2151 Obvious Solution  
  
Warden remained silent for a while, looking at the sprawling expanse of the castle, the beautiful lake beyond, and the dark palisade of twisted trees in the distance.  
  
The castle was still teeming with abominations, the depths of the lake hid horrors beyond description, and the forest itself was one enormous, slumbering monster… now that the vermilion dragon was gone, there was nothing left to keep that monster in check, and it would probably come to life soon.  
  
Аnd yet, Jest had never seen the young knight, Warden of Valor, look troubled while braving the perils of this nightmarish land.  
  
He looked quite troubled now, though, while thinking about the real world.  
  
Eventually, Warden sighed.  
  
"Now that I have a son, I can't help but think about the future. Both the distant future and the immediate future… all I can see ahead is trouble."  
  
Jest raised his eyebrows and chuckled.  
  
"Check your eyesight, maybe?"  
  
Warden shook his head.  
  
"The distant future is too hard to predict, because the nature of how we live our lives has fundamentally changed. I am not talking about the Nightmare Spell and the Nightmare Creatures — I am talking about ourselves. About humans. Human lives have always been shaped by those in power, and therefore, established power structures had remained more or less the same for thousands of years. But now, all those structures have become meaningless."   
  
The young knight raised a hand and made a fist.  
  
"That is because there seems to be no limit to personal power anymore. We were mundane people not too long ago, but now we are Awakened who possess superhuman strength and mystical abilities. It is reasonable to assume that there are higher rungs on this ladder — there are Fallen monsters, after all, and Ascended Memories. So, someone will find a way to grow even more powerful sooner or later, and then even more powerful after that."  
  
He paused for a moment and looked at Jest somberly.  
  
"The framework of humanity is built upon the principle that an individual can't defeat an army, though. It's the fundamental principle… remove it, and the whole structure will collapse. We, Awakened, are already so tough that killing us with conventional weapons is a tall task. What about Ascended? What about those who will one day transcend even that theoretical frontier?"  
  
Warden shook his head with a wary expression on his face.  
  
"The nature of power itself will change. So, the shape of our lives will be changed, as well… for better or worse."  
  
Jest blinked a few times and stared at the young knight for a few moments. Then, he raised a hand and pointed an accusing finger at him.  
  
"You're… you're from a rich family, aren't you?! Damn! That explains so much!"  
  
Warden tilted his head in confusion.  
  
"That… is not a reaction I expected."  
  
Jest let out a laugh.  
  
"Listen, all these profound contemplations of yours are a dead giveaway. Only spoiled brats from bureaucrat families have enough time to waste it on learning fancy words and studying philosophy. The rest of us are too busy making a living, and a miserable one at that!"  
  
Warden blinked.  
  
"That's not philosophy, though? That's mainly history and a bit of sociology. A smidgen of anthropology, at best."  
  
Jest pointed again.  
  
"See! Fancy words!"  
  
The young knight coughed and looked away with a hint of embarrassment.  
  
"...My parents were engineers, to be precise. Not bureaucrats."  
  
Jest grinned.  
  
Military engineers were also elites. And although Warden did not say that his parents had belonged to the army, there was no doubt that they had — after all, everyone worth anything used to be conscripted, back when the regime still existed.  
  
Before the Nightmare Spell.  
  
"Anyway, that's what you are afraid of? That your son will grow up in a world ruled by a handful of tyrants who can annihilate armies single-handedly?"  
  
Warden grimaced.  
  
"It's a gross oversimplification, but basically… yes."  
  
Jest laughed.  
  
"What's the problem, then? Isn't there an obvious solution?"  
  
The young knight raised an eyebrow.  
  
"There is?"  
  
Jest nodded, then shrugged with a confused expression.  
  
"Well, of course. You just have to make sure to become one of those omnipotent tyrants yourself."  
  
He himself would undoubtedly die an untimely death by harboring such ambitions… but if it was Warden, then it could actually be possible. If anyone was capable of gaining great power in this dreadful new world, then it was their intrepid leader. After all, the guy was already ostensibly ruling the castle and had a large group of powerful Awakened following him.  
  
Warden studied Jest for a few moments, then smiled strangely.  
  
"Become one of the rulers myself? Well. Maybe you are right. Maybe it is that simple."  
  
His smile slowly turned wistful.  
  
"But that only concerns the distant future. The immediate future is much more troubling, really."  
  
Jest simply stared at him sullenly.  
  
"What are you so worried about? We'll gain full control of the castle within a year. We'll have a safe space to spend the nights and enough food to fill our bellies. We are also Awakened now, so surviving in the real world has become much easier… even though the monsters are also growing stronger, it seems. So what has gotten you so worried?"  
  
Warden remained silent for a while, then frowned.  
  
"It actually has to do with our previous conversation. People… I am worried about people."  
  
His expression darkened.  
  
"Now that every remaining government and coalition in the world have collapsed, there is little order left anywhere anymore. People are just banding together to survive… naturally, they can't survive without the Awakened. Only Awakaned can effectively battle the monsters, so they have great value. There are remnants of previous authorities employing Awakened to fight for them, but they won't be able to control their own soldiers for long. In the end, the power will concentrate in the hands of people like us — and not everyone will use it fairly."  
  
Jest scowled.  
  
"So what? What does it have to do with us? You're not feeling responsible for the whole world, are you? Because, let me tell you something, Mr. Warden… you're not a god. Despite those magical powers of yours, you're still a person."  
  
Warden sighed.  
  
After a few moments of silence, he said:  
  
"I am a part of the world too, am I not? Indeed, I am a person. My wife and son are people, too. People need food, shelter, and clean drinking water. They need air to breathe. You know how fractured NQSC is at the moment… there are so many factions and smaller communities that I can't even count them all. It has been less than a year since the Nightmare Spell descended, so things are still somewhat stable. But…"  
  
He frowned.  
  
"Who is going to repair the city barriers when they break down? Who is going to maintain the hydroponic farms? Who is going to distribute the food and make sure that people don't starve? For now, the infrastructure of the city is being controlled by a few factions that splintered from the regime when it broke apart. A few key points are being held hostage by Awаkened warlords. Things are only going to get worse in the future, and that is just NQSC. It is in a far better state than the other cities."  
  
Jest smiled.  
  
"Aren't you overlooking something, though? Indeed, we are Awakened! You personally have the power to craft incredible items. There are others with the power to make plants grow faster, or summon stuff from thin air. The city barriers and farms have been maintained by the regime, but now that there are people like us walking around, making miracles happen… who's to say that things aren't going to improve, instead?"  
  
His smile widened.  
  
"Maybe your son will live ten times better than we ever did. My life has already improved, in fact. I have an entire room of my own… it even has an attached bathroom! And I haven't been hungry in weeks. That is also what the future holds, too."  
  
Jest sighed.  
  
"Now, if only I could fetch my girlfriend from that pit up north… life would be perfect."  
  
Warden looked at him silently for a while, thinking about something.   
  
Eventually, he shook his head.   
  
"No way, have you been an optimist this whole time?"  
  
Jest scratched the back of his head.   
  
"Have my sunny personality and amazing sense of humor not relayed that? Anyway, I do understand your concerns. There are crazy people everywhere, and many of them have Awakened, as well. There are already horror stories being told about the guy who controls the train tracks. The factions formed by the former members of the secret police is… very creepy, too. And those fanatics going around trying to convert people, they're the creepiest! Honestly, what we need to do is gather the guys that reside in the castle out there in the real world, as well, and form a faction of our own. Better safe than sorry."  
  
Warden remained silent for a while, then smiled.   
  
"...You're just saying that because you want my help in retrieving your girlfriend, right?"  
  
Jest grinned.   
  
"She's from the castle too, is she not? More than that, her Aspect is quite useful… unlike mine. If you want to become one of the omnipotent tyrants of the distant future, you'll need people like her."  
  
Warden lingered for a while.   
  
Eventually, he shrugged.  
  
"Well, why not? Let's gather a team of reliable people and go on a trip to the north. We can invite more of our fellow Awakened who reside there to join us in NQSC, as well. I'm not sure what shape the futurе will take, but if we want to even have a say in what happens to us, we need to consolidate our powerbase first… building a reliable foundation is the most important step, after all. And if we want to build a bastion of safety for us and our families, we will need a truly robust foundation."  
  
Jest grinned, prompting Warden to look at him with suspicion.  
  
"...What?"  
  
Jest shook his head.  
  
"No, no… it's nothing. It's just that, speaking of robust foundations… uh… wait, I almost have it!"  
  
There was definitely a joke in there!  
  
Warden took a deep breath and turned away.  
  
"Right. I'll be going then… let's meet in the real world, when we wake up."  
  
The goal of their trip to the north was quite simple — to gather a few of the Awakened following Warden from there and bring them all to NQSC.  
  
However, many things changed as a result of that journey, and both of them were changed, as well.