2173 Paper Armor  
  
The battle between Anvil and his flawless copy, despite decimating the underbelly of the Valor compound, had not lasted long.  
  
At least Jest wanted to believe that it was over.  
  
Signs of chilling destruction surrounded him from all sides, but there were no deafening booms ravaging his ears anymore. There were no crushing shockwaves, and the world wasn't quaking. The dim darkness was illuminated by the spreading flames, and clouds of dust obscured the world like a veil.  
  
In such moments, Jest cursed his inability to use Memories. It would have been nice to be able to see clearly in this mess.  
  
'...Has the boy become that powerful, then?'  
  
Jest had battled plenty of Fallen Nightmare Creatures, and a few Masters as well. Ascended were indeed inhumanly strong, but not quite at the level of what Anvil had displayed immediately after coming back from the Nightmare.  
  
Was that the power of those with divine blood in their veins?  
  
Jest carefully moved through the carnage, searching for Anvil. He found him soon enough, kneeling in the dust with a pale face.  
  
The young man was... in bad shape. His intricate armor was nearly destroyed, and blood was pouring from a dozen hideous wounds on his body. One of his arms was hanging limply, sharp fragments of bone protruding from the mess of torn muscles, and even his face was not spared.  
  
He was covered in blood.  
  
However, his eyes remained calm and eerily cold.  
  
'What a terrible way to return from the Nightmare...'  
  
A shattered sword was collapsing into a whirlwind of sparks in Anvil's hand.  
  
Hearing Jest approach, he shifted and looked up.  
  
Jest had a thousand questions on his mind, but meеting the young man's gaze, he faltered.  
  
For a moment, he even doubted whom he was looking at... was it really Anvil?  
  
Or was it the anomaly?  
  
Which one of them had won?  
  
'The... the other one... wasn't wearing armor.'  
  
As if reading his mind, the young man said evenly:  
  
"It's me."  
  
Anvil opened his mouth, as if wishing to say something more, but at that moment, his mask of indifference finally cracked.  
  
His expression changed, and he suddenly took a shaky, frightened breath.  
  
"Gwyn..."  
  
Ignoring his wounds, Anvil jumped to his feet and looked around, as if in panic.  
  
Thеy found Gwyn a minute later, buried in rubble and unconscious... but, luckily, alive.  
  
Hugging her, Anvil let out a shaky breath.  
  
"Thank the gods... thank the gods... thank..."  
  
And looking at him, Jest realized something that should have been obvious, but had eluded him until now.  
  
It was that Anvil's armor of indifference, which had seemed impenetrable, was merely a facade.  
  
In truth, it was merely a flimsy disguise made of paper.  
  
...At least it had been, then.  
  
But things never stay the same.  
  
The anomaly was destroyed, and all the problems caused by its existence were resolved. The authority of Clan Valor was not only mended, but grew explosively now that the young lord of Valor had become a Master.  
  
The clan compound in NQSC was repaired. The wounds received by Anvil, Gwyn, and the knights caught in the battle healed. The Great Mirror hiding under Bastion was wrapped in canvas once more, and the forces of the clan started to develop countermeasures against the visitors from the other side.  
  
There was happy news, too.  
  
Not long after Anvil returned from the Nightmare, young lady Gwyn was announced to be pregnant. Before the end of the year, they welcomed a new heir — an infant boy who would inherit Bastion, the Mirror Lake, and all the glory of the Valor clan one day. He was named Mordret.  
  
It was then that things started going wrong.  
  
Because when Anvil looked at his son, Jest noticed no warmth whatsoever in his cold grey eyes.  
  
It was not just his usual air of indifference. There was more to it... an eerie suspicion that no one else shared.  
  
A suspicion that young Mordret was not his son at all.  
  
A suspicion like that was nothing short of crazy. Considering the situation, nothing could have happened between Gwyn and the anomaly, no matter how convincing the other Anvil had been. Jest was sure of it.  
  
Nothing had happened, and yet... a worm of doubt found its way into Anvil's heart. And once it did, doubt seemed to slowly devour him from the inside.  
  
Anvil became only colder and more unapproachable after his son was born. But there was still some humanity left of him, at least.  
  
These last drops of humanity did not last, though.  
  
Whatever warmth was left in his heart disappeared on the day Lady Gwyn passed away after giving birth to their second child, Morgan.  
  
On the day of the funeral, Jest found Anvil in the underground hall once more, looking at the canvas shrouding the Great Mirror.  
  
The young man turned and looked at Jest with no emotions in his steely eyes.  
  
A few moments later, Anvil said evenly:  
  
"...I failed again."  
  
He remained silent for a bit, then turned back to the mirror and added without any emotion in his cold voice:  
  
"But I won't fail anymore."  
  
Jest wanted to say that the boy was learning all the wrong lessons. But he wasn't sure that he had that right... most of all, he wasn't even sure that the boy was wrong.  
  
The Nightmare Spell was a cruel god. People said that time healed all wounds...  
  
But in the world of the Nightmare Spell, time only dealt you new ones.  
  
Jest's tentative hope that Anvil would eventually recover from losing Gwyn was shattered two years later, when disaster struck and a Category Five Gate swallowed America.  
  
So many things were lost in that calamity.  
  
Among those things were the lives of Immortal Flame and Smile of Heaven, who fell while buying civiliаns time to evacuate.  
  
Аnd losing Smile of Heaven was the final straw that made something snap inside Anvil.  
  
That was what pushed his cold iron heart to make an unforgivable decision.  
  
For the good of humanity, for himself... and for the glory of the Valor clan, as well.  
  
...Of course, that decision would not have been possible without the damn abomination, Asterion, waiting there with a smile on his lips after offering the lord of Valor a new deal.  
  
A deal to help Anvil kill Broken Sword.