2143 Thoughts and Emotions  
  
Cassie moved.  
  
The Quiet Dancer flashed past Helie, her narrow tip aimed at the old man's heart. However, a split second later, when the graceful rapier pierced the red fabric of his dapper shirt… it came to a sudden halt, its hilt quivering in the humid air.  
  
The narrow tip had barely cut Jest's skin, drawing a few drops of blood, but failed to plunge deeper. His muscles were like steel, resisting the sharpness of the Awakened blade with transcendent resilience.  
  
The gallant old man was nowhere to be seen, either.  
  
Instead, a towering abomination stood in his place, looking down at Cassie with chilling malevolence. The creature was vaguely humanoid in shape, with a muscular human torso and furry goat-like legs. Its face was a disturbing mix of human and bestial features, with two curved horns protruding from its grotesque head.  
  
The most eerie part was that Cassie could still recognize Jest's features in the bestial face, and see her own distorted figure reflecting in his sinister rectangular pupils.  
  
She did not know whether his Transcendent form was supposеd to be a devil or a satyr… in any case, he looked like a fiend.  
  
As a vicious grin twisted the fiend's lips and his clover hooves dug into the scarlet moss…  
  
Cassie grasped the hilt of the Quiet Dancer, augmented the slender rapier with the power of her Supreme charm, and pushed the narrow blade deeper with all her Transcendent strength.  
  
"Ho…"  
  
A low, inhuman laugh escaped from Jest's mouth. Now almost twice as tall as Cassie, he easily batted the slender rapier away with his clawed hand and thrust the other one forward, aiming to grab her head and crush it in his fist.  
  
Even knowing what was coming, she barely had time to jump away.  
  
Jest looked down, at the thin stream of blood trickling from the small cut on his chest, and grinned.  
  
His unnaturally deep, dark voice sent shivers running down Cassie's back.  
  
"That tickles a little. Still… you should be proud of yourself, little girl.  
  
You made me bleed. Few ever managed."  
  
He crouched, preparing to lunge forward.  
  
"How did you even manage to attack me, anyway?"  
  
Cassie did not waste time responding — but actually, it was simple.  
  
Jest's insidious Aspect allowed him to play with his victim's emotions, manipulating living beings like obedient puppets, but its very power was also its weakness.  
  
Because while people were usually hostages of their feelings, they also possessed the capacity for rational thought. Most of the old man's enemies did not know what his powers were, and therefore lacked the ability to understand how they were manipulated.  
  
But Cassie was different.  
  
Knowledge was a heavy burden, but it was also the origin of power — and in that sense, she wielded more power than most. She knew exactly what Jest was capable of, and so, she knew not to trust her emotions when facing him.   
  
Of course, there was a vast difference between knowing not to trust one's feelings and actually being able to disregard them. After all, the crippling fear he had induced in her did not disappear simply because she realized its artificial source.  
  
Currently, Cassie felt two powerful emotions.  
  
A scathing hatred and fear of Helie, whom she wanted to kill with an almost uncontrollable intensity, and a good measure of trust and favor toward Jest, whom she wanted to keep alive with all her heart.  
  
But she also knew that these feelings were supposed to be reversed.  
  
The powerful emotions ruling her heart were clashing with the rational thoughts borne of her mind, which left her torn and dazed. Even knowing better, she could not help but want Helie dead — want it more than she wanted anything else, to the point that the very idea of failing to kill Helie made her tremble in rage. So…  
  
Cassie ignored her emotions.  
  
It wasn't that hard to do, really — at least for her. In truth, Cassie had long learned to build a wall between herself and what she felt. Otherwise, it would have been too easy to lose herself in the endless lives she experienced through her marks, countless foreign memories she saw, and all the fleeting versions of the future she felt.   
  
She knew so much, and she had experienced so much. Every time she stepped on the battlefield, she had to die a thousand times in order to survive once. Every time she experienced the vibrant beauty of the world through someone else's eyes, she was tempted to abandon the dark confines of her own bleak existence forever.   
  
...If anything, it was hard not to allow herself to grow unfeeling and numb.   
  
Jest seemed surprised that Cassie had managed to shake off his compulsion, but in reality, she had not.   
  
She simply steeled her heart and willed herself into following cold logic instead of her fleeting and unreliable emotions.   
  
So, Cassie resolved to kill the one whom she wanted to protect, and save the one whom she wanted to kill.  
  
That was how she was able to attack Jest instead of Helie.   
  
Sadly… that did not mean that she would immediately win the battle.   
  
Far from that, in fact.   
  
"Ah!"  
  
Cassie dashed back, parrying Helie's attack with her dagger, and was a split second toо slow to evade Jest's claws. They tore through her armor and left deep cuts on her side, hot blood streaming down her thigh.  
  
She had known when and where the attack would come from. But she was still too slow to avoid it because the goat-like abomination was simply too fast and ferocious, moving so swiftly that there was no possible future where she had avoided both blows.  
  
Raising the bloodied claws to his bestial face, Jest smiled.  
  
"Well… so what if you can attack me? There are still two of us, and only one of you. How much essence do уou have left, lass? Why don't you just give up this tired routine and accept your fate?"  
  
As Cassie heard these words, her expression suddenly froze, and an eerie presence suddenly enveloped the jungle, making the old man frown for a moment.  
  
Her lips moved, and a quiet question escaped from them.  
  
"Accept… fate?"  
  
Cassie's unseeing eyes suddenly ignited with dangerous light.  
  
Lowering her head slightly, she gritted her teeth and then smiled wickedly.  
  
"Why do you insist on constantly running your mouth, old man? Just die quietly!"  
  
Snarling, she pushed herself forward.