2158 Old Guard  
  
In the end, there had not been a Second Gate Crisis.  
  
That was because people like Warden had anticipated that Category Three Gates would start appearing in the near future, and prepared accordingly.  
  
It cost them a lot.  
  
For a few years after Immortal Flame had conquered the Second Nightmare, the higher echelons of humanity were overcome by great ambition, great determination… and great sorrow.  
  
There were countless celebrations, and countless funerals.  
  
Almost all the best and the brightest of humanity answered the Call of Nightmare, entering the blooming Seeds to face the trial of the Spell. Many returned victorious, but many had perished, as well.  
  
It was as if the old guard was being culled. Jest had lost count of how many of his old acquaintances — all seasoned veterans and survivors of the Spell's descent — had lost their lives in the pursuit of Ascension.  
  
But he survived. Warden survived, too, becoming an Ascended in the tenth year of the Nightmare Spell era… people like them were more and more often called Masters, now.  
  
Both of them were in their thirties now.  
  
They weren't young, but the ruthless world kept changing around them at the same rapid pace.  
  
In the Dream Realm, Warden managed to push the monstrous forest back from the walls of Bastion… for a time, at least. Despite having reached Ascensiоn, they still could not contend against a Fallen Titan — all they could do was contain it, and slow down its growth.  
  
Jest himself had left Bastion and traveled south along the river, conquering the strategic Citadel that stood hаlfway between the Mirrоr Lake and Stormsea. With Rivergate in human hands, it was now possible to connect with Nightwalker and the other champions of that nebulous region of the Dream Realm.  
  
Many more Citadels were conquered at that time, as well. While the River of Tears basin in the west was still largely underdeveloped, with every human enclave isolated from the rest, things were changing here in the heartland of the Dream Realm.   
  
Humans were slowly uniting around Bastion and Warden, and the Citadels were supporting each other to present a united front against the horrors of the Nightmare Spell.  
  
Things were changing in the waking world, too.  
  
Almost all remaining cities were now under the control of the United Human Government and the Awakened forces standing behind it. The mad ruler of the Western Quadrant, Caliban, had been eliminated — the less powerful local tyrants had all been either killed or persuaded to join the new world order, as well.  
  
Quite a few of those who persisted in their misguided ways diеd by Jest's own hand. He had been deadly even as an Awakened, and his power and lethality only exploded after becoming a Master.  
  
The Dream Cult had been ruthlessly suppressed and erased from the annals of history, replaced by the powerful propaganda machine of the government. The Awakened Supremacy movement had been eradicated. Countless smаller gangs, cults, movements, and extremist factions were all gone now, and a semblance of if not peace, then at least stability enveloped the world.  
  
Even the Ascension zealots were gone now… this particular faction had not been too malicious, but there was still no place for it in the new world order. Which was a shame, considering how powerful many of them were — in fact, while Immortal Flame was the first one to conquer the Second Nightmare, it was the Path of Ascension believers who had braved it second, much earlier than even Warden himself.  
  
While most Awakened dreamed of becoming Masters in order to never enter the Dream Realm again, the Ascension zealots wanted the opposite. So, after being pressured and persecuted by the dominant forces of the human world, they simply left it forever and established a colony somewhere in the Dream Realm, never to be heard of again.  
  
Jest was not sorry to see the lunatics go.  
  
Not that he had a lot of time to spare them any thought.  
  
Busy, busy, busy… if there was one word to describe their lives in the past few years, it was busy.   
  
So busy that he did not even really notice when his older son had turned into a temperamental teenager, and his younger son started school.  
  
'Gods. Look at this guy! He's taller than me!'  
  
Jest was just contemplating spending more time with his children when he noticed Anvil, now fourteen years old, practicing with a sword in solitude.  
  
He was currently visiting the Valor residence to discuss a few important matters with Warden — a frequent occurrence now that they were anchored at different Citadels in the Dream Realm. Traveling from Rivergate to Bastion did not take a lot of time, but it was still more convenient to meet here in NQSC. So, he was often a guest here.  
  
His lessons with Anvil had long been canceled, though, because the little fiend was already a far better swordsman than Jest himself was. So was Madoc — now the two brothers just sparred with each other when they needed a partner, and taught each other as well.  
  
They were both monstrously talented, even if Anvil had an edge over his older brother due to a special lineage.  
  
Noticing Jest, Anvil smiled subtly and put down the sword.  
  
"Uncle Jest. What a nice surprise."  
  
Jest grinned.  
  
"That's what she… actually, never mind. How have you been, kid?"  
  
Anvil nodded.  
  
"Thank you. I've been doing well."  
  
'Ah. He's still too prim and proper.'  
  
Although Madoc and Anvil were both talented and diligent, one thing they were missing under Warden's strict oversight was liveliness.  
  
Today, however, Warden's younger son seemed troubled.  
  
He hesitated for a few moments, then asked tentatively.  
  
"Uncle Jest. Do you think that Madoc… will he be alright?"  
  
Jest raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Why wouldn't he be alright?"  
  
A shadow crossed the boy's face.  
  
"Because he turned sixteen."  
  
Jest blinked.  
  
Sixteen.  
  
Most of the youths who contracted the Spell were between sixteen and eighteen years of age.  
  
'...Madoc is already sixteen, huh?'  
  
At that point, someone would say… gods! How fast time had passed!  
  
But not Jest. To him, it felt like a dozen lifetimes had passed between the day Madoc was born and now.  
  
However…  
  
Since Madoc was already sixteen, his own son will be, too, in a year.  
  
He remained silent for a while, then smiled.  
  
"Madoc? That guy? Bah! Of course, he'll be alright. Don't you worry about him, worry about yourself instead…"  
  
And indeed, Madoc was alright. A year passed, and he was yet to show any symptoms of having contracted the Nightmare Spell.  
  
So, Jest allowed himself to feel hopeful, too.  
  
'Maybe it's really… really going to be alright.'  
  
But then, one day, when he returned home...  
  
His son's sleepy eyes met him, and the boy said after a big yawn.  
  
"Ah, dad… sorry… can we skip practice today? I feel a bit tired."  
  
Jest's heart stopped.