2167 C2-167  
  
Anvil was fine, at least physically.  
  
However, his entire personality seemed to have changed — or have regressed, at least. He seemed not quite there, yet. He didn't look dazed or confused, but rather... blank.  
  
As if the very thing that made him who he was had been if not erased, then at least lost.  
  
At the same time, frоm time to time, he displayed glimpses of his usual self — enough so to convince Jest, Madoc, and young lady Gwyn that he was truly and unmistakably Anvil of Valor, the ruler of Bastion.  
  
It was because of the small, subtle details that only those who knew him well would recognize. The small peculiarities of his speech, the rigid set of his shoulders, the way he smiled in a reserved, but confident manner — it was all perfectly familiar, even in this strange and concerning state.  
  
There were more and more of these glimpses with each minute, as well, as if Anvil was slowly remembering his previous self. That gave them hope that he would recover eventually.  
  
For how, however...  
  
The most disturbing change was how warm and soft Anvil seemed, stripped of his impenetrable armor of cold indifference. For Jest and Madoc, it was as if he had reverted to his personality from before becoming a carrier of the Nightmare Spell. For Gwyn, who had only ever known him as an Awakened, it was an entirely new side of her usually stern and aloof husband.  
  
But... there was also something subtle and eerie about Anvil now. Jest couldn't quite put his finger on what it was, but he felt strangely uneasy in his presence.  
  
Well, of course he did. The clan leader of Valor, one of the most powerful men in the world, was currently no different from a child.  
  
Warden had once told Jest that the world was full of sharks, and Anvil being in this uncanny state was no different from spilling blood into the water. All of them would not miss a chance to rip out a chunk of flesh if news about his condition spread.  
  
Whatever the hell his condition was.  
  
They would have to figure that out later. First, Jest needed to contain the spread of information.  
  
As if that was even possible!  
  
The mere idea of keeping Anvil's return under wraps made his head hurt. There were so many things to consider...  
  
Jest suppressed a groan and looked at Anvil once again.  
  
The boy was smiling while Gwyn was kneeling in front of him, saying something softly.  
  
Shaking his head, Jest looked at Madoc.  
  
"We will need to move fast. But also cautiously."  
  
Luckily, Warden's older son was no fool. In fact, he was a remarkable young man in his own right — an exceptional talent, even. It was just that his excellence was always outshined by Anvil's monstrous talent.  
  
In any case, he was someone Jest could rely on to handle things... but not all things, and especially not those that demanded a delicate approach.  
  
For example, while there were only two Squires who had witnessed Anvil's strange state here in Bastion, there was no saying what was currently happening in the waking world. He should have awoken in his sleeping pod in Valor's compound in NQSC, after all, before using his new ability to enter the Dream Realm of his own volition to come to Bastion.  
  
His sleeping pod was now empty, and many people would have been alerted that the clan leader had disappeared. Someone had to make sure that none of them talked, either — in theory, Madoc was the perfect candidate to do just that, since his own sleeping pod was mere dozens of meters away.  
  
But it was not that simple.  
  
Because Anvil had not challenged the Nightmare alone.  
  
His companions would have returned, too... or would have perished inside the Seed. If it was the latter, then their bodies had already turned into corpses by now — in the best case. Alternatively, they could have become Hollow.  
  
So, someone had to negotiate with the Immortal Flame clan. There was also the Song clan, which could not compare to the family of Broken Sword and Smile of Heaven, but wаs only more unpredictable as a result. Luckily, Asterion was an orphan of a destroyed cult... he was borrowing a sleeping pod in the compound of Clan Valor, so at least that was not a concern.  
  
There were other forces in play, too.  
  
The situation was unknown and unpredictable, so Madoc would not be able to handle everything on his own.  
  
Jest sighed, the gears of his mind spinning. Eventually, he looked at Madoc.  
  
"You stay here and make sure that no one... and I mean no one... in Bastion learns of what happened yet. Also, make sure that those who did learn do not speak about it."  
  
Madoc glanced in the direction of where the two Squires stood behind the door, then nodded. Those two would keep their lives if they were loyal and smart, or die if they weren't.  
  
Next, Jest looked at Gwyn and hesitated for a few moments.  
  
He still felt a little uneasy.  
  
Eventually, though, he spoke:  
  
"My lady, please take care of Anvil until I return. Hide him in your quarters and stay with him... don't let anyone else enter. This is a sensitive situation, and we must protect him until we know more about what happened."  
  
The young woman looked at him, then nodded hesitantly.  
  
Jest rubbed his eyes.  
  
"…I'll return to the waking world and handle matters there. It should not take me more than a day or two. I'll return with the news."  
  
With that, he looked at Anvil one last time and smiled.  
  
"And you. Be sure to get better by the time I'm back, brat. Don't make me worry."  
  
Jest lingered for a few moments, then grimaced and walked toward the dais. Putting his hand on one of the steps leading up to the throne, he activated the Gateway.  
  
...A few moments later, Jest found himself in the foyer of the Dagonet estate in NQSC. He sighed, looked around, then entered a security code and accessed the elevator.  
  
Descending deep underground, he briefly checked on his son — the boy was resting peacefully in the sleeping pod — and then proceeded to the security center of the estate.  
  
There, he activated a few precautionary measures and dialed a certain number on his communicator.  
  
Considering that it was the dead of night, it took the person on the other end of the call a while to pick up.  
  
Eventually, though, an unpleasant voice resounded from the communicator:  
  
"I swear to the dead gods, Jest... if this is some kind of prank..."  
  
Jest forced out a smile.  
  
"No, no. How have you been, Ruin?"  
  
Master Wake of Ruin — another remnant of the First Generation and the pillar of the government — ground his teeth. The two of them were not exactly on friendly terms, but they knew each other well, having worked together on establishing the current world order.  
  
"Apart from being woken up in the middle of the night? I'm fine. What do you want?"  
  
Jest had about a dozen jokes ready to fly out of his mouth, but he held himself back.  
  
He needed Ruin's help.  
  
Since Anvil was back, the Seed of Nightmare was conquered. Which meant that the corresponding Nightmare Gate would have closed in the waking world.  
  
The government monitored all known Gates, so that was another point from where the information could leak — and the largest one, at that.  
  
So, Jest just said neutrally:  
  
"I need a favor. Gate C2-167 should have closed earlier today. I want you to keep that fact hidden for a while."  
  
There was silence on the other side of the call. Jest waited for a while.  
  
"Hello? Did you hear me?"  
  
Eventually, Wake of Ruin answered.  
  
His response, however, was not at all what Jest had expected.  
  
His old colleague said angrily:  
  
"What the hell are you talking about? Bastard, are you drunk again?"  
  
While Jest was considering what to say, confused by the intense reaction, Wake of Ruin added:  
  
"Gate C2-167 is wide open! It has never closed. Do you think I would have been sleeping if it did?"