2154 Off the Cuff  
  
Cassie witnessed the inception of the Great Clan Valor — of the force that would shape the future of humanity in accordance with its will. Warden's reluctant determination to become one of the cornerstones that held up the new world would pay off, propelling him to the height of power in the coming years.  
  
That was how history was made, it seemed. Not by vast armies or mystical powers, but by the will of a determined individual — as long as that will was sharp enough to leave a mark on the world.  
  
Granted, Warden himself was not destined to become an individual whose personal power could trample armies. His son, however, would… by following in his father's footsteps.  
  
Wasn't it bitterly ironic, then, that the cleaner world Warden wished to create for his children would be drowned in blood by them?  
  
…Perhaps it was inevitable, since what they inherited from him was a legacy of war, not peace.  
  
The beautiful castle he had turned into a bastion of humanity was now a ruined battlefield where his grandchildren were struggling to kill each other, and his son had gathered a great army to slaughter other people, not creatures summoned by the Spell.  
  
That was his sin, as well.  
  
At that moment, Cassie sensed a movement. By now, it was not just a subtle twitch… Jest's hand rose weakly, and then fell again, hanging limp.  
  
She shivered and delved deeper into his memories, in a hurry to find traces of Anvil.  
  
This time, finally, she succeeded.  
  
A vague memory surfaced from the well of them — brief, but etched with deep, bittersweet emotions.  
  
…Jest exited a luxurious PTV and inhaled deeply, enjoying the clean air of NQSC. Now that the problem with the barriers had been resolved, peоple could breathe freely here once again — well, closer to the center, at least.  
  
His posture was full of confidence, and his dashing figure was made even more eye-catching by a suit of elegant, expensive clothes. Now that Jest had credits to spare,he made a point of enjoying the finer things in life — something he had been deprived of during his youth.  
  
It was definitely not to compensate for his inability to wear fancy Memories. Not at all!  
  
'Who needs those clunky suits of armor, anyway?'  
  
Smiling, he walked between the Awakened warriors guarding the entrance to a newly built administrative complex and walked inside. No one dared to stop him, since everyone knew who he was… actually, what the hell, why had no one at least checked his ID? There were all kinds of Aspects out there, so one could never be too careful…  
  
Then again, the power of the people who had gathered inside was so fearsome that only a lunatic would try to stage an attack.  
  
'Damn. But the world is still full of lunatics!'  
  
Jest sighed.  
  
Five years had already passed since the day the Nightmare Spell descended. By now, the world was slowly overcoming thе dire state of instability it had undergone at the start. Of course, there were still countless problems, big and small, but there was at least a semblance of order in most of the Quadrants — and here in NQSC especially.  
  
In large part, it was thanks to the people that had gathered today… and Jest himself, as well, even if what he did was usually less glamorous.  
  
A few minutes later, he entered a room where Warden was seated in a chair, looking mildly uncomfortable — not that many people would recognize genuine emotions behind his flawlessly stoic facade. There were two young women here, too, working on his hair and makeup.  
  
Jest couldn't help but laugh.  
  
"Oh, oh gods. Never have I imagined seeing you in makeup, Lord Warden."  
  
Warden looked at him sideways, seemingly afraid to turn his head and disturb the makeup artist. If looks could kill, Jest would probably fall dead at the spot.  
  
"That… others insisted. I am going to address all of humanity today, after all."  
  
Jest grinned.  
  
"Good luck… to humanity. Witnessing yourmug will be a great shock for many, no doubt. Let them suffer,I say! Like I have suffered all these years."  
  
Today was indeed a special day. Bеcause today, they were announcing the formation of the United Human Government — an overarching organization meant to facilitate the cooperation of disparate human strongholds, serve as connective tissue between independent Awakened champions, and oversee the infrastructure of populated areas of the planet.  
  
That was why brilliant figures like Warden, Immortal Flame, Nightwalker, and many other powerhouses were all in the same building today.  
  
Of course, that name — the United Human Government — was merely a bold proclamation. In truth, humanity was far from being united. Most of the planet was indeed under the control of their coalition now, but there were still powerful adversaries left in its corners.  
  
The Americas seemed to come around last year, but the Supremacists were still holding ground in the South. The entire Western Quadrant was under the control of Caliban and his cabal of demented fiends, all indoctrinated by his eerily sinister ideology. The Dream Cult was still prevalent in many places, and the Path of Ascension zealots were steadily gaining ground right here in NQSC.  
  
There were many smaller cities that had yet to be liberated from the Nightmare Creatures, too.  
  
In short, there was still a lot of work to do.  
  
Which was why Jest was late to arrive today.  
  
Warden hesitated for a few moments, then asked the makeup artist and the hair stylist to leave. Once they were gone, he looked at Jest evenly.  
  
"How did it go?"  
  
Jest shrugged.  
  
"There was a bit of collateral damage. Unfortunate, but inevitable. In any case, it went well — those old regime fogies won't be a problem anymore. We'll be able to take full control of the water distribution system and purification plants by the end of the week, then hand them to the UHG. Obviously, that will also make the negotiations with the Farmers moot — they won't last long if we cut water supply to their precious hydroponics.And without a stable source of food, all other holdouts will fall in line. In short, there'll be no independent factions controlling vital infrastructure here in NQSC anymore. All thanks to yours truly."  
  
He grinned.  
  
Warden sighed, then nodded curtly.  
  
After a few moments, he said:  
  
"There's blood on your sleeve."  
  
Jest flinched.  
  
"What? Ah, crap… that's a bespoke shirt, damn it!"  
  
He pulled the cuff of his shirt from under his jacket's sleeve, studied the degree of damage, then grimaced and tore the entire cuff off.  
  
Of course, not before removing the expensive cuff link first. Those were a gift from his wife, so he could not lose them.  
  
'Oh no, my shirt...'  
  
Throwing the bloodied cuff into a trashcan, Jest sighed dejectedly and glanced at Warden.  
  
"Well, anyway. You go ahead and prepare for your speech… I'll go say hello to the kids."  
  
Warden nodded.  
  
"Tell the makeup team to come in on your way out. And… good job today."  
  
Jest smiled.  
  
"Why, of course. When have I ever not done a good job?"  
  
The last five years had not been peaceful… in fact, they were stained by endless bloodshed. Power came at a great cost, and one had to pay for it in blood — either their own or that of their opponents.  
  
So, Jest had long lost count of the number of such missions he had undertaken on behalf of Warden, both openly and in secret. It was not very enjoyable work… most of the time… but he prided himself on being good at it.  
  
Most importantly, it mattered. Because he was not spilling blood for personal gain or to satisfy his greed. He was spilling it to build a better future for everyone, and especially for his family.  
  
Now that Jest was a father himself, he understood how Warden had felt, all those years ago.  
  
Forgetting about thе bloodied cuff, Jest headed for the door.  
  
"Oh! Is your youngest here today?"  
  
Warden nodded with a smile.  
  
"Yes, he is."  
  
Jest chuckled.  
  
"Good, good. Although I still can't believe that you actually gave him that name. That is, like… child abuse?Hello! Don't you have any shame?"  
  
Warden shook his head.  
  
"You won't understand. Anvil is different from Madoc…"  
  
And standing in the dark jungle of Godgrave, Cassie smiled subtly while Jest's hands twitched.  
  
'Found you.'