2171 The Return of the King  
  
Although the Valor compound seemed the same on the surface — apart from the retainers and mundane workers employed by the clan being strangely subdued and on edge — the situation underground was different.  
  
The level where Anvil... the anomaly... was kept remained quiet and peaceful. Very few people were allowed access there, and usually, it was just young Lady Gwyn and a few loyal Knights keeping guard.  
  
However, the levels above and below the temporary containment floor were different.  
  
There, dozens of Knights weгe gathered, waiting for something to happen in tense anticipation. Not all of them even knew what it was that they were here for, since the existence of the anomaly was still being kept secret. They had just been told to be prepared for anything.  
  
Pulling so many powеrful warriors away from their duties was stretching the resources of Clan Valor thin, but there was nothing Jest or Madoc could do about it.  
  
Currently, Madoc was in Bastion, holding down the fort.  
  
Jest was here, dealing with the powerful figures of the human world.  
  
Even though he had done everything in his power to prevent the news from leaking, it was impossible to stop it completely. Therefore, there were strange rumors going around the Legacy clans about the Valor family. Most people just treated these rumors as idle entertainment, but those who held actual influence were stirring.  
  
After all, there was no fire without smoke.  
  
So, Jest had spent the entire day talking to old acquaintances and lying through his teeth.  
  
Everything was fine.  
  
Nothing had happened.  
  
There would not be a new ruler in Bastion.  
  
Things were under control.  
  
...But things were definitely not under control. In fact, things were getting more and more out of control. Both here and in Bastion, eerie and unexplainable events kept happening, and while no one had perished, it was only a matter of time.  
  
Because in the world of the Nightmare Spell, sinister signs always led to disaster.  
  
Jest was not naive enough to expect anything less.  
  
'Ah... I'm regretting getting rid of all those cults now. It feels like we need an exorcist...'  
  
He was currently in a small room under the Valor compound, reclining in an office chair tiredly. The video walls were turned off, plunging the room into darkness. The only source of light were the screens in front оf him, which bathed him in pale light.  
  
One of the screens displayed the security feed from the level where Gwyn was watching over the anomaly. Currently, she was reading him a book —the young man seemed quite content, listening to her voice curiously. If one did not know the truth, they would have looked like a happy mаrried couple.  
  
On the second screen, the reports and papers that Clan Valor had quietly commissioned from various researchers and specialists were displayed. Jest had been reading through them slowly, trying to find some sort of explanation for the current situation.  
  
Sadly, they were proving to be useless, for now —he had learned about all kinds of Aspects that could create an illusion of a person, Nightmare Creatures that could mimic human behavior, and mysterious locations where bizarre occurrences had been documented to happen for naught.  
  
The anomaly had passed every test they had come up with based on this research. The new Anvil was not an impostor using a rare Aspect to fool them, a Nightmare Creature, or a Dream Realm phantom. For all intents and purposes, the young man was Anvil of Valor in the flesh.  
  
...The third screen displayed the Obel Scale telemetry, as well as the reading from Anvil's sleeping pod.  
  
Jest rubbed his eyes tiredly, and then turned back to the research papers. The human domain in the Dream Realm was relatively small at the moment... but far north, beyond the impregnable mountain chain serving as the boundary of the eastern human enclaves, an even more fearsome mountain range was rumored to be located.  
  
According to reports, those mountains were perpetually shrouded in mist, and that mist displayed strange and terrifying properties...  
  
As Jest read the exploration paper, written by some audacious guy named Julius, something suddenly attracted his attention. Turning his head, he looked at the feed from the containment level... and flinched.  
  
The anomaly was still listening to Gwyn, but he had shifted his gaze and was looking directly at the hidden camera now.  
  
Almost as if looking directly into Jest's eyes.  
  
A subtle smile twisted the young man's lips, making Jest shiver for no reason.  
  
'What...'  
  
In the next moment, the sound of alarm resounded from the speakers. Jerking his head in the opposite direction, he stared at the third screen, where an urgent notification was displayed.  
  
It took Jest a few moments to realize its meаning. He leaned forward.  
  
"It's gone!"  
  
Nightmare Gate C2-167 had just disappeared. Since he had set up the system to notify him immediately if its condition changed, he was probably the first person in the world to learn of that fact.  
  
There was some lag to the Obel Scale, but it must have happened minutes ago at most.  
  
While Jest was digesting the startling piece of news, there was another alarm. His eyes moved, and then widened.  
  
Anvil's vital signs were going crazy.  
  
'Crap!'  
  
Flying out of the chair, Jest rushed outside.  
  
By the time he reached Anvil's sleeping chamber, there was an audible boom, and its heavy armored door suddenly folded like paper. The metal walls groaned and bent inward.  
  
Jumping over the deformed alloy, Jest entered the room and looked around wildly.  
  
It looked like a violent implosion had happened inside. The armored walls had broken, revealing the framework of the compound beyond. The iron sarcophagus had turned into a small jagged sphere of torn metal. The lights were blinking chaotically.  
  
In the middle of it all, Anvil was standing like an unnecessary tall sculpture. He was naked, his flawless build and chiseled muscles revealed in all their glory. His dark hair had grown long, and was sticking to his handsome face in wet strands.  
  
His calm, steely grey eyes were peering at Jest steadily.  
  
Even as a Master, Jest suddenly felt oppressed by the weight of that gaze.  
  
'He... he definitely Ascended...'  
  
As a whirlwind of scarlet sparks surrounded Anvil's naked figure, forming into a set of knightly armor, he raised an eyebrow and asked in an even tone:  
  
"...Are you going to continue staring?"