

Kazumi yelled something. I had no idea what.

“What?! I can’t hea-” I began, but my voice was being drowned by the music that had suddenly engulfed the entire room. It would take a lesser gamer than myself not to recognise what was playing as traditional boss music, all brass and loud choir.

“What?” Kazumi mouthed. I pointed to my own ears to indicate I couldn’t hear her. I turned around to Sabine, who still had her hands raised defensively, although I could tell she was tempted to bring her hands to her ears to drown out the noise. I tried to make a gesture that might convey ‘do you know what’s happening here?’ She just shrugged and looked at Kazumi. I shook my head and held up a hand between them that I hoped indicated my desire to cease hostilities right this instant. Both Kazumi and Sabine looked at me quizzically. I rolled my eyes and tried yelling again. I couldn’t even hear myself.

Kazumi waved her arms to get my attention. When I looked at her, she flapped her arms up and down like she was flying and then pulled them close to herself. Then she pointed at me. Or rather, just over my shoulder. I turned around but didn’t see anything. I turned to her again to indicate I didn’t see what she was seeing, but when I looked at her again she had a hand over her face. This time Sabine tried to catch my attention. It was hard to concentrate with the music blaring and tooting in my ear. Music, I felt, should not *Pwarp* as aggressively as this did, but to each their own.

She had conjured up a pair of magical wings for herself, sparkling blue and white, which was really cool, but I wasn’t sure how that was going to help us in this situation. I looked at Kazumi to shrug, who also looked exasperated, and then back at Sabine, who flapped her ethereal wings for a second, then grabbed one and pointed at it, and then made an exaggerated motion where she pulled her arms in close while her wings retracted as well. I looked back at Kazumi who nodded enthusiastically.

I deduced that they wanted me to retract my wings, and I did so, shifting back into my more human form. Immediately the deafening music stopped. The two of us that had knees to sink to did so. Kazumi simply fell forward to land on her hands.

“Thank *Fuck!*” I yelled. It was a relief to hear my own voice again. It sounded weirdly muffled, speaking, making me wonder if I had hearing damage now.

“By the Five Divines!!” Sabine cried out, and she collapsed to sit down. “What was *that?*”

“Oh thank the Shaper,” Kazumi panted. “She figured it out.” That was a little hurtful.

“What was that, Kazumi?” I cried out. I could feel my voice beginning to break. This was no way to wake up in the middle of the night. I wanted to go back to bed.

“You really don’t remember?” She looked at me in disbelief. “Also, Eli-- my Queen, do you realize who that person is?” Sabine was still catching her breath. Clearly the music’d had a

strong impact on all of us. I just nodded. “She used to be with the Hero of Efernton. She’s cool.”

“She’s *cool*? What does that even mean?”

“She’s not here to fight. They cut her head off.”

“It looks pretty attached to me, Eliza.”

“I put it back on.”

“I’m sure that was very kind of you. I’m still not sure I can fully agree with your decision in this matter.”

Sabine interrupted me before I could come up with a response.

“You don’t... treat her like most people treat a queen.”

I’d never been a fan of being talked about like I wasn’t there. On the other hand, I was sort of used to it, and if it kept them from fighting and kept the peace, I was willing to let them talk. I sat down, pulled my knees up to my chest, and let the conversation run its course.

Kazumi put her hands on her hips defensively. “We happen to have a professional working relationship, mage. What is your point?”

Sabine rolled her eyes. “I’m not looking to fight you. I’m saying... Look at her.”

Kazumi did. I have no idea what she saw when she looked at me, and I felt self-conscious, so I wrapped my hands around my knees. Sabine gestured at me.

“You *know*, right? Like, you have to see it?”

Kazumi sighed and her demeanour changed. “Yeah, that’s not Queen Eliza.”

I looked up in shock. “You knew?!” She gave me a sheepish look.

“Eliza... the old Queen, the one from from *yesterday*, would have put me through a wall for not addressing her by her title.”

“She what?! But that’s so unfair! Why would she...?!” I began to tear up in anger. I just wanted to protect Kazumi. Nobody deserved to get treated like that!

“Because she could, Eliza.” She paused for a moment, and then looked at me reassuringly. “I don’t think you’re like that, if it helps.”

“If you knew, then why did you still treat me like your queen?” I sniffled.

Kazumi paused and slithered over to me. Sabine did the same. Sitting down as I was, we were all at about eye level to one another, which was a pleasant change. Towering over everyone had its downsides. I wondered if the reason tall villainesses looked down their noses at people was to prevent chronic back pain from looking down all the time.

“I didn’t want to take the risk. If it turned out that you were the queen with a memory problem, you would’ve remembered my impropriety and... punished me for it.”

I made myself a little smaller. Appearing threatening to Kazumi was the last thing I wanted. “I... I wouldn’t...”

She nodded. “I know. I figured that out too. But if you’re not her... who are you? And what is it you’re trying to do?”

I was trying to explain to her what I had to Sabine, but I found myself exhausted.

“I need a cup of tea,” I mumbled as I stuttered through my words over and over again. Kazumi put a hand on my arm as she remembered something.

“Hold on, you say you *need* a cup of tea, yes?”

I nodded, and then opened my mouth to protest. “You don’t have t--”

She shushed me with a smile and pulled herself to her full height, and motioned Sabine and I to follow her. I looked at Sabine, who just gave me a shrug and got up. Kazumi led the way back to my quarters, though she did hold the door open for me, which was nice. Once inside, I looked around and was reminded that there was a fourth room I hadn’t explored yet. It was the one Kazumi was exploring. Excited, I rushed over to the door.

“I have a kitchen?!” I exclaimed enthusiastically. She shot me a look that reminded me of something I couldn’t put my finger on, but it was endearing.

“Not quite, Eliza,” she said as she began to open the heavy door. A very slight flash of light, like a discharge of static electricity, ran around the doorframe like a seal being broken. “You have a Room of Relaxation.”

There was a squeak coming from my left indicating that the previous phrase should have meant something to me.

“A what?”

“A Room of Relaxation!” Sabine said excitedly. “Incredibly powerful magic!”

I blinked a couple times. “What does it--”

“Whatever you need it to, Eliza,” Kazumi said with a smile as she pushed the door open cautiously, as if she wasn’t sure what to expect on the other side. When it swung all the way open, she had an incredibly happy smile on her face, and I could understand why.

The room looked wonderful. There were pillows everywhere, surrounding low coffee tables. In the center of the room was a large koi pond, with a glass ceiling above it. It would be easy to forget you were in the tower of a large castle if all you could see was the inside of this room. It was amazing. There was soft guzheng music playing. A detail I missed until Kazumi went over to it was that one of the tables next to the pond, the one I would’ve picked, had a steaming pot of tea on it, and three little cups. Kazumi stretched herself out over a bunch of pillows and curled up. She seemed to have almost forgotten about the two of us. She looked so comfortable and cozy and I just wanted to hug her then and there. Sabine seemed to want to step forward and then hesitated, looking up at me.

“May I?”

“Of course!” I said, not sure why she thought she needed my permission. I joined the two of them on several pillows that were larger than the others and immediately I felt much better than I had all day - and night. Sabine poured the tea.

“What is this place?”

Kazumi blew on her tea with a very satisfied look on her face.

“This is a Room of Relaxation. Every time you open the door it appears what you need to relax most. It’s also... If there was any doubt that you weren’t the original Queen... this would have dispelled it.”

I burned my tongue and didn’t really care. “How so?”

Kazumi looked around. “The last time I was in here it was more...” She made a vague gesture in the air. “Fire and... she called them ‘play racks’.” She shook her head. “It was not a good room, Eliza. This... this is wonderful.”

Sabine nodded. “I can’t imagine the demon queen I came here to fight having a room like this, no.”

“So...” Kazumi paused and looked at me, cradling her tea. She was quite beautiful in the soft, gentle light of this room. She was swaying gently to the music and I just wanted to wrap myself around her. Or have her wrap around me? Regardless, any boy snake would be lucky to have her. I tried to give her a reassuring smile, but she just blushed again in what I couldn’t help but assume was how she showed fear.

“Uh... so?” I stammered.

“Who are you? If you’re not Queen Eliza, then who?”

I explained everything to Kazumi the way I'd done to Sabine. She took the news much the same way, nodding along to the story. She asked small questions, like the name of where I'd grown up, but I answered, with honesty, that I preferred not to answer that question, that the name would not mean much to her. When I got to the end of the story, waking up in the throne room, she sipped her tea.

"And now you're here."

"And now I'm here."

"So now what?"

I paused for a second and looked at Sabine, then at Kazumi.

"From what I understand... Queen Eliza was really powerful, right? And about to launch a full-scale war, supposedly to 'liberate' Wydonia from its elf-and-human-centric rule."

"That's... what she told me, yes. Though I've had my doubts," Kazumi pondered. I didn't have the heart to tell her that the fact that she was being used had literally been part of the promotional material.

"Do you... Do you think we could achieve that through peaceful means?" Sabine had already been on board with this plan, for the most part, and Kazumi nodded thoughtfully. "I got a feeling that this might have been an option during your war briefing, earlier, but, again, I did not want to get my hopes up."

"You're going to need help," Sabine said. "From both of us. I know Wydonia. I'm sure Kazumi knows the... monstrous races of this area. I was born on this side of the border, actually, but I'm afraid my family kept me away from people like you."

Kazumi rolled her eyes, but didn't address it. "Anyway, yeah, we can help you. Oh, and I had another question, actually."

"Oh?" I said.

"What's your name?"

I really didn't want to answer that question. Sure, I wasn't really Queen Eliza, and she'd sounded like a truly awful person, but this was my chance to reinvent myself, to be new. There was something in the back of my brain, something primal tugging at my mind, that was *terrified* of the possibility of going back, which was strange because, all things considered, my life hadn't been *that* bad. I stuttered for a few seconds.

"I just... I don't... I mean..."

Kazumi looked at me with confusion. "You don't remember?"

"N-- No, that's not... I just..."

Words were becoming harder and harder to find. I didn't understand why.

"I just... I want..."

"Hey, just take a deep breath," Sabine said. I did as she was asked and it helped a bit.

"I just... I'd like to stay Eliza, if that's okay."