2174 Fatal Curiosity  
  
Cassie froze, momentarily shaken by what she had discovered.  
  
It had not been her goal...  
  
But now that she had caught a glimpse of the conspiracy that would shape the fate of the world — as well as destroy Neph's life and turn her into who she was today — she could not just let go.  
  
Even if it was the wisest choice.  
  
Her reserves of essence were dwindling, and Jest was already showing signs of freeing himself from the bewitching vice of her gaze.  
  
She still had to handle the aftermath, as well. Killing the old Saint would not prove too difficult... but as much as he deserved to be killed, that was not necessarily the best choice.  
  
Cassie's Aspect gave her a rare ability to understand hеr enemies. Understanding someone usually made it impossible to hate them... after all, how could she truly hate someone whose joys and sorrows she had experienced herself? Understanding could only give birth to compassion, and it was easy to lose herself in the memories of others.  
  
Just like that, she could not help but empathize with Jest, who had experienced so much, and had suffered so much sorrow throughout his long and extraordinary life.  
  
However... memories were also deceitful.  
  
They were not truthful records of what had happened. They were vague and fleeting, often showing only a fragmented account of the past. Even then, they were shaped and painted by the mind of the one who remembered.  
  
Take Jest, for example. In his mind, he was a loyal and sympathetic person... perhaps not virtuous, but definitely well-meaning. That was why what he remembered of his life told a tale of beautiful human connections and dire adversity in pursuit of greater good.  
  
But in reality, he was a butcher whose hands were drenched in blood to the elbow. A callous killer who disregarded human life and had left countless innocent victims in his wake... it was just that he did not care about them that much, and therefore, the faceless victims did not even leave a lasting trace in his memories.  
  
Cassie felt compassion toward Jest, but she was also revolted by him... not that her own hands were clean, of course.  
  
Both of them deserved to die, perhaps. So it was a question of profit.  
  
Killing Jest would be profitable, since it would remove a powerful enemy from the board. However, it would also result in a loss, since his death would undoubtedly push Anvil to take action and reveal Cassie's hand.  
  
As a result, she hesitated to kill him.  
  
There were other ways to deal with the old man, as well.  
  
She could alter his memories slightly, manipulating them to achieve her goals. With some effort, she could erase some of them instead, making him forget ever wanting to kill her.  
  
She could even burn away all his memories one after another, erasing them until his mind became a clean slate, and the man named Jest became swallowed by oblivion while his body and soul remained alive.  
  
That was within her power, too.  
  
But all of it required vast amounts of essence to be spent. Only killing Jest did not demand any additional cost.  
  
Still, still...  
  
Could she really let the chance to learn about Broken Sword's death go?  
  
Cassie hesitated for a few moments, then made a decision and delved back into Jest's memories.  
  
And not long after that...  
  
Her eyes widened slightly.  
  
'...Weaver? That was the reason?'  
  
She did not have time to finish the thought, though.  
  
Because at that moment, Jest's monstrous hand shot forward.  
  
He had been struggling desperately and biding his time while the audacious girl sifted through his mind. It felt vile and ghastly, to feel someone invading your mind forcefully and carelessly perusing your most hidden feelings, most cherished memories... shedding light on your deepest scars.  
  
What right did she have?! What gave her the courage?!  
  
Even enthralled by Song of the Fallen's bewitching gaze, Jest was shaking with shame, indignation, and fury.  
  
But he was an old monster who had outlived more than his fair share of needlessly confident youngsters.  
  
He knew how to be patient.  
  
And just like Jest had thought...  
  
Cassia had succumbed to greed.  
  
She overstayed her welcome.  
  
When he finally moved, she seemed caught by surprise. The young woman reeled back, her eyes opening wide, but it was already too late.  
  
They were too close to each other.  
  
His clawed fingers closed around her slender, fragile neck.  
  
Jest grinned.  
  
"...Curiosity killed the cat, you know?"  
  
Of course, he wasn't foolish enough to give her time to answer.  
  
Just as the words left his mouth, Jest strained his muscles and snapped the young woman's neck.  
  
She was a Saint, of course, but her Aspect did not augment her physique. Jest, however, was currently in his Transcendent form.  
  
Her spine broke easily enough.  
  
As the hideous Echo behind him collapsed into a maelstrom of sparks, he threw Song of the Fallen away. Her broken body landed on a very special patch of scarlet moss and submerged into it slowly, the wide-open eyes still staring at him with a silent accusation.  
  
Was she still alive? Well, probably... it would take some time for a Saint to die from a broken neck.  
  
Her body would dissolve in the pit of digestive fluid hidden beneath the moss soon enough, though. A grisly death, no doubt — quite fitting for a girl who did not know her place.  
  
There would be no trace left, leaving him free to come up with an explanation.  
  
'So what if you learned all my secrets? Take them to your grave, foolish girl.'  
  
Now, then... there was one more left.  
  
Dealing with Helie turned out to be almost boring. Her Flaw made her a perfect victim for someone like Jest, after all — denied the power of her Aspect, she died powerlessly in his hands.  
  
She did not stop struggling until the very end, though.  
  
That, at least, was a bit fun.  
  
In the end, he tossed her body into the same pit. Looking around, Jest let out a deep sigh.  
  
"Ah. I feel like he'll reprimand me very sternly, this time..."  
  
Even he was a little afraid of Anvil's wrath.  
  
And Anvil would definitely be very angry about what Jest had done today... well, at least as angry as his cold iron heart allowed him to be.  
  
Assuming his human form, Jest went about getting dressed. His clothes were designed in a way that prevented them from being destroyed when he Transformed — his shirt and trousers were, at least. All he had to do to restore them to their previous shape was fasten a few buckles.  
  
The jacket, unfortunately, was completely gone. He clicked his tongue.  
  
"Damn it! I just had this one tailored..."  
  
Shaking his head, Jest picked up his cane, looked around one last time, and left.  
  
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Not long after that, Helie walked out from behind a tree and looked at Cassie, who was standing nearby, with a strange expression.  
  
"...That's it? He just left?"  
  
Cassie nodded tiredly.  
  
"Why would he stay? I implanted a false memory into his mind. One of killing us brutally and disposing of our bodies. So, he has nothing left to do here."  
  
She had erased the memory of what her eyes truly looked like when she transformed, as well — like she always did after using her Transcendent Ability.  
  
Helie remained silent for a few moments, then shivered.  
  
"Can you put your blindfold back on? I'm, uh... will feel better if you do."  
  
Cassie did not comment and simply pulled the blindfold back into its place. Helie seemed to relax once she did.  
  
That was the very reason she wore a blindfold, to begin with.  
  
Eventually, Helie asked:  
  
"So... I guess we are dead now? At least as far as Clan Valor will be concerned. What do we do now?"  
  
Cassie turned to her, remained silent for a moment, and then smiled softly.  
  
"Well, what else?"  
  
With that, she faced the jungle.  
  
"We'll have to defect to Song, I guess."