

Hana and Tashiro had just finished telling us their stories, and now, my mind was consumed by the possibility that Shalia might be locked up in Cour Earl's mansion. But why would Shalia be here, and how was she caught? I thought Shalia was sent to the border as reinforcement. Could it be a trap? However, when I look at Hana and Tashiro's faces, they seem sincere and worried.

I let go of Tashro, who immediately ran to Hana's side.

"Darx," Namy said, her voice serious, "We shouldn't get involved. It's not our problem, and rescuing those girls would only attract unwanted attention to us. Remember what situation we are in, and if we are discovered, we will have all the adventurers in the city after us."

Usofra nodded in agreement, "My sister is right. We can't afford to risk being caught. You said it yourself. Let's get what we need, and let's continue with our journey."

I clenched my fists. My heart raced at the thought of leaving Shalia behind if she was truly in danger. I indeed had no desire to get involved in other people's problems. It is very likely that this is a trap, and it would be best to escape immediately; however, now that I know that Shalia may be in trouble, I just can't abandon her.

"Maybe you're right," I conceded, "But I can't abandon Shalia if there's even a chance she's really locked up in that mansion."

Namy sighed, running a hand through her long, black hair, "I knew this would happen... you just can't stop worrying about others even after everything that's happened to you. Just worry about yourself for once!"

"Agreed," Usofra added, "We are taking a big risk if we get involved."

"I made up my mind," I responded, "I have no right to force you two to help me. I can take care of this on my own if you don't want to get involved."

Namy and Usofra exchanged a glance, their expressions softening. After a moment of silence, Namy sighed again, "Fine," She conceded, "We can't just leave you alone. We'll help you. I still think it's a bad idea, though."

"Thanks," I replied, "But I don't plan to go in blindly and get caught. I'm not just going to take these two's word for it. We need to find out if what these two say is true before we do anything drastic," Then I turn to look at Namy and Usofra with a smile, "And I know no one is better than you two for this kind of work."

With our course of action decided, Namy and Usofra turned their attention to Hana and Tashiro, "Tell us everything you know about the security at Cour Earl's mansion," Namy demanded, her tone firm, "Times when staff goes out of the mansion, any patterns or habits they have, anything that would give us a way inside."

Hana and Tashiro hesitated, glancing at each other before responding, "W-Well," Hana began, wringing her hands nervously, "I was watching the mansion looking for a way to enter and noticed that two maids usually go out in the mornings to buy in the markets. Besides, the guards outside the gate change shifts around midnight."

"Also," Tashiro added, "There's a side entrance near the gardens that the staff uses. It's not as heavily guarded as the main entrance, so it might be easier to get in there without being noticed."

"Good," Usofra said, nodding, "We can use that."

Since it was already past midnight and we were tired, we decided to spend the night in this place and investigate in the morning. While Usofra took Hana and Tashiro upstairs, we prepared something to eat with the ingredients in the Inn's kitchen.

"Darx," Namy said while cooking beside me, "Are you sure about trusting them? They could be leading us into a trap."

"Call it a hunch," I responded, my eyes never leaving the front, "I believe they're genuinely concerned about the kidnapped women."

For the rest of the night, we got as much information as possible from Hana and Tashiro. After that, we went to sleep, taking turns to make sure Hana and Tashiro didn't escape. The next morning, Namy and Usofra prepared to leave the Inn while I stayed at the Inn again, making sure Hana and Tashiro didn't escape.

"We'll infiltrate Cour Earl's mansion and find out if Shalia is really locked up there," Usofra said, opening the door of the Inn, "Make sure you keep an eye on those two."

"Yeah," I answered, "Don't take any unnecessary risks."

"Of course," Namy replied before she and Usofra disappeared into the pre-dawn gloom.

I returned to the second floor and entered the room where Hana and Tashiro were sitting close to each other, whispering to each other. As soon as they saw me enter, they cut off the conversation. I simply sat on a chair near the door, gazing at them, grabbing a book that was on the table to pass the time.

"How do your companions plan to enter the mansion?" Hana asked, looking anxious, "Didn't you listen to me yesterday when I said the mansion is filled with guards and adventurers? There's no way they can enter unnoticed!"

I momentarily took my gaze off the book, turning to look at her, "It's not something you have to worry about. And other than that, Namy and Usofra will have no problems entering the mansion. They both have a lot of experience in infiltrating enemy territory."

Hana and Tashiro turned to look at each other, confused by my statement.

"Hey, Dox?" I suddenly hear Sunshine's voice echoing softly from within the medallion, "Who is this Shalia you're so worried about?"

I smiled faintly, "Shalia is a friend," I said, "We were part of the same party in my time with Midnight Dawn. She, Leona, and Ryul... we did a lot of quests together."

"Ohh, I see," Sunshine replied, her tone curious, "Tell me more about them."

I leaned against the chair, closing my eyes as I recounted our past exploits. "Shalia was our healer, always making sure we stayed alive and well. Leona was our warrior, never afraid to charge headfirst into battle. And Ryul... well, he is a monk who hits very hard."

For a long time, I spent time telling Sunshine stories about the various quests I did with them while Sunshine listened and asked for details with curiosity.

"Sounds like you all had a great bond," Sunshine mused.

"We did," I admitted, feeling a pang of nostalgia, "But things have changed since then."

As I shared my memories with Sunshine, Hana, and Tashiro couldn't help but overhear our conversation. They exchanged glances, curiosity piqued by the talking medallion.

"Um, Darx?" Hana hesitantly asked, "Who are you talking to? It seems like... you're speaking with your medallion."

"Ah," I chuckled, realizing that it must have seemed strange to them.

"I'm Sunshine. A beautiful Fairy! However, I can't leave the medallion right now because adventurers with sensory abilities might detect my presence. Or something like that, Usofra said."

"W-Wow, a fairy!" Tashiro exclaimed, his eyes widening in surprise. Hana mirrored his expression of amazement, both seemingly fascinated by this revelation.

"HAHAHAHA!" Sunshine laughed, making fun of Hana and Tashiro's fascination, "Surprising, right!? If you give me fruits, I might come out of the medallion and give you the opportunity to see a real Fairy. What do you say?"

"Don't even think about it!" I said, "You know you can't get out of the medallion just yet."

"Darx," Hana began, her tone thoughtful, "If it's not too much of an intrusion to ask... y-you don't seem like the fearsome criminal who fought against the entire Oblivion guild. What led you to become... well, what you are now?"

I hesitated, not quite sure how to respond. Never in my life did it even cross my mind that I would end up as a criminal. Just as I was about to speak, we were interrupted by Usofra and Namy's return.

"Darx, we're back!" Usofra announced as she and Namy entered the room. The two of them were wearing maid outfits, with short skirts and form-fitting designs that emphasized their curvy figures.

"HAHAHA! Oh, this is priceless!" Sunshine couldn't help but snicker from within the medallion, "My lovely demonesses have turned into cute little maids!"

"Shut up, Sunshine," Usofra grumbled, her cheeks turning a deep shade of red. She looked incredibly uncomfortable, a rare sight for someone who was usually so confident and composed.

"Demonesses!?" Hana asked, confused.

"I-It's just an expression," I responded, trying to justify what the indiscreet Sunshine just said so that Hana and Tashiro did not realize that Usofra and Namy were demons, "Anyway," I said, trying to get us back on track, "Did you two manage to infiltrate the mansion?"

"Yes, we did," Usofra confirmed.

Namy, looking strangely serious, quickly added, "I'm going to go change."

"Wait," I asked, concerned, "Is everything okay, Namy? Did something happen?"

Usofra hesitated before answering, "When we left the mansion still disguised as maids, we unexpectedly ran into people Namy seemed to know. Namy called them Leona and Gerald."

"Leona and Gerald are here too?" I couldn't hide my shock.

"Indeed," Usofra replied, her voice laced with both surprise and concern, "They were asking around for information about Shalia."

"Shalia? Are they searching for her as well?" The revelation that Leona and Gerald were in Oidao, too, made my heart race.

"Apparently so," She continued, "They approached us when they saw us exit the mansion, mistaking us for the actual maids, and asked if we had any knowledge of a girl named Shalia. It seems that Shalia has been missing for a couple of weeks."

"Did you tell them anything?" I asked.

"No, we didn't," Uofra reassured me, "We played dumb and told them we didn't know anything. But it seems like they're also suspecting Courl Earl to be behind Shalia's disappearance."

"Is it true then? Is Shalia really locked up in the mansion along with other girls?" I asked, my voice filled with a mixture of hope and dread.

"Unfortunately, yes," Uofra confirmed, "We saw her there, along with several other women. It appears Hana and Tashiro didn't lie."

Hana and Tashiro exchanged glances, their faces filled with desperation, "Please," Hana implored, wringing her hands, "Now that you know you must save those women."

"I know I don't have the right to ask you this, but please save my sisters," The guards are bought, and the adventurers are more focused on war, or they simply don't have the desire to go against a noble with as much authority as Courl Earl." Tashiro Tashiro added, his voice firm but pleading.

I clenched my fists, feeling anger boiling inside me. The thought of Shalia and the other women being held captive by this asshole.

Uofra excused herself to change out of her maid's disguise. So, I guess the reason for Namy's strange attitude was her encounter with Gerald. After all, there is history between the two of them. When they returned, Namy had also changed into her usual attire and looked normal again.

"Alright," I announced, "We'll save Shalia and the imprisoned women tonight. Courl Earl will pay for what he did."

Uofra furrowed her brow, clearly concerned, "We're going to need a plan," She said, "The mansion is full of strong-looking adventurers and guards. The only way to save those women will be to eliminate all of them, which will attract a lot of attention."

"Uofra's right..." I agreed, "We'll have to leave [Oidao] as soon as possible after getting rid of Courl Earl, or more adventurers will arrive when they notice the commotion in the mansion."

Namy chimed in, her eyes narrowing, "We haven't yet purchased the supplies we need to continue our journey. After the attack on the mansion, we won't be able to make those purchases later."

Hana and Tashiro exchanged a glance before Hana stepped forward, "We can help with that," She offered, looking sincere, "We'll buy all the supplies your group needs and wait for you outside the city with a carriage so you can leave immediately after the rescue."

Namy scoffed, her arms crossed over her chest, "I don't trust their offer. It could be a trap."

"Please," Hana insisted earnestly, her eyes filled with determination, "We just want to save the women who are in that place against their will. We don't care about the reward for Darx's capture."

I studied Hana and Tashiro, trying to gauge their sincerity. Despite Namy and Usofra's disapproval, I decided to trust them. But not without issuing a warning, "If you betray us, you'll pay dearly. I will show no mercy, understand?"

"Understood," Hana and Tashiro replied in unison, nodding solemnly.

"Then it's settled," I said, "Let's prepare ourselves for tonight."

Night fell over Oidao, casting shadows on the streets and shrouding us in darkness. As we left the Inn, Namy, Usofra, and I pulled our hooded cloaks tighter around ourselves, concealing our features from any prying eyes. Our plan was clear.

"Remember," I said, my voice cold and relentless, "We're here to save Shalia and the other women. Kill anyone inside the mansion who gets in our way."

Namy and Usofra nodded, "Understood."

Back in [Riledo]

The grand throne room of the Castle was silent, save for the flicker of torchlight dancing across the stone walls. A large semitransparent bubble encased three people in the middle of the throne room, ensuring no outside ears could hear the discussion within. Inside, Queen Zara, her bodyguard S-Rank Zhoron, and Aelbrecht, the legendary Guild Master of Dark Dragons, stood around a large, ornate table with a map on it.

"The plans in motion are the Dark Elves, the Dragons, the Dwarves and Elves, the Beast-Kind, and finally, Darx," Queen Zara began, "Let's discuss the Dark Elves first."

Zhoron nodded, "Kase, Syvis, and Ilene are on their way to Dark Elf territory. They left by ship and should reach their destination in the next few days. The leaked information reached the ears of the Beast-Kind quickly, as we expected. The Beast-Kind were aware from the beginning that an S-Rank human was heading to the Dark Elves, a move that should instill doubt in their

invasion plans if they were indeed planning an invasion," After a short pause, he continued, "Our spies in Beast-Kind territory report that opinions remain deeply divided, with the two S-Rank Beast-Kind leaders promoting different viewpoints. Currently, it appears that Syvis and Kase will be able to carry out their objective without interference from the Beast-Kind."

"That's good news," The Queen said with her eyes focused on the map on the table.

Zhoron's brow furrowed, "However, can we trust Kase to help Syvis? His past actions are... troubling."

The Queen's eyes hardened, "Kase will do his job well since he took the bait. Kase believes he can redeem himself and become the Guild Master of Oblivion. Kase thinks Arthur's appointment is only temporary. Kase is desperate to prove himself, thinking that success with the Dark Elves will erase his crimes. What Kase doesn't know is that I lied about the Oblivion investors' decision. The Oblivion investors prioritize profit and appearances over what is right. Therefore, they want to keep an S-Rank as Guild Master, no matter what. Most of them wanted Kase to be the Guild Master since they feared Oblivion would lose status and, with that money. They fear the Dark Dragons will surpass Oblivion even more after Agnes's death. However, the Oblivion guild members indeed don't want Kase to lead them," She continued, her tone steely, "I made Kase and Syvis leave the city immediately after the reunion, ensuring Kase had no time to verify my claims. Kase is too focused on his mission and his obsession with Syvis to realize the truth. Mr. Enzo's temporary arrest for irrelevant crimes was a necessary precaution to prevent him from contacting his son Kase and telling him the truth."

Aelbrecht, with his spectral voice, added, "While Kase and Syvis handle the Dark Elves, Zhoron, you should visit the dragons. I'll remain here to protect the city and the Queen."

The Queen said, turning to look at Zhoron, "The Dragon Mountains and the territory of the Dark Elves are close. If everything goes well, the distance is short, so you can carry out the next procedure. Is everything going well with the bracelet plan?"

Zhoron inclined his head. "Understood. I'll depart immediately after this meeting," He responded to Aelbrecht. Then, addressing the Queen, he continued, "Regarding the bracelet plan, the day Kase, Syvis, and Ilene left the city, I intercepted Amelia, who was planning to follow them. I had been searching for her after receiving reports of her involvement in Darx's battle against Oblivion. Although Amelia was initially distrustful, I managed to gain her trust and bring her to our side. Amelia revealed everything she knew about Kase, her reasons for wanting to kill him, and about his skill. As I mentioned before, Amelia suspects that Kase possesses a skill capable of controlling people's wills, which would explain the strange behavior of Ilene. Guild Master Aelbrecht has noted this abnormality, having known Ilene during her brief time with the Dark Dragons."

"I ordered Amber to investigate the skill records for skills with characteristics similar to what Amelia described, but she found nothing equivalent," The Queen added, "Most likely, it is the skill granted by the Goddess to S-Ranks."

"That's right, Your Majesty," Zhoron replied, "However, by the time I discovered this, Ilene was already far from the city with Kase, so there was nothing I could do. Additionally, we don't know the specifics of Kase's skill. I believe it has limitations; otherwise, someone like Kase wouldn't hesitate to control you or me to achieve his malicious objectives."

"Zhoron did well to come to me upon hearing this before acting hastily," The Guild Master Aelbrecht spoke, "The skills given by the Goddess to the S-Rank have to be taken with caution. They can be great powers or heavy penances."

After a brief silence, Zhoron continued explaining the bracelet plan. "Given the circumstances, we must make the most of the situation. The relic twin bracelets lent by the Queen will be invaluable. I sent Amelia on a ship wearing one to follow Kase and Syvis. She has assured me she will monitor them closely. Once Kase and Syvis's mission is complete, Amelia will activate her bracelet. I will be able to track her location using the other bracelet I'm wearing, which will guide me to hers. If the Queen has not changed her mind, I will carry out what she asked of me." Zhoron finished by turning to look at the Queen, waiting for her confirmation.

The Queen closed her eyes for a moment, meditating, and then opened them again, looking Zhoron in the eyes, "Kase, being an S-Rank assassin, would have been invaluable in killing specific targets in the war against Demons. However, Kase's attitude and unpredictability make him more dangerous than useful. And even more so now that we know Kase has a skill that can control people. Eliminating Kase is a necessity," The Queen stopped for a second and, with her gaze fixed on Zhoron and a firm voice, gave the order, "Kill Kase on his way back to Riledo once Kase and Syvis have secured the Dark Elves to our side."

"Understand. Kase is a liability we can't afford." Zhoron replied.

"Since Ilene and Syvis are under Kase's control, they will likely try to defend him. It shouldn't be difficult for you to kill the three of them, but as a personal favor, I ask you not to eliminate Ilene." Aelbrecht requested Zhoron, turning to look at him with his skull-like face.

"Of course!" Zhoron replied, "I know that Ilene could be useful to control Darx, and I don't plan to eliminate Syvis either since we need her to maintain a good relationship with the Dark Elves."

Zhoron's gaze shifted to the map, "How is the situation going with the Elves and Dwarves?"

The Queen pointed with her finger on the map, more specifically at the line that separates the territory of the Elves and Dwarves, "If the Dark Elves ally with us, it will strengthen our position in mediating the conflict between the Elves and Dwarves. Nevertheless, apart from that, Guild

Master Aelbrecht is also taking other measures to resolve this conflict. We will leave this task in the hands of Dark Dragons."

"Understand!" Zhoron replied.

"All races must unite against the Demons," The Queen continued, "I am still working on a truce with the Beast-Kind. When you return, Zhoron, I expect to have their armies ready to join ours, so leave that matter to me. With Humans, Beast-Kind, and Dragons allied, we can mount a formidable attack against the Demons. Once the Elves, Dwarves, and Dark Elves join, our chances of victory will increase significantly."

The room fell silent as they moved to the final and most crucial topic: Darx.

"What about Darx?" Zhoron broke the silence, "The latest report indicates that Darx is in [Oidao]. I'm still not entirely convinced that letting him go into Demons' territory is the best option. Darx's group is very close to the border, and if they cross it, there will be nothing we can do. The risk we're taking by allowing Darx to go is immense. If Darx really is who Aelbrecht assumes he might be, we need Darx alive and on our side."

Queen Zara said, unable to hide her concern, "It's a necessary gamble. If everything else fails, Darx reaching his true potential might be our only hope. We can only presume that Darx is entering demon territory with a specific purpose in mind. We can only hope that this purpose is related to the suspicion that the former Demon Queen is still alive. If that is the case and Darx seeks to find her, both would be beneficial for us."

Zhoron looked grim, "If Darx allies with the Demons, we are doomed..."

Aelbrecht interjected, his voice steady, "Darx's quest is vital. The war is just the immediate threat. We cannot let the information that put us two steps ahead in this entire conflict for which Azriel gave his life be in vain.

We know who this new Demon King is and what he wants. However, the real danger lies in whoever orchestrates all this. Darx's journey may reveal our true enemy and perhaps shed light on the past. I have the feeling that everything is connected to the destruction of [Zrephia] centuries ago. We need to trust Darx."

Queen Zara added, "We aren't leaving everything entirely to chance. Stella is shadowing Darx. She is the one who is updating us on everything with her crows, and her companion will be able to help both of them follow Darx into demonic territory. Stella's latest report indicates that Darx, the two demons, and the Fairy are inside a small Inn along with two other people. Darx will soon leave [Oidao] and enter demonic territory through the western mountains."

A heavy silence settled over the room as the gravity of their situation weighed on them. Queen Zara looked at Zhoron and Aelbrecht, her resolve clear, "We must succeed."