2468 Home Bitter Home  
  
It was already late when Sunny returned to his dark, dusty apartment. Unlocking the door, he walked inside, closed it, then gave it a long look.  
  
'How fun.'  
  
The door was made from a sheet of ordinary metal, while the walls around it were nothing but concrete panels. In other words, even a Dormant Nightmare Creature could easily rip through the door or crash through the walls… but then again, there were no abominations in this world. So, these pitiful safety measures could very well stop anyone uninvited from entering the apartment.  
  
That said, the Devil Detective was a paranoid guy — and for a good reason. As a cop, he had a lot of enemies, and his nasty temperament did not earn him any friends either. So, one of the empty bottles scattered around the apartment actually served a purpose.  
  
Following a habit that belonged to someone else, Sunny locked the door and carefully balanced the bottle on its handle. That way, if someone picked the locks and tried to enter quietly in the middle of the night, the bottle was going to fall and break loudly, alerting him to the presence of an intruder.  
  
Sunny was usually guarded by one of the shadows, so this level of caution felt both unfamiliar and new.  
  
Turning away from the door, he studied his place of residence.  
  
Dust everywhere, empty bottles and plastic food containers scattered on the floor, oil stains and streaks оn every glass surface…  
  
With a sigh, Sunny removed the bottle from the door handle and opened the curtains. Then, he rolled up his sleeves and got to cleaning.  
  
An hour or two later, after a few visits to the nearby trash containers, the apartment finally started to resemble a place suitable for human life. Locking the door once more, Sunny lowered himself into a threadbare armchair and let out a heavy sigh.  
  
It was ridiculous to admit, but this little amount of physical activity had tired him out. His muscles ached… not from battling some awful Nightmare Creature, but from fighting mundane thugs and dust!  
  
'Such an… indignity…'  
  
He was sleepy.  
  
Before dragging his tired body to the bed, however, Sunny took the primitive communicator out of his pocket, struggled against the unfamiliar interface for a while, and finally managed to dial the number Saint had given him.  
  
For a few moments, odd noises poured into his ear. Then, the enthralling voice of his supposed therapist resounded from the communicator, making Sunny shiver against his will.  
  
"Yes?"  
  
He lingered for a few moments, then spoke in a neutral tone.  
  
"Dr. Saint, good evening. This is… Detective Sunless from Mirage PD. I wanted to discuss future therapy sessions…"  
  
A few minutes later, he put down the communicator and closed his eyes. The echoes of Saint's voice were still resounding in his ears.  
  
'This is so strange. To hear her talk.'  
  
Before Sunny knew it, he fell into the soft embrace of sleep.  
  
…In a different part of Mirage City, earlier, Effie had spent a long time standing in front of the door of a small, cozy villa. Eventually, she took a deep breath, put on a bright smile, and walked in.  
  
"Mooommy!"  
  
"Mama!"  
  
Two energetic kids rushed to her, their faces shining with happiness and adoration. Effie leaned down to catch them, then lifted them into the air, feeling little arms wrap around her neck and kisses being planted on her cheeks.  
  
"Mommy is home!"  
  
"Mama! Mama!"  
  
Failing to resist the overflowing cuteness, Effie nuzzled the children. Her forced smile gradually turned into a natural one.  
  
"Oh, my! Who are these little darlings? Are you my kids? No way! My precious children were way smaller when I left home… how did you grow up this much in just a day? Huh? If this continues, you'll be carrying mommy instead by the end of the week…"  
  
The children giggled as he brought them into the living room.  
  
"Noooo…"  
  
Effie let the babysitter go, then got busy caring for the children herself. She prepared them food with unfamiliar ingredients, read them unfamiliar books, played unfamiliar games with them, and helped them wash in an unfamiliar bathroom.  
  
Her counterpart's children were younger than her dumpling was… he had grown up too fast, which left her feeling wistful. So, spending time with these little cuties lifted her mood.  
  
Of course, they weren't children at all. The cute little boy and the adorable little girl who called her mommy were the Others… the terrifying, unfathomable beings forced into the shape of children by the Great Mirror.  
  
But they looked so real, and acted so real… more than that, her counterpart's dreamlike memories were still flowing like a hazy river in her mind — memories full of real love and affection for these tiny bundles of joy and innocence, just like she was full of fierce love and аffection for her own.  
  
It was a maddening contradiction, to find herself caring for little children who treated her like their mother, but were not hers… children who were innocent and pure, but at the same time monstrous and frightening. Effie could feel herself reeling.  
  
But despite all that, and even knowing better…  
  
She simply could not bring herself to treat them like monsters. Perhaps it was the mother in her, but the sight of the childlike smiles made her heart both flutter and ache.  
  
'Ah. What am I going to do…'  
  
At some point, her counterpart's husband returned from work.  
  
He was tall, he was handsome, he was gentle and sweet…  
  
But he wasn't her husband. He was not the man she loved — his features were different, his voice was different, his smile was different… and for that reason, everything about him was hateful.  
  
The kids were asleep, and now, it was time for her and her supposed husband to go to bed, too.  
  
However, Effie was not having it.  
  
"Here. You go sleep on the couch."  
  
She handed the startled man a rolled-up blanket and a pillow.  
  
He looked at her with eyes full of confusion.  
  
"Uh… darling? W—what did I do?"  
  
Effie smiled.  
  
Indeed, what did the poor guy do? She couldn't really tell him that there was only one man allowed into her bed — her husband — and that he was not that man… that he was not even a man. He was an Other pretending to be one.  
  
So, Effie employed a tactic tried and tested by numerous generations of women.  
  
Giving the Other Husband an offended look, she said in a wrathful tone:  
  
"You have the gall to ask? Wow… just wow. Go figure it out! You'll be sleeping on the couch until you do!"  
  
The man paled.  
  
"B—but, darling…"  
  
Not hearing any objections, she pushed him out of the bedroom and slammed the door shut.  
  
Finally alone, Effie let out a relieved sigh.  
  
Looking at her empty bed, she then sighed again.  
  
"Damn, was I swindled? I really can't see how any of this will help me become Supreme... ah, I want to go home..."