The cobblestone streets of Riledo felt cold and unyielding beneath my boots as I walked dizzy and with a lump in my throat, trying to get away from where my mother was aimless. The city, usually so vibrant and alive, now seemed to mock me with its cheerfulness. It was a stark contrast to the turmoil inside me-an overwhelming sense of betrayal and distress that threatened to consume me entirely.

"Damn it all," I muttered under my breath, slamming my fist against the cold stone wall of a nearby building, still unable to wrap my head around the fact that my mother had married Kase.

How could she have done this? I know she must felt alone, and I know I told her that I would like her to find a partner, but why would she choose Kase, knowing how much I despise him? Did Kase take advantage of her vulnerability when my mother thought I was dead? I-If so, maybe I can convince her to leave him... Shit, shit, shit!!! Did my mother really told me the truth? Did it all start when Kase helped her look for me when I was missing, or was there something between them even before that? I-I don't know what to think or do anymore...

My thoughts raced, desperately trying to make sense of it all.

As I continued to walk, the weight of everything settled heavily on my chest. I clenched my fists, anger, and helplessness coursing through me. Why did this have to happen? And why now, when everything seemed to be going well for once? Every step felt like a battle; my mind waged war against itself, torn between wanting to understand and wishing to forget it all. Lost in my thoughts, I aimlessly kept roaming the streets until, almost by instinct, I found myself standing in front of my guild building. I guess I unconsciously headed to this place. Taking a deep breath, I ascended the steps leading to the entrance and pushed open the double doors, revealing the grandeur of the guild's great hall.

"D-DARX? Darx! Is that really you?" A familiar voice called out, snapping me out of my thoughts.

I turned to see Elina running toward me with a mixture of shock and fear on her face.

"Elina..." I breathed, momentarily distracted from the turmoil within me.

"T-Tell me I'm not seeing a ghost?" Elina continued bringing her glasses closer to her eyes as if she was trying to see better.

"I'm not a ghost," I reply, "It's really me. I just came back."

"I feel like I'm going to faint. Everyone thought you were dead! W-What happened?" She asked, her eyes wide as she held onto my arm, "How can you suddenly appear as if nothing had happened?"

"Long story... I'll explain later," I replied, forcing a weak smile before adding, "I'm glad to see you too."

"Darx, you look very pale. Are you sure you're okay? Come in and sit down." Elina said, pulling my arm.

After taking a few steps following Elina and seeing the tables with just a few people, I said, "There aren't many people here."

Elina paused, her expression turning somber, "Yeah, the guild has been notably quiet and less populated these last few weeks. Almost everyone is out of the city right now. Fitgrot, Gerald, Dante, Leona, and others are on the northern border, helping to prepare the defense against the demons. William and Ryul are accompanying Princess Kathleen on her journey, looking for an alliance with the Beat-Kind. And Shalia, Hisa, Neku, and Seto are in the middle of a quest."

"I see..." I reply.

"It's a shame they're not here to see you're alive. Everyone suffered greatly with the news of your disappearance and then the devastating belief that you were gone for good. Shalia, in particular, was deeply affected." Elina said, her voice filled with a mix of relief and sorrow.

"I see," I muttered, feeling even more isolated than before.

"Hey," Elina said gently, placing a hand on my shoulder, "They'll be back soon enough. In the meantime, you should rest because you really look like you're exhausted."

"Thanks, Elina." I forced another smile, trying my best to sound grateful despite the crushing weight of everything that had transpired since my return to Riledo.

My mother's betrayal and the absence of my friends left an aching emptiness in my heart.

"Let's go," Elina urged, leading to one of the tables.

As we sat down at the table, Elina spoke up again, "Have you already gone to see your mother? She was quite distraught about you."

"....Y-Yes."

"That's good! Not just Ilene but numerous guild members and even individuals from the church were searching for you. Where on earth did you manage to conceal yourself so effectively that no one could find you?" Elina persisted, her curiosity piqued by the mystery of my disappearance.

"Ah? Did the church actually send people searching for me in the cave?" I asked.

"Yes, they did. Now that you're back, you need to be cautious around them. Dante made an effort to keep them away from Ilene while she was trying to locate you. Even though Dante never shared his reasons with me, I am well aware that the current church leaders are individuals to be wary of," Elina replied, her expression etched with concern.

"I wished I could have spoken with Dante; there are several things I would have liked to discuss in more depth. I suppose Harold can assist me with that, too." I said quietly to myself.

Elina hesitated momentarily before spiking again, "About that... there's one more thing you should know, Darx. It's about Harold."

"Harold? What's the matter with him?" I asked.

"Someone... someone murdered him a few months ago," Elina revealed, unable to meet my eyes.

"M-Murdered?" I choked out the word, feeling a wave of nausea sweep over me. My hands clenched into fists, nails digging into my palms, " How could this be? Harold was the queen's right hand and rarely left the castle. Who could have possibly killed him? Who did it?" I demanded, anger and grief warring within me. My heart pounded in my chest, and it felt like I couldn't breathe.

With sadness in her eyes, Elina replies, "It seems that it was his girlfriend who killed him, although the motive was unclear. It appeared that Harold's girlfriend was affiliated with the church. We suspected this might have been orchestrated under the orders of the church's high command, considering Harold's role threatened the church's plans of weakening the kingdom. However, there was no concrete evidence, and the church vehemently denied any involvement, dismissing it as a mere lover's quarrel gone awry," Elina admitted, her voice cracking with emotion, "The authorities are still investigating. But I promise you, Darx, we'll find out who really did this, and we'll make them pay."

I didn't expect news like that, much less that it would affect me so much. Tears welled up in my eyes, blurring my vision. Harold had always been there for me, a guiding hand and a reassuring presence when I needed.
I can still vividly recall the last time we met. He cautioned me about the dangers of being seen together and advised me to be careful around the church. Was that why he died? Did I...

"Darx..." Elina murmured, reaching out to take my hand. Her touch was warm and comforting, but it did little to assuage the turmoil raging inside me.

"Please give me some time alone," I whispered, my voice barely audible. I couldn't bear to be near anyone right now. I needed to process this devastating news and come to grips with the fact that Harold was truly gone.

"Of course," Elina agreed softly, giving my hand a gentle squeeze before releasing it. She stood up and left me sitting at the table, allowing me the solitude I desperately craved.

With tears streaming down my face, I vowed that I would find out who had taken Harold's life and seek justice for him. No matter what it took. I would not rest until his murderer was brought to justice.

As I sat there for quite a while, trying to process my mother's betrayal and Harold's death, the door to the guild creaked open. Sonn, after Oliver, appeared in front of me, his eyes filled with concern.

"Darx," Oliver said, his voice wavering, "I heard what happened. I came as soon as I could."

He pulled out a chair from beside me and took a seat.

"Oliver," I managed to choke out, my throat tight with emotion, "Tell me everything you know about my mother and Kase."

He looked at me with sympathy before taking a deep breath and beginning his recollection, "After the news of your disappearance became known, Ilene left the capital to look for you in the cave along with Kase. Five months later, they returned without you."

"Go on," I urged, clenching my fists under the table.

"Ever since then, I've tried to search for answers from your mother, but she started living in Kase's mansion for some reason," Oliver continued, his voice tinged with frustration, "I tried to go look for her several times, but the people at the mansion wouldn't let me contact her. I was never able to speak directly with her. Shortly after, the news of their marriage became public, and... well, you know the rest."

His words felt like a punch to the gut, and I struggled to breathe. The woman who had raised me, whom I had trusted and loved, had betrayed me in the worst possible way.

"Thanks, Oliver," I whispered hoarsely, knowing that despite the pain his words caused, I needed to hear them. I needed to face the truth, no matter how much it hurt.

With a heavy heart, I rested my head in my hands, feeling the weight of the world pressing down upon me. Betrayal, pain, and loss were all I could feel.

"Darx, there's more," Oliver hesitated for a moment before continuing, "Since you and Kase went on that quest, Amelia also disappeared. I investigated and found that Amelia and Kase's other fiance, Tricia, left town following Kase shortly after."

"Amelia?" I looked up, surprised by this revelation. Even though Amelia and I weren't exactly on friendly terms, she was someone who was very close to me in the past, "Did something happen to her?"

"A-Amelia is missing..." Oliver responded, remaining silent for a few seconds, his face reflecting his anguish before continuing, "In fact, I expected you to know something, but I realize that you don't know anything."

"Do you have any clues or something? Is she okay? I-Is she a-alive?" I asked, desperate for any information.

"Unfortunately, I don't know...," Oliver replied solemnly, "No matter how hard I searched, even going to the coastal village looking for her, neither Amelia nor Tricia appeared, and Kase didn't give me any answers. However, I did hear a rumor that Amelia might be alive."

"Tell me what you know!" I echoed, hope flickering inside me despite my pain.

"Apparently, There was a rumor in that coastal village about two girls, who I think are Amelia and Tricia. The rumor is that there was an incident that ended in disaster. It seems that Amelia ended up killing Tricia, and now Amelia is possibly hiding somewhere," Oliver explained, his voice heavy with concern, "I don't know if it's true or not, but that's what I've heard. The fact that Tricia was murdered is true since I confirmed it. With Tricia dead and Amelia missing, I think this really happened. Since killing a noble person is a severe crime, Amelia must be hiding. At least is what I prefer to believe rather than that Amelia is dead."

"Amelia... in hiding..." I muttered, my head spinning with this new piece of information.

So many questions filled my mind. Why were Amelia and Tricia following Kase? And why would Amelia kill Tricia? Now that I remember, I heard that same rumor.

"Seriously... what on earth is happening today... it feels like the universe conspired to make me miserable," I whispered.

"I understand you've been bombarded with bad news since your return, but I need you to know, Darx, how genuinely relieved I am to have you back," Oliver said softly, his hand resting gently on my shoulder. "I truly believed I had lost both you and Amelia. Now that you're here, it fills me with hope that we might locate Amelia, and the three of us could be reunited, just like the old days."

I knew he meant every word, and I was profoundly grateful for his unwavering support. Yet, his words, his presence–none of it could extinguish the pain that consumed me like wildfire. My mother's betrayal, Harold's death, Amelia's disappearance... it was all too overwhelming to bear.

"Stay strong, Darx," Oliver said gently, squeezing my shoulder before standing up to leave, "We'll get through this."

As Oliver left back to work, I sat there in silence, trying to process everything I had learned. The world around me seemed to fade away as I tried to make sense of it all, but the more I thought about it, the more questions arose. And at the center of it all was Kase, like a spider weaving its tangled web.

Unable to find any solace in my thoughts, I desperately reached for the bottle of liquor that sat on one of the tables. The bitter taste of alcohol had never appealed to me, but at this moment, it was the only thing that seemed capable of numbing the pain. As the burning liquid slid down my throat, I felt a temporary warmth that offered a brief respite from my suffering. I knew it wouldn't last, but I didn't care. I needed an escape, even if it was fleeting. Eventually, I found myself carrying the bottle with me as I retreated to my room. The familiar surroundings did little to bring comfort, and so I continued to drink, each swig promising a momentary reprieve from my anguish. Time slipped away as the bottle grew lighter, and in its place, a heavy weight settled in my chest.

Somehow, night crept in, and I found myself stumbling out of my room and into the deserted guild hall. My movements were clumsy and uncoordinated, fueled by an intoxicated desire to escape the suffocating confines of these walls. As I pushed open the front door, the cool night air hit me like a slap in the face, but it did nothing to clear my head.

The streets of Riledo seemed to stretch endlessly before me, but I didn't know where I was going, nor did I care. All I knew was that I had to keep moving because every step I took was another step away from reality.

"Damn it all… Why does everything have to be so twisted?" I muttered under my breath as I stumbled forward. With each step, my anger and despair threatened to consume me entirely, "Harold… Amelia… Mother… Kase…" Their names echoed through my mind like a haunting nightmare.

"Please... just make it stop," I whispered into the night, my voice barely audible above the sound of my own ragged breathing. But the universe offered no reprieve–only the bitter taste of liquor on my tongue and the suffocating weight of grief.

As I wandered aimlessly, my feet eventually led me to a familiar park. The moonlight cast a somber glow on the empty benches and trees. I found a secluded bench, collapsing onto it, and took another swig from the bottle in my hand.

"Darx?" A familiar voice called out hesitantly, cutting through the silence. I looked up, squinting my eyes against the darkness, and saw Syvis cautiously approaching me. Her red hair shimmered under the moonlight, and her deep green eyes were filled with concern.

"Syvis… What are you doing here?" I slurred, struggling to focus on her face as she stood before me.

"What are you saying? I was looking for you," She replied, sounding angry, before sitting down beside me, "I have something important to tell you, remember!? I told you I wanted to talk to you tonight before we parted ways in the morning."

I barely remembered that Syvis asked me to meet at night since she had something important to tell me, but at the moment, I couldn't bring myself to care about anything other than the numbing effect of the alcohol, "Ah, yes, I-I remember..."

Syvis bit her lip, her gaze flickering between my bloodshot eyes and the nearly-empty bottle clutched in my hand, "Darx, you're not yourself right now… "Seriously, how did you get like that."

"I hear about your mother and Kase," Syvis said, gently taking the bottle from my hand, "I was quite surprised when I found out."

"Sounds like a joke, doesn't it!?" I said, attempting to grab the bottle from Syvis's hand, however, she moved it out of my reach, keeping it away from me.

"I know this must be painful for you, but drinking is not how to face your problems."

"Of course, it is painful!" I snapped, my voice cracking, "My mother betrayed me, Harold is dead, and Amelia is missing! How am I supposed to feel?!"

"Ha-arold is dead?" Syvis repeated, sounding surprised, "I didn't know that..."

"Looks like the church was involved in her death," I said once again, trying to grab the bottle with no luck, "The goddess's idea of trusting her followers doesn't sound like such a good idea now, don't you think, hahaha!"

She gazed at me with a mix of sadness and worry. "I'm truly sorry about Harold. I know how much you esteemed him," She said softly while throwing the bottle and grabbing my hands, then she moved her body closer to me, resting her head on mine, "He was a good guy."

A couple of tears came out of my eyes, and with a broken voice, I replied, "Ye-ah... he was..."

We sat there, side by side, not uttering a single word. The closeness of our bodies, our heads touching, brought a sense of tranquility and solace I had previously sought in the numbing embrace of alcohol.

"I feel like you're the only person I can trust," I said, putting my hand on top of hers.

As soon as those words left my mouth, I felt Syvis's body tense.

"Syvis, you said you had something important to tell me," I reminded her, my heart pounding in my chest as I braced myself for what she might reveal.

Syvis moved away slightly and turned to look at me with a pensive expression, but her gaze flickered away from mine for a moment before returning. "Yes... it's just..." Her voice wavered.

"You can tell me. Whatever it is, we can face it together." I reply, looking at her eyes.

Her gaze locked onto mine, her eyes filled with panic. She opened her mouth to speak, but no words came out. The tension between us grew palpable, thick like the fog that enveloped the park. She took a deep breath, her grip on my hand tightening.

"Darx, I... I ...," She murmured, tears welling up in her eyes.