2165 Dreamspawn  
  
"I don't get it. I just don't... what are you thinking?"  
  
Jest was dismayed.  
  
The kid, Asterion, had seemed strange from the very beginning. The mere fact that Anvil, who was turning twenty-three soon, would recruit a youth who did not look older than sixteen to accompany him into the Nightmare made no sense.  
  
Given his age, Asterion could not have Awakened years ago, and would therefore have no experience. Unknown, inexperienced, untested... someone like that should not have become a member of any cohort attempting to challenge the Second Nightmare, let alone one consisting of warriors of Anvil's caliber.  
  
More than that, the kid simply gave Jest the creeps. He was perfectly pleasant and friendly, spending most of his time wandering the Citadel with a curious look on his face, but there was something about Asterion that seemed slightly... off.  
  
As if he was not quite human, but merely a thing wearing human skin.  
  
No one else seemed to notice, but Jest did. And so, he pressed Anvil for an explanation, even though that was not how they usually talked.  
  
"Where did you find that guy? Who is he? Why do you want to take him into the Nightmare?"  
  
Anvil simply stared at him indifferently, not showing any emotions.  
  
Eventually, he shrugged.  
  
"Since when do I need to justify my decisions to you, Ascended Jest?"  
  
Jest let out a bewildered scoff.  
  
"Wow. Ascended Jest, really?"  
  
Anvil stared at him some more, then sighed.  
  
"I want to take him into the Nightmare because he is worth it. As for the rest..."  
  
When Jest heard the brief explanation, he did not know what to think, or how to feel.  
  
It was a strange thing, to learn that an old enemy you had thought was gone forever suddenly appeared out of nowhere, alive and well.  
  
"Path of Ascension? Those lunatics, really?"  
  
The zealots of the Path of Ascension had disappeared decades ago... no, to be precise, they had disappeared around sixteen years ago, soon after Immortal Flame conquered the Second Nightmare.  
  
Jest knew about their twisted beliefs, albeit not in detail. If he remembered correctly, they saw the Dream Realm as some sort of Promised Land, and the Spell as a divine guide meant to lead humanity — or at least a few chosen ones — out of the dying world where they had been born to find salvation.  
  
Or some such nonsense.  
  
As far as all the cults that had sprouted after the Nightmare Spell's descent went, this one was not the most malignant. The zealots of the Path of Ascension mostly kept to themselves, maintaining peace with the mainstream factions as long as they were left alone.  
  
If there was one thing that separated them from the crowd, it was that the core of their cult consisted of genuine powerhouses — those who stood out among the Awakened of the First Generation, no different from people like Warden or Nightwalker. It was why Warden had often felt regretful about not being able to bring them into the fold due to how strange and extreme their views were.  
  
In the end, however, the Path of Ascension cult had become a ghost on the pages of history, just like all the other cults. The men and women comprising it had just disappeared one day, never to be seen again.  
  
To think that those lunatics had actually managed to establish a colony in the Dream Realm. Not only that, but they had even raised a child here...  
  
"Lunatics!"  
  
They were all dead now, though... according to Asterion, at least — the very child who had been born and raised in the Dream Realm by the powerful zealots, and the only survivor of the first human colony established in its wild expanse.  
  
"How did that even work?"  
  
Had Asterion been infected by the Nightmare Spell here? Did he undergo the First Nightmare? What about the winter solstice, what happened to him when he was supposed to fall asleep and be sent to a random spot in the Dream Realm?  
  
Anvil shook his head.  
  
"Nothing happened to him on the winter solstice. He conquered the First Nightmare just like anyone else would, then Awakened immediately after anchoring his soul to a Citadel. In any case, you don't need to worry about Asterion. He might have come from a fringe cult, but he is not a zealot himself. In fact, unlike his parents and guardians, he is quite interested in the waking world. Granted... some of the notions he has and views he holds are a bit strange. What else would you expect, considering his upbringing? But what really matters is the power he holds."  
  
He looked at Jest somberly.  
  
"Unlike what you think, that young man is not inexperienced. He has more knowledge and experience than any of us, in fact, having spent his whole life in the Dream Realm. His Aspect is also exceedingly formidable. He will be useful to me in the Nightmare — no one else can compare."  
  
Jest remained silent for a while, then shook his head.  
  
"How do you know that you can trust him? Need I remind you that your companions can be just as dangerous as the phantoms of the Spell in the Nightmare? There are many Masters out there who experienced strife and betrayal after entering the Seеd... and that's just those who have nothing to hide and talk about their trials freely. Those who keep silent could very well have been the betrayers."  
  
Anvil shook his head again.  
  
"You don't have to worry about that. Asterion and I have a deal — and he is very particular about deals. So, he won't betray me."  
  
Jest frowned.  
  
"What kind of deal?"  
  
Anvil glanced at him coldly.  
  
"I will help him find a way to enter the waking world after he helps me become a Master. Nothing more, nothing less. So, are we done here, or do you want to interrogate me some more?"  
  
Jest remained silent for a while, feeling unhappy, then waved a hand.  
  
"Well, whatever. Do what you want. I'll keep an eye on him while he's here in Bastion, though... deal oг not, that kid is dangerous. I can feel it."  
  
Anvil chuckled, surprising Jest — these days, it was rare to see the young man displaying emotions.  
  
He nodded.  
  
"Indeed. I know he is dangerous. That is why I need him."