2156 Flexible Steel  
  
Little Anvil was not so little anymore, having just turned seven. He had somehow grew into something that resembled an actual person now, albeit a mini version, and one could already recognize his father's features in his earnest, serious face.  
  
Too serious, even. Jest had often wondered what kind of kids Warden would raise — with how serious and prone to giving lectures about chivalry the man was, his poor children were bound to grow up with a severe deficiency of fun in their lives.  
  
It was already showing…  
  
Perhaps that was why Anvil liked to hang out with Immortal Flame's daughter so much.  
  
At the moment, though, he was laying on the ground, breathing heavily and staring at the sky with bleak eyes.  
  
Jest coughed.  
  
"That, uh… maybe we should end things here today."  
  
The kid was weirdly fit for someone his age, but the training regime Warden forced upon the poor fellow was way too intense. Little Anvil really did nothing but study and practice all day long, which was a sad thing to see.   
  
Then again, Jest understood Warden completely… in fact, all of them, the original Awakened, were a bit too harsh on their children.  
  
That was because the Nightmare Spell was continuing to reap lives, with new youths contracting it each year. The thought of his son being sent into a Nightmare made Jest sweat, which was why he and his wife trained their little devil with an almost equal — but not quite — level of intensity.  
  
They had faced the horrors of the Nightmare Spell unprepared, so if there was something — anything — they could do to coach their children on how to survive the danger, they were willing to do it. Not everyone had such a wealth of resources at their disposal, but they did, and so they used it thoroughly.  
  
Thankfully, their second son was too young for sword practice… for now. Still, his training would have to start soon.  
  
…No one was trained more intensely than poor Anvil, though, both in swordsmanship and intellectual pursuits.  
  
Warden was not so strict even with Madoc, who was two years older. By now, Jest knew why, and while he understood that the younger of the two brothers had a different, somewhat inhuman constitution, it was still a shame to see him waste his childhood this way.  
  
Anvil himself did not seem to mind, though.  
  
Shaking his head, the boy sighed, then rose to his feet wearily and picked up the wooden sword.  
  
"No, Uncle Jest… I can go again. Please instruct me."  
  
Jest sighed. He didn't even want to joke at the moment.  
  
'Warden… ah, I really need to talk to him.'  
  
Warden was, without a doubt, an exceptional man. He was a fearsome warrior and benevolent leader, and more importantly than that, he was someone with a great and clear vision. Even his enemies did not question his nobility, and his intellect was truly formidable.  
  
More than that, he was Jest's closest friend and benefactor. It would not be a stretch to say that everything Jest had was because of Warden… he would not even be alive if not for that excessively serious guy. His life would have ended on the day of the winter solstice, all those years ago.  
  
And yet, despite what many seemed to think, Warden wasn't perfect.  
  
In particular, аs far as Jest could see, he was not treating his children — especially Anvil — right. Warden approached their education with his usual level of seriousness, and although he meant well, children also needed warmth and affection. Especially these two, who had lost their mother young.  
  
It had happened during the First Gate Crisis… that damn disaster. Many people had suspected that the Nightmare Spell had more terrors in storе for humanity, but still, no one expected that a few years after the first Awakened returned from the Dream Realm, the Dream Realm would follow them to Earth through the Nightmare Gates.  
  
The Gates kept opening, and no one managed to close one yet.  
  
Jest frowned.  
  
There was no telling what other calamities the Nightmare Spell had in store. The future they were trying to build was dark and unclear.   
  
So… perhaps Warden had the right idea to prepare his sons for the worst, after all.  
  
'Ah, I don't know anymore…'  
  
Jest remained silent for a moment, then smiled warmly.  
  
"Sure, kid. Let's go again… be sure not to let go of your sword this time."  
  
Since most of the human enemies that had threatened them were gone now, he had a lot of free time on his hands. That was why Warden had asked him to give Anvil lessons.  
  
There were better swordsmen out there, of course, but there were few killers better than Jest in the world… if any.  
  
Two worlds, really.  
  
So, what he had to teach Anvil was not the sword, per se, but rather combat. Real battle was never clean and orderly like training spars — both people and Nightmare Creatures fought dirty, using anything and everything they could to kill the enemy and survive. Desperation was the best teacher, but it was hard for a child from a noble family to really taste it.  
  
Clutching his wooden sword, Anvil frowned. Jest chuckled.  
  
"What's with that bitter expression?"  
  
The little boy looked at him somberly, and then said in a guarded tone:  
  
"Uncle Jest… since yоu are telling me to hold onto my sword, you'll probably ignore it completely and just smack me on the body, right?"  
  
Jest grinned.  
  
"It seems you did learn something!"  
  
With that, he attacked… ignoring the boy's wooden sword and aiming directly at his body, instead.  
  
After a few exchanges, Anvil found himself on the ground again and sighed.  
  
This time, he did not hurry to stand up.  
  
"I see. So today's lesson is misdirection."  
  
Jest stared at the little boy, then shook his head in dejection.  
  
"You are way too honest and upright, boy. There's no honesty in battle, though. Your enemies will try to deceive you, and you must know how to both see through their deceit and deceive them in turn."  
  
Anvil frowned.  
  
"But isn't Father an honest and upright man, too?"  
  
Jest laughed.  
  
"Who, Warden? Why, of course. He is the honestest and the uprightest… but he can be cunning and crooked when he needs to, too. A true warrior can't be too rigid in his thinking. He has to be flexible, or he'll die."  
  
The little boy nodded seriously.  
  
"Like steel."  
  
He considered something for a few moments, then smiled.  
  
"A good sword has to be flexible, too. Rigid blades will break faster. I understand now, Uncle Jest!"  
  
Jest gave him a dubious glance, not sure what if the boy really understood.  
  
Then, he shrugged.  
  
"Well, if you do, get up and go clean yourself. I'll take you into the city to eat something tasty."  
  
Anvil looked at him with a childish expression, which made Jest happy — it was nice seeing the boy act like a kid for a change.  
  
Eventually, though, Anvil sighed.  
  
"Father hired a nutrition specialist to oversee my meals. I am… forbidden from eating ice cream…"  
  
Jest smiled benevolently.  
  
"Why, then we can take the nutrition specialist with us. I'm sure that we can find a nutritious ice cream, with some help… and even if we can't, Warden doesn't need to know everything, right?"  
  
The boy's eyes widened.  
  
Jest thought that it was a look of admiration at first, but then realized that there was a tall figure reflecting in Anvil's eyes.  
  
Turning around, he saw Warden, who was walking across the garden with wide steps.  
  
The man looked strangely intense.  
  
Jest coughed.  
  
"Listen, man… Lord Warden. I didn't mean it that way, okay? I was definitely not teaching your kid how to deceive his father..."  
  
But Warden ignored his words and just stared at him.  
  
Jest felt that something was wrong.  
  
"What?"  
  
Warden remained silent for a few moments, and then suddenly smiled fiercely.  
  
"It's Immortal Flame. That guy. He closed a Nightmare Gate!"