As we entered the city, passing the familiar gates of the capital, our carriage came to a halt. I was happy to see the familiar place, with its usual hustle and bustle, seemed oddly unchanged despite the looming threat of war. We stepped out of the carriage, taking in the sights and sounds of the familiar surroundings. The air was thick with the scent of spices and the chatter of merchants haggling with customers. People moving in all directions, making a lot of noise, which, when I first arrived in the capital for the first time, I wouldn't say I liked it, but now I find it comforting.

Standing beside the carriage, we turned to face our fellow travelers, who had become friends on our journey.

"Well, it's time to say goodbye," Craig spoke first, "I should be heading back to the guild. If you ever need assistance, you know where to find me."

Harris let out a hearty chuckle, "You know, traveling for so long at my age, one might think it'd start to wear me down, but I'm as spry as ever!"

"I understand what you mean," Frank responded, smiling, "Every time I return to Riledo, I feel relieved, although after a few days, I already want to go out again, hahaha!"

Shianne, standing beside Harris, smiled warmly, her eyes reflecting a similar spirit, "There's something invigorating about the road, even after all these years. But," She added, her voice softening, "There's nothing quite like the feeling of coming home."

"You know," Harris continued, his voice more serious now, "We're eager to return to our home and our daughters."

Shianne nodded, her expression mirroring Harri's sentiments, "We just hope they're not off on some quest outside the capital."

"For me, a few days of rest, and I'll be ready to hit the road again," Craig said as he stretched his arms.

"It's also time for Syvis and I to leave. We have several things to do, but let's keep in contact," I said.

Harris nodded, his grin wide, "Absolutely!

"Whenever you all can, I will take you all to my favorite restaurant in the Riledo," Shianne said with a smile.

 "I fully intend to keep in touch," Craig spoke.

Having said our goodbyes, everyone went their separate ways, leaving Syvis and me alone.

"Darx," Syvis spoke up, looking nervous, "You have to go look for your mother, and I also need to take care of something important. It might take a while. But... can we meet up later?"

"Of course," I replied, my eyes meeting her gaze, "Is everything alright?"

She hesitated for a moment, her fingers twirling a strand of her red hair, "There's something I need to tell you, but... not now. Later, when we have more privacy."

"A-Alright," I responded, feeling somewhat anxious about what she had to tell me.

Syvis told me during the trip that she had something important to tell me. Whatever it is, it must be the reason why she's been a little strange. After we slept together for the first time on the trip, Syvis seemed more affectionate with me than usual, and it made me think that what was worrying her had disappeared, but at times, I saw her staring into space with a sad expression.

"Darx... I..." Syvis said, her voice barely above a whisper. Syvis looked at me in a way she had never done before. Almost as if she was afraid, "I..."

"Hu?"

"I-it's nothing... I-I'll see you at night at the usual place."

"S-Sure," I said, though the words felt heavy on my tongue. We exchanged a brief hug, her slender arms wrapping around me before she disappeared into the crowd.

As I stood there, watching her retreating figure, I couldn't help but feel a sense of unease. Shaking off these thoughts, I decided to focus on the task at hand – finding my mother. I started running towards the castle, hoping she would be there. I ran for a while, dodging people until I heard someone call my name.

"Darx!" A familiar voice called out, cutting through the noise around me.

I turned just in time to see Emma looking at me. Her eyes widened in disbelief as she stammered out my name once more, "D-Darx? Is that really you?"

"Emma," I replied, offering her a half-hearted smile. Seeing the shock register on her face.

"B-By the gods, y-you're alive!" She stumbled forward, hand reaching out to touch my arm as if to make sure I was real. Her legs trembled, and she almost fainted, but I managed to catch her before she hit the ground, "W-We all thought that you... You, you have no idea how much we've worried about you."

"I know, and I'm truly sorry," I said, helping her regain her footing.

"Please, let's go to the Inn. Oliver needs to see you!" Emma said, looking at me almost as if she was begging me.

"Y-Yes, of course," I reply.

She led the way through the labyrinthine streets, her steps quick and confident despite her earlier shock. We had brief conversations on the way, but she seemed more concerned about taking me to see Oliver.

"Here we are," Emma announced once we reached the Inn, "Oliver had a very bad time when we thought you were dead."

"Thank you, Emma," I said, my hand resting on the door handle.

Before stepping inside, I took a deep breath. I opened the door and stepped into the Inn. Emma came in behind me and then walked past me at a fast pace, shouting Oliver's name. Oliver came from the hallway that leads to the kitchen when he heard Emma's screams, looking scared, perhaps thinking that Emma was in trouble, but he stayed still when he saw me.

"D-Darx!" Oliver said, his tone a mixture of disbelief and shock, letting a plate he had in his hand fall to the floor. His eyes were wide and moist with tears. He rushed towards me, his apron flapping wildly against his legs, and enveloped me in a powerful hug before I could say anything.

"O-Oliver, n-not so strong. I can't breathe."

"By the gods...I can't believe you're really here," Oliver said, pulling back to examine my face as if to ensure I was truly real.

"It's hard to explain, but I'm fine," I said.

"Sit down, Darx," Oliver insisted, guiding me to a nearby table. As we sat, a small child waddled out from behind the bar, her chubby cheeks flushed from the warmth of the room. She couldn't have been more than two years old, her bright brown eyes filled with curiosity as she was trying to hug Oliver.

"D-Don't tell me..." I said, unable to keep the smile off my face as I watched the little girl approach.

"My daughter has grown a lot since you last saw her," Oliver said proudly, his voice brimming with love. His daughter climbed onto his lap, her tiny fingers gripping his shirt as she stared at me with wonder.

"Say hello to your uncle Darx!" Oliver said to his daughter, who looked shy.

I reached out, trying to grab the little girl's hand, but she shyly refused, causing Oliver, Emma, and I to laugh. I didn't say anything, but I couldn't help but think that the girl resembled Fabe a little. Emma sat next to Oliver and grabbed her daughter.

"Now, tell me everything that happened while you were away. We've all been worried sick about you." Oliver spoke.

I recounted my experiences to Oliver and Emma, giving them an overview of everything that had transpired since my departure from the city nearly nine months ago. However, I made a conscious decision to omit any mention of my encounter with the goddess, as I felt it was best to keep that part secret for now. Oliver and Emma attentively absorbed every word I uttered, their faces displaying a mixture of astonishment and shock as they listened to me talk.

"I-I can't even begin to imagine what you've been through," Oliver said after a long pause, his voice heavy with concern, "All I can say is that I'm glad to have you back."

"Thank you, Oliver," I responded, my heart swelling with gratitude. "That means more to me than you'll ever know."

I wanted to continue talking to them, but I had to go see my mother. It was of utmost importance that I put her mind at ease and assure her that I was safe and sound. I informed Oliver that I would be back at a later time, but for now, I needed to make my way to the castle where my mother resided.

"Wait, D-Darx, before you go. Before you go looking for Ilene, there's something I need to tell you," Oliver said with a worried expression on his face.

"Ah? What is it?" I asked, sensing that whatever he had to say would be important, "I-Is she okay?"

"Y-Yes, but Ilene... s-she's been through a lot since you've been gone, and well..." He trailed off, struggling to find the right words, "M-Many things happened in your absence. And... w-well, I don't know how to tell you this but-"

I was starting to worry with Oliver's words, but before Oliver could continue, the door to the Inn swung violently open.

"DARX!!"

I turned around as I heard the familiar voice and saw my mother, who was looking around the Inn, breathless.

"Mom?" I said as I stood up.

Her eyes widened in shock as she saw me, as they locked onto mine, "Son!" She stammered, her voice barely audible as she took a few staggering steps towards me, "I-Is it really you?"

She ran to me with tears in her eyes. She was crying in a way I had never seen before. Unable to contain my emotions any longer, I rushed forward and pulled her into a tight embrace. As we held each other, I could feel her body trembling, her tears wetting my shoulder.

"Darx, i-it's really you... I-I thought you..." My mother said while hugging me tightly, and her words were cut off by emotion and crying.

"Mom, I'm here," I whispered, trying to reassure her, "I'm really here."

"Darx, I thought I'd lost you forever," She choked out between sobs, "I never stopped searching for you."

My mother, still with tears on her face, said, sounding kinda like a scolding, "Darx, where were you? What happened? I looked for you for months in the cave and surrounding areas, and there was not a clue to your whereabouts."

"...It's a long story," I replied.

"Darx, I've missed you so much," She murmured into my ear while clinging to me just as tightly, her fingers digging into my back as if she feared I would vanish again.

For a few minutes, we simply held each other.

"We'd better sit down because I have much to tell you," I said.

As I swiveled around to face Oliver and Emma, I couldn't help but notice the hint of unease that lingered on their otherwise smiling faces. Their expressions seemed oddly juxtaposed, almost as if they were trying to mask their discomfort with forced cheerfulness. As we stood there, I couldn't help but feel something was strange. But for now, I pushed those thoughts aside, determined to focus on the joy of being with my mother again. We had been apart for far too long, and there was so much we needed to share.

"O-Oliver, let's let Darx and Ilene talk alone. I'm sure they have a lot of things to talk about." Emma said to Oliver, pulling him by the arm.

"Ah, y-yes," Oliver replied, then turned to look at me, "Darx, if you need me at any time, you know where to find me... Also, there are several things I have to tell you when you have time."

With those words, Oliver and Emma left, leaving me alone with my mother.

"How did you know I was here? Who told you?" I asked my mother.

"S-Someone I know saw you when you arrived and went to inform me. But that's not important now," My mom said hesitantly, "There's so much for us to talk about. But the most important thing right now is that you're alive, and you're here with me."

"Mom, I have to tell you what happened to me," I said, my voice still hoarse with emotion, "Syvis and I... we were trapped in a portal."

"I heard about that portal," My mother replied, looking me in the eyes, "I asked several of those who were with you when everything happened, and they talked about some kind of portal in which you were dragged, and shortly after it disappeared without leaving any trace."

"It's... complicated. But the important thing is that even though it's been almost nine months for you, for Syvis and me, it's only been one month since we got trapped."

"One month?" Her eyes widened with shock, and I could see her struggling to wrap her head around the concept, "So all this time... you've been alive, just... trapped somewhere else?" She asked, her voice barely more than a whisper.

I explained the rest of the story once again, leaving out my encounter with the goddess. I can trust my mother, so I plan to tell her about the goddess and my new skill, but when we are in a more private place and sure no one will hear us.

"I'm so sorry for making you worry, Mom," I continued, "I know this is a lot to take in, and it's hard to understand."

"Darx, it's not your fault," She assured me, shaking her head gently, her eyes still filled with disbelief, "It's beyond comprehension, but what matters most is that you're here now, alive and well," She smiled softly, her eyes shining with tears of happiness, "We'll figure everything out together."

"Thank you for never giving up on me," I whispered, my voice thick with emotion, "I heard about how you searched for months in the cave where I disappeared."

"I couldn't bear the thought of losing you." She said with a sad expression.

My heart swelled with gratitude and love for this incredible woman, who had always been there for me, even in the darkest of times.

As we were sitting across from each other, I couldn't help but notice a glint of gold catching the firelight on her left hand. My gaze drifted down to the elegant ring that adorned her finger.

"M-Mom, that ring," I said while holding her hand, looking at the ring with what looked like a diamond-encrusted, "D-Did you get married?"

"Ah!!" My mother reacted, looking surprised.

Now that I remember, my mother told me that she made friends with Ryul's father and his daughters. Whenever she talked about him, she seemed to smile more than usual, and it seemed like they saw each other often. I asked with a smile, my heart swelling with joy at the thought of her finding love again after all these years, "Is it Ryul's father? Did you marry Ryul's dad?"

The surprise and shock on my mother's face were noticeable, and she slowly pulled her hand that I was holding. She hesitated for a moment, as though she were carefully considering her words, before finally responding, "Y-Yes, I got married. But no, Darx, it's not him."

"Ah? Wasn't it with Ryul's father? T-Then who is it?" I pressed, eager to learn more about the man who had won my mother's heart.

Aside from Ryul's father, I can't think of anyone else. Could it have been someone she met in those months that I didn't see her? Now that I pay attention, my mother is wearing elegant clothes. Clothes that only the noble usually wears. She never wore that kind of clothes before. She used to say that she preferred clothes that allowed her to move easily. And since she started working in the castle, apart from her casual clothes, she only wore the armor of the royal guard.

Looking at my mother's face, she seemed quite nervous for some reason. Her silence only served to heighten my curiosity, and I could feel the anticipation building within me.

"Darx," she said softly, her voice barely audible above the crackling of the fire, "I-I married Kase."

"Ah? ...I-I'm sorry. I-I don't think I heard c-correctly. C-Can you repeat what you said?"

After hesitating for a moment, she responded by saying the same answer, "I-I'm Kase's wife. We got married a month ago."

What? Is this a nightmare or a joke of very bad taste? Did I hear her correctly? S-She said she married Kase? Ha... It must be a mistake. It must be a mistake. Suddenly, the room around me felt suffocating.

"P-Please don't joke like that," I said, barely able to speak.

"D-Darx, please understand," She pleaded, her voice breaking under the weight of her emotions, "It wasn't an easy decision, but I had my reasons—"

"Reasons?!" I interrupted, unable to contain the fury that coursed through my veins, "So it's not a joke? What possible reason could you have for marrying someone like Kase?"

I felt how my vision began to distort, and my breathing became agitated while I felt a knot in my stomach and heart. My entire world seemed to shatter in an instant.

"Kase!?" I hissed, my voice shaking with a volatile mixture of anger and disbelief, "You married my enemy, the man who has done nothing but cause me pain and torment? How could you do this, Mom? What reasons could you have for marrying the person who has been trying to get in my way since I met him? I-I even told you what happened with Amelia. T-Then how? WHY?"

My anger was so great that I hit the table so hard that I broke it. The people inside the Inn stood up as they heard me scream and heard the table being smashed. I could see the guilt etched across my mother's face, her eyes brimming with tears as she struggled to find the words to explain her decision. But no explanation would ever be enough to heal the rift that had formed between us at that moment.

My mother's silence spoke volumes, and as the truth settled in, I felt a cold, hard knot of betrayal form in the pit of my stomach. The man who had tormented me for years was now with my mother.

"Fine," I spat, my voice dripping with venom as I turned away from her, no longer able to bear the sight of her tear-streaked face.

And with that, I stormed out of the Inn, the door slamming shut behind me like the final nail in the coffin of our once unbreakable bond.

The street felt suffocating and stifling as the weight of my mom's words threatened to crush my spirit. For a moment, I felt as if I were drowning—lost in a sea of disbelief and despair, struggling to make sense of the revelation that had just shattered my world.

I barely took a few steps when my mother ran after me.

"DARX, WAIT!"

When I heard her voice, I didn't stop and continued walking, but she caught up and stood before me.

"P-PLEASE, WAIT, LET ME EXPLAIN!"

"Kase?" I choked out, my voice barely above a whisper as I tried to wrap my head around the shocking truth, "You married Kase!?"

I stared at my mother, searching her face for some sign that this was all just a terrible mistake—a cruel joke. But the pain etched into her features was all too real, leaving me with no choice but to confront the reality.

"Darx," She began hesitantly, her voice wavering with emotion, "Please, let me explain…"

"Explain? Hahaha..." I interrupted, my anger rising like a tidal wave within me, "How can you possibly justify marrying the man who has tried to make my life a living hell?"

My mom flinched visibly at my harsh words, tears welling up in her eyes. "I know how you feel about him, Darx, but there's more to the story than you realize. There are things you don't know about, things that I had to consider—"

"Like what?" I demanded, my hands clenching into fists by my sides, "What could be so important that you would betray your own flesh and blood?"

Her mouth opened and closed, searching for the right words to say amidst the turmoil of emotions. The silence hung heavy in the air between us, each second feeling like an eternity as I waited for her to speak—to give me some reason, any reason, to understand her actions.

"Darx, it wasn't easy for me," She finally murmured, her voice breaking under the strain of her emotions, "Kase was by my side when I thought I had lost you. He did everything possible to help me find you. I even thought about ending it all, but he was there to stop me, and without realizing it, I fell in love with him. Kase has changed a lot. If you give him the chance-"

"You really don't realize? Kase always wanted to get between your legs! How did you let yourself be fooled? You're smarter than that! He's just a son of a bitch who's incapable of being a decent person."

"Don't talk to me like that!" She told me, reflecting on her face, that my words hurt her, but at this moment, I really don't care.

"Darx, you told me that you didn't want to see me alone. In Kase, I found the person I wanted to be with. I am happy with him and happier now that you are by my side. I have never asked you for anything in my life, but now I am asking you to understand my decision. I love him, and I want us to give each other a chance to fix things. It is the best for the three of us."

"Best for who?" I spat bitterly, my voice trembling with a mix of hurt and betrayal, "For you? For him? Because it sure as hell wasn't the best decision for me!"

"Darx, please…" She pleaded, her eyes brimming with tears as she reached out towards me.

I recoiled from her touch, my heart aching like a fresh wound in my chest. It was as if our bond, once so strong and unbreakable, had been severed.

"Save your explanations," I snarled, my voice rising in anger as I stepped back from her. "I don't want to hear them. I can't believe you would do this."

"Darx, I'm so sorry," She whispered, her voice barely audible over the sound of my own ragged breathing. "I never meant to hurt you like this."

"Sorry doesn't change anything," I replied coldly, my gaze locked on her tear-streaked face.

I stared at my mother, unable to reconcile the woman who'd given birth to me with the one who now stood before me—married to Kase, of all people. My heart pounded in my chest, and I clenched my fists, trying to suppress the whirlwind of emotions threatening to consume me.

"Darx, please try to understand," She implored, her eyes desperate for empathy. "I was lost and broken when you disappeared, and Kase… he was there for me."

"Was there no one else?" I snapped, my voice cracking as I struggled to keep my anger in check, "Did it have to be him?"

She hesitated, biting her lip as if searching for the right words, "I know it's hard for you to accept, but he changed, Darx. He helped me through the darkest time of my life, and I… I fell in love with him."

A bitter laugh escaped my lips, "Love? That's what you call this twisted mess? By marrying my worst enemy?" I shot back, incredulous, "You really expect me to believe that was the best choice for both of us? Maybe the fact that I'm back is now just a nuisance to your relationship with him."

"Please don't say that... There wasn't a single day in which I didn't think about you."

"ENOUGH!" I shouted, my voice echoing through the street, "I can't do this anymore. I need some time—to think, to process, to… just be away from all of this."

"Darx, wait!" My mom called after me, her voice choked with sorrow. But I didn't look back, my heart heavy with anger and sadness as I walked away, leaving her standing there.