2161 A Flawed World  
  
So many things had happened, and worse than that, things constantly kept happening. So, Jest was busy all the time and had not paid too much attention to young Anvil after their lessons were over.  
  
The boy was a constant presence in his life, but more of a background character than a main one. Still, they were close — or had been, at least.  
  
Ever since last year... Jest had distanced himself from everyone who was around the age of being infected by the Nightmare Spell. Even if it was unreasonable and cowardly, he had to in order to prevent himself from falling apart completely.  
  
Anvil had contracted the Spell, faced the First Nightmare, and returned alive. They had seen each other once or twice since then, and even though everything seemed fine, Jest sensed that something was not quite the same.  
  
Well, of course... it wouldn't be. The First Nightmare was a formative experience for many, and no one was the same after suffering its horrors. So, even if Anvil had changed, there was probably no hidden meaning behind it.  
  
Perhaps Jest just felt sad about growing distant from the boy, considering that they had been close once.  
  
He wanted to visit the kid at the newly established Academy, but this and that kept getting in the way. In the end, it wasn't long before the winter solstice that Jest finally found himself paying a visit.  
  
He made a point of making himself preventable, and had even gone so far as to not drink anything the night before. After all, he had an image to maintain in front of the youths.  
  
The Academy was just as impressive as he had expected. He found Anvil in the library, studying academic papers on various dead languages of the Dream Realm and the reproductions of obscure runic engravings found in different parts of the world. Jest could not really imagine what for, but vaguely remembered seeing Warden doing the same.  
  
"Hey, kid."  
  
When he called with a smile, Anvil looked up, studied him for a few moments, and then nodded.  
  
"Uncle Jest."  
  
The greeting was not really unfriendlу... but it wasn't too warm, either, a far cry from how  
  
happily the boy had greeted him before, in the past. Jest hesitated for a moment, childishly hurt by that lackluster reaction.  
  
Was it simply because they were not as close as they had been once, or was there a different reason?  
  
Still maintaining a smile, Jest sat down and glanced at Anvil.  
  
"Funny seeing you here. I went by the dojo first, and what would you know? Lo and behold, there was Immortal Flame's girl... ah, I'm supposed to call her Smile of Heaven now, aren't I? Bah, what a mouthful."  
  
He grinned.  
  
"Well, anyway. She was having a blast sparring with some guy... he's a menace with a sword, too. Weren't you two joined at the hip? How come you left her there alone?"  
  
Anvil hesitated for a while, then shrugged.  
  
"I don't need more sword practice."  
  
Jest clicked his tongue and shook his head reproachfully.  
  
"That's not what I am talking about, fool! Don't you know anything? If you are not fast on your feet, that guy is going to steal her right from under your nose!"  
  
That finally elicited a reaction. Anvil looked up from the inscriptions he had been studying and looked at Jest, his cold grey eyes turning a little somber.  
  
He held his gaze for a while, then turned away once more.  
  
"If she finds someone who cares about her, then I will wish them all the best. Smile of Heaven is a dear friend of mine, so I'd be happy for her."  
  
Jest scowled.  
  
No, was there seriously something wrong with the kid?  
  
Or was he simply a clumsy fool that had no idea how to treat a girl? That would not be surprising, either.  
  
Honestly... it was a miracle that Anvil even existed. Both of Warden's sons resembled their father, and Jest still had no idea how that guy had managed to find a woman who could endure his insufferably stiff and serious personality, let alone convince her to marry him.  
  
In any case, this was not a good time to discuss matters of the heart, and Jest wasn't the best person to have such a conversation with a teenage kid, anyway.  
  
There were far more important things they had to talk about.  
  
He lingered for a moment, then asked:  
  
"So, how do you feel? The winter solstice is drawing near."  
  
Anvil nodded.  
  
"I am sufficiently confident. My preparations have been thorough."  
  
Jest sighed.  
  
"Well, true. You are quite strong for a Sleeper, and the Aspect you unsealed is very useful. Still, don't become complacent. Winter solstice is different from the First Nightmare — first of all, there is no guarantee that the Spell will send you anywhere near Bastion. Secondly, and most importantly, the Dream Realm is not tailored for you personally, like the Nightmare was. You might meet abominations that are simply too strong and terrible for you to face. Don't be shy and run away if you do."  
  
Anvil studied him silently.  
  
"I know, Uncle Jest."  
  
He seemed strangely calm. Jest, however, was not.  
  
The first journey to the Dream Realm resulted in far fewer casualties than the First Nightmare — but that was only because those who were weak had already been culled by the Spell's trial. In truth, countless Sleepers still failed to return from the Dream Realm alive.  
  
Anvil was still in danger, and Jest, having already lost one child, was terrified to lose another.  
  
But there was nothing he could really do for the boy.  
  
Other parents, mentors, and relatives could bestow Memories or even precious Echoes on the Sleepers before the winter solstice, but Jest couldn't even do that. Because he did not, and could not, possess any.  
  
So, he could only try to cheer Anvil up.  
  
Jest smiled.  
  
"You know-it-all. Can't you just pretend to listen to my sage advice? Let me tell you something... when your old man and I were young, there weren't even any human Citadels in the Dream Realm. We still managed to conquer one, so don't even think about failing to come back. I won't forgive you if you do, you hear me?"  
  
Anvil smiled politely.  
  
"I guess I can make an effort, Uncle Jest. I can't go around offending the elderly, can I?"  
  
Jest laughed.  
  
Finally, the kid seemed like a human again.  
  
The moment of levity did not last long, though. Soon, the smile drained from young Anvil's eyes, and he stared at his inscriptions again.  
  
After a few moments of silence, he suddenly asked:  
  
"Uncle Jest... can one defeat their Flaw?"  
  
Jest's own smile froze on his lips.  
  
'Ah. So that is the reason.'  
  
He remained silent for a few moments, then shrugged.  
  
"Well... sort of? But not really. A Flaw is a Flaw, so no one can ever escape it. Doesn't mean we can't live with our Flaws. It all depends on the particular one you get, but usually... most Awakened suffer quite a lot at the beginning, but then gradually learn to work around theirs."  
  
It was not something people usually talked about, but if Anvil couldn't share his worries with Jest, then who else was there?  
  
Jest hesitated for a moment.  
  
"For example. Do you know what my Flaw is?"  
  
The kid gave him a strange look.  
  
"That... I think everyone knows, Uncle Jest."  
  
Jest nodded, a bit disappointed.  
  
"Well, fair. I guess it's pretty obvious — after all, people are bound to make conclusions after knowing me for years. Where else would you find an Awakened who never uses Memories? Not being able to use Memories is a pretty bad Flaw... huh, what's with that expression?"  
  
At some point, Anvil's eyes widened a little. Hearing the question, he hurriedly shook his head.  
  
"No, no... you are right, Uncle Jest. That was... that was definitely my guess, as well."  
  
Jest smiled bitterly.  
  
These days, smiling did not come easy for him, but he was making an effort to help the boy feel calm.  
  
"Figures. So, anyway — not being able to use Memories is a rather severe Flaw, but I've lived my entire life, won countless battles, and conquered the Second Nightmare despite it. I just had to teach myself how to rely on my cunning, skill, and strength instead. You see, kid, it is not that hard to learn how to deal with your Flaw... one way or another. However, you need to be able to do one thing to accomplish that feat."  
  
Anvil looked at him for a while, his eyes growing strangely wistful.  
  
"What thing?"   
  
Jest chuckled.  
  
"Ah, I guess it's... unconventional thinking? You need to be able to flip your perspective, and look at the problem without preconceived notions. You need to change the way you think. That way, you can find a solution even if it seems like there's none to find."  
  
Anvil remained silent for a while, then repeated slowly:  
  
"Change... the way I think."  
  
Then, he did not say anything else.  
  
Jest did not hurry him, either. However, eventually, he said cautiously:  
  
"If you share exactly what your Flaw is... I might be able to give you better advice."  
  
Somewhere far away, Cassie held her breath as she experienced the vivid memory.  
  
She was so close...  
  
Anvil lingered for a while, then smiled.  
  
"Perhaps I will. After I return from the Dream Realm as an Awakened."  
  
Jest laughed.  
  
"You cheeky brat, I told you mine! And you are just going to leave me hanging? Well... good! Don't go around revealing your Flaw. Keep it a secret."  
  
With that, the conversation ended.  
  
After Anvil returned from the Dream Realm as an Awakened, things happened, and more things kept happening, delaying their next private conversation.  
  
And on the day they did find a reason to speak about Flaws again...  
  
Jest wished that they never had.