

As we made our way back to the coastal village, I couldn't help but feel relieved to finally be outside the cave. The sky above us was a brilliant shade of blue, with fluffy white clouds lazily drifting by. The sea breeze was refreshing yet carried a distinct aroma of salt that tickled my nose. As we drew nearer to the village, the sound of waves crashing against the shore grew louder and more distinct.

Despite the picturesque scene that lay before me, I couldn't shake off the feeling that something was off about the surroundings. Small details caught my attention—the way the leaves rustled in the wind, the colors of the flowers along the path, and even the distant cries of birds seemed to echo strangely in my ears. It was as if the world itself was slightly askew, a sensation I couldn't quite articulate. Perhaps it was just my mind playing tricks on me, but I couldn't help but feel as though there was more to this idyllic setting than met the eye. It was as though something was amiss, something that I couldn't quite put my finger on.

I wonder why I feel this way...

Walking beside Syvis, I stole glances at her from the corner of my eye. Her usually confident and determined demeanor had shifted into something distant and contemplative. The air between us felt thick with unspoken words, a tension that I couldn't quite put my finger on. I knew something was amiss, and I couldn't shake off the feeling that Syvis was keeping something from me.

"Syvis," I began tentatively, "Is something bothering you?"

She turned her head slightly, but her expression didn't change as she looked at me, "No, it's nothing."

"Are you sure?" I pressed, my concern growing, "You seem... different."

She let out a small sigh, her gaze fixed on the path ahead, "I'm just tired from everything that happened in the cave. It's been a long and exhausting journey."

"Y-Yeah, you are right..." I nodded, not entirely convinced by her response.

We walked silently for a while. I wanted to believe her, but something in her voice told me there was more to it. The unease in my chest grew as we walked, and I couldn't shake the feeling that she was keeping something from me. I feel like I wanted to reach out to her, but I couldn't find the right words to say.

After some time, we reached the village. In an instant, my senses were overwhelmed by the vibrant and joyful atmosphere that permeated the air. I could hear the sounds of laughter and lively conversations filling the streets as the villagers went about their daily activities, enjoying the warm day. It was a stark contrast to the dark and eerie cave I had just emerged from.

We wandered through the animated streets until we reached the heart of the village. Here, the atmosphere was even more jubilant and carefree. A troupe of musicians played lively tunes that captivated the attention of all who passed by. The melodies seemed to dance in perfect harmony with the infectious energy that filled the air, and in reward, the people passing by left them some coins. Amidst the cheerful commotion, many vendors displayed their colorful wares, each stall a treasure trove of unique and fascinating items. Looking at all these people, I realized there are many more people than when we first arrived.

Initially, one would have assumed that because the hot months should already be ending, fewer people would visit this place. However, it seems that the heat has lasted longer than normal since it is still quite warm, and with that, it seems that people are attracted to come to places like this.

Abruptly, Syvis stopped in her tracks, her gaze fixed on something beyond me, "Darx," she said without looking at me, "I need to buy some ingredients for my potions. Why don't you, in the meantime, find a place for us to stay tonight while I go buy that."

My instinct was to offer to accompany her, but before I could speak, she continued, her words rushed, "I know you're tired too. I'll be quick. Find an inn nearby."

I blinked, taken aback by her sudden determination, "Are you sure? I can come with you."

She shook her head, a fleeting smile on her lips, "No, it's alright."

And just like that, she walked away, leaving me standing in the middle of the bustling street. I could only stare at her getting lost in the crowd while thinking that I would like her to tell me what was worrying her. Was it something I said? Did I do something wrong? ...I wished she would turn around and just tell me. I took a deep breath and decided to walk in the opposite direction.

As I walked through the bustling village, I couldn't help but shake my head in disbelief. The streets were overflowing with people, all rushing to their destinations. It was a chaotic scene, with vendors shouting out their wares and children darting in and out of the crowds. My main concern at the moment was finding a place for us to rest. I passed by several Inns, but they all seemed to be bursting at the seams with travelers. It was clear that finding an empty room would be no easy feat. I was starting to worry that Syvis would come back, and I still hadn't found a place we could stay. I must have visited at least half a dozen Inns before finally stumbled upon an Inn tucked between two shops. I pushed the door open, greeted by the warm scent of food.

The innkeeper, a middle-aged woman with tired eyes, looked up from her ledger. "Greetings, traveler. Looking for a room?"

I nodded, my gaze wandering around the Inn. "Yes, that's right. Is there any room available?"

"We have a few rooms available. Just give me a minute." The lady said before entering a back room behind the desk.

I was surprised that this Inn had several vacant rooms while others were filled to the brim with adventurers seeking shelter. I wonder why.

While I waited, a man who seemed to also be staying at the Inn approached me, his expression wary. "You're new here, aren't you?"

I turn to see him, "Something like that," I reply.

He glanced around as if to ensure no one else was listening, "Let me tell you something strange about this place. Months ago, a girl went crazy and killed another girl with whom she was sharing her room with a knife. It caused quite a scandal! After that, the girl who committed the terrible act walked the streets covered in blood, with the murder weapon still in her hand. She then fled into the forest and was never seen again. People say she might return and exact the same fate on the guests here, just like she did to the other poor girl."

A chill ran down my spine as he spoke, "S-So because of that rumor, not many people come to this place?" I asked.

"Yes, that's exactly how it is!" It is said that in the room where this happened, you can see the lifeless body of the blonde girl who died there at night, or when you are asleep in one of the rooms, you will suddenly open your eyes in the middle of the night. The murderous girl will be standing in front of your bed, staring at you, covered in blood, but you will not be able to see the face as it is covered by her black hair and blood."

Before I could respond, the innkeeper returned, and the man fell silent, stepping away with a nod of acknowledgment.

"Follow me, please!" The innkeeper said, " I will take you to your room."

I hesitated a bit but ended up following her. However, my thoughts were still consumed by the unsettling story. I wonder if all of that is true.

Once I got the key to the room, I decided to venture out into the streets once again, looking for Syvis to let her know that I found a room, and I was lucky enough to find her shortly after near the inn.

"Syvis!" I yelled at her, hoping she would hear me.

She turned to face me, her eyes reflecting a turmoil I couldn't quite comprehend. "Darx," she murmured.

"I found us a room," I said, hoping that this simple announcement might ease the tension between us. "It was difficult, but I found a good room where we can stay. It's that one over there!" I said, pointing with my finger.

A fleeting smile tugged at the corner of her lips, but it quickly faded as if she couldn't muster the strength to hold it, "Thank you, Darx. I appreciate it."

Something tugged at my heartstrings, "Syvis, is something wrong? You've been distant ever since we left the cave."

She averted her gaze before replying, "It's... complicated, Darx. I just need some time to sort things out."

"You can talk to me about anything, or if there is something you need help with, I am always willing to help you."

A sigh escaped her lips, laden with a mixture of regret and yearning. "I know, Darx. But please, not now. I promise I'll explain everything when the time is right."

The frustration within me swelled, but I held it back. I know Syvis and know that if something has her this way, it must be important. Although I don't really like the idea, I'll have to wait until she wants to tell me what's wrong with her.

I nodded, though my heart still ached, "Alright, Syvis. Just know that I'm here for you whenever you're ready."

With that, Syvis offered a faint smile, "Darx, there was an ingredient that I couldn't find. I'm going to the forest to look for it. It shouldn't be too hard to collect in this area."

"Do you want me to accompany you?" I said, waiting for her to say yes.

"I-I'll go alone... You go rest."

I wanted to press further, but I had no choice but to remain silent. Before I could say anything else, Syvis excused herself, leaving me alone with my thoughts, feeling helpless. I just watched her disappear into the crown once again.

Not knowing what to do, I just walked through the village aimlessly until I found myself drawn to the beach. This was my first time seeing the sea so close. I thought that seeing the ocean would make me happy since it was something I wanted to do since I was a child, but my other worries were not letting me enjoy the moment. Still, the sight of the waves crashing against the shore was calming. Sitting on the sand, I gazed out at the expanse of the sea and stayed there for a long time, thinking about many things.

Why is Syvis behaving like this? When we met on the bridge, she seemed happy to see me. Even when we were inside the portal, thinking that we would be trapped there, we were holding each other, waiting for the worst. Even there, I could feel how much Syvis didn't want to get away from me. Then, at what point did everything change?

Thinking about it, her change in attitude started as we approached the cave exit. Even so, no matter how much I think about it, I can't find the reason why. Am I leaving something out? What happened before that?

I kept thinking until I remembered the detail of Syvis's magic bag. Before being interrupted by Selgoth, Syvis picked up her magic bag from the ground, meaning she spent a few days without access to her potion. I know how important this potion is for Syvis and how it helps her suppress her urges imposed by being a Dark Elf. Even now, as soon as we left the cave, the first thing she did was buy ingredients to create more of those potions. For that same reason, she went to the forest to collect the last ingredient that she lacked.

Could that have something to do with her change in attitude? I'm sure I saw her drink the potion as soon as she grabbed her magic bag before we were trapped in the portal and also a short time after we left the cave, so I don't think that not being under the potion's effects is the reason.

As I tried to piece together the events leading up to Syvis' strange behavior, a disturbing thought crossed my mind.

W-Wait... before that. When we found Syvis on the bridge, she was with Kase on the bridge. Meaning that Syvis was with Kase when she didn't have her potions within reach... Could it be possible that something had happened between her and Kase? ...W-What am I thinking? S-Syvis told us when we found her that she, too, had just encountered Kase and that they hadn't been alone for long.

I-I have no reason to doubt Syvis. After all, Syvis knows what kind of person Kase is. She knows all the terrible things he had done to me. Syvis knows what kind of scum he is. She told me that she also hates Kase and only talks to him when necessary because they are guild members or because she cured Kase's sister. T-Thats right... Syvis would never betray me like that.

Ha... I'm a fool for even thinking that something happened between Syvis and Kase. Just thinking about it makes my heart feel squeezed, and I get a weird feeling in my stomach. That thought really makes me sick. There had to be another reason why Syvis was acting so strangely. I just needed to figure out what it was.

Since Syvis is my first girlfriend, I don't know how to deal with these situations. I'm going to wait for Dante to come out and ask for his advice. When it comes to women, it seems that he knows everything.

Hours passed, and the sun dipped below the horizon. I watched the sun sink beneath the horizon, casting a warm glow across the water. Unfortunately, I couldn't find the reason for Syvis's sudden change of attitude, and eventually, the chill of the night prompted me to return to the village. I stood up and started walking back to the streets of the town.

I wonder if Syvis has already returned... Maybe she's already in the Inn room. Perhaps we can go get something to eat.

As I walked through the village's winding paths, a group of three men stumbled toward me, their gazes wide with shock and fear. One of them pointed at me, his voice trembling, "A ghost!"

Confusion gripped me as their words washed over me. "What? What's going on?"

After seeing them for a few seconds, I managed to remember them. They were the three drunkards we found as soon as we got to this village.

For some reason, they kept staring at me with wide eyes, with one of them pointing a trembling finger, his voice wavering with fear, "Ghost! Ghost!"

Confusion welled up inside me, and I raised an eyebrow. "Hey! Are you three drunk or something like that? I'm not a ghost."

They exchanged nervous glances before one of them managed to speak, "A-Are you really not a ghost?"

"Of course not! What makes you think that?" I reply, "If you want, you can touch me to realize that I am flesh and blood."

I said that as a joke, but one of them really stretched out his hand and touched my arm with his finger and, realizing that obviously, I wasn't a ghost. Then they looked at each other, confused.

"Now, will you tell me why you think I'm a ghost?" I asked.

The men stumbled back, faces pale. "I-I don't understand... M-Months ago, all the adventurers came out of the cave except for two—you and a Dark Elf girl..."

I struggled to process their words. "Months ago? What are you talking about?"

They exchanged uneasy glances before one of them continued, his voice quaking, "It happened eight months ago. You and a Dark Elf girl never came out."

"Are you playing with me?" I asked, raising my voice, "There's no way that's true. Me and the Dark Elf girl you mentioned were the first to come out of the cave. The others are still inside, and we are waiting for them to come out."

When I raised my voice, the three of them got scared. It seems they still think I'm a ghost or something like that. Maybe the 3 of them are actually very drunk or took some substance that makes them say nonsense.

The three guys also looked confused until one of them kept talking, "We are telling you the truth! Eight months have passed since the other adventurers left the cave, except the two of you."

Another one of the guys continued the conversation, "There was a big fuss over you two! A group of adventurers came from the capital sometime later with the purpose of finding you and the girl. Even people from the church came looking for you. They all searched all over the cave for months. I-I think it was your mother who led one of the search parties."

"M-My mother? W-What are you talking about? There's no way that's possible."

"Her name is Ilene, right!?" The other guy, who hadn't spoken until now, spoke, "She was here for five months looking for you. The poor woman was devastated when they never found you after searching the whole cave. Even Kase, the S-Rank, helped in the search."

I felt a chill run down my spine. I thought it was all drunken nonsense until I heard my mother's name. T-This has to be a lie, but how do they know my mother's name? Just what is going on?

One of the guys continued, "We all thought that you or the girl were nobles or someone kind of important person that even an S-rank helped in your search. After not finding either of you, they sealed the entrance to the cave to prevent anyone else from getting lost in that maze."

"What is today's date?" I asked, almost stuttering.

They told me the date; as they said, it was eight months more than it should. Perplexed and filled with a sense of unease, I reached out and grabbed the arm of a stranger passing by. Startled by my sudden intrusion, the stranger's eyes widened in surprise. With a trembling voice, I implored them to share the date with me, hoping against hope that, somehow, the previous revelation was a lie. To my astonishment, the stranger confirmed the exact date that had been relayed to me by those three. My heart raced, and a chill ran down my spine as I realized that this couldn't possibly be a mere coincidence. I stopped three more people in rapid succession. Each encounter mirrored the previous one, with every individual confirming the same date. It was as if the entire world had conspired to deceive me.

"A-Are you okay?" One of the three drunks asked me.

E-Eight months...? The realization hit me like a tidal wave. My mind raced, piecing together the odd sensations and the disjointed moments that had been haunting me. This can't be happening...

Without even thinking about it, I turned away from the men and sprinted through the village streets. My heart was racing, and my mind a chaotic swirl of thoughts and emotions. It felt like the world had shifted beneath me, leaving me suspended in a reality I couldn't comprehend. I had to find Syvis. She was the only one who could possibly make sense of this. I searched frantically, scanning the faces of the people, hoping to catch a glimpse of her familiar form. Finally, I spotted her near the village's exit. My footsteps slowed as I approached her, watching her just standing near the village entrance.

"Syvis!" I called her name.

She turned towards my direction, and I saw her expression mirroring the shock and disbelief that mine probably had. Our eyes locked, and without her having to tell me anything, I immediately realized that she had also already discovered what was going on. For a moment, we simply stood there, not knowing what to say.

I stepped closer, "You know, don't you?"

Syvis nodded and began to speak with a trembling voice, "S-Since we left the cave, I had felt something strange, but I didn't know exactly what it was. Later, when collecting the missing flower for my potion, I saw other flowers that should not be in this season. After talking to some people from this place, I discovered that eight months had passed since the others left the cave."

"S-Something similar happened to me," I reply, "How the hell could something like this be possible? I believe it's only been a few hours since we parted ways with the others."

"I'm not sure..." Syvis responded, "I'm still trying to process all of this. The only explanation I can find is that time inside the portal fluctuates differently than here. Which makes sense considering that Selgoth was also confused by how long it had been since he had been locked."

"W-What do we do now...?" I asked her.

"...For now, let's go back to the Inn's room to talk in a place without so much noise."