2147 Fateful Meeting  
  
Two days later, Jest emerged from the forest. He had expected to die… and yet, he was still alive, if just barely.  
  
His body was covered in bruises and dried blood, and he was holding a makeshift spear in a trembling hand. The spear was made from a long branch, a sharp splinter of stone, and rope made from bark.  
  
He was also wearing something akin to a poncho, made from beast hide and tied at the waist by another piece of rope. Of course, Jest had no idea whatsoever how to skin a beast, let alone how to treat leather or sew clothes… so, the poncho was quite disgusting to look at, and even more repugnant to smell.  
  
He couldn't care less, though, since the entire damn forest was one terrifying living being, hellbent on consuming him whole.  
  
"Damn… damn…"  
  
Jest was running for his life. He had somehow managed to kill a beast, true, but there were more than one monster in this cursed land. Currently, one was pursuing him… and quite a terrifying one, at that.  
  
He had been just running away blindly when the forest suddenly grew brighter, and then the trees disappeared altogether.  
  
Instead… there was a river in front of him, flowing steadily as its surface glistened in the sun.  
  
The sight of it was so beautiful and alien — where would anyone find a clean river surrounded by a forest in the real world? — that Jest froze for a moment, then shouted in anger.  
  
The damn river!  
  
Who cared if it was pretty?!  
  
The only thing that mattered was that it stood in his way, and therefore, there was nowhere left for him to run.  
  
Jest, of course, had no idea how to swim. Since there were no rivers, no lakes, and no ponds accessible for the workers of the regime — except for the toxic ones — he had never encountered a body of water larger than a bathtub.  
  
Even then, a bathtub was a luxury that people like him rarely saw. Most were only familiar with communal showers.  
  
"Damn!"  
  
Groaning, Jest grasped his pathetic spear and forced his tired body to move.  
  
He ran along the bank of the river, forcing air into his burning lungs.   
  
But it was all futile.  
  
He could already hear a terrifying growling coming from behind him, and the sound of something heavy moving through the grass.  
  
'Not… not… not like this! There's no punchline, damn it!'  
  
His life had been a joke, but if he was going to die, he at least hoped that it would be a good one.  
  
Jest considered turning around and trying to fight, but at that moment, he tripped and fell into the dirt, rolling a few times before coming to a halt, sprawled in the dirt.  
  
His sorry excuse of a spear had broken. The sturdy branch was intact, but the binding of the spearhead had comе undone, and the sharp piece of rock flew away.  
  
There were bitter tears in his eyes, and through them…  
  
He saw a terrible, blurry beast lunging at him with hungry madness burning in its eyes.  
  
Death was coming.  
  
Just then, though, a shadow momentarily covered Jest's face, and a steel javelin suddenly plummeted from the sky, piercing the beast's forehead and impaling it. The massive creature's jaw hit the ground, and it crumbled, rolling over its head and crashing heavily mere centimeters away from Jest.  
  
He stared at the dead beast silently, then studied the javelin.  
  
Then, after a while, he looked up.  
  
There was someone standing above him, having appeared seemingly out of nowhere.  
  
It was a tall young man with handsome features, dark hair, and steely grey eyes. His face was perfectly clean, and he was wearing a polished suit of knightly armor that seemed as impenetrable as a tank.  
  
In other words, he was the perfect opposite of the dirty, gaunt, and barely clothed Jest.  
  
The young knight looked down and gave him a charismatic smile.  
  
"You were smart not to jump into the river to escape the beast, friend."  
  
Jest blinked a couple of times.  
  
Then, he said weakly:  
  
"River. I… I h—hardly knew her?"  
  
The knightly young man looked at him strangely, giving Jest the impression that he had no sense of humor.  
  
Well, no one was perfect.   
  
His savior, meanwhile, offered him a hand.  
  
"What I meant was that there are even worse kinds of creatures under the water."  
  
Jest accepted the offered hand and slowly stood up.  
  
It was then that it struck him…  
  
The valiant stranger was speaking in the language of the real world.  
  
Not in the strange and archaic language that the people in the Nightmare had spoken, yet Jest could still somehow understand.  
  
Come to think of it, the poor guy whom Jest helped avoid being digested alive by a tree had spoken in the real language, as well.  
  
Jest stared at the young man with wide eyes.  
  
"Wait… are you real?"  
  
The young knight nodded.  
  
"Quite real, yes. It seems that this situation is different from the Nightmare. Actually, there is an entire group of Sleepers here, in this monstrous forest. We were all sent here together."  
  
He remained silent for a moment, then smiled.  
  
"All people of great courage and valor, no doubt."  
  
Jest stared at him with wide eyes.  
  
"...Valor? Who cares about valor?! Do you have food and water? That is what I want to know?"  
  
The young knight laughed.  
  
"Yes, we do."  
  
Then, he stepped on the head of the dead monster to pull his javelin out.  
  
"We should harvest the soul shard and leave this place as quickly as possible, though… otherwise, our own valor will be tested when more monsters arrive at the smell of blood. I have little of it, so we'd better not linger."  
  
Jest remained silent, trying to come up with a suitable joke.  
  
For some reason, he really wanted to mock the unbearably serious young knight.  
  
Who knew that their chance encounter would set the course of his entire life?  
  
Because the young knight, despite claiming not to be too valiant, was destined to become Warden of Valor.  
  
While Jest… was destined to become his sharpest blade.