2144 Look Into the Eyes of Monsters  
  
The battle had turned more ferocious after Jest assumed his Transcendent form and Cassie reclaimed the Quiet Dancer. Before, the three Saints had merely been testing each other's power — now, they grew serious about killing each other.  
  
The ancient jungle was shaken by the fierce clash of the three Transcendent humans. A swath of it was devastated entirely, with dozens of trees being cut, splintered, and toppled by the dire forces unleashed by each of the fighters.  
  
Jest was like a demon that had crawled out of the deepest reaches of a dark hell, moving with both the bestial might and the cold, calculated malice of an experienced killer. Helie was consumed by intoxicating wrath, allowing her honed martial excellence to turn into a violent, destructive calamity.  
  
Cassie remained calm and composed, facing them both with the grace and measured precision of a talented swordsman trained by Changing Star herself. But there was now a ruthless coldness and scathing killing intent in her movements now, too.  
  
But despite that…  
  
She was still slowly losing ground. Jest had no problems with using Helie as a living shield to protect himself against her biting attacks, and while Cassie wanted nothing more than to kill her, she had to hold herself back.  
  
She barely managed to keep herself alive in the furious whirlwind of deadly attacks. Jest's malice and Helie's wrath left blоody marks on her body, but they weren't able to bring her down… at least not yet.  
  
Despite that, the situation did not look good.  
  
It seemed desperate, in fact.  
  
Eventually, Cassie managed to send Helie staggering by bashing her in the head with the pommel of her dagger. The beautiful Saint swayed and fell to one knee, her flaxen hair soaked with blood. She raised one hand and pressed it against her temple, dazed, then tried to stand up — only to fall once again, opening herself to a fatal blow.  
  
Cassie had to use all of her self-control to stay her hand.  
  
By then,  
  
her armor was broken and battered, and a dozen shallow wounds covered her body. Her breath was hoarse and labored, too, with sweat rolling down her pale face. She activated the enchantment of her protective bracelet to block a devastating swipe of Jest's clawed hand and was sent reeling by the recoil, a quiet groan escaping from her lips.  
  
"Didn't you make a mistake, lass?"  
  
Jest's inhuman voice was full of mockery.  
  
Indeed, she had.  
  
Removing Helie from the battle might have been a boon, since it only left one enemy fоr Cassie to deal with — the one whom she really needed to defeat.  
  
However…  
  
With the cunning old man still keeping his eyes closed, Helie was the only source of sight for her. Now that the beautiful Saint was dazed and disoriented, her vision blurred and painted red by flowing blood, Cassie was once again fully and utterly blind.  
  
"You know how it goes… one mistake is all it takes…"  
  
Jest's inhuman voice was so deep that it was hard to determine which direction it was coming from. She could still perceive his other four senses, so she could guess in which direction he was moving — but that was hardly enough to survive.  
  
Even her foresight did not guarantee salvation, since the horned fiend was strong and swift enough to be inescapable.  
  
Backing away with a frightened expression on her exquisitely beautiful face, Cassie raised her weapons and prepared to defend herself.  
  
"Too late!"  
  
She felt the air moving as something massive and murderous lunged at her... from the different direction from where the shout had come from a moment earlier.  
  
Cassie stumbled and fell, barely avoiding one of Jest's hands.  
  
But she was not saved…  
  
On the contrary, she was cornered.  
  
It was at that moment, when the terrible creature reached forward to rip her apart, that Cassie deactivated her Supreme charm and poured her essence into the Transcendent Memory meant to augment her Echo, instead.  
  
However, she was not augmenting the Quiet Dancer.  
  
'Got you.'  
  
In the last moment, Jest seemed to notice that instead of looking terrified, Cassie had a subtle smile playing on her soft lips. But with the enemy wounded and defenseless in front of him, he had allowed himself to get consumed by the thrill of the hunt. He had committed to the attack too much, and therefore, failed to react in time.  
  
So, he had no choice but to finish it…  
  
But he never got the chance.  
  
Because just then, a terrifyingly strong tentacle wrapped itself around his neck, squeezing it cruelly.  
  
Jest's momentum was broken, and his claws swiped the air in front of Cassie's neck fruitlessly.  
  
Before he could resist, more tentacles wrapped themselves around his arms and legs, binding him like slippery chains.  
  
'W—what… what the hell…'  
  
If Jest could turn his head, he would have seen that the dark tentacles were stretching from beneath a beautiful red dress covering a delicate, deceptively human figure. Her face was hidden behind a veil, and her silhouette was eerily similar to Song of the Fallen.  
  
It was the Echo of Torment, whom Cassie had hidden in the Hollows in advance.  
  
And Echoes had neither thoughts nor emotions… nothing for Jest to manipulate in order to turn them into his puppets.  
  
His inhuman pupils moved.  
  
Then, augmented by the power of the charm, the Transcendent Echo pushed Jest to his knees. And at the same time, Cassie rose from hers, wiping blоod off her face.  
  
Now that he was kneeling and she was standing, their eyes were on the same level.  
  
Looking at Jest, Cassie smiled coldly.  
  
"Did you… say that you were going to rip the head off my shoulders?"  
  
Being strangled by the tentacles, Jest tried to smile.  
  
"That… come on now, lass! That was just an innocent joke… a figure of speech, at best..."  
  
She did not seem to find it funny, though. The cold smile disappeared from her face, replaced by something dark and ruthless.  
  
Cassie took a deep breath.  
  
"...Look me into the eyes and say it again, then."  
  
At that moment, her eyes changed.  
  
Looking at them, Jest reeled back, as if witnessing something that terrified him to the deepest, darkest corners of his bloodstained soul.  
  
But it was already too late.  
  
The was no escape.