2271 Bright Future  
  
An endless expanse of tumultuous waves rested under a twilight sky, shrouded in mist and illuminated by the pale light of countless shimmering stars. Powerful winds blew above the surface of the undulating sea, while below it lay the unfathomable darkness of abyssal dеpths.  
  
The distant horizon was hidden behind a wall of heavy clouds, heralding the arrival of an obliterating storm.  
  
Indifferent to the daunting threat of the inevitable calamity, a colossal ship moved across the waves at great speed. At least a kilometer across from port to starboard, the ancient vessel still appeared narrow due to its great length. Its ancient hull was made of wood, but had no seams, as if someone had hollowed out a branch of an inconceivable tree once to create it.  
  
The ship was like a city in and of itself, with dozens of vast decks, beautiful palaces, tall pagodas built on its surface, and great mysteries hiding in its boundless holds. It had wild groves, rushing streams, deep lakes, and gentle meadows.  
  
It was Night Garden, the Great Citadel ruled by Saint Jet, the Steward of the South.  
  
The miraculous vessel had been mostly desolate once, back when it belonged to the House of Night. Even though thousands of Awakened had called it home, their number had not been enough to crowd its many decks and countless holds—most of the palaces and pagodas had stood empty, many of the lower decks had remained unexplored, and the groves had grown untended.  
  
Things were different now.  
  
Millions of refugees had arrived aboard the great ship through the Dream Gate, and so, the Night Garden was transformed.  
  
The palaces were now inhabited dwellings. The wild groves had turned into cultivated fruit gardens. The meadows had become fertile fields. Children were playing on the shores of the lakes and swimming in the clear water...  
  
Countless colorful lanterns illuminated the floating city, making it glow like a vibrant jewel in the dim twilight of the misty sea.  
  
Naeve was observing the lively landscape of the Night Garden from a vantage point on the bow of the ship with a complicated expression on his face. It was good to see the Great Citadel braving the perilous expanse of the Stormsea once again... it was also rewarding to see it become so lively and thriving, home to countless people.  
  
But at the same time, he could not help but remember the desolate tranquility of its former self... the starlit peace of how the Night Garden used to be under the rule of his clan.  
  
  
His former clan. The House of Night did not exist anymore.  
  
"Daddy!"  
  
Hearing a childish voice, Naeve erased the melancholy from his face and turned around with a smile. In the next moment, a girl with vibrant indigo eyes and hair lunged herself into his embrace at full speed—he caught her and laughed quietly, spinning her around.  
  
"Wait, wait... you are too big now to ram you poor dad like a hungry shark..."  
  
The girl frowned fiercely.  
  
"Am not!"  
  
Naeve laughed again.  
  
His daughter was already twelve—a fact he sometimes found hard to believe.  
  
His family had finally rejoined him aboard the Night Garden a few months ago. Even then, he did not get to spend as much time with them as he would have wanted to, since there were too many ships in need of guidance and too few Nightwalkers left alive.  
  
So, their lives were split unevenly between the Stormsea, where the Night Garden and the rest of the Citadels needed to be settled and defended against the perils of the Dream Realm, and the waking world, where naval convoys had to serve as the last tenuous connection between the isolated Quadrants.  
  
It had gotten somewhat better after the last of the Stormsea Citadels were reclaimed, and especially after Changing Star used her Dream Gate to evacuate the last remaining humans from South America... still, with the war raging in the Eastern Quadrant and the infrastructure of the waking world slowly collapsing, nobody had time to rest.  
  
Putting his daughter on the ground, Naeve patted her on the head.  
  
"So, you're done with school for today?"  
  
Schools were а relatively recent development. With millions of people settling in the Dream Realm and countless more on the way, there were naturally many children here now—some having arrived with their parents, some having been born under the alien sky. All these children had to be educated and taught.  
  
The Sword Domain and the Song Domain had done little in that regard in the four years prior to the war. There had been schools, of course, but too few—and even those that had been established lacked a unified teaching progrаm and vision. So, most children were either homeschooled by their parents or handed off to caretakers chosen from the members of small refugee communities while the parents worked.  
  
Creating a comprehensive school curriculum for children who were destined to grow up in this strange new world was not an easy task, either. After all, the Dream Realm often refused to follow the laws that had seemed axiomatic on Earth. Were the teachers supposed to instruct their pupils on how electricity worked, considering that it did not work the same way, or at all, here?  
  
Granted, Naeve had heard that someone in Bastion managed to build a functioning hydroelectric power plant. If so, the Night Garden was certain to benefit soon, considering that the great ship itself was known to attract and absorb lightning from the endless storms.  
  
In any case, things had changed after the war. The government got involved, employing the services of many renowned Dream Realm experts. From what Naeve knew, the head of the project was someone named Julius—a seasoned explorer and esteemed academic of the First Generation, formerly employed as an instructor of the Awakened Academy.  
  
Under the energetic old man's leadership, the universal education guidelines were swiftly developed, iterated, and implemented. The Night Garden was largely under the government's control, so it was the first city to benefit from the education initiative—the other cities in the Dream Realm would be opening enough schools to accommodate every child soon, but here, kids were already receiving a proper education.  
  
Naeve's daughter, it seemed, was enjoying school greatly.  
  
Which was why he was surprised to see her before the classes were supposed to end.  
  
She nodded with a grin.  
  
"Teacher let us go early! Something about needing to return home before the... the trаnsition?"  
   
Naeve lingered for a few moments, then sighed.  
  
"Right. So why aren't you home, young lady?"  
  
The girl grinned.  
  
"Why would I go straight home when there's no homework? Dad... are you crazy?!"  
  
Then, she giggled and said:  
  
"I met Grandpa on the way. He brought me here."  
  
As she did, there was a sound of uncomfortable coughing from behind her. There, a man with smooth ebony skin and perfectly white hair stood, his eyes glinting with shades of indigo and deep blue. His towering figure was broad and fearsome, but at the moment, there was a deeply somber expression on his face.  
  
"Brat, I told you not to call me Grandpa."  
  
She looked at him innocently.  
  
"But Grandpa Bloodwave... you're my dad's uncle. That makes you a grandpa!"  
  
Saint Bloodwave looked at her silently, then sighed.  
  
"..Great-uncle. At least call me a great-uncle."  
  
Naeve caught himself looking at his daughter, feeling both warm and cold at the same time.  
  
"Good. It's good."  
  
It was good that she could smile, grin, laugh, and tease her elders without a second thought, still. After everything that they had gone through two years before—all the terror, all the loss, and all the change—Naeve himself could rarely smile without forcing himself to.  
  
Children were much more resilient than adults.  
  
That was why he hoped that his daughter and her peers would build a better world in the future. A kinder world, even if it was not the world their parents had been born into.  
  
Letting out a sigh, he turned to Bloodwave.  
  
"Uncle."  
  
Naeve hesitated for a few moments, and then asked tentatively:  
  
"Is she going through with it?"  
  
He did not mean his daughter, of course. He meant Soul Reaper Jet, the ruler of the Night Garden and the de facto leader of the government.  
  
Bloodwave nodded.  
  
"She is. In fact... because of the storm, it is going to happen sooner. It is going to happen now."  
  
Naeve closed his eyes for a moment.  
  
The war against the Skinwalker was not proceeding smoothly, and the evacuation of the Eastern Quadrant was not happening as fast as it had to happen. After all, there was only one Dream Gate—the refugees had to be brought to a single gathering point from all across the continent first, then screened thoroughly to not let any vessels of the vile abomination pass through.  
  
The Western Quadrant was drowning in the flood of Nightmare Gates, as well.  
  
So, Changing Star and her Steward had come up with an emergency measure. Something to tip the scales in favor of humanity, at least for a while.  
  
But their decision was not without risk. Naeve opened his eyes and looked at his uncle.  
  
"Are we... sure that it is the best course of action?"  
  
Bloodwave shrugged.  
  
"I am not. But if you have objections, you can go talk to Soul Reaper yourself."  
  
Naeve raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Why don't you?"  
  
His uncle looked at him silently, then cleared his throat.  
  
"Well. It's because... that woman. I am scared of her."  
  
Naeve's daughter looked at her great-uncle with wide eyes.  
  
"I thought you didn't fear anything, Grandpa. Why would you be scared of Auntie Jet?"  
  
Bloodwave was not a very expressive man, but at the moment, he looked like someone stabbed him in the heart.  
  
He remained silent for a bit, then grumbled: "How come Soul Reaper is an auntie, but I am a grandpa?"  
  
Naeve wanted to chuckle, but at the moment, he felt a subtle change happen to the world.  
  
The stars seemed to have grown brighter, and the great ship trembled slightly below their feet.  
  
"It's starting. Look!"  
  
The three of them looked ahead.  
  
There...  
  
A white line suddenly cut the fabric of reality in front of the Night Garden, falling from the heavens into the turbulent waters below.  
  
Then, it expanded, turning into a towering, wide rift.  
  
The rift was filled with nothing but brilliant radiance for a moment. Then, for the first time in thousands of years, pure daylight shone onto the surface of the Stormsea from the titanic Dream Gate.  
  
  
Naeve took a deep breath, then smiled faintly.  
   
"I guess we are really doing that..."  
  
Soon enough, the bow of the colossal ship plunged into the wide fissure of the Dream Gate.  
  
And a moment later, it cut the waves of a different sea.  
  
To be specific, the Night Garden had entered the abomination-infested expanse of the Indian Ocean.  
  
It had arrived on Earth.