2469 World of Abundance  
  
The next morning, Sunny parked his PTV in front of Effie's home in a foul mood. She was standing there with a brown paper bag in her hand, holding the umbrella with the other and yawning. When he opened the door, she climbed in and gave him a reproachful look.  
  
"You're late."  
  
Sunny cursed under his breath.  
  
"Do you know what I had to do on the way here?"  
  
Effie shrugged.  
  
"No idea. Why?"  
  
Sunny gave the steering wheel of the PTV an annoyed push.  
  
"I had to refuel this piece of junk! Again!"  
  
She stared at him in shock.  
  
"What? No way. These things need to be refueled daily?"  
  
He nodded a few times.  
  
"That's what I'm saying! That pungent, flammable fuel? Turns out, they burn through it faster than I burn through essence!"  
  
Effie blinked a couple of times, then shook her head and put on her seatbelt.  
  
"No, but really... daily? What a hassle."  
  
Sunny was inclined to agree.  
  
As they drove to their destination, Effie explained what she managed to salvage from her counterpart's memory last evening. Most of it had to do with police procedures and protocols they had to follow — paperwork, briefing the press, coordinating with other teams, and so on.  
  
"Actually, I already received a phone call from the Captain. There is going to be a press conference tomorrow afternoon, where I am supposed to make a statement to answеr a few questions. The journalists are dying to know about the Nihilist and his latest victim — obviously, they are also dying to castigate the Police Department and lament the lack of progress in catching him. I'm the designated punching bag, I guess."  
  
Sunny smiled faintly.  
  
"That should be nothing new for you, though? You've been the propaganda machine's favorite ever since the Forgotten Shore. Remember those posters of you they plastered all around NQSC? The first batch, I mean…"  
  
Effie stared at him for a few moments, then laughed.  
  
"Oh, gods! You saw those? Wow… made an impression, did I?"  
  
Well, her armor certainly did...  
  
Sunny scoffed.  
  
"Some of them took entire facades of huge buildings. You were hard to miss."  
  
She grinned and looked into the window, at the colorful billboards decorating the buildings of Mirage City. They were propaganda posters, as well… only of a different, far more subtle kind. Instead of the government pushing a false narrative onto its citizens to control the population, these were made by private enterprises to manipulate people into consuming their goods.  
  
It was hard to tell which was more invasive. "It is both wonderful and sinister, don't you think?"  
  
Sunny raised an eyebrow.  
  
"What do you mean?"  
  
She pointed to the city outside the window.  
  
"This world… a world of abundance. Of prosperity so extreme and staggering that it has become a problem in and of itself. A world that is based on endless growth, and therefore can never allow itself to slow down — even a little, even for a brief moment, no matter if there is still a reason to rush forward or not."  
  
Sunny remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged.  
  
"To be honest, I am not very familiar with how the world was before the Dark Times. I only know the romantic version of it — the great golden age of humanity before all the problems started, and all that. A lost era of peace and prosperity. People usually talk about this time as some kind of a lost paradise."  
  
Effie smiled.  
  
"I guess it was, for a while. As close to a paradise as we have ever come."  
  
She sighed.  
  
"Of course, the construction of that paradise was financed by borrowing from thе future, which ended up causing all those problems to begin with, when the time to pay up arrived. Still… I like it here."  
  
She opened her paper bag and pulled out a small carton painted in brown and white.  
  
"Do you know what this is?"  
  
Sunny almost flinched. That tone, that glint in her eyes — he knew it all too well! It was the look of insatiable avarice and utter obsession… which Sunny himself wore when looking at soul shards and piles of treasure.  
  
'What is she...'  
  
Effie drew in a shaky breath.  
  
"This… this just might be the greatest invention humanity has ever made. It is called... chocolate milk! This era has it, but ours doesn't, so how can I be critical of the past? The world has really gone to crap since then..."  
  
Opening the carton, she took a big sip and leaned back with a blissful smile.  
  
"Aaahhh…"  
  
Sunny gave her a dubious look.  
  
"Did you, by any chance, steal this from your kids?"  
  
Effie gave him a look of outrage.  
  
"What? Of course not! I just… they still have apple juice, okay?"  
  
Sunny shook his head reproachfully.  
  
"Uh-huh. Well, do you at least have another carton so I could try it, too?"  
  
Effie brought the paper back closer to her chest, looking at him defensively.  
  
"N—no?"  
  
He looked at her in indignation.  
  
"Wаit, you didn't just go on and on singing praises tо this chocolate milk of yours without planning to share it with your senior, did you?"  
  
Effie stared at him with an open mouth for а while.  
  
"Listen, senior. I'm a growing girl…"  
  
Sunny almost choked.  
  
"A growing girl? Where are you planning to grow?! If you grow any more, your head will punch through the roof!"  
  
Effie grinned.  
  
"What, jealous?"  
  
Instead of answering, Sunny snatched her paper bag.  
  
"Hey! Give it back!"  
  
…The car swayed slightly, continuing on its way.  
  
Soon enough, they reached the headquarters of the Valor Group. The building was hard to miss — it was almost the same height as the dormitory hives in NQSC, towering above the landscape like a glass spire. It was impossible to see it tip when standing on the ground below, no matter how much one craned their neck, and trying was enough to make one's head spin.  
  
Effie whistled.  
  
"You know, the Valor Group used to have its main offices in a different skyscraper, which was the tallest building in Mirage City. But then, a different conglomerate built one that was even taller. And then a third conglomerate built one even taller than that… until the Valor Group built this one, which is the current tallest."  
  
She grinned.  
  
"These guys really like to measure whose tower is the biggest, huh? I wonder what can be behind their obsession with tower sizes…"  
  
Sunny stared at the glass skyscraper for a few moments.  
  
"I'm not really interested in their tower-measuring contests. By the way… what does the Valor Group even do? I mean, what's their business?"  
  
Effie scratched her head.  
  
"Everything is their business. Your communicator? They made it. You PTV? They built it. Your apartment complex? They both built it and own it. Your furniture, your clothes, your food… your cops, your politicians — anything you point at in Mirage City, chances are, it exists because of the Valor Group."  
  
Sunny remained silent for a while.  
  
'How bizarre.'  
  
Then, he looked at her and smiled.  
  
"So… let's go take the CEO of the Valor Group down, shall we?"  
  
Effie chuckled.  
  
"I thought you'd never ask…"