2139 Bad Timing  
  
Cassie asked the question in a calm and composеd tone, and yet, the air suddenly seemed infused with subtle tension. Perhaps it was due to the fact that she had stopped walking without giving a reason, or because Jest did not hurry with an answer.  
  
Helie turned around and glanced at them with a look of confusion. Wet strands of her flaxen hair were sticking to her exquisitely beautiful face, so she sighed and lowered her sword to brush it back.  
  
The old man leaned on his cane and studied Cassie with a wry expression. Then, he chuckled quietly.  
  
"Oh, goodness me… I guess I'm not as slick as I thoughtI was."  
  
With that, Jest sighed and shook his head in dejection.  
  
"Comedy is all about timing, you know? That is why I just can't stand diviners. Most of them lack basic decency, if you ask me. People should have at least some tact, right? Who goes around learning the punchline before I even deliver the joke? That's just mean."  
  
He stretched his neck languidly.  
  
"In any case… dealing with seers is such a hassle. I should have known that you'd ruin all the fun, really. My bad! It's just that your lot has grown toothless in the last few years. So, I grew a bit complacent."  
  
Cassie remained motionless, keeping her hand on the hilt of the Quiet Dancer.  
  
"If it's any consolation…"  
  
She paused for a moment, then smiled coldly.  
  
"...You were never funny, to begin with."  
  
Jest's eyes widened, and he looked at her with an appalled expression.  
  
"Hey, now! There's no reason to get nasty!"  
  
Helie interruρted them, her tone full of confusion:  
  
"What the hell are you two talking about?"  
  
Cassie took a deep breath. She was facing Jest, while Helie was standing behind her. Of course, it did not matter much because she was looking at herself through the eyes of both… still, there were limitations to human anatomy. Even if she was aware of what was happening behind her, her joints could not bend backwards. So, she was more vulnerable to attacks aimed at her back.  
  
Still calm,Cassie kept facing Jest as she answered:  
  
"We are discussing how Saint Jest intends to kill us both on this mission."  
  
She paused for a moment, then smiled.  
  
"...Oh, as well as his lack of comedic talent."  
  
The old man scoffed.  
  
"Lack of talent? It's not that I lack talent! It's that you dull people lack the capacity to appreciate it!"  
  
Saint Heliе looked at him, her eyes widening a little. Eventually, she asked in disbelief:  
  
"That is what you are refuting? Not the fact that you were planning to kill me and Lady Cassia?"  
  
Jest coughed in embarrassment.  
  
"No, no… don't let her deceive you. She is completely wrong!"  
  
Pausing for a moment, the old man flashed them a smile and added:  
  
"I mean, I was only really planning to kill Song of the Fallen. As for you, Helie, I planned to see how it goes first. Who knows? I might even spare you, depending on what you do!"  
  
Hearing that, Saint Helie frowned and studied him somberly, not saying anything else.  
  
She did not seem that surprised by the sudden revelation — not surprised enough to ask for the reason, at least.  
  
She must have known that after Master Orum was executed as a traitor, her entire clan would come under suspicion and remain on thin ice for a while. Before, Saints had been too precious to waste their lives — that was why Tyris of White Feather had only been exiled to Antarctica for killing a Transcendent retainer of Clan Valor, Cormac.  
  
But now, there were far more Saints walking the world, and there was a war raging as well. Keeping potential traitors around could cost the King of Swords more than it was worth.  
  
After a few moments of silence, Helie finally spoke.  
  
"You know, that's the funniest thing you've said yet."  
  
The old man looked at her with reproach and mumbled in a muffled voice:  
  
"What's up with young'uns these days? It's like they don't respect their elders at all…"  
  
Cassie remained silent for a moment, then spoke in a measured tone.  
  
"I doubt that the King ordered you to eliminate me, though.You led us here entirely on your own initiative, didn't you?"  
  
Jest studied her silently for a few moments, then shrugged.  
  
"So what if I did?"  
  
She frowned.  
  
"Aren't you afraid of the consequences of going against the King's will?"  
  
The old man smiled sheepishly.  
  
"Оh. Well… I guess he'll be quite angry, won't he? But you know what they say! It's better to ask for forgiveness than to ask for permission. He'll thank me in the end."  
  
Cassie shook her head.  
  
"Is that what you call loyalty, Saint Jest? Aren't you acting too arrogant, assuming that you know what is good for the King better than he knows himself? That, too, is a form of treachery."  
  
Jest simply laughed.  
  
His laugh, however, ended abruptly a few moments later, and he looked at her with cold contempt.  
  
"What do you even know about loyalty, girl? What do you even know about the King?"  
  
He raised his cane and placed it on his shoulder, glaring at her with a dark expression on his weathered face.  
  
"That boy, Anvil… I knew him from the day he was born. I watched him grow, mature, and turn into the fearless ruler he is today. That is why I know what he is capable of better than anyone… but I know what his flaws are better than anyone, too. He is too fearless, in fact. He fears nothing because he values nothing — not even his own life. So, someone has to value it for him, you know?"  
  
Jest smiled.  
  
"The King is not afraid of you, Song of the Fallen, but I am. I might not know what exactly you are scheming, but I can smell a snake when I see one. So, to protect him from your venom, I am going to cut off your head before you can bite."  
  
With that, he looked at Helie and asked in a cold tone:  
  
"So, what is going to be, Helie? Are you going to prove your loyalty by helping me kill her? Or are you going to force me into making you help me kill her? The latter will mean you'll have to die as well, of course. You decide."  
  
As Cassie took a deep breath, Saint Helie hesitated.