

That concluded the trial, if only because everyone started talking at the same time. By the time we might consider reconvening, there were small riots all over the capital. My words hadn't fallen on deaf ears. Many people didn't know there was an alternative to having a king or a queen, and so, obviously, there was more than a little confusion. Queen Anastasia herself had found it hard to push back against my proclamation and her own people, but she did need some help understanding just *how* a representative democracy could work. Erza to the rescue, thankfully. The three of us sat down and Erza presented her plan to start an instant transition to the new Wydonian system of government, including a total demilitarization. Wydonia *had* no hostile neighbours, it only had an enslaved populace to keep down since the reunification.

I was only partly there. Physically, I was present, but I found it harder and harder to keep my mind on these proceedings. In my head, I had done what I had to. My 'powers' as queen had ended, and the only reason I was here, I felt, was out of a sense of obligation. There were already more competent people present. I tried to spend as much time as I could -- which, sadly, wasn't all that much -- with Kazumi, and some intervening time with John. We talked about soul magic a whole lot.

Morgana had taken me aside early on, taking me to a balcony overlooking the Dergow. She stood by the bannister with her arms crossed. She was, as always, completely impossible to read. "So," she said, and I was worried I was about to get yelled at.

"So?" I asked.

"You," she said, and turned to me, and I saw the slightest of smiles play on her lips, "are absolutely impossible."

"I... what?" I was taken aback, not just by what she'd said, but by how much her face had softened when she'd smiled. The residual hatred that had seemingly kept her going was in there, somewhere, but it wasn't the sole engine that fueled her existence.

"You would give the river back to the Elf and end the line of Kings," she said. I wasn't sure where she was going with this. "I expected you to wrest control from the river. That the river would run red with human blood as a new generation of Elf took back what was theirs." I looked at her sheepishly. "You did as promised, Que-... well, not anymore, I suppose. Just Eliza." She looked out to the river. "The Elf have been given the freedom to sail the river, if not own it. And there will be no more Kings or Queens in Wydonia." She shook her head and laughed. "I am still trying to figure out if I over- or underestimated you, Eliza." She looked me in the eyes, and there was that little smile again. "But consider our compact fulfilled." Her eyes turned back to the river. "Perhaps there will be a place for me on the next Ark-city. I've missed the water."

"I--," I began, eloquently, and then decided not to say much else of anything. We watched the sun rise over the river in silence. I wondered if she would be accepted. If she would feel anything again, if she'd ever be whole again. If there was anything I'd learned, it was that broken things could be mended, given time and care.

“Thank you,” was the last thing she said before she headed back inside. She was a valuable part of the reconstruction talks after that. She was the only person present who remembered a time when the giant cities sailed the Dergow, after all, even though the Elf hadn’t been the first on this continent either. No Kings, that included them. Morgana didn’t care about that, after all. It wasn’t about the Feudalism. It was about the freedom. The glory of the ark-cities didn’t come from a crown. She wasn’t the only Elf voice in the room, however, and she had many, *many* loud arguments with the modern Elf. But it was always healthy, leading to compromise that everyone could agree with.

After a few days, during one of the talks with the people who had been selected to represent the people of Wydonia in the interim, while its first election was being set up, Erza took me aside. She had a worried look on her face, and I was worried I’d missed something. I’d been zoning out more and more while matters of agriculture and the like were discussed.

“Eliza,” she said, and looked up at me. “Liz.” A lot went unsaid in those few moments. We’d both come a very long way to end up here, making change on a systemic level. Rebuilding a nation steeped in archaic power structures and ancient, harmful traditions was what we’d set out to do, in a sense. But it had started as just, well, saving the queen. This was bigger than me. She put a hand on my arm and looked up at me. Her smile was warm and her eyes were... sad? There was a melancholy look on her face that I couldn’t quite place. “Go home, Liz.”

I nodded and, not really giving a damn about what anyone else might think, pulled her in for a hug. She froze for half a second and then relaxed. We stood there for a moment, our breaths synchronizing. When I pulled away, the energy between us was strange. To a certain degree, it always had been. She’d been better than me at this. She’d had a more powerful energy than me, and if I hadn’t been in the room, she would’ve always been the tallest, most imposing figure. I’d looked up at her for her sheer competence, and blushed at her unabashed diplomatic bluntness. And now we were equals.

Unspoken, there was a feeling that, in another life, things would have been very different between us. I didn’t know how, but there’d always been something unspoken between us. Our eye contact lasted a second too long and I swallowed some unspoken feelings.

“I’ll see you soon,” I said. I almost managed to keep my voice from cracking. She belonged up north, didn’t she? She’d come visit, right? Besides, the lands where my old castle was had been Orc lands, she could even move in there. Why did this feel like a goodbye of sorts? She nodded and smiled.

I found Kazumi and informed her that we weren’t really needed up here anymore, and started to get ready to make our way back up north. Sally, John and Elena would be coming as well. Most of the others would be sticking around in the capital.

It was in the late morning when Kazumi slithered off to say goodbye to Erza too while we waited in some hidden front garden, close to the path down to the city. When she finally

joined us, she was still wiping her tears. I smiled at her. "You too, huh?" She nodded. It was possible it was going to be a while before Erza was going to be able to join us up north. There was also the fact of the castle to consider. It had no name, and it didn't feel right to keep the ugly thing if I wasn't going to be queen. The whole point was the redistribution of power, it wouldn't make sense for me to sit in a large black castle and look down on the surrounding fields.

We'd be staying there while we looked for a place up in the country where Kazumi and I could move. Finding a place for me to live was going to be tricky, considering my size, so we'd agreed that a compromise could be made while we built something. Finally, the five of us were ready to head home. Sally would be coming with us, of course. She didn't have anywhere else to go, which was part of her problems, too. There was a lot we had to do, a lot of miracles we had to try to make work. On the upside, we had all the time in the world, now.

We piled into the coach. For the journey, I wore the magic stone the Dragonborn Matriarch had given me. For one thing, we didn't want to get recognized everywhere we went. That was the emotional reason. We wanted a quiet trip back, one without danger or excitement. The practical reason would have been waiting for my private coach to make its way all the way down here, because I sure wasn't going to fit into a normal one. It was a comfortable vehicle, and I felt a little bad for how expensive it felt. My guilt, however, was overshadowed by the fact that I hadn't exactly enjoyed many creature comforts in the weeks leading up to our arrival at the capital. We deserved to relax.

The coach started to move with a slight jolt, and the gentle bouncing of the carriage quickly rocked me to a dreamless sleep. There was something about being on the road that had always been relaxing to me. Yknow, when there wasn't a timer on the lives of other people. Leaning against Kazumi, I felt safe, cozy, and while I knew we'd be on the road for almost two weeks, there was a part of me that felt like I'd wake up at home if I just fell asleep against her.

To my disappointment, when I woke up, I was still in the carriage. To my satisfaction, Kazumi had her arm around me. She was snoring softly and stirred when I sat upright. It must have been some time in the afternoon and we'd long left the capital behind us. The fields around us were empty, the harvest having been concluded in the past week. Winter had just about arrived. I wondered how the transition to a society *without* forced labour was going to impact Wydonia. I worried for a moment that there'd be new power dynamics, but then I realized that, well, *of course* this was going to happen. Change was going to be constant and difficult, but every step towards equality was a necessary one. Besides, Erza had some plans to socialize the distribution of food, which would go a long way to easing the transition.

We stayed at a few inns along the way. All the way up north, we asked, inconspicuously, how the changes had affected them. Most people were somewhat bewildered, but hadn't really noticed a change in their lifestyle. The biggest difference was that most towns we'd noticed had haphazardly erected new structures that could house the recently freed, and educate

those who had never had that opportunity before. Apparently, there were mages all over Wydonia who were working as teachers.

There were no major riots that we could see, which I was glad for. The people of Wydonia, for the most part, didn't seem to be resisting the changes too much. Sure, there'd be people who didn't like the change in power structures but, and I considered this with the utmost respect, fuck 'em. I had little patience for people who considered their own discomfort a more important issue than the freedom of other people.

Every day was colder than the last. We were more than halfway through our journey, and we could already see the mountains looming in the distance. We'd taken a more western route -- we'd elected *not* to pass by the Redwood again -- and we'd be riding past the mountain pass John and Elena had held for most of the 'war' soon. It was also getting so cold that we could see our breath, and after a certain point, Elena had summoned a small, concentrated ball of fire that hung in the middle of the coach. I was impressed with her progress -- I'd read her frankly endearing diary -- especially when I saw her fall asleep and the little ball of warmth didn't waver for a second. She'd achieved a level of self-control I hadn't expected from her, and, well, I was proud.

John was reading some on the opposite bench. Elena had fallen asleep against him and he smiled at me. "If you have a moment, do you want to go over the magic again? We'll be crossing the Dergow soon." I nodded. We'd discussed some things, some theory, but I still needed to know what exactly we could do, what *I* could do.

"So," he said. "Soul magic is *difficult*, incredibly so. As far as I'm aware, you're the only living practitioner, although one can never be certain. The problem is simply the immense power it requires," he expounded. I knew some of this already, but it helped me to go over this stuff again. The limits of what I could do had always been vague. "All magic concerns the use and manipulation of one's own soul one way or the other, but to create, destroy and change another person's soul on the scale you're attempting is, well..." he paused. "There's no precedent. Nothing written down, at least. The closest example I can imagine is what the old Demon Queen did with Morgana, and that was different. As I understand it, Morgana was barely a soul, and there was a body to work with. This is... unheard of."

I nodded. I knew how unlikely succeeding here was. But I had to try. John cleared his throat and lifted his book slightly to indicate that he was still studying. "Now, if I understand this correctly, what you will be doing is a combination of a form of Necromancy, the communication with souls that linger, and Soul magic, the manipulation of those souls. We *know* her soul lingers -- you hold it in your hand -- but we don't know if she can communicate in this state. There's a reference to this kind of crystallization before, but not much is known about it." He flipped to a bookmarked page. "Now, because she has no body to feel with, she is not currently receiving any kind of new stimuli, and without a mind, she can not comprehend her current situation. She's not, well, conscious. She isn't thinking, as such."

"But she's still alive?"

“In a sense. You are carrying the essence of who she was. Her emotions and feelings. But if I understand correctly, these are still, well, feeling themselves. To keep her in that state indefinitely would not be... hm... I don't think it would be right.” I nodded. If she was in there, just her feelings, then that was a fate worse than death. “One way or the other,” he said, “the best thing to do will be to release the soul and try to help it form a body. We can not randomly assign her an empty vessel, the soul requires something familiar to latch onto or it might reject the new body outright.” He glanced at me and Sally. “Though there have been exceptions. The study of the Adjacent Realm,” he said, referring to the world I'd come from, “is young and largely conjecture.” He closed the book. “You will have to take your chance, and try to guide her to you. And if you can not, then you'll be with her when she finally passes on.”

Kazumi had been listening intently along for a while now, too. She nodded. It was a scary prospect, but we'd both, in a certain sense, already said goodbye to her, a dozen times over. We *had* to take the chance to get her back, but in a worst case scenario, the ritual would function just as well as a funeral and a wake.

We crossed the Dergow a few days later. It was funny to see small chunks of ice float down the river, carried downstream from the mountains. It had been months since we'd crossed it, and freezing it then had been a difficult endeavour, to say the least. We'd decided to skip right past Shereton and Whitehallow. We didn't really want to waste time. On our last day of approach to the castle, it had started to snow. The fields around us were covered in a white blanket. It was beautiful. I remembered vaguely seeing snow like that as a child, but I'd lived in the city most of my life. Snow never really stayed on the ground for long around exhaust fumes.

We arrived at the castle. It was even more of an oppressive eyesore in winter, its black stone in stark contrast to the white landscape. But when we exited the carriage and the snow crunched softly underfoot, and I could smell the crispness of winter, I couldn't help but admire it. It was peaceful and quiet, in a solitary kind of way. A kind of lone watcher, away from the mountains. We made our way inside quickly -- it was too cold to stay outside for too long -- and found that the servant staff was still present and still simply doing its thing. It occurred to me that the changes in Wydonia had not been extended north of the river, and that we'd have to make some reforms up here of our own. But all in due time.

Kazumi and I made our way to our quarters, which had been kept exactly the same as we'd kept them, although the staff had made sure to clean everything, of course. Not a cobweb in sight. My beautiful Lamia and I fell onto the bed and immediately fell asleep in each other's arms. We'd been on the road for so long, finally coming back to this bed felt almost surreal, though I wasn't planning on spending too much time philosophising about it.

The next day, we wasted no time. John joined us in the Room of Relaxation. It was my room, without the music or the sound of running water this time. There was also no tea. We weren't here to rest, we were here for Sabine.

I carefully extracted her Soul Stone from the necklace we'd made to carry it, and placed it on the table. John wasn't going to be performing any magic here, and Kazumi couldn't do much more than watch, but as far as I was concerned, John was the expert and I wasn't going to do it without Kazumi. She'd loved Sabine just as much as I had.

John, seemingly less than eager to break the silence, motioned for me to hold the crystal as he got up and prepared to leave us. He'd told me the day before that what I'd need to do was find a way to release the soul without *breaking* it. The crystal was both a vessel *and* a physical manifestation of Sabine as a disembodied person, so I had to be careful not to shatter, well, *her*. And that would require intimate silence, one he wasn't willing to break. He gave us the space we would need as he closed the door behind him.

I held her loosely in my hand and closed my fingers over it, feeling the crystal, trying to find where Sabine separated from the gemstone, but I was having trouble focusing. I was scared I was going to mess this up and hurt her. The last thing I wanted was for her last experience in this world to be pain. Then, Kazumi's hand very gently touched the back of mine, and her soft fingers intertwined with mine, and it slowly became clearer to me. I could feel Sabine in the stone, a thin barrier between her and eternity where she existed in a state of non-existence, a limbo of emotions but no conscience of what was going on. Ever so slowly, I let myself, my energy, flow into my hand, and Kazumi gasped. I looked up at her but she shook her head with a smile. Perhaps she could simply feel it too, as I ran the magic into the Sapphire.

Ever so slightly, I felt the barrier begin to crack. It was subtle at first, hairline fractures that were felt more than heard or seen, but slowly but surely I felt a latticework of lines spread across the Sapphire. In my other hand, I began to gather strength, power, energy, whatever she'd need to construct herself a body out of the aether. I'd be here to catch her when her soul went looking for her body.

Then, the Soul Stone shattered, and Sabine unleashed on us the full breadth of her emotions. Who she was, who she had been, every emotion and sensation, swept through Kazumi and me.

It was harrowing. It was amazing. It was awful, and perfect. I had always felt like I was never good enough, could never be good enough, for two women like Kazumi and myself, but now I felt, as if these were my own sensations, what it was like to love me, and if I had been any weaker I feared it might have killed me. She had loved me so utterly and completely and in the blink of an eye I experienced and remembered every second we had ever spent loving one another. I saw myself the way she saw me and it was the most beautiful, the most painful thing I had ever seen. I had never felt so loved as I had in that moment when I felt what she had, that every single doubt I'd ever had had been unfounded. She had loved me totally, completely, and without a second of doubt or remorse.

Another wave came, as her love for Kazumi swept through me, and it was the most exquisite experience. I got to love her, now, in two ways instead of one, love her like Sabine had, powerful and different. She was so much more beautiful now that I could see her the way

Sabine had, not because I'd never loved or appreciated Kazumi, but because Sabine had noticed little things I'd never seen and loved her for them. The two emotions entwined until Sabine was as much a part of me as I myself had been and I could no longer see Kazumi *only* as I'd seen her and as our eyes met I realized she now saw me the way Sabine had and we cried.

Tears streaked and burned down our face as Sabine's very essence ran through us and we felt, over and over again, how important we were, how much we'd mattered to someone we had loved so purely and so deeply, impossible to ignore. We cried as we felt her and she was nothing less than amazing. She had loved us so much, so joyfully and without restriction, that it seemed there was no end to it, and there was no end to our tears for her.

I readied my hand, powered myself up, and tried to mentally coax the wisp-like soul to find it, to hold on and create herself a new body. I felt her run through me and more sobs wracked my body as I felt every emotion she'd felt in a split second, and I felt her touch the magic for a moment.

And then she was gone.

The feeling of her, like a torrent, like an ocean in a storm, as it had thundered through us, was suddenly gone. She'd left behind her feelings, of course, I would never be able to forget what it felt like to love myself as someone else had, truly see myself that way, nor would I ever want to. It was the greatest gift she'd left behind. The power in my hand hummed and sizzled, waiting to be used, but there was nobody here to use it.

Kazumi held me and I held her, and we both loved each other more than we'd ever had, thanking Sabine over and over again as we cried in each other's arms.

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Two months passed, and Lisa had barely sat down with her cup of coffee.

"Miss Drake, there's a visitor for you."

Lisa pressed the button on the little intercom. She still wasn't used to the fact that she had her own office now, but apparently it was something LIT entertainment reserved for all their writing staff. There needed to be a sanctum, where ideas could float around and be found in silence.

"If it's Daniel, you can just let him in, Cee," she said. Daniel came to visit her here often and she relished her little visits. He'd toned down some of his activism recently as she'd had to bail him out twice in the past month. He had never looked sorry for even a second, and his shit-eating grin had been one of best things she'd ever seen. If she understood him, and she liked to think that she did, he was so very glad to finally be fighting for something worthwhile again. And this world had plenty of worthy causes. And sure, he was the first to wave a banner, but he'd also volunteer in soup kitchens. Now that she was a full-time paid author,

they'd agreed that he'd focus on what mattered to him while she would provide for him. The savings account was still there, but their combined pride led to them barely touching it. And they didn't need to. Lisa was "Miss Drake" now, although -- and she wouldn't admit this even under threat of death -- she was looking forward to becoming Mrs. Drake some time soon. Daniel wasn't as subtle as he thought he was.

And she was a published author now, and her work on more DLC for the game had quickly earned her a name in the gaming community. The story of a fan author who had written what was quickly becoming the best selling expansion to not just this game, but any, was one that made for good headlines. She was proud of her work, and deservedly so. It had, however, made her the target of headhunters and journalists alike, and while she'd initially liked giving interviews, they had become tiring after a while. Which is why she wasn't eager to respond when Cee, the wonderful woman at the front desk who owed her two (2) frappuccinos now, answered her.

"It isn't, Miss Drake. She says she knows you."

"Oh?" Lisa said, a little confused. Other than Daniel and, to an extent, Sally's family, most of the people she had gotten to know had been through this job. They were a wonderfully diverse group, and she got along with many of them, but none of them called in from the front desk. "I-- send her in, I suppose."

The girl who knocked on her door seemed more than a little insecure. She was young, maybe nineteen years old, wearing an overly large sweater and an overly large shirt. She looked unkempt, if clean. She'd seen the type before. Because of Lisa's success in the online writing community, a lot of young, promising writers contacted her in the hope that she'd read their work and put in a good work in the industry. Sadly, her push and pull therein was less than she would like. Still, the ones that came to her office she heard out. It was the least they could do if they'd come all this way.

The girl sat down and Lisa sat down opposite her. With a soft voice, the girl started talking, and Lisa listened, her fingers steepled on her desk. With every word, Lisa listened more and more intently, her eyes narrowing. Occasionally she interjected with a question or a soft exclamation, but she let the young girl speak. When she was finally done, Lisa took a deep breath, and pressed a button.

"Mark, I'm going to be out for the rest of the day." She paused. "Actually, it might be the rest of the week. Yeah, it is. Thank you. I'll make it up to--. Oh, shut up." She smiled as she put the phone back down and looked at the girl.

"Well," she said, and crossed her arms. She was considering a lot of things. She was, to a certain extent, one of the few people as used to having her world overturned as she was. It was the only reason she was still as calm as she was. She could tell that the girl was nervous, bewildered, even. Lisa smiled at her, trying to comfort her as best she could. She knew it would take more than that, of course, her story was, well... Lisa could empathize.



“I promise you,” Lisa Drake said, “we are going to do *everything* we can to get you home, Sabine.”