

The world felt heavy and bitter, as if the air itself was suffocating me. My steps were slow and deliberate, barely keeping my balance as I entered the Guild, still reeling from the confrontation with Kase and my mother. All eyes seemed to follow me like vultures circling a carcass. I tried to ignore them, but it was hard not to feel exposed.

"Darx," Elina's voice cut through the haze of my thoughts, "Estalla wants to see you in her office."

"The guild master!?" I repeated, confused, "O-Okay, I'll go right away."

Without wasting time, I made my way to Estella's office, feeling the weight of the few guild members that remained in the Guild gazes following me.

I was so lost in thought that when I reached the office door, I forgot to knock and just opened the door. Inside the office, I saw the guild master Stella and Neku, whose conversation stopped abruptly when they noticed me, making me think they didn't want me to hear whatever they were discussing.

"I-I'm sorry," I quickly tried to apologize.

"...We'll continue later, but keep me informed if anything new happens," Stella said to Neku.

"Understood," Neku responded and then began walking to the door.

"Hey, Darx," Neku said, while lightly punching me in the chest as she walked by, leaving the room, "I see you're not dead. Maybe you are the real deal after all." Her words were confusing, but there wasn't time to dwell on them.

Neku continued walking without stopping at any time, walking away down the hallway.

"Have a seat, Darx," Estella gestured to an empty chair in front of her desk.

I entered the office and closed the door for later, sitting down, trying to look composed despite my inner turmoil. Stella studied me briefly before speaking – I could tell she knew something wasn't right.

"Is everything okay?" Stella asked.

"E-Everything's fine," I lied, forcing a smile, "It's just been a long morning."

Stella leaned back in her seat, "Elina told me about your miraculous return yesterday," She said, her face showing genuine surprise, "I'm glad to see you're alive and well, Darx. Dante will be even more delighted to know the same. I know my brother well, and I know the remorse he has been feeling from that moment until now when he thought that you had died under his care."

"T-Thanks, guild master," I replied, managing a small, appreciative nod, "I heard that Dante and many other guild members are in the north."

"That's right, but there will be another time to talk about that. Darx," She continued, her expression growing somber, "I've heard about your mother's marriage to Kase. I'm truly sorry... I understand how difficult this must be for you."

My jaw clenched as she mentioned their union. My frustration was palpable, but I tried to remain calm, "Y-Yeah, it's been... tough."

"I know you have a bad history with Kase, but I want you to listen to me carefully," Stella warned, leaning forward in her seat, "You need to keep your emotions in check around him. Kase is the worst kind of person you can ever meet. He could even be looking for any excuse to get rid of you, and if you give him one, he will not hesitate to eliminate you."

I frowned, realizing the gravity of what she was saying, "I'm not one to back down from a fight, especially when it comes to that bastard." I reply.

"Kase is an S-Rank adventurer, which means he'll play a vital role in the upcoming war. Whatever horrible things he does will likely be forgiven by those in power," Stella explained, her voice full of discomfort, "You must endure, Darx. For your own safety and for the sake of those who care about you."

"B-But, I..." I try to speak.

"With this, I am not saying that you have to let yourself be Kase's toy, but rather that you need to be intelligent with your actions and plan your next move well," Stella continued, "Believe me, I know more than anyone how difficult it is to have to stay calm in situations like this. But don't doubt for a minute that Kase's time to pay will come."

The guild master's words seem sincere. I wonder what history she has with Kase since the hatred in her eyes when she talks about Kase seems genuine. As much as I hated Kase, I knew that Stella was right – I couldn't afford to let my emotions control me, not when so much was at stake.

"O-Okay, I understand," I said, my voice strained but determined, "I'll do my best to keep my distance from him and stay calm."

"Thank you, Darx. I know it won't be easy," Estella offered a sympathetic smile, "Leaving that aside, the reason I called you here today is different. I need to talk to you about something else," Stella said, her tone shifting to a more serious note, "I know how close you were to Harold, and I understand you may have the desire to investigate his death. But I must ask you to avoid getting involved in that."

"Wait, what?" I asked, my eyes widening with surprise and frustration, "Why would I not want to find out who killed him?"

"Darx, it's not that simple," Estella sighed, "The Queen is personally handling the investigation into Harold's death. Remember that Harold was the Queen's right-hand man and was murdered inside the castle, which was a clear message for the Queen. The Queen is dangerous and not someone you want to cross. By now, she must know who killed Harold and why, but the fact that she hasn't acted yet makes me think she has another plan in mind. If you interfere and ruin whatever plan she has, even if it's by accident, it could have dire consequences. Believe me when I say that you don't know who you can trust around here."

"Are you saying I should just sit back and do nothing?" I couldn't believe what I was hearing. A close friend had been murdered, and now I was being told to stay out of it?

"Listen, Darx," She said, her expression softening, "Harold was also my friend. I know how much this hurts you. But I'm asking you to trust that the Queen will bring justice to whoever is responsible. Right now, the best thing you can do is focus on rebuilding your life and be prepared since, just as Harold suspected, the church will soon seek to contact you."

Stella knows about the church's attempt to contact me!? I guess Harold or Dante must have informed her. Still, if the church wants to contact me, so be it. I also have my reasons to contact them and see what is behind all this.

"Take things easy for a few days," Stella urged, her gaze sympathetic but firm, "Avoid problems with Kase or the church. You've just returned to the capital, and there's still so much you don't know. Be patient, Darx. Your time will come."

"A-Alright," I agreed reluctantly.

As I left Stella's office, her words echoed in my mind. Though I understood her reasoning, it was a bitter pill to swallow, knowing that I had no choice but to sit back and let others handle things.

What Stella said makes sense, and the most reasonable thing would be to let the Queen deal with Harold's murderer and see what move the church makes to see their intentions. However, I made up my mind. I don't know how many more days I will be in the capital, and more than anything, I can't just stay still with my arms crossed. I wasn't going to let the church contact me first. No, I will go to them directly. I need an answer about Harold and about how reliable the words of the goddess Imris are about trusting her disciples.

I left the Guild with a firm step, walking down the cobblestone streets of the capital towards the church. However, I had not advanced much when I started feeling an uneasy feeling creep over me. It was as if someone, or something, was watching me. My instincts were rarely wrong, and the sensation made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

I attempted to scan the streets for any sign of an observer, my eyes darting from one corner to another. Despite my efforts, I couldn't find anyone who seemed interested in me. Whoever was watching must've been skilled at hiding, making it even more unnerving. My guard was up, and every sense was on high alert as I continued my way, cautious of every shadow and every movement around me.

"Stay focused, Darx," I told myself as I continued to walk, trying to shake off the feeling of being watched.

The church loomed ahead, its towering spires reaching for the heavens. I continued walking until I was finally in front of the huge door of the church.

Taking a deep breath, I pushed open the massive wooden doors, its creaking hinges echoing through the vast interior. The church was dimly lit by the light filtering through the stained glass windows, casting an array of colors onto the polished stone floor. The air was heavy with incense and the scent of burning candles. The church's interior was adorned with religious symbols and numerous statues of the goddess Imris in various poses – some depicting her as a nurturing mother, others showing her as a fierce warrior. Each statue seemed to exude an aura of divine grace, demanding respect from all who entered this sacred space.

I walked hesitantly down the central aisle, my footsteps echoing through the vast hall. The solemnity of the place weighed on me, and I couldn't help but feel small in the presence of such grandeur.

"Darx," A man in white robes called out softly, starting to walk towards me. I turned around to see one of the Church members standing there, his eyes holding a mix of curiosity and familiarity, "We've been expecting you."

"Expecting me?" I questioned quietly, surprised that they knew of my intentions. He didn't offer any further explanation, only gesturing for me to follow him. I hesitated for a moment before deciding to comply, curious about what awaited me.

The Church member led me through a series of winding corridors, past more paintings, statues, and murals depicting the life and teachings of the goddess Imris. We eventually arrived at a large room where an elderly man dressed in ornate white and gold robes knelt in deep prayer. It's the same priest I spoke to last time. Priest Gabriel. The Church member motioned for me to wait and then departed, leaving me alone with the praying priest.

I stood silently, observing the priest as he continued his prayers, his lips moving fervently without making a sound. Despite being anxious to speak with him, I decided to wait patiently for him to finish his prayers. After a few more minutes, Priest Gabriel finally finished his prayers and slowly stood up. He turned to face me, his eyes warm and kind as he greeted me with a gentle smile.

"Darx, my child," He said softly, gesturing towards an empty chair beside him, "Please, sit."

I hesitantly took a seat. Priest Gabriel's gaze never wavered from mine, and I couldn't help but feel the weight of his attention as if he were studying me.

"Darx," He began, his voice calm and steady, "I never doubted for a moment that you were still alive. You are the chosen one of our beloved goddesses, Imris. As a descendant of our goddess, your destiny would not be stopped by trifles."

His words caught me off guard, and I struggled to maintain my composure. For some reason, his compliments feel unpleasant.

"Thank you, Priest Gabriel," I managed to say, trying to hide my unease behind a polite smile, "But it seems as if you were waiting for me. Can I ask, how is that possible?" I asked.

"It's our faith," The priest responded, "As disciples of our goddess Imris, our duty is to wait for you every day until you are ready."

With that answer, it was clear to me that Priest Gabriel would not answer me directly and would give me vague answers. If I want to find out anything about the secrets they keep about the goddess or their involvement in Harold's death, I need to be intelligent in my questions and answers. I need to look like I trust them, and I'm considering agreeing to follow the church plan.

Because of my red eyes, the church wants to convince me that I am a descendant of the royalty of [Zrephia] and that I should be the one who governs the human lands. The church wants to supplant the Queen with a coup, but I know well that the church only wants to use me as a puppet king controlled by them. The only thing that matters to the church is power and control, and that is why I don't doubt that they were the ones who ordered Harold to be killed since he was one of the Queen's most trusted men.

"I am honored by your words," I replied, carefully choosing my words, my voice steady, "If it is true that I am of royal descent, I am willing to fulfill my duty to our people. But I must understand the full scope of your plan and how far the church is willing to go to achieve the goal. I need to know more about the goddess Imris to be sure of my decision."

Priest Gabriel's smile widened, his eyes gleaming with satisfaction, "Of course," He replied, "I understand your concerns and will do my best to answer your questions. Our plan is simple. We believe that you are the rightful ruler as a descendant of the royal family of Zrephia, and with your guidance, we can bring peace and prosperity to our lands. Something that the current kingdom has failed to do."

"I see," I replied, nodding thoughtfully, "But what about the Queen? She has ruled for many years, and her leadership has been mostly successful. I also heard that her right-hand man, Harold, was murdered months ago. I imagine that the Queen is not happy."

"I understand your concerns, Darx. I suppose you're telling me this because there are rumors that the church had something to do with the death of the Queen's advisor, but I assure you that they are lies scattered by the Queen," Priest Gabriel's expression darkened slightly. He leaned forward, his gaze intense, "We have reason to believe that the Queen is not what she appears to be," He said cryptically, "The Queen Zara has been corrupted by evil forces. That Queen killed her husband, the King, to be with the lancer Zhoron, and those are not just rumors, but they are the truth. Even worse is the rumor that the princess also has indecent relations with Zhoron too. I don't even want to imagine the vulgarity of the Queen and the Princess sharing a bed with the same man. With that, you can understand how low and degenerate the false royalty that governs us is. As disciples of our goddess, it is our duty to remove any obstacle that stands in the way of our people's prosperity and follow the true King."

I had already heard that rumor, but after meeting Princess Kathleen, I doubt it is true. And more than anything, that doesn't justify wanting to usurp the crown and cause hundreds of deaths in the process and even worse when the war against demons is at our doors.

"Our only goal is to serve the goddess and the people. We believe that you are the key to bringing peace and prosperity to our lands, and we will do everything in our power to support you in that endeavor, so please trust me." Priest Gabriel continued.

Priest Gabriel tried to assure me that I could trust them, but I couldn't shake the feeling that there was something he wasn't telling me. In turn, I attempted to subtly extract any information he might have about the goddess Imris and Harold's death, but it seemed like neither of us was willing to reveal too much. We danced around each other in a delicate game of verbal chess, neither wanting to give away our true intentions. It was frustrating, and eventually, our conversation came to a natural close. We exchanged farewells and promised to speak again soon, but as I walked to the exit, I couldn't shake the feeling that I made a mistake by coming here.

As I stepped out of the church, the sunlight washing over me, I felt a sudden chill run down my spine. The feeling of being watched had returned, but it was stronger than ever. Before I could look around for any potential threats, I heard a familiar voice.

"Darx!" Neku suddenly called out, seemingly appearing out of nowhere. "I've been waiting for you."

"N-Neku!? What are you doing here?" I asked, trying to hide my surprise.

"You won't find the answers you're looking for this way," Neku said, looking at me in the eyes without blinking, "We need to talk. I think we can help each other."

Without waiting for a response, Neku turned on her heel and entered the church, leaving me standing there, more confused than ever.

I wonder what Neku is referring to. In the time I spent with her in the cave, I learned that she is a church member, but I wonder what her intentions are and what she means by saying we can help each other. I really feel like I find more questions than answers...

I took a deep breath and began walking through the streets. My senses heightened as I tried to shake off the unnerving feeling of being watched. Every shadow seemed to conceal a potential threat, and every whispering breeze carried sinister undertones. My paranoia grew with each passing moment, and I found myself constantly glancing over my shoulder, searching for the source of my unease.

As I continued my uneasy walk through the city, I returned to the Guild to rest a little before going to meet Syvis at night and hear what answers she got from the Queen regarding going to the territory of the Dark Elves to ask for help from Syvis's father.

Night fell upon the city. After a brief respite in my guild room, I ventured out to a familiar park, which is the meeting place between Syvis and me whenever we agreed to meet. The anticipation of seeing her again and hearing about her visit to the castle filled me with anticipation. I also want to tell her what happened to me today at the church and listen to what she thinks about that. Once there, I found a secluded bench beneath the canopy of a large oak tree, a spot where Syvis and I often met. The air was crisp, and a gentle breeze rustled the leaves, creating a soothing atmosphere despite the weight of the day's events.

As the minutes ticked by, I found myself glancing around restlessly, searching for any sign of her approaching figure.

How odd. Syvis despises tardiness, and she has never been late before. Could something have kept her occupied? I highly doubt she forgot our meeting. ...It's frustrating that she's a member of Oblivion; their strict policies prevent anyone outside the Guild from entering their building—quite a contrast to my own Guild, which welcomes all without such constraints. I wish I could just go and look for her.

I waited for Syvis for over two hours, but no sign of her. "Where could she be?" I muttered under my breath, my impatience growing with each passing moment. I desperately wanted to see Syvis, not only for the comfort of her presence but also for the information she might have gathered during her visit to the castle. If we are going to leave the capital soon, I would like to know how much time we have left here.

As more time passed without any sign of Syvis, a heavy feeling of disappointment settled in my chest. I couldn't help but wonder if something had gone wrong or if she had simply forgotten

about our meeting altogether. My mind raced with possibilities, each one more disheartening than the last.

"Maybe she fell asleep," I thought to myself, trying to rationalize her absence, "She must be exhausted from everything that's happened lately." Despite my attempts to console myself, I couldn't shake the nagging feeling of sadness that plagued me.

Eventually, I decided to return to the Guild, my heart heavy with dejection and loneliness. As I walked back through the now-deserted streets, I couldn't help but have a bad feeling about all this. I feel like since I returned to the capital, everything has gone wrong for me.

I wonder where Syvis is.