2145 Broken Door  
  
As the goat-like abomination's expression grew slack, and its monstrously strong hands fell, Cassie took a deep breath.  
  
She had to, because while Jest was caught in the boundless abyss of her eyes, the battle was not over.  
  
What had to happen next would be a battle, too.  
  
Cassie had broken the mental defenses of Master Orum with relative ease, but Jest was a Saint — one who was no stranger to mental manipulation, at that. So, she was going to have to work hard to extract what she wanted to learn from his memories.  
  
But that was what it all had been about.  
  
That was why she had risked being lured into the depths of the jungle by a sinister killer, endured the difficult fight, and allowed her body to be cut and bruised.  
  
In truth, no matter how fearsome Saint Jest was, it wasn't that hard for her to get rid of him. If Cassie simply wanted to kill him, there were countless ways — the most difficult part about killing him was not the old man himself, really, but the reaction the King of Swords would have to his death.  
  
They were away from the King's watchful gaze here, though…  
  
And yet, Cassie's hands had still been tied. Because she wanted to keep Helie alive and needed to keep Jest alive. That was how she had ended up in a battle against two Saints whom she could not kill.  
  
Of course, subduing someone was much harder than simply killing them. So, she was bruised and in pain, with blood soaking her garments beneath the battered armor.  
  
Still, everything had transpired almost exactly according to her wishes. Saint Jest turned out to be even stronger than she had anticipated, but he had been doomed to lose from the moment he set his sights on Cassie.   
  
It was ironic, really… among the servants of the Great Clan Valor, the old man seemed to be the only one who had seen through her pretense. He had sensed that the quiet, unassuming, and easily forgotten Lady Cassia was much more dangerous than everyone presumed.  
  
And yet, he had still underestimated her.  
  
It was as if her unassuming рersona had managed to misguide him even after being seen through and uncovered as a false facade.   
  
In all honesty, Cassie was quite amused by just how far simply being quiet, polite, and modest had gone in making people disregard her as a genuine threat.  
  
Then again, perhaps it was simply the consequence of how hard it was to stand out when monsters like Changing Star and the Lord of Shadows were walking the world. There were Soul Reaper and the Prince of Nothing, too… there were brilliant talents like Morgan, Seishan, Beastmaster, Aether, Effie аnd Kai, all competing in the grandeur of their feats and accomplishments.  
  
Because of them, people tended to forget that Cassie had survived the Forgotten Shore, too. She had been baptized by the madness of the Kingdom of Hope, too. She had fought in the Battle of the Black Skull, endured the horrors of the Nightmare Desert, and plunged into the deep dark waters of the Great River, too…  
  
She was a monster, too.  
  
It was just that she concealed her monstrous nature better than most, hiding it behind a pretty blindfold.  
  
"Ah… what… what the hell…"  
  
A few meters away, Helie groaned as she grasped her bleeding head. Now that Jest was caught in Cassie's bewitching gaze, his Aspect powers were released, and she had regained her senses.  
  
Turning, Helie looked at the scene in front of her dazedly. The hideous goat-like abomination was kneeling on the ground, looking into the eyes of the breathtakingly beautiful, delicate young woman who stood in front of him, her golden hair moving slightly in the wind.  
  
Behind the kneeling creature… another delicate figure was hovering above the ground, with appalling tentacles stretching from beneath her elaborate red dress to bind him like moist black chains.  
  
As Helie tried to comprehend what she was seeing, the red woman shifted and moved, carried through the air by her long tentacles. That movement was so eerie and inhuman that Helie shuddered.  
  
She shuddered again and reeled back when the red woman came to hover above her, looking down from behind a veil.   
  
Helie felt a strong impulse to crawl away.  
  
"W—what…"  
  
Before she could say anything else, one hand of the red woman rose. Moving with strange elegance, the eerie abomination reached toward its veil… and then, the creature pressed her index finger against where human lips would have been.  
  
As if telling Helie to be quiet.  
  
'...Echo. It's an Echo.'  
  
Calming down, she threw another glance at Song of the Fallen and Jest, then grew silent. Whatever was happening there, Cassia seemed to have it under control… Helie herself, meanwhile, was bleeding profusely and had to tend to her wound.  
  
Cassie could not allow to be distracted anymore.  
  
Having invoked her Transformation — which only affected her eyes — she delved into the vast, hostile ocean of Saint Jest's memories.  
  
He tried to resist her, making it much harder to discern what she was seeing and sensing, but Cassie pressed on, ruthlessly breaching his fearsome mental fortifications one after another.  
  
Because her prey was so resilient, and because his life had been so long and storied, she was burning more essence than usual to maintain the Transformation. They were still in the Hollows, as well — even though there didn't seem to be any immediate threats nearby yet, that could change at any moment.  
  
So, Cassie did not have the luxury of time to sift through Jet's memories slowly and thoroughly. Instead, she had to find the most important ones, the most intense ones… and, hopefully, discover a path to learning the secrets of the Sovereigns through them.  
  
Inhaling deeply, he dove into the life of Jest of Dagonet, the hidden blade and executioner of the Great Clans.  
  
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"Damn. Shit… what is this crap? Really…"  
  
Jest had come home.  
  
His home, of course, was a concrete barrack where dozens of worker families had lived in pitiful living conditions, struggling to survive under the indifferent authority of the regime. Lives were short and deaths were frequent, so it was not surprising for familiar faces to disappear without a trace, replaced by new ones the next day.   
  
Grоwing up, he had given up on remembering the names of the numerous Uncles and Aunties who flowed through the barrack, since it seemed like a futile endeavor.   
  
Still…  
  
Now, everyone was dead, which was a bit too much. The interior of the barrack was like a scene from hell, with countless half-devoured corpses littering the floor akin to a morbid carpet. The massacre seemed to have happened many days ago, so the blood had long dried. The smell, however, was overwhelming, making him retch.   
  
"Ah… ah…"  
  
Jest wanted to come inside to search for the remains of his family, but couldn't force himself to.  
  
Instead, he took a few steps back, and somehow found himself sprawled on the ground.   
  
His mind was empty, and there were tears streaming down his face.   
  
'Turns out I still have tears to shed, huh?'  
  
The thought was strangely calm and detached despite his miserable state.  
  
Jest had not cried in a good decade or two. He was an adult now, after all, having turned twenty something not too long ago. He had finally escaped the barrack about a year ago. He had even harbored a vain hope of returning here one day with pockets full of credits, boasting about his accomplishments, and taking the others with him to live a better life someplace else.   
  
Who knew that the world would end so soon?  
  
Now, there were monsters roaming the streets, devouring people and tearing military tanks apart. The regime had collapsed, and he had nowhere to return to.  
  
Jest had passed out when the end of the world stаrted and experienced a long, dreadful nightmare. Waking up a few days later, somehow alive, he decided that there was no point in clinging to his silly dreams anymore and headed home… his real home, the barrack.  
  
Crossing the city had proven to be a deadly ordeal, but he had survived somehow. In the process, he met a few others like him — people who had fallen into deep sleep and woke up wielding unexplainable powers.   
  
But it was a joke. It was all like a vile, terrible joke.   
  
Because his power was pure crap.   
  
All he could do was make emotions stronger. Since the only emotion the monsters felt was a demented desire to rip him to pieces, the only thing Jest could do was make himself die faster.  
  
'Maybe I should. Die faster, I mean…'  
  
Looking at the broken door of the barrack, Jest suddenly felt a dark and oppressive sense of futility.   
  
What was he struggling for, anyway?   
  
The world was ending, and everyone was dead. Why was he clinging to life so desperately when being alive was so painful?  
  
Looking down, he let out a stifled laugh.  
  
"Ah. Ah! But... but..."  
  
But wasn't it funny?  
  
Despite the tears streaming from his eyes, he forced himself to smile.  
  
There was a lesson that people from the barrack learned early on... life was unbearable if one was too serious.  
  
Humans had to have a sense of humor to survive in this crappy world.  
  
The world had turned even crappier now, so…  
  
There was a funny joke in here, somewhere.  
  
He just had to find it.  
  
"I guess you guys don't have to kill yourself at work anymore."  
  
'See?'  
  
There was a bright side to anything.  
  
Jest's tears tasted salty, but he forced himself to laugh.  
  
Rising from the concrete, he decided to try and survive.  
  
Not that it would be easy… nobody had a power as useless as his, after all, so he would undoubtedly die soon.  
  
But he would at least die with a smile on his face while having fun.  
  
…His forced smile still faltered, however, when he eventually entered the barrack and started searching the morbid carpet of corpses.  
  
It took a long while before it returned.