2162 Shield of Humanity  
  
Almost three years had passed since the Awakened Academy welcomed its first batch of the Second Generation Sleepers.  
  
The world had settled a little. Humanity was still besieged from all sides in the Dream Realm, but no Citadel had been overrun in quite some time. The waking world was still plagued by the Nightmare Gates, but they did not pose an existential threat to mankind anymore.  
  
For now.  
  
Young Anvil had become a fearsome warrior and a widely admired champion among those who defended Bastion. Together with Madoc, who had conquered the First Nightmare a year after his younger brother, the sons of Warden now led the Knights of Valor into battles against the dreadful creatures of the hungry forest.  
  
He also collaborated with his Academy companions, Broken Sword and Smile of Heaven, often — all three had gained quite a bit of fame, becoming known as the brightest stars of the new generation.  
  
The power and prestige of both the Valor clan and the Immortal Flame clan continued to grow. The only other clan that could compete with them was the coalition of the prominent Awakened families united by Nightwalker, the House of Night.  
  
The culture of the Legacy clans was swiftly being cemented. In fact, Jest had even found himself as the head of a clan of his own.  
  
Considering that he did not have a fancy True Name, he just named it Dagonet as a joke.  
  
Sadly, no one seemed to realize that it was a joke. So, people called him Master Jest of Clan Dagonet in all seгiousness now.  
  
That was a bit of a fiasco...  
  
His one remaining son was fifteen now.  
  
That was why Jest did nоt feel at ease, even though things seemed to be going fine.  
  
Warden remained restless, as well.  
  
One day, while visiting Bastion after joining the retainers of his clan on a patrol of the Mirror River, Jest found him in the underground chamber deep below the castle, gazing at the great mirror that stood there, surrounded by silence as it towered above the dark hall.  
  
There were no reflections in the mirror, of course, since it was covered by canvas.  
  
They had discovered this underground hall decades ago, when clearing the castle from the Nightmare Creatures populating it. The mirror had not been covered back then, and so, they glimpsed the sight of the harrowing realm within.  
  
Many members of the initial group had perished as a result, and the mirror had mostly remained covered since then. It was only when Warden became an Ascended that he dared to venture into the mirror realm once more.  
  
Jest was not quite sure what his friend had found there, but his already formidable powers seemed to have gained a considerable boost after that.  
  
"Oh, no. You have that look on your face."  
  
Warden turned and smiled after noticing Jest. After spending two decades side by side, the two of them had long become so used to each other that their relationship transcended mere friendship.  
  
One could even say that still being able to tolerate Jest after all these years was one of Warden's most amazing feats...  
  
In any case, he raised an eyebrow.  
  
"What expression?"  
  
Jest sighed.  
  
"The 'I am about to stir trouble' expression."  
  
Warden hesitated a bit, then nodded.  
  
"Indeed."  
  
He remained silent for a while, then sighed and turned his back to the covered mirror.  
  
"Let's leave this dreary place."  
  
Soon, they were in the main keep of Bastion, looking at the maps scattered on a large round table. Some of the maps depicted the Dream Realm, but most of them, surprisingly enough, showed the familiar continents of the waking world.  
  
Warden stared at them bleakly.  
  
"Those dots all represent Nightmare Gates — both active and those few we closed. The red one all appeared this year. The Category can be seen from the size of the dot — Category Three Gates are larger than the Category Two Gates, naturally."  
  
He paused for a moment, then pointed to another map.  
  
"That one is from before the Gate Crisis. Of course, the Obel Scale did not exist yet back then, so its accuracy is not too high. And speaking of the Obel Scale, now that it operates stably, the efficiency with which we can deal with the emerging Gates has increased by magnitudes. The world is at peace... as close to at peace as it realistically can be, at least."  
  
Jest studied the maps for a while, then asked in a somber tone:  
  
"You're not just studying the maps from before the Gate Crisis for fun, are you?"  
  
Warden had lost his wife during the Gate Crisis, so it was a sensitive topic.  
  
He shook his head.  
  
"Of course not. I am trying to determine when the first Category Four Gate will open."  
  
Jest scowled, feeling a heavy weight settle on his heart. After a while, despite already knowing the answer, he still asked the question:  
  
"...So, are you planning to challenge the Third Nightmare?"  
  
Warden did not try to deny it, and just nodded calmly.  
  
"Of course, I am."  
  
He looked at Jest, his steely grey eyes shining with a familiar, infectious determination.  
  
"Immortal Flame became an Ascended nine years аfter the descent of the Nightmare Spell. Twelve years have passed since then, and humanity is yet to take the next step. How long do you think the Spell will continue to spare us? I don't think that it's going to be long at all."  
  
When Warden looked back at the maps, his eyes suddenly dimmed, becoming weary and bleak.  
  
"...It's a race, after all. This word we leave in. It's all one endless race with terrible stakes, one where you can't get ahead no matter how long you stay in the lead. That is why we don't just need to conquer the Third Nightmare — we have to conquer it. We must!"  
  
Jest remained silent for a while, feeling a storm of emotions rage in his heart.  
  
There were a lot of things he was feeling. But mostly, he felt scared.  
  
Eventually, he chuckled.  
  
"Ah... I see. So that is why you and my wife have been spending so much time together behind my back. Goodness gracious! I was this close to believing that you two are having an affair."  
  
Warden coughed, then smiled subtly.  
  
"What... what the hell are you talking about? An affair? Preposterous! We were merely conspiring to challenge a Nightmare while leaving you behind."  
  
Jest clenched his fists.  
  
Of course. Both he and his wife were members of the initial group that had conquered Bastion with Warden — two of his most loyal and powerful followers. Both of them were Masters, as well. And while Jest had played an integral role in building the world Warden had envisioned, his wife wielded a much more destructive Aspect.  
  
So, it was not surprising that Warden would want her to be a part of his cohort once again.  
  
It was also not surprising why he would choose to leave Jest behind, this time.  
  
But, still.  
  
Jest wanted to hear it from Warden's own mouth.  
  
"Why?"  
  
Warden sighed.  
  
He leaned over the table, and then said quietly:  
  
"Because you are not in the best shape? Because there is no telling how long the Third Nightmare will take, and your son is fifteen — so, at least one of his parents should be with him if the Spell calls. Because we spent so much time building this world, and I need to leave someone I trust behind to keep it all from falling apart while I am gone."  
  
Warden paused for a while before adding:  
  
"Because Anvil and Madoc have both grown up, but even though they are already Awakened, I still want someone to watch over them. This world is full of sharks, after all. And you are my best shark."  
  
Jest remained silent foг a long time.  
  
There was a lot he wanted to say... a lot of bitter words that burned his tongue.  
  
But in the end, he simply grinned.  
  
"I think you are starting to show symptoms of dementia, old boy. I am not a shark. I am obviously a person."  
  
Warden chuckled.  
  
"Ha! This one... was actually funny."  
  
Then, he froze for a moment and shook his head.  
  
"No, wait. I actually laughed. Perhaps I am really suffering from dementia..."  
  
Both of them laughed.  
  
...Not long after that, Warden took a cohort of his most powerful warriors, including Jest's wife, to challenge the Third Nightmare.  
  
However, this time, none of the had returned. That was how the legend of Warden of Valor, the brilliant shield that protected humanity, had come to an end.