2148 The Knight and the Fool  
  
"You are completely crazy. Insane. Psycho. A raving lunatic… a madman!"  
  
Jest was muttering curses as he stood on the shore of a beautiful lake, while the young knight just listened nonchalantly. Behind them, a few dozen bloodied, terrified Sleepers were busy toppling the trees.  
  
The young knight was still clean and handsome, even if his polished armor had a dozen dents by now. He had fought and killed more monsters than anyone else, but still managed to look valiant and unperturbed despite that.   
  
The past few days had not been kind to them.  
  
Initially, there had indeed been a large group of Sleepers who banded together after finding themselves in the dreadful forest — almost a hundred of them, with new survivors joining every day. A considerable force even during the end of times… or so they had thought.  
  
The Sleepers had established a camp on the shore of the river — far enough from the trees to have time to react when the forest monsters attacked, but also far enough from the water to defend themselves against the aquatic abominations. They worked together to survive, unsure where they were and what the future held.  
  
However, Jest had become a pariah once again… and that was despite his positive attitude and disarming sense of humor. Strength was the only virtue in the world that had gone insane, and he had none.  
  
Worse than that, he reeked. Everyone seemed to have some kind of Memory, be it armor or enchanted garments, to cover themselves… but he only had his crudely made poncho. So, people tended to avoid him.  
  
Because of the smell. Not because of the jokes, of course.  
  
Everyone except for the infuriating knight, that was.  
  
Jest had even asked him about it.  
  
"Listen, dimples… how come you keep bothering me? My Aspect is useless, you know. I also don't have any Memories."  
  
But the knight only chuckled.  
  
"Exactly."  
  
He glanced at the rest of the Sleepers.  
  
"Everyone here has fought hard to survive. During the Nightmare, after the Nightmare, and here as well… while having powerful Aspects and deadly Memories. But wouldn't a person who has neither have fought the hardest?"  
  
The knight shook his head.  
  
"Don't take me for a fool. I am not talking to you because I am gracious and kind. I am talking to you because I think you are strong, and I need strong comrades to survive."  
  
Jest shook his head in amazement.  
  
"Wow. Who would have thought? There's actually brains in that handsome head..."  
  
The young knight raised an eyebrow.  
  
"Thank you? But also, was that ever in doubt?"  
  
Jest shrugged.  
  
"Ah, don't take it personally! It's just that you are so calm and upbeat all the time that I thought there's a screw or two… or a dozen… loose in your head."  
  
The knight looked at him strangely, then shook his head in amusement.  
  
"No, but… of all people…"  
  
Jest did not quite catch the meaning.  
  
In any case, that was how they ended up as comrades.  
  
By now, Jest wasn't wearing a filthy poncho anymore. The knight had a strange Aspect that allowed him to craft all kinds of things, so he had fashioned a set of clothes for Jest, as well as a proper wooden spear, a bow, and a quiver of arrows.  
  
Being able to summon magical flames or possessing tremendous strength seеmed like the kind of Aspects people would want to have, but that ability to craft things had actually earned the young knight more respect and reputation than his armor, his sword, and his uncanny ability to kill monsters.  
  
Although Sleepers possessed Memories, few had many of them. So, everyone needed something to make up for the equipment they had left in the real world.  
  
That was how the knight had become one of the leaders of the group, and Jest was catapulted to the very height of social hierarchy as his friend.  
  
Holding onto a golden thigh was a pleasant way to live.  
  
Not that everything went well for him and the other Sleepers.  
  
The forest was immeasurably dangerous, and the river was as well. Many of them had died while fighting the monsters…  
  
But actually, the humans were just as dangerous themselves.   
  
The same thing that was happening in the real world continued to happen here. Out there… people were scared, traumatized, hopeless, and unable to recognize the world that had changed in an instant. Naturally, many strange ideas were sprouting from the rich soul of fear and despair.   
  
There were cruel warlords, roving gangs of marauders who had lost all remains of humanity, broken fragments of local governments that were slowly descending into appalling lunacies, and weird cults that were perhaps the most sinister, eerie, and harmful of them all.   
  
Here as well… not all of the Sleepers were quite sane, and even less were entirely benevolent.   
  
So, eventually, there was a bit of bloodshed, and the group broke apart.   
  
Most of them had decided to try their luck by following the river downstream, while the knight and his followers decided to travel upstream, instead.   
  
Toward the lake…  
  
And an enormous castle that towered above it like a beautiful mirage, there in the distance.   
  
The young knight was currently standing on the shore of the lake, armed with a sword and a shield. He looked quite valiant in his knightly armor, but Jest was in no mood to appreciate the heroic ambience.  
  
Because the rest of the men and women in their group were toppling trees to build rafts.   
  
"Listen, you… you know that there are dreadful abominations living in the lake, right?"  
  
The knight nodded.   
  
"Right."  
  
Jest took a deep breath.  
  
"And although we don't know what exactly lives in the castle, we all saw the dragon breathing fire from the roof of the main keep. Right?"  
  
Their intrepid leader nodded again.  
  
"That thing did look like a dragon, true."  
  
Jest exhaled through gritted teeth.  
  
"So why are we going to the castle?! Even the crazy fools who went downstream agreed that going to the castle is suicide!"  
  
The young knight looked at him with a smile.  
  
"You know, I always wanted to kill a dragon."  
  
Jest blinked.  
  
"...Really?"  
  
The knight laughed.  
  
"Heavens, no! Despite what you think, I'm not crazy. Who in their right mind wants to fight a dragon? An actual dragon. Those things are unscientific, they aren't even supposed to exist… weren't supposed to exist, at least."  
  
Jest shook his head in bewilderment.   
  
"So why then?"  
  
The young knight remained silent for a while.   
  
Then, he looked at the castle again, his expression finally turning somber.  
  
"Because I left my pregnant wife alone in the real world. There was a way back the last time… so, there has to be a way back this time, as well. The castle is the only man-made structure we've seen so far. Plus, it's rather conspicuous. So, I am going to conquer it and return home, even if I have to kill a dragon."  
  
Jest stared at him with a mix of envy and admiration for a few moments.  
  
It had to be nice… to still have a home, and someone waiting for you to return there.  
  
Eventually, he sighed deeply.  
  
"Well, alright. Let's kill a dragon."  
  
The young knight glanced at him.  
  
"What, no joke this time?"  
  
Jest gritted his teeth.  
  
"Bastard! This entire situation is a joke! Is this not fun enough for you?!"  
  
The knight looked away with a wistful expression.  
  
"To be honest, I don't really have a sense of humor. I've never been good at having fun. So, Jest… I'll delegate that part to you."  
  
Just stared at him with wide eyes.  
  
Huh?  
  
'I didn't volunteer, though? What am I, a clown? No, but what is this bastard even saying?!'  
  
The next morning, they sailed across the lake toward the castle.