

At the same time that Darx was at Oliver's daughter's birthday celebration, an important meeting was taking place at the castle. Princess Kathleen, who had spent several days outside the capital on her trip to Beas-Kind territory, had returned. That same day, other significant events had happened. Given the importance of all this, the Queen, as well as the three leaders of the three great guilds, were present to receive the princess and the news that she would bring, in addition to other important topics.

The grand doors of the royal throne room creaked open, revealing the figure of Princess Kathleen. Yet she was not alone. Beside her was a person with ears and a tail that resembled that of a wolf wearing elegant clothes. A Beast-Kind envoy from the Beast-Kind territory named Nazatin. They walked elegantly across the room, adorned with regal tapestries, flickering torches, and soldiers standing still like statues in front of the pillars.

At the far end of the room sat Queen Zara upon her throne. A short distance away, to the Queen's right, stood the S-Rank Zhoron, while on the Queen's left stood Amber. Formerly the captain of the Royal Guard for numerous years, but who now assumed the role of the Queen's advisor following the death of Harold. Beneath the elevated throne platform and closest to the Queen stood Aelbrecht, the guild master of Dark Dragons. Besides him was the still guild master of Oblivion, Agnes, who was using a cane to make it easier for her to stay standing. And, finally, the youngest of all, the guild master of Midnight Dawn, Stella.

Upon reaching the elevated platform where the throne is, Princess Kathleen took a deep breath and knelt gracefully, "Your Majesty, I have returned from the Beast-Kind territory."

Queen Zara raised an eyebrow, her piercing gaze fixed on Princess Kathleen, "Rise, my dear," She commanded, her voice carrying the weight of authority. Kathleen obeyed, standing tall, her eyes momentarily meeting Queen Zara's before casting down.

Stepping forward with a calculated bow, "Your Majesty, I am Nazatin, envoy of the Beast-Kind. I bring greetings from my brother, the Shogun, and considerations and the hope for an alliance against the common enemy." He said, his voice deep and resonant.

Queen Zara's gaze shifted from Princess Kathleen to Nazatin, "Greetings, Envoy Nazatin," Queen Zara replied, her voice steady and composed, "Your presence is most welcome in our kingdom."

Nazatin straightened his posture, his wolf-like ears twitching slightly, "Thanks to the princess and the incident in the cave, we have learned how vital cooperation between our nations will be. My brother, the Shogun, believes that if we join forces, we can stand a chance against this looming threat."

"The safety and prosperity of my kingdom is my utmost priority," Queen Zara said, her voice unwavering, "The beginning of the dialogue between the Humans and Beas-Kinds will be a turning point between both nations."

Nazatin nodded respectfully, his eyes gleaming with judgment, "Indeed, Your Majesty. The Beast-Kind have long admired the strength and resilience of your kingdom. With a capable leader like you, we consider it is time to reestablish diplomacy," Nazatin stated, straightened, his gaze meeting Queen Zara's, exuding an air of arrogance, "The Shogun acknowledges the threat and is open to negotiations. However, he seeks assurances. It is for that reason that my brother, the Shogun, entrusted me with the negotiations that will allow us just that."

The Queen's eyes narrowed as she contemplated Nazatin's words, "There will be time to discuss these terms and the Shogun's intentions in more depth," She said, her tone measured and composed, "But for now, I'm sure the long journey has left you tired. You two should go to rest, and tomorrow, we can resume this conversation."

Nazatin inclined his head respectfully, a smile playing at the corners of his lips, "Thank you for your understanding, Your Majesty. I appreciate your hospitality and look forward to further discussions tomorrow." With a graceful bow, he turned to Princess Kathleen and nodded, silently indicating they should exit the throne room.

Queen Zara's lips curved in a subtle nod, looking at the princess, "Well done, Kathleen. You have fulfilled your duty admirably."

Surprised, the princess looked up, "T-Thank you mothe-, I-I mean your majesty."

At the same time, Nazatin's attention was briefly diverted. His eyes widened imperceptibly as they fell upon the legendary Aelbrecht, the renowned Lich Lord and guild master of Dark Dragons. Aelbrecht, considered by many to be the strongest S-Rank in existence for many ages. A figure known even in distant territories. Nazatin confirmed the rumors with his own eyes. The archmage Aelbrecht the Taciturn indeed resembled a skull. Although his dark cloaks concealed much of his form, his skull-like face was visible. For a moment, Nazatin was stunned, staring at the purple light emitted where his nonexistent eyes should be. His trance ended when Aelbrecht subtly shifted his head in his direction, causing Nazatin a momentary startle and prompting him to quickly return his gaze to the princess, attempting to conceal any sign of nervousness.

Shortly after, Princess Kathleen and Nazatin left the room. As the doors closed behind them, Aelbrecht, Agnes, and Stella stood in front of the Queen.

"Everything is going just as we expected," Stella began to speak, "The information that William, who was with the princess at all times, gave me is accurate. Tomorrow, Nazatin will ask for the princess's hand in marriage."

"The impertinence of asking for something like that..." Agnes spoke, "Neither the humans nor the beast-kind people would accept something like that."

"It's just a whim of Nazatin. From what I have investigated about him, Nazatin is an egotistical man with an endless desire for beautiful women. He is selfish and poorly educated. However, his brother, the Shogun, seems to trust Nazatin enough to leave him in charge of a negotiation like this," Stella responded, "Both the Shogun and Nazatin know that the Queen will reject such a request. Still, it will be the starting point in the Beast-Kind's demands to cooperate with us."

"All of these are things we already anticipated. The Shogun, unlike his younger brother, knows what he is doing, and that is why he sent Nazatin. Who better than someone without criteria, like Nazatin, to make unrealistic requests!?" Amber remarked as she crossed her arms, "Even so, the Shogun should have made it clear to Nazatin what he expects from this negotiation."

"I can already picture tomorrow's meeting," Agnes spoke while coughing lightly, "That Beast-Kind playing the victim and acting offended after rejecting his marriage offer. Then resorting to dramatic and pathetic theatrics to ask for land and wealth in exchange for cooperation," Agnes paused her speech for a second as she suffered a coughing fit, "Coff, A-Acting as if they didn't know that if humans fall, they will be next."

"Most likely, they will take advantage of the situation and ask for relics from Zrephia, historical artifacts of Beast-Kind origins that were left in possession of some humans after the last war with them, as well as lands that are still in dispute between both nations," Amber added, "Although I dislike having to concede to their demands, especially considering that it's our people who will fight and will end up protecting them, we can agree to some extent. Even if we fail to convince them to aid us, accepting neutrality and refraining from exploiting the situation by launching invasions from the South should suffice."

The Queen listened attentively to the opinions of the others before finally speaking, "Stella, what was the general sentiment of the Shogun and those closest to him?"

"From what we know, the Shogun takes the opinions of the two S-Ranks at his service very seriously, and from the information William manages to collect, the sentiment between the two is divided," Stella responded, stepping forward, "On the one hand, the S-Rank Maya and her guild want to take advantage of the situation. Maya is in favor of invading while we focus our forces on the north. Maya thinks that once the humans are eliminated after causing significant casualties to the demons, the Beast-Kinds can create an alliance with the Dwarves with whom they have good relations and stop the weakened army of demons."

"I see..." Amber said, looking irritated, "And what is the opinion of their other S-Rank, Kitsune?"

"Kitsune's opinion is quite the opposite," Stella continued, "Kitsune advocated an alliance and is convinced that humans and beast-kind have to do everything possible to prevent demons from crossing their border. William heard that Kitsune had a strong exchange of words with Maya, in addition to Kitsune going so far as even to suggest that she was willing to create an army with volunteers to help humans fight the invasion from the north."

"Indeed two really opposing opinions," Agnes spoke, "So, which side is the Shogun leaning more toward?"

"That I don't know," Stella replied.

"The Shogun will likely aim to keep his options open, avoiding a complete commitment to either side," The Queen asserted firmly, "His strategy will involve getting as much out of us while maintaining a stance of neutrality and seeing how the conflict develops, delaying a final decision until circumstances force his hand."

"Even if we agree to their demands, I wonder if we can really trust the Beast-Kind. How certain will we be that they will keep their word if we move the soldiers and adventurers we have in the South." Stella wondered.

"They will uphold their word since they have no other option," Aelbrecht, who had remained silent finally spoke. His nearly otherworldly spectral voice echoed in the ears of those present. While those in the throne room had grown accustomed to his voice, first-time listeners often struggled to conceal their surprise or terror, "Regardless of the ambitions or deceptive facades the Beast-Kind may present, deep down, they understand that this is not merely a war of interests but a battle for survival."

"Aelbrecht is right," The Queen declared, "Just as the Beast-Kind and the other races must come to terms with the reality we face, we, too, must be prepared to make sacrifices. This is necessary to allow all the pieces to fall into place and, most importantly, to protect the kingdom and its people."

"W-Wait, that means that envoy Nazatin's marriage proposal will be considered?" Agnes asked, looking surprised.

"It will be our last resort, but we believe we can reach an agreement before having to resort to something like that," Amber stated, "However, given the recent developments, time may not be on our side for prolonged negotiations."

"New developments?" Agnes asked.

"I've called you all here not just to discuss the recent developments with the Beast-Kind but also to address the concerning information Stella has found," The Queen announced, turning to look at Stella as if giving her the signal to speak.

Stella, wearing a visible expression of concern and struggling to find her words, looked at each person in the room one by one. After a few moments of hesitation, she finally spoke, "It's become increasingly challenging for me to spy through the eyes of my crows. Nevertheless, based on the latest information I gathered, I dare to conclude that the new demon King has subjugated the remaining forces of the previous demon King. As a result, the numbers of this

new demon King's army have multiplied considerably," Stella closed her eyes, almost seeming like she was gathering the courage to deliver her following words: "We can expect a full-scale invasion soon. The war... the war has begun."

The room fell silent as Stella's words hung in the air. Everyone's face turned grave, their eyes narrowing with concern.

Agnes let out a gasp, clutching at her chest, "Are you certain of this?" She asked, her voice steady despite the worry that crept into her words.

"It is impossible to be completely sure, but given what I have seen, their armies will probably begin their march south within this month." Stella reply.

A heavy silence filled the room as the gravity of the situation began to sink in. The reality of war, which they had been preparing for, was finally upon them, and knowing that the Beast-Kind's demands and negotiations now seemed far more urgent and necessary than anyone had anticipated.

"We must secure an alliance with the Beast-Kind immediately," Amber spoke, her voice filled with worries, "The humans and Beast-Kind would have to set aside their differences and form an alliance if we want to stand any chance against the demonic forces."

The Queen, her expression unwavering, broke the silence, "We have expected this day to come," She said firmly, "While negotiations with the Beast-Kind continue, we must focus our efforts on keeping the conflict at the border," The Queen then turned to see Agnes, "Agnes, after tomorrow's negotiations, I will ask Syvis to begin her journey towards the territory of the Dark Elves and convince her father to give us support no matter what. Please let her know that I need her to be prepared."

"I will let her now..." Agnes responded without much enthusiasm.

Amber nodded, her face etched with determination, "If everything goes well tomorrow, we will mobilize our forces in the South to reinforce the northern borders. Our soldiers and adventurers will stand united against this common enemy. Even so, I think sending at least an S-Rank would be appropriate. Zhoron has to stay at her majesty's side. Aelbrecht has to stay in the capital and Agnes is not in the best condition. Would it be Kase then!?"

"S-Rank are our best weapons against demons. Our primary role should be to lead elite parties tasked with eliminating the Demon King's generals and other critical targets. Therefore, we must exercise extra caution to avoid disadvantageous situations," Zhoron, who had maintained silence until now, spoke up, "That's the most significant impact we S-Ranks can have, at least at the beginning of the war."

"Zhoron is correct," The Queen affirmed, "For that reason, I have to ask something." The queen turned to Agnes once again, "Agnes, how much can we depend on Kase?"

Agnes remained silent for a few seconds after hearing the Queen's question. After coughing lightly, she raised her head and responded, "Kase... He... he is very talented. Nevertheless, he has a long way to go," Agnes paused momentarily, contemplating her words, "Kase has bad habits and needs to work on his character. If you ask me, Kase still isn't reliable. Besides that, he is probably the weakest S-Rank of all at the moment," Then Agnes smiled slightly before continuing, "Still, I don't doubt that the day will come when Kase will surpass even me when I was in my prime. Not for nothing will I entrust him with the future of my guild. It is for this very reason that I am completely committed to doing everything within my means to provide him with the necessary support and time to enable him to fully realize and achieve his true potential."

"I see," The Queen answered after reflecting for a few seconds, "In that case, we will plan everything with that in mind. We will give Kase time. However, he has to understand that his role in this war is of utmost importance, and time is not on our side."

"Thank you, Your Majesty," Agnes responded, bowing her head slightly and closing her eyes, "I appreciate your understanding considering these difficult times. I will see to it that Kase becomes a competent S-Rank serving the kingdom as soon as possible."

Coff *Coff* *Coff*

After hearing Agnes have a coughing fit with what looked like concern on the Queen's face, she addressed Agnes once more, "Agnes, we will also need you, too, so make sure you take care of your health as much as possible."

Everyone in the room lingered a while longer, strategizing for their next moves. Once the discussions concluded, the Queen ended the meeting. Amber was the first to go after the Queen ordered her to start preparations immediately. Stella headed back to her guild, and Agnes intended to do the same. Yet, halfway through the throne room, she glanced back to find Queen Zara, Aelbrecht, and Zhoron still in place. Doubt and suspicion crossed Agnes's mind; however, she returned her gaze to the front and left the room.

Sometime after Agnes departed, Zhoron instructed the guards present to vacate the room. Slightly perplexed, the soldiers complied, abandoning their posts and exiting the chamber. Without anyone saying anything, the Queen rose from her throne, descended the three steps of the elevated platform, then walked to the center of the room, followed by Aelbrecht and Zhoron. Once in the center, the Queen stretched out her hand, adorned with several fancy rings and bracelets. The gem on one of those rings briefly shimmered, and soon after, a transparent white bubble enveloped them. That ring formed a bubble in which no one outside could hear anything said inside.

"The demons make their move sooner than expected," Zhoron started, "With what happened in the cave with the death of Selgoth, we can assume the Demon King gave up on his goal of returning his former allies. After all, two are dead, and the other two are locked in places he can't reach."

"Can we be sure that the Demon King is not complete yet?" The Queen asked.

"At least one more year will be needed before he is complete," Aelbrecht responded.

"That's good! That assures us that the Demon King will not intervene personally for at least another year," The Queen said firmly and confidently, "The demons must feel confident. This new Demon King must be sure of his victory. However, they don't know that we are more prepared than they think, thanks to Azriel's sacrifice. Thanks to Azriel, the alliance between nations is just one of the options we have."

"All the preparations are now ready to take care of the church leaders," Zhoron continued, "Once they are out, I will be able to go with peace of mind to the mountains to tell the dragons that everything is ready, knowing that Her Majesty will be safe."

"Don't worry so much about it. I'll keep Stella by my side while you're away," The Queen replied, then turned to see Aelbrecht, "An alliance between nations is the only option the demons think we have. Without them knowing that the Dragons will be on our side and even more than the secret alliance with the dragons, Azriel left us another option. We have Darx."

"Isn't it about time we told Darx what we know?" Zhoron asked Aelbrecht.

"What we know is only part of the story," Aelbrecht spoke, his chilling voice echoing through the bubble, "The only one who has all the answers is Zaine. She's the one who has to tell Darx everything."

"Would that even be possible?" The Queen asked.

Before Aelbrecht could respond, both he and Zhoron turned simultaneously to the left wall. The queen confusedly asked, "What, what is going on?"

After a few seconds of silence, Zhoron responded, "Something unexpected has happened."

Aelbrecht and Zhoron simultaneously sensed the moment when Darx succumbed to his dark side. After letting the Queen know, her face was filled with concern, knowing what this entailed.

In another place, Agnes was already on her way to the guild when she also noticed the demonic presence. Rushing her carriage to the guild building, Agnes discovered some of her top members, including Kase, engaged in a brutal confrontation with a familiar figure when she arrived. Agnes identified the individual emanating dark energy and a potent demonic aura as

Syvis's boyfriend, Darx. Agnes didn't understand what was happening. However, Agnes acted swiftly, firing a shot at Darx's forehead to prevent Kase from making a rash move. To her astonishment, the seemingly fatal shot only resulted in bleeding on Darx's forehead.

In her long life, Agnes had already faced demons before. Nevertheless, Darx made her feel something very different compared to the other demons she had confronted that she could not comprehend. Like many other people, Agnes also tried to investigate Darx without finding a clear answer as to who he is. Why Darx is in that state was also a mystery to her.

Agnes looked up at the destroyed guild building, where she saw Syvis looking back at her with an expression of pain and confusion that she had never seen Syvis make. Then Agnes turned to see Kase, who had an angry and confused expression. However, Agnes knows Kase well and realizes that despite the tough appearance that Kase is trying to show, Kase feels intimidated. Agnes ultimately returned her gaze to Darx and remembered at that moment the words she said to the Queen when she was questioned about Kase.

"That's right..." Agnes murmured, while making a smile that looked sad, "Kase is the future of Oblivion, and I am committed to doing everything within my means to provide him with the necessary support and time until he reaches his true potential."