2149 Red Dragon  
  
The lake had turned out to be utterly deadly. Even after preparing thoroughly for the battle against the terrifying creatures that dwelled in it, the Sleepers led by the young knight still ended up losing one of the rafts — they managed to pull a couple of people out of the water, but the rest were pulled into the depths, never to be seen again.  
  
The clear water was painted red with blood.  
  
The rest of the rafts only survived because they were crafted from the unnaturally sturdy wood of the cursed forest with the help of their leader's Aspect. Otherwise, there would have been only drifting splinters left on the surface, with all traces of the Sleepers washed away by the clear water.  
  
Even then, the journey had not been easy for those who survived. By the time they reached the walls of the castle, each and every one of the Sleepers was bloodied, barely conscious because of exhaustion, and numb from terror.  
  
Except for the knight, of course. He was bloodied and tired, too… but his calm confidence had never waned.  
  
By then, Jest was starting to suspect that his new buddy was the craziest one of them all.  
  
Or maybe simply the most driven.  
  
The castle, meanwhile, was huge. It was many times larger than they had assumed, to the point that one would feel vertigo when trying to look up the immense expanse of the towering ramparts. There was more than one layer of walls, as well, rising in concentric circles up the slope of the mountain.  
  
The castle was like a city in and of itself.  
  
The Sleepers were currently at the lowest point of that stone city, while the main keep was at the highest, built upon the very peak.  
  
That was where the dragon had made its nest.  
  
The dragon wasn't the only monster inhabiting the gargantuan fortress, either.  
  
They learned it immediately after approaching the towering gateway. For the next few days, the Sleepers had slowly made progress toward the main keep, enduring one harrowing battle after another.  
  
The monsters they faced were different from the ones of the forest — not all of them were beasts, some wearing armor and wielding steel weapons with chilling skill.   
  
And the higher they climbed, the more powerful the monsters became. Still, the young knight led them from one structure to another, from one bastion to the next, carving a path to the main keep. They fought when there was no other choice and hid when they could, bandaging their wounds and absorbing the power from the soul shards they had scavenged.  
  
It was quite amazing, really. Jest would have never expected that they would get that far… but the disorganized group of Sleepers had somehow turned into a stalwart and cohesive combat force somewhere along the way. They all moved with purposeful determination, acting as one enormous being that possessed a hundred eyes and a hundred hands, its resilient body brimming with sharp weapons.  
  
Was it experience? Was it survival instinct? Was it the benefit of having a daring and indomitable leader? He did not know, but whatever it was, it seemed to be working.  
  
Except for the times when the moon was high in the night sky.  
  
There was always something eerie about the ancient castle, but its chilling, mysterious presence grew so much more sinister and palpable in the moonlight. That was why even the young knight did not dare to leave their shelters when the moon was shining upon the beautiful lake.  
  
…Just like that, they fought and sneaked their way to the last and highest circle of walls. Beyond them, only the main keep remained.  
  
Everyone was tired. No one knew what would happen to them, and everyone felt grim about the future.  
  
But, strangely enough, they also felt hopeful.  
  
They remained in one of the towers of the last rampart for a few days, observing the main keep and gathering strength… and courage… for the last push.  
  
In the morning, the young knight and Jest snuck to the top of the wall to take a peek at the keep.  
  
The great winged beast was sleeping on its roof, its vermilion scales glistening in the light of the rising sun. Thin plumes of smoke rose from its maw from time to time, only to be scattered by the wind moments later. Despite the distance separating them from the dragon, they could feel the deep reverberations of its steady breaths.  
  
The creature spent most of the time asleep, only waking up once every week or so to fly over the lake and burn the forest. No one κnew why it was doing that, and it almost seemed as if the dragon was simply unleashing its accumulated fury.   
  
It would fly above the forest for a while, roaring in anger and sending great jets of incinerating flame barreling down. Aftеr a while, when large swaths of the forest became shrouded by acrid smoke, it would plummet into the billowing black veil of it and disappear from view.   
  
Some time later, the dragon would return, sometimes carrying the charred carcasses of enormous, abominable beasts in its maw.   
  
The sight of it was both majestic and terrifying. The scales of the red dragon had а metallic sheen to them, almost making it seem like the great beast was forged from vermilion steel. Surrounded by black smoke, the dragon was like a herald of hell, bringing hellfire wherever it went.   
  
And that…  
  
That was the thing their leader wanted to kill.  
  
Jest glanced at the young knight darkly.  
  
"...What are you thinking about in that handsome head of yours?"  
  
The knight's steely grey eyes were focused on the sleeping dragon.  
  
After a while, he spoke:  
  
"We watched the beast fly over the lake yesterday, did we not? And seven days before that, when we were preparing the rafts."  
  
Jest nodded.  
  
"What of it?"  
  
The knight remained silent for a while.  
  
"Have you noticed, Jest? When the dragon was flying across the lake, there was something missing. I wondered what it was for the longest time."  
  
Jest frowned.  
  
"Your sanity is missing. What else is new?"  
  
The knight smiled, then leaned his back on the wall and raised his sword carefully, extending its blade beyond the entrance of the tower. Jest could see the keep reflecting in its polished blade.   
  
"Do you see it now?"  
  
Jest blinked.   
  
'Huh.'  
  
Something was indeed missing.