her now wasn't exactly the same, but he still couldn't help but feel that their roles were reversed.  
  
Effie remained silent for a while, then sighed.  
  
"Is it such a sin, to be satisfied with one's life?"  
  
Sunny shook his head.  
  
"No, it's not. In fact, if you know some secret way to achieve that… please teach me!"  
  
Effie laughed, then looked at him with a grin.  
  
"Ah… so you want me to teach you about satisfaction. Okay, listen well — it's time for another one of Auntie Effie's lessons…"  
  
Sunny's eyes widened.  
  
'Oh, no...'  
  
He suddenly realized that he was trapped in a PTV with her, with nowhere to escape.