2157 Seeds of Calamity  
  
What Immortal Flame had accomplished changed evеrything. Even before the news of his Ascension spread around the world like a tidal wave, igniting the hearts of countless people, it had shaken the hearts of those who held both the greatest power and the greatest responsibility in the dire world of the Nightmare Spell… of people like Warden.  
  
The repercussions were too significant.  
  
Knowing the importance of what he had learned inside the Seed of Nightmare, Immortal Flame wasn't shy about sharing the information. An urgent meeting between the members of the prominent families was arranged, and soon, the powerhouses of humanity gathered in a heavily guarded government complex.  
  
As one of Warden's elites, Jest attended as well.  
  
Everything they learned from the Immortal Flame was astonishing.  
  
First, the nature of Ascension — the further evolution of one's body, the qualitative increase in the potency of soul essence, the unimaginable degree with which one could control it as an Ascended, the unsealing of the third Aspect Ability, and most importantly of all… the ability to enter the Dream Realm whenever one wanted.  
  
Or not enter it at all.  
  
All of them were seasoned and powerful Awakened warriors, but witnessing what Immortal Flame was now capable of, even just on a purely physical level, was enough to leave them all stunned. That… was an entirely new level оf might that they could not have dreamed about.  
  
Not even superhuman power, but an inhuman one.  
  
Something that would finally allow them to contend against Fallen Nightmare Creatures on equal footing, and therefore alleviate the crushing pressure every one of them was experiencing, both in the real world and in the Dream Realm.  
  
Take Bastion, for example… although it had become a beacon of safety for the humans of the Dream Realm, the actual situation in the castle was not too good these days. That was because without the red dragon, the abominable forest that surrounded Warden's Citadel was growing more and more terrifying with each year.   
  
By now, Bastion was besieged from all sides, and the only way to stave off the enemy was to venture out on frequent punitive expeditions to cull the abominations spawned by the dark woods, burning large swathes of the forest in the process. Each of these expeditions was more onerous and deadly than the previous one, and the balance of power was slowly shifting in favor of the sprawling dark mass of the eerie Titan.  
  
Ascension offered a chance to swing the balance back in favor of humans.  
  
Then, there was the freedom from the clutches of the Nightmare Spell it offered. All Awakened had no choice but to enter the Dream Realm when they slept… and the Dream Realm was a harsh and inhospitable hell.  
  
Bastion was one of the strongest Citadels of humanity in its dark expanse, and even it was barely standing… there was no need to mention how hard the lives in the smaller human enclaves were. Surviving was hard, and casualties were a constant. The Citadels were like small, trembling flames, shining weakly in the endless expanse of chilling and impenetrable darkness.  
  
So, for most Awakened, the mere possibility of never having to enter the Dream Realm again would be like a ray of hope.  
  
For those in charge of humanity, however, something else held much more significance… it was not the allure of greater power that Ascension offered, and not even the promise of remaining in the real world forever.  
  
It was the fact that conquering a Seed was now the only proven method of closing a Nightmare Gate. The Gates had become a plague after first appearing a few years ago, and their number only continued to grow. There were already a dozen or so exclusion zones in NQSC alone, and constant military presence was required to eliminate the emerging abominations.  
  
The scale of the problem was manageable… for now. But anyone with the smallest amount of foresight could see the writing on the wall — sooner or later, the Nightmare Gates were going to swallow all human population centers.   
  
Unless they were dealt with.   
  
And Immortal Flame had shown them a way to do just that.   
  
Finally, there was the last shocking part of his report.  
  
It was the truth of what was hidden inside the Nightmare Seeds.   
  
Immortal Flame, of course, was not the first person who had entered one of them. However, he and those of his comrades who had survived were the first ones to return alive, and therefore, the first people who could tell the rest of humanity about what awaited Awakened inside the Nightmare Seeds.   
  
The truth was something that many had theorized, but none had been able to prove.   
  
It was another Nightmare… a Second Nightmare.  
  
Just like the trial that every Awakened faced after contracting the Spell, a new Nightmare awaited them inside the Seeds — this one far more deadly and demanding, with enemies that were far more powerful than most of them had ever had to fight.  
  
However, there was another difference to the Second Nightmare, one that had the potential to have decisive influence on the next few years. It was that, according to the Immortal Flame, these new harrowing Nightmares were not individual trials, but rather meant to be challenged as by groups of Awakened.  
  
The idea of a Nightmare that many people could challenge was preposterous, but it was nevertheless true. Jest was quite shocked by the unexpected turn of events, but in hindsight, nothing about the Nightmare Spell had ever been predictable.  
  
The news of Immortal Flame's Ascension was announced a few days after the meeting. Not long after that, the prominent Awakened gathered once more, this time for an official celеbration…  
  
It was just before the celebration that Warden looked at Jest somberly and said, his voice full of familiar determination.  
  
"We must do it, Jest. We must Ascend."  
  
Jest sighed.  
  
"Yeah, sure. But hold your horses — you know better than I do how mаny people died while challenging the Seeds. The fact that Immortal Flame returned alive doesn't mean that from now on, everyone will too. We must prepare thoroughly… there is no rush."  
  
But Warden shook his head.   
  
"You are wrong. There is a rush. Don't you see?"  
  
Looking at the streets of NQSC that moved past the window of their PTV, Warden gritted his teeth.   
  
"The fact that there is a Second Nightmare… means that there will be a Third, as well. And the Fourth."  
  
His expression darkened.  
  
"Which also means that after the First Gate Crisis, there will be the Second. And the Third. And so on… that is a reasonable extrapolation. These Nightmare Gates we are dealing with will soon become more terrible. What will we do when Corrupted Nightmare Creatures start entering the waking world?"  
  
Jest shivered.  
  
Corrupted Nightmare Creatures... were legendary monsters synonymous with death. Just one of them could wipe out most of NQSC, since there was no one here to stop it.  
  
Except for Immortal Flame and his surviving companions.  
  
Noticing the lack of a humorous response, Warden nodded and looked at him silently.  
  
Eventually, he said:  
  
"That is why we must Ascend, Jest. As soon as possible."