2169 The Anomaly  
  
Jest did not know what to do.  
  
A person like him, who had survived the end of the world and lived long enough to see a new one emerge from the ruins, could usually maintain composure no matter the circumstances.  
  
All kinds of unexplainable things were possible now that the Nightmare Spell ruled the world, and Jest had experienced more than a fair share of bizarre encounters. He had braved the wild reaches of the Dream Realm and the mournful desolation of the waking world, spending decades fighting harrowing monsters — humans and Nightmare Creatures alike.  
  
And yet, at that moment, he felt utterly lost.  
  
'It doesn't make any sense...'  
  
Hiding his shock, he accessed a special panel on the sleeping pod and studied Anvil's vital signs. Everything seemed to be in order — he was perfectly healthy. His body was, at least.  
  
His soul, though, was not inside its mortal vessel at the moment. It was somewhere far away, in the depths of a Nightmare...  
  
It was supposed to be.  
  
Could it be that the boy had sоmehow escaped the Seed without conquering it? When Awakened slept, their souls traveled to the Dream Realm, where they were manifested as spiritual bodies. In the process of Ascension, the physical and the spiritual bodies fused, making one a Master.  
  
Jest assumed that Anvil had conquered the Second Nightmare and Ascended. If he had not, however, then his physical and spiritual bodies would still be separated.  
  
The physical body was right here.  
  
The spiritual body... would appear near the Gateway where his soul was anchored.  
  
Which was the throne room of Bastion.  
  
Jest covered his face with a hand for a moment.  
  
Was the man they had found there really Anvil?  
  
Or was it an impostor?  
  
He was unsure. And uneasy.  
  
He was afraid.  
  
Taking a deep breath, Jest turned to the butler and said hoarsely:  
  
"Sebastian... gather the Knights and stаtion them here. Tell them to be ready for battle."  
  
The butler raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Are you expecting an attack?"  
  
Jest wanted to shake his head, but stopped himself. Eventually, he shrugged with a sigh.  
  
"I don't know yet. You have to keep it quiet, though. The less people know, the better."  
  
He hesitated for a moment, and added:  
  
"This concerns the safety of the main family."  
  
Sebastian inhaled sharply, then nodded.  
  
With that, Jest left a tether near the sleeping pod, then reached into his soul and pulled on his anchor, traveling back to the Dream Realm.  
  
The throne room was empty. Time in Bastion was somewhat similar to that in NQSC, so it was early dawn. The first rays of sunlight were already pouring through the tall windows, which meant that the Gateway would have visitors soon.  
  
Few Awakened stayed in the Dream Realm for prolonged periods of time, preferring to return to the waking world as soon as they could. The main keep was locked at night, which meant that those who needed to use the Gateway would start arriving before too long.  
  
There was a noise from just beyond the door. Jest pursed his lips, then walked there with silent steps.  
  
Madoc was kneeling in front of the gates, using a rag and a bucket of water to wash the stone floor. It was a rare sight, to see a prince of Valor performing such a mundane chore with his own two hands — so much so that Jest was taken aback for a moment.  
  
But then, noticing drops of blood on the stone plates, he understood the situation. It seemed that at least one of the squires had proven to be unreliable, and due to the need for secrecy, Madoc could not very well summon a seгvant to clean up the resulting mess. It seemed like both of them had had a busy night.  
  
The grim nature of it all made Jest want to tell a joke.  
  
He swallowed a laugh.  
  
Madoc looked at him from below with no amusement whatsoever in his eyes.  
  
"Uncle Jest... you are back. What news do you bring?"  
  
Jest hesitated for a moment.  
  
'How do I even explain it?'  
  
He knew the main keep of Bastion like his own backyard, but at the moment, the twilight of its silent halls felt eerie and ominous.  
  
...Come to think of it, Jest did not know his backyard too well. He had never bothered to spend much time there after purchasing the current estate of the Dagonet clan.  
  
He gritted his teeth.  
  
"We need to find Gwyn soon. She... might be in danger. Come, hurry. I'll explain on the way."  
  
Madoc's expression changed, and he pushed thе bucket of bloody water away. By the time he stood up, he was already summoning a combat Memory.  
  
The two mаde their way to Anvil's chambers both quietly and hastily. It was at a moment like this that Jest cursed how grand and labyrinthine Bastion was... with every step he took, his unease and alarm continued to grow.  
  
He was the one who had sent Gwyn away with the... whoever or whatever it was that had appeared in the throne room of Bastion in the middle of the night. Everything that was going to happen from this point on, or had already happened, would be his responsibility.  
  
So, he mentally prepared himself for the worst.  
  
But, to his surprise...  
  
When they finally arrived at the chambers Gwyn and Anvil shared, the situation inside was perfectly peaceful.  
  
Anvil, now properly clothed, was sitting at a table and studying the plates of food in front of him curiously. Young Gwyn looked a little tired, but otherwise fine, pouring him a cup of fragrant tea.  
  
She seemed relieved, even, a tentative smile illuminating her face when she looked at her husband... who she thought had finally returned from the Nightmare alive.  
  
When they entered, both Anvil and Gwyn turned to look at them.  
  
Jest froze.  
  
Suddenly, he realized that he had actually hoped that there would be horror and carnage by the time he came back.  
  
Because then, he would at least know what to do. He knew how to fight and kill best, after all.  
  
Standing by his side, Madoc tensed and asked quietly:  
  
"Should we... attack?"  
  
They could try to kill the anomaly. That was the safest choice.  
  
But what if it was Anvil, after all, brought back from the Nightmare by some strange whim of the Spell? Wouldn't Madoc be killing his own brother, and wouldn't Jest be killing his friend's son?  
  
Death was something that could not be taken back.  
  
If it wasn't Anvil, though...  
  
Could they even kill whatever it was that had taken his form? Or would they just be provoking something so sinister and terrible that none of them stood a chance against its malice?  
  
Jest remained silent for a few moments, wishing for nothing more than to let loose and answer with a brilliant joke, like he usually did.  
  
In the end, however, he simply shook his head.  
  
"Let's take him to the waking world."