2166 The Returned  
  
Eventually, the five Awakened — Broken Sword, Smile of Heaven, Ki Song, Asterion, and Anvil of Valor — had left to challenge the Second Nightmare.  
  
Jest would lie if he said that he wasn't worried. But, at the same time, he was strangely not too worried.  
  
That was because he knew each of them well... except for the kid, Asterion, of course. If those five could not conquer the Nightmare, then no one could.  
  
Coincidentally — or perhaps intentionally — the Seed they challenged was the same where his wife and Warden had perished. So, he felt both melancholy and vengeful excitement while waiting for their return.  
  
Jest was quite busy in the meantime, himself. Now that the young lord of Bastion was gone, Madoc had temporarily assumed control over Clan Valor, and although his loyalty to Anvil was not in question, he still needed help to keep the other Legacy Clans in check.  
  
Anvil's young wife, Gwyn, also needed support and protection. So, Jest — a powerful Ascended whose mere presence could solve many problems — had left Rivergate in the hands of his son and temporarily relocated to Bastion.  
  
Things went smoothly at first...  
  
But then, two months after Anvil had entered the Seed, Jest woke up from the sound of furtive footsteps approaching his bedchamber.  
  
He looked at the door coldly and grasped the hilt of the dagger that lay beneath his pillow. Then, however, he relaxed after hearing a quiet knock... his hearing was sharp enough to recognize who it was knocking on his door late at night, anyway.  
  
Letting out a quiet sigh, Jest got up, put on a robe, and went to the door.  
  
There, young Lady Gwyn was standing, pale as a ghost and wearing an enchanted nightgown. The dim light of a lantern Memory illuminated her youthful figure and lovely features.  
  
Jest coughed.  
  
"Ah... Lady Gwyn... its not that I don't appreciate the thought, but I'm afraid I must decline..."  
  
The young woman looked at him in confusion, prompting Jest to sigh.  
  
"Indeed! I am quite dashing. However, I am old enough to be your father, and your husband is almost like a son to me! Something like that... would be highly inappropriate..."  
  
Her eyes widened.  
  
"W—what... I am not..."  
  
Jest laughed.  
  
"Bah! It's a joke, a joke, girl! What happened?"  
  
Alas, Anvil's wife seemed to lack a sense of humor, too.  
  
After staring at him for a few moments, she took a deep breath and said in a small voice:  
  
"It's... it's Vale. He's back."  
  
Vale was a nickname that Smile of Heaven had given Anvil when they were kids. It had stuck to him ever since, so...  
  
'Wait. He's back?!'  
  
Jest studied the girl's face somberly, then asked in a low voice:  
  
"You don't seem too excited, Lady Gwyn."  
  
She shook her head slowly.  
  
"Something... something seems to be wrong. He doesn't have any wounds, but he's... something is wrong, Master Jest! M—madoc... Madoc told me to bring you."  
  
Jest's expression darkened.  
  
He remained silent for a few moments, then asked:  
  
"Who else knows?"  
  
If there was something wrong with Anvil... his thoughts raced. They would have to prevent the news from leaking out before anything else.  
  
The girl took a shaky breath, trying to calm herself.  
  
"It's just me, Madoc... and two Awakened guards who were keeping watch over the Gateway."  
  
Jest nodded.  
  
The guards were retainers of Clan Valor, Squires who hoped to become Knights some day. They were loyal, but human loyalty was often fleeting. He did not know whether they would need to be silenced, yet, or merely contained for a while. In any case, Madoc was wise to call him.  
  
"If you would give me a moment to put some clothes on."  
  
Unlike the young and pretty Lady Gwyn, Jest was too old to walk around in his pajamas.  
  
Soon, they quietly arrived into the throne room of Bastion, where the Gateway was located. It was the throne that stood on a tall dais, with two enormous pillars rising from behind it... the pillars were almost identical to the frame of the Great Mirror that was located deep underground, directly below the throne room.  
  
Whether it was a coincidence or not, Jest did not know.  
  
The two Squires were keeping watch at the door, while inside, Madoc was standing in front of the dais. A familiar figure was sitting on the steps leading up to the throne, wrapped in the cloak that Madoc had taken off.  
  
Beneath it, Anvil seemed to be naked.  
  
When Jest and young Gwyn approached, he looked up and stared at them with cloudy, hollow eyes.  
  
There was no will or intelligence in thosе eyes, just a deep and eerie nothingness... as though Anvil was not quite awake, but merely sleepwalking.  
  
Jest saw his own pale reflection in those glassy eyes, and felt his heart skipping a beat.  
  
'No, no... what happened? Nothing was supposed to happen!'  
  
A familiar, dark sense of futility raised its ugly head in his heart again, but before he was overwhelmed by a panic, some semblance of life suddenly returned to Anvil's eyes.  
  
The young man smiled warmly.  
  
"Uncle Jest..."  
  
Jest had grown so accustomed to only ever seeing cold indifference in Anvil's eyes that this sudden burst of genuine warmth left him stunned. It was just like how the boy had smiled at him as a child.  
  
The sight of Anvil smiling brightly was so out of place that Jest even considered if Immortal Flame's daughter, Smile of Heaven, had stolen his body.  
  
The girl's Dormant Ability allowed her soul to wander freely, exploring the world as a bright spirit. She could also occupy and animate objects... as far as Jest knew, Smile of Heaven had never displaced someone's soul to take over their body, but that did not mean that she couldn't.  
  
However, a moment later, his crazy suspicion disappeared.  
  
That was because Anvil raised a hand, causing Jest's dagger to float from its sheath and land on his palm. After studying it for a moment, the young man frowned.  
  
"...Imperfect."  
  
Even if someone had taken control of Anvil's body, they wouldn't be able to use his Aspect.  
  
And neither would they display the same loathing of flawed things.  
  
Anvil was indeed back.  
  
But... why was he in this strange state?  
  
And where were the other members of his cohort? Broken Sword, Smile of Heaven, Ki Song?  
  
Asterion?  
  
Jest glanced at Madoc, and they both frowned.  
  
Something... was indeed wrong.