2152 Esteemed Temporary Governor  
  
A month later, a weary group of Awakened stood on a hill in the desolate wasteland, looking at the sprawling ruins below. The world seemed entirely black and white, with charred frames of ancient buildings rising from the snow. Cold wind was trying to get into the gaps of their armor, and neither the warm coats nor the mittens they wore on top of the gloves could stop it.  
  
This land seemed dead, with no trace of life left anywhere on its poisoned surface.  
  
Of course… it was not the Dream Realm. Instead, it was the real world. The charred ruins were simply one of the countless human cities that had been destroyed during the Dark Times, and the soil was contaminated by drеadful weapons borne of human mind, not some eerie curse.  
  
The air was toxic, as well, which was why they were wearing military gas masks and carrying oxygen tanks on their backs — Awakened were more tenacious than mundane people, but braving the wild reaches of Earth unprotected was still a deadly task for them.  
  
The long journey had been a rough experience even for Warden and his people. There were very few Nightmare Creatures out here, but the land itself presented an obstacle. With the collapse of the regime, as well as other powers that had ruled the remaining human enclaves in this part of the world, whatever logistics and transportation systems that had existed before were now in complete disarray.  
  
Warden and his warriors had intended to travel by train, but the tracks were broken just a few hundred kilometers away from NQSC. So, they purchased an off-road cargo vehicle from a group of former soldiers and drove it further north.  
  
The vehicle had not been very comfortable, but at least it worked. Sadly, its engine was torn to shreds by the claws of a random Nightmare Creature about a week ago, and they had to cover the rest of the distance on foot.   
  
…Overall, Jest couldn't quite decide which of the worlds was more inhospitable. He did enjoy returning to the castle when it was his turn to sleep, though — it was warm there, at least.   
  
In any case, they had reached their destination now.  
  
There was a human settlement in front of them.  
  
It was much smaller than NQSC, of course, with a population that barely reached a few dozen millions of people. More than that, it had not been turned into a fearsome siege capital during the Dark Times, so its defenses and infrastructure were far inferior.  
  
There were no tall barriers surrounding the city like an impenetrable ring, serving both as defensive fortifications and a sophisticated air filtration system. Instead, there were several domed areas hidden deep within the charred ruins — the original city had been much more sprawling than the one that emerged from its corpse, despite having housed far fewer people.  
  
Pulling his gas mask up, Warden inhaled the cold air, grimaced, and then put it back on.  
  
"Let's get inside as quickly as we can. Be careful — there will be many abominations in the ruins. Jest, get the map."  
  
Since several of the Awakened in the castle were from this forlorn city, they had given them a lot of information about the situation inside.  
  
The situation… was not good. After the descent of the Nightmare Spell, the domed areas became largely isolated from each other, and each was now in the hands of its own self-proclaimed ruler. Some of those rulers were good, some were bad, and some were worse.  
  
So, Warden added:  
  
"Be even more careful when we encounter people. There are thousands of Awakened in the city, and even if we are more powerful and better prepared, we can't fight them all."  
  
The others nodded somberly.  
  
Soon, they descended from the hill and entered the ruins.  
  
They had to battle a few Nightmare Creatures, and even an entire swarm of terrible beasts, on the way to the nearest dome. However, Warden's followers were all experienced and deadly warriors by now. They carved a path through the ruins without losing a single man, and eventually found themselves among humans once more.  
  
Life in the dome they entered seemed… strangely more orderly than what had been happening in NQSC in the last year.  
  
Everyone moved with purpose and determination, busy at work. Granted, people seemed tired and malnourished, most of them wearing bleak expressions — however, no one cowered in fear of Nightmare Creatures, since there were teams of Awakened constantly patrolling the streets.  
  
Warden looked around with a guarded, but subtly surprised expression.  
  
They were met by an Awakened officer of the local garrison and treated in a friendly manner. He was quite happy to meet them, it seemed — a group of powerful Awakened warriors was most welcome to enter the city, since their strength could only help the situation.  
  
"All of us Awakened are comrades. We were called upon to carry out a solemn duty."  
  
Warden and Jest glanced at each other, feeling a little troubled.  
  
After arranging their accommodations, the officer escorted them to a dinner with the person ruling the dome, who seemed to be called the Esteemed Temporary Governor.  
  
The dinner was nothing short of lavish, and the Governor — an Awakened with clean features and a dashing smile — was both polite and friendly. He inquired about the situation in NQSC with curiosity, explaining how things were handled here in comparison.  
  
At some point, an old man in a servant livery arrived to pour more wine into their glasses. Jest was so amazed at the strange opulence of the Governor's residence that when the servant's hand trembled, and a few drops of wine fell on the white tablecloth, he did not even notice.  
  
But the gracious host of the dinner did.  
  
The old man shuddered.  
  
The Governor looked at him with a smile, then shifted his gaze to one of the Awakened warriors guarding the room and waved a hand slightly.  
  
Before anyone could react, the guard forcefully grabbed the old man and dragged him out of the room.  
  
The Governor sighed apologetically.  
  
"Please forgive the unsightly display, Lord Warden. You know how it is… it's difficult to train cattle, is it not?"