2146 Heart of the Party  
  
"Ah. Finally, fresh air!"  
  
Jest smiled as he looked at the forest where he was going to die. There was little doubt that his life was going to end shortly, gruesomely, and pathetically.  
  
His lips trembled a little.  
  
'No, really… this crap again?'  
  
He had just barely managed to settle down in the actual world, finally finding a safe community that was defended from the monsters by a group of… what was it that people were calling them these days?  
  
Right... Sleepers.  
  
Jest was a Sleeper himself, so he had been welcomed there with open arms. Sadly, he was a defective Sleeper who could not wield Memories and did not have a useful pоwer… he could still handle a rifle and a bayonet, but that alone did not win him a lot of points.  
  
'Damn…'  
  
And speaking of Memories! As it turned out, there were those, as well. Apparently, everyone received at least one in the Nightmare or shortly after. Jest had been clueless about the existence of Memories until he saw other Sleepers summoning deadly weapons out of thin air — it was then that he realized what his so-called Flaw meant.  
  
Being unable to use "enchanted items" had not seemed like a big problem before he learned that enchanted items actually existed. But knowing that they did, Jest could not deny the truth.  
  
He was not just screwed… he was doubly screwed.  
  
Other Sleepers had useful Aspects, and they could also wield Memories — the latter was often even more important than the former. Both allowed them to slay monsters, which he was unable to do.  
  
And that, in turn, allowed them to collect the glimmering crystals from the monsters, absorb them, and grow stronger.  
  
Sleepers needed strength to kill monsters, and they grew stronger by killing monsters… but Jest could not kill monsters because he was weak, and was weak because he could not kill monsters.  
  
If that wasn't hilarious, he did not know what was.  
  
In any case, he was not that useful to the community.  
  
People — even those who had not experienced the Nightmare — quickly started treating him with disdain. After all, he was being fed and protected without contributing much in return. The most he could do was handle various menial tasks inside the base… no different from a worker from the barrack, really.  
  
Which was funny, as well.  
  
Still, they had not kicked him out yet — because of his delightful personality and stellar sense of humor, no doubt. His life had been mostly safe and somewhat comfortable for the last couple of months.  
  
Somewhat.  
  
…Before the winter solstice.  
  
On that cursed day, Jest had been relaxing on his bunk while carefully handling a precious antique — a real paper book that he had fоund in a museum while hiding there from the monsters.  
  
That book was his lifeline, and despite its fragile state, Jest still poured over the yellow pages whenever he had free time. The festive title on the cover hinted that wisdom from before the Dark Times was contained within…  
  
Hold Your Bellies! A Hundred Hilarious Jokes to Make You the Heart of the Party!  
  
That was what the ancient book was called.  
  
Jest was just about to get to the nicest of the hundred irresistible jokes when he was suddenly overcome by a mighty yawn.  
  
Which wasn't that strange…  
  
If not for the fact that it was the middle of day.  
  
His expression froze, and a trembling smile slowly bloomed on his face.  
  
'No… no!'  
  
The last time he had started yawning all of a sudden, he ended up in the Nightmare.  
  
And here Jest was, mere hours later, in the alien world again.  
  
Granted, this time felt different. The weird voice he sometimes heard in his head these days had welcomed him with new words, as well.  
  
Plus, he was naked.  
  
'What the hell is this…'  
  
He had been clothed the last timе, at least!  
  
Shivering in the cold, Jest shielded his gaunt, bruised body from the wind and looked at the twisted trees that surrounded him with trepidation. There was nothing but these trees anywhere he looked, and sunlight barely pierced the thick canopy above…  
  
There were almost no sounds here except for the ominous rustle of leaves and the sinister creaking of branches. The eerie silence was making him nervous.  
  
Jest bit his lip and whispered:  
  
"No weapons… no clothes… in the middle of the woods…"  
  
After a while, he added in a trembling vоice:  
  
"Something something, naked guy… wood?"  
  
A stifled laugh escaped from between his lips.  
  
Picking up a rock from the ground, Jest shivered and started walking.  
  
…It wasn't too long before he found another human.  
  
A young man, not much different from him, was laying with his back against the tree… or so it seemed, at first. However, as Jest came closer, he was terrified to discover that the guy's body was actually embedded into the craggy trunk, as if being devoured by it. Crimson blood was flowing onto the dark bark, which drank it greedily.  
  
A thick root was wrapped around the guy's waist, and thin branches were sprouting from his body, blooming with vermilion flowers.  
  
The young man was already mostly dead… and yet, he was still alive and in pain.  
  
Jest only realized that when their eyes met, and the other youth opened his mouth, straining to speak.  
  
"Help… me…"  
  
Jest reeled back.  
  
He wanted nothing more than to turn around and run away, but something stopped him.  
  
Perhaps it was compassion. Perhaps it was envy at the sight of the bloodied suit of leather armor that the young man was wearing.  
  
In any case, Jest gritted his teeth.  
  
"...Alright, buddy. Alright, I'll help you. Leave it to me."  
  
Trembling, he took a step forward…  
  
Then strained his muscles and brought down the sharp stone on the young man's head.  
  
That was the only thing he could do for the poor fellow.  
  
It took several blows before the light finally dimmed in the poor guy's eyes, and Jest staggered back in horror.  
  
The leather armor he had wanted to steal disаppeared into a rain of sparks.  
  
And the roots of the tree moved, stretching in his direction.  
  
Panicking, Jest turned around and ran…   
  
And while he ran, the voice living in his head spoke once again.  
  
[You have slain Dreamer…]  
  
At the same time, Jest felt something strange.   
  
It was as if something flowed into him, and responding to its presence, his body changed subtly.   
  
Growing stronger, more agile, and harder to destroy.   
  
His eyes glistened as he ran.  
  
'So… there was another way to grow stronger, too.'  
  
It was not just killing monsters.   
  
Killing humans worked fine, as well.  
  
He did not really know how to feel about that.   
  
'...Ain't it the funniest thing, though?'