



Bound In Stone, Claimed In Fire

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: I was sealed in stone to protect the world from what I'd become.

Then she touched the wrong rune—and woke me up.

Now we're bound.

Her magic's in my blood.

Her scent's in my head.

And I can't let her go.

She says it was an accident.

But the way she trembles when I touch her?

That's no mistake.

She unleashed the monster.

Now she has to live with him.

And I don't share what's mine.

Reader's Note: This book features a growling gargoyle, one accidental bond, forced proximity in the mountains, primal obsession, and a heroine who wakes something ancient, furious, and starving—for her.

He was never meant to wake up. Now he's never letting her go. HEA guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 73

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SARIAH

I press my back against the cold stone of a half-collapsed column, trying not to breathe too loudly. My heart thunders in my chest, and the wind howling across the barren mountain range of Prazh does nothing to mask the cacophony of my pulse. The night air is sharper than any blade, nipping my cheeks, numbing my fingers. I shouldn't stop. Every second spent crouched here allows Drayveth to gain ground, and I have little strength left for another confrontation.

I can't remember the last time I felt warm. The chill seeping into my bones has become a constant companion—perhaps it's a reflection of my life these days, a never-ending struggle where hope flickers like a sputtering candle. Prazh's rugged beauty holds no comfort tonight: jagged peaks rising like broken teeth, snow-driven winds slicing my face, and the occasional wail of distant creatures prowling the slopes. Even the sky seems hostile, stars glaring down without mercy.

Move, Sariah. I grit my teeth, glancing around the fragment of carved stone that once formed part of an elaborate temple gate. This place is ancient, older than my memory can place. Intricate glyphs span the remaining walls, half-eroded, half-buried under centuries of shifting ice and debris. I'm desperate, but not entirely foolish: heading into an unexplored ruin alone is idiotic at best. But Drayveth is close behind, and foolish or not, it might be my only chance.

My palm tingles where the old scar circles my wrist. I can almost hear Drayveth's voice hissing that I should never have defied the covenant. Traitor. I know what they call

me now. They claim I'm too dangerous to live, that my magic is an affront to the purna way of life. But I refuse to crawl back to them or beg for forgiveness. They wanted me obedient and pliable, a pawn in their endless fight for power. Instead, I walked away, and apparently, that's a sin worthy of death.

I steel myself and push off the column, sliding into a low sprint. My boots crunch over loose gravel as I dart between the remnants of tall pillars. Centuries ago, these stones must have arched over a grand entrance, perhaps for pilgrims or worshippers. Now, everything is in ruins. The gloom is cut by scant moonlight reflecting on patches of ice. Stumbling once, I catch myself just before toppling into a jagged patch of broken marble. My breath puffs white with every exhalation, each ragged draw of air reminding me how alive I still am—and how easily that can change.

I risk a glance over my shoulder. No sign of Drayveth yet, but he's as relentless as a vulture, circling and waiting for the moment I weaken. He knows my strengths, but he also knows I've been running for too long. Exhaustion weighs on me like a heavy cloak, sapping my focus. My magic flickers unpredictably, half in my control, half tugging at me with dangerous potential. If I'm not careful, I might lose more than just my life. I might lose whatever last shred of humanity I cling to.

Skirting the perimeter of the ruins, I see a large archway leading further inside. A massive door, carved with swirling sigils, stands half ajar. My pulse quickens at the faint glow emanating from within. Could that be a wardsign? A relic from ancient purna magic, or something else entirely? I hesitate, chewing my lower lip. Every part of my rational mind screams that stepping into unknown enchantments is the surest way to die. But Drayveth is out there, and this glow might hint at a protective force. My best chance is to slip inside, see if I can find cover or something to shield me from detection.

I cross the threshold into a wide corridor littered with fallen columns. The walls tower overhead, curved inwards like an inverted rib cage, their surfaces carved with

symbols older than any I've studied. The atmosphere hums with a faint resonance, each step magnifying an electric tension beneath my skin. It reminds me of the moment right before I unleash a spell: that razor-thin space between potential and manifestation.

Pressing forward, I catch my reflection in a cracked slab of polished stone. For a moment, I barely recognize myself, even though it's my face staring back. Snow-damp chestnut hair hangs in waves around my shoulders, marred by streaks of silver that showed up the day I first tapped into my more potent purna magic. My golden-olive skin carries the smudges of days spent on the run, and there's a thin brand around my wrist, the mark of my former coven—a permanent reminder that I once belonged, and now I'm exiled. My storm-gray eyes flicker, the silver flecks catching the reflective surface, making me look feral, on edge. I hold that gaze, inhale, and push onward.

The hallway ends in a cavernous chamber where the glow intensifies, emanating from glyphs inlaid into the floor. They form circular patterns, radiating outward like the ripples from a stone dropped in water. Ice drips from the ceiling, and the air is thick with expectancy. Carefully, I kneel at the edge of the largest glyph, adrenaline ricocheting inside my veins. There's no dust here, no sign of the centuries that must have passed—only pristine lines shimmering faintly with an otherworldly sheen.

A breathless laugh escapes my lips. By the Source. This is big. Very big. Could these inscriptions be a protective seal left behind by some ancient purna? Or maybe they're wards cast by the gargoyles who once fought my kind. Either possibility sends goosebumps across my arms.

Footsteps echo down the corridor behind me. I snap my head around. Drayveth. His voice cuts the hush: "Sariah! Stop running, child. Let's talk."

Child. He always called me that, even when I surpassed every test he threw at me. He

used to protect me from the harsh judgment of the coven; back then, I believed he cared. Now, his tone is layered with coldness. He's not going to spare me.

I press my palm to the glyph, more from desperation than understanding. My magical sense tingles, urging me to try something. My mind scrambles through half-forgotten incantations, scraps of archaic chanting I gleaned from a thousand coven lessons. Maybe I can turn this place into a shield. It's worth a shot.

"Are you here?" Drayveth's footsteps quicken. His voice ricochets off the stone walls, and I'm out of time.

Closing my eyes, I whisper incantations that come to mind in a patchwork of terror-fueled memory. My breath trembles, words tumbling in a mixture of old purna tongues. Heat flares beneath my hand, and a surge of raw magic crackles up my arm. I pour my last dregs of power into the glyph, begging it to respond, to erect a barrier between Drayveth and me. My heart hammers louder than the chunk of ice slipping from the ceiling and shattering at my feet.

A faint hum builds. My fingertips tingle. The lines across the floor begin to glow brighter, turning from pale silver to a fierce white. I open my eyes to see the glyph swirl, arcs of light dancing across the chamber like living serpents. Yes. Relief warms my insides—maybe, just maybe, I'll survive this.

"What are you doing?" Drayveth steps into the chamber, robes swirling around his tall frame. Shadows drape his features, but I know his expression is pinched with disapproval. His eyes zero in on me, then on the glowing glyph under my hand. "Are you insane? These wards are not for you to tamper with!" He lunges, arms raised, conjuring a sliver of green-black energy in his palms.

I flinch, bracing for impact. My concentration falters, the incantation slipping from my mind like water through a sieve. Light flares beneath me, so blinding it sears the

edges of my vision. The ground rumbles. A roaring force rips the air from my lungs, and suddenly, it feels like the floor buckles.

Drayveth staggers, looking stunned. “Sariah, what have you done?” he hisses, attempting to shield his eyes from the sudden brilliance.

I clamp my teeth together, barely able to keep my balance as the floor cracks. An unearthly howl echoes from below, a sound that rattles my bones. The glyph’s glow shifts, pulses of red emerging within the white. My heart seizes. Red—always the color of war, of gargoyle magic, of chaos in the purna histories. The stories say gargoyles once warped the earth with that red hue, their ferrous bloodlines steeped in destructive power.

An explosion of energy courses through my body. I scream, falling forward onto the glyph. My brand scorches, the symbol around my wrist momentarily flaring silver against my skin. For a frantic heartbeat, I can’t see. Everything is noise and brilliant light. Then, darkness.

In that suffocating blindness, a presence brushes against my consciousness. It’s immense, ancient, filled with restrained fury. My pulse throbs in my ears. Who—? No answer, just the sensation of something stirring deep underground, as if roused from a centuries-long slumber.

When my sight returns, Drayveth is gone—his shape is a blur sprinting back into the corridor. The entire chamber groans, the carved walls trembling like they might collapse. Chunks of debris crash down, dust billows upward, and I lurch upright, coughing. The glyph is dim now, cracks spiderwebbing through it. Whatever force it once contained must be broken, the magic undone.

I push myself to my feet, nearly tripping over a loose slab. Think, Sariah. If Drayveth is fleeing, that means something truly terrible must be happening. He’s never been

one to run from a fight unless there's a threat beyond his ability. Which implies I've just unleashed something far more dangerous than my old mentor's wrath.

My legs feel like lead, but I force myself forward, scanning the chamber for an exit or any immediate signs of danger. My ears ring, and a fine layer of dust coats my lashes. Darkness seeps into every corner where the moonlight doesn't reach. A faint rumbling persists, traveling beneath my feet like a living heartbeat.

"Sariah." The voice resonates through the stones, a low vibration that makes every hair on my arms lift. It's not Drayveth's voice. It's deeper, filled with an unearthly quality.

I freeze. "Who's there?" My voice is hoarse, scraping against the silence. Nothing answers. But I can still sense the presence, an immense aura pressing against my senses.

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Swallowing hard, I pick my way toward the far side of the chamber, where a portion of the wall has collapsed inward. A faint swirl of air tugs at the back of my cloak—there must be an opening behind the rubble. If there's a chance to slip out, I'll take it. Better to face the wilds of Prazh again than remain at the epicenter of this magical quake.

Before I move more than three steps, the floor cracks anew. A jagged line splits across the chamber, and I stumble back, arms flailing. The ground to my left crumbles inward, exposing a sinkhole that plunges into blackness. I don't see a bottom—just swirling dust and the faint reflection of glimmering stone. My chest tightens. This place is a death trap.

“Sariah.” The voice thrums again, closer somehow. A wave of pressure knocks me off balance, forcing me to my knees. My brand flares in pain, drawing a cry from my throat. I press a trembling hand to my wrist as if that can dull the burn.

“I—” I try to form a question but my words tangle with my fear. Another rush of energy surges through the chamber, and the sense of some colossal entity stirs beneath the broken glyph. I force myself upright, ignoring the dusty sting in my eyes. Step by step, I maneuver around the sinkhole, refusing to look too long into that hungry darkness.

When I near the collapsed portion of the wall, I wedge my shoulder against a fallen pillar. It shifts with a grating sound, and I wedge myself through the gap. The corridor beyond is narrower and slopes downward. Flickering light from the original glyph dances across the walls, casting them in red and white strobes like some nightmarish heartbeat. There's no telling if this passage leads out or deeper into the

temple's bowels, but I have no choice.

A memory pricks at me: I recall reading that in the oldest temples, labyrinthine corridors led to hidden altars or crypts. Places best left undisturbed. That knowledge does nothing to help my mounting dread. But anything is safer than the main chamber, where the floor might give way at any moment.

I force my tired limbs forward. My mind scrambles to process what just happened. A protective glyph twisted into something else. The color shift to red suggests gargoyle energy—did I awaken a gargoyle? A shudder grips me. The purna told countless stories about their wars with gargoyles, how brutal and ruthless those creatures could be, how they once nearly overran an entire continent. My coven believed them dead or slumbering. If they were locked away, someone in the past wanted them out of reach. Have I just undone centuries of a powerful seal?

“Breathe, Sariah,” I mutter to myself, turning a corner in the corridor. The sound of my footfalls echoes, the darkness heavy, pressing in from all sides. If I've freed a gargoyle, that might be my downfall. They hate purna. And if one is truly stirring, it won't rest until it's certain I pose no threat or until I'm dead.

The passage slopes steeply now, littered with shattered tiles and rock fragments. My thighs burn with each cautious step downward. Sweat beads on my brow. My cloak snags on a jagged outcrop of stone, forcing me to pause and yank it free. This small annoyance is enough to send fresh waves of panic through me. Drayveth is probably regrouping, or maybe he's run off entirely. Unlikely. He won't abandon his goal of seeing me captured or killed. All that matters is I stay ahead of him—or find a way to defend myself if cornered again.

Another quake rattles the walls. I press a hand against the stone to keep from falling. A muffled crack reverberates overhead, like thunder trapped in the earth. With a jolt, I look up—and see the roof fracturing. My breath hitches. Fine fissures crawl across

the ceiling in chaotic lines.No, no, no.I lurch forward, desperate to escape, but then the corridor floor abruptly gives way beneath me.

I plunge into darkness. My scream chokes off as I hit a slope of rubble, tumbling down a steep decline. Stone tears at my arms, my hip slams into something sharp, my knees bruise on impact. Finally, I slide to an undignified halt in a small, circular chamber illuminated by an eerie glow from somewhere overhead. Pain lances through my side. I groan, rolling onto my back, fighting the sting in my eyes.

A crumbling avalanche of debris follows me, settling with a final clatter.That's it,I think grimly,no going back up that way.As I push to my feet, the world sways. Pinpricks of light dance before my gaze, and I suck in a ragged breath, pressing one hand against my bruised side. The pungent smell of dust and centuries-old air fills my nostrils. The chamber around me is small, the walls close, carved with swirling patterns reminiscent of the glyph above. However, one detail stands out immediately: a massive statue occupies the far wall, overshadowing everything else.

At least, I think it's a statue. It's hewn from obsidian-hued stone, nearly eight feet tall, wings folded behind a broad, powerful frame. The figure's face is sharp, features regal yet ominous. Claws tip its hands, and a tail curls around its feet. My heart drums dangerously.A gargoyle.It has to be. The legends describe them just like this—towering, built of living stone, often found in old temples or fortresses. But... it's unmoving, eyes closed, as if sealed in place.

Instinct screams for me to run, but there's nowhere left to go. Another corridor might open up, but from a quick glance, I see only a single archway that's heavily caved in. If I want to reach it, I have to pass this massive figure. Adrenaline sparks, but so does curiosity.Why here?A memory flutters at the back of my mind: gargoyles once used temples as prisons or strongholds, especially if they needed solitude to slip into stone sleep, their regenerative slumber.

I edge closer, nerves fraying. He—I can't help but think of it as a "he," given the formidable masculine shape—looms with silent power. My brand stings again, and the echo of that voice, Sariah, grazes my mind. The statue's eyelids remain shut. There's no movement. Even so, the air in this chamber feels charged, as if lightning crackles invisibly around me.

Should I try an incantation? My entire body trembles at the mere thought. The last time I messed with the wards, I nearly brought the temple down. But if this gargoyle is truly in stone sleep, he might be the reason the glyph above was so heavily warded. My downfall might already be sealed. Drayveth alone is lethal. A gargoyle woken from centuries of slumber might be worse. But if I do nothing, I might just be waiting for him to wake and tear me to pieces.

Deciding caution is the lesser evil, I inch closer, raising a hand to see if I can sense any magical aura. The moment my fingers hover near the statue's chest, a faint warmth radiates from the stone. My heartbeat rockets as a trickle of energy slides through me, like a spark dancing across the surface of water. He's alive. The stone is not cold as any inanimate object would be; it hums, a reservoir of dormant power.

Gently, I let my fingertips graze the carved runes across his chest. In an instant, my breath catches, and I see a flash—a swirling red sky, gargoyles roaring in flight, and a woman's laughter echoing in the distance. My entire being recoils. What was that? I snatch my hand away, breathing hard. The statue remains still, but that single moment felt like I dipped my consciousness into a vast well of memories.

A series of tremors run through the floor again, though softer. Dust trickles from the ceiling. I suspect the rest of the temple might collapse if another quake hits with enough force. I can't stay here. Yet, the half-buried archway on the far side seems impassable. My gaze returns to the statue. This can't be a coincidence. The magic in the glyph led me here, or I led it here. Whichever the truth, I suspect I'm meant to do something with this gargoyle—and time is running out.

Gritting my teeth, I press my palm flat against the carved symbol at the center of his broad chest. Closing my eyes, I focus on the incantations swirling in my mind, the fragments I used above. But I alter them this time, searching for a gentler approach, as if coaxing a locked door rather than forcing it open. “Let me out of this place,” I whisper, my voice shaking. “If there is a spirit here, a soul bound in stone... guide me.”

The moment I speak, I feel an answering thrum. Heat blooms under my palm. The runes etched across his obsidian flesh light up, faintly at first, then shining with the intensity of molten lava. A whisper of air sighs through the chamber, an exhalation that seems to come from the gargoyle himself.

My eyes fly open, and I witness the statue’s eyelids shift. A flicker of gold sparks beneath them, like smoldering embers. My mouth goes dry. He moves—barely, but enough to jolt me into taking a step back. Tiny shards of stone flake from his wings and shoulders, as if he’s shedding an outer layer. Each crack and pop resonates like distant thunder.

“Sariah,” that same low voice from before vibrates in my thoughts. This time, it’s tethered to the gargoyle in front of me. My entire body seizes with alarm, but I’m too mesmerized to look away. A thousand warnings flare through my mind: Gargoyles hate purna. I have no backup. He’s enormous. And I just helped break his seal.

He lifts his chin, as if testing the weight of his newly freed form. Thick dust drifts off his shoulders. For a heartbeat, his glowing eyes meet mine, fierce and ancient. A ripple of fear flutters through my stomach, mixing with something inexplicably electric, like fascination laced with dread.

His lips part, revealing sharp canines. “What’s your name purna?”

“Sariah.”

“Why,” he growls, voice more audible now, “have you unleashed me?”

My heart thuds so violently it almost drowns out the meaning of his words. Unleashed. What have I done?

Before I can stammer a response, the chamber lurches violently, sending me to my knees. Stones crash from the ceiling. A wide crack zigzags across the wall. Dust engulfs us in a suffocating cloud. The gargoyle looks up sharply, eyes narrowing as if sensing a threat far beyond collapsing masonry. I clutch my side, bruises throbbing, mind spinning. Everything is happening too fast.

He turns back to me, the glow in his gaze searing into my very soul. “You have no idea,” he says, voice echoing like the rumble of an avalanche, “what you have set in motion.”

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I don't. My throat tightens. But I do know one thing: I may have just awakened an ancient gargoyle, and whatever monstrous force that seal was holding at bay... might be stirring too. My skin prickles as an ominous rumble rattles beneath us, echoing with the promise of danger.

Before I can process this fully, the floor splits again, and I scramble for footing. The gargoyle's massive wings flare open, stone dust spiraling around him. He reaches out with a powerful, clawed hand, catching me by the arm just as I lose my balance. I grip his forearm, the warmth of living stone a stark shock against my trembling fingers.

Everything roars at once—the temple, the quake, the surge of magic I feel racing under my skin. My eyes lock on the gargoyle's molten-gold stare. In that silent, suspended moment, I understand that the life I knew before—exiled purna on the run, fleeing Drayveth, longing only for freedom—no longer exists. Something bigger has claimed me, a bond or a curse I don't fully comprehend.

A final thunderous crash resounds above our heads. The temple is caving in. I gasp, pinned by fear and the weight of this gargoyle's gaze. His hold on me is unbreakable, almost comforting in its sheer solidity. My pulse hammers against my ribcage.

"Hold on," he commands, voice a gravelly timbre of stone and fire. The floor collapses beneath us in a chaos of dust and splintered rock. My scream catches in my throat. We plunge downward into darkness. Everything becomes a swirl of falling debris, unstoppable momentum, and the suffocating certainty that I have awakened something far greater than I can manage—and the cost remains terrifyingly unknown.

KAELITH

Darkness. It clings to my thoughts like tar, sluggish and unrelenting. Every part of me feels weighted, as though boulders anchor my limbs. I have drifted in this abyss for a timeless stretch, neither conscious nor absent. My senses are muted, wrapped in a deep, heavy veil. Then, in the distance, I detect the faint hum of magic—its vibration a steady pulse, coaxing me back from the endless void.

A flare of pressure crackles along my arms and chest. It's as if a distant thunderstorm rumbles through my body, urging me to stir. I taste the acrid tang of old wards unraveling, and a singular thought pierces the fog of my slumber: Something is wrong. My eyes snap open, though for a moment, the surrounding blackness remains. I suspect my vision simply can't adjust after centuries in stone sleep.

I let out a low, rasping breath, stone fragments and dust scattering around me. An unfamiliar voice echoes in my mind, a desperate call—magic, female, frantic. My senses sharpen. My gaze, still fighting the remnants of stasis, lands on a figure sprawled on the floor a few paces away, half-buried in crumbled rock. She's so small, all angles and shadows in the dim light of this collapsing temple. Yet I sense the potent power swirling around her like a storm. A jolt of recognition slams through me—not her, not the one I once knew, but a purna all the same.

I push myself upright, shards of stone shedding from my shoulders and wings. The first breath of open air is exhilarating, burning my lungs and clearing away the stale residue of centuries. Muscles stiff from disuse protest each movement. My arms, thick with onyx-toned skin etched by faintly glowing runes, flex under the sudden strain. I stand taller, stretching to my full height—seven and a half feet in flesh, feeling as if my sinews creak from long disuse. A swirling rush of air eddies around me, carrying an undercurrent of ice and mountain wind from beyond the rubble

above.

A single chunk of falling debris nearly clips my wing, forcing me to jerk sideways. Instinct flares. My tail slaps the ground, braced for balance, its ridged length coiling with tension. The tail's thick, muscled contour is an extension of my body, an anchor in the midst of chaos. I run a clawed hand on my jaw and grimace at the grit caked there. I slept for an eternity, and yet the world can't remain still for even a moment.

The chamber's walls groan, threatening to cave in further. Shattered glyphs that once held this place secure are dimming into pale scars on the stone floor. My gaze snaps to the purna. She slowly sits up, her features contorting with pain. When she turns her head, I catch a clearer glimpse of her face. An immediate wave of disquiet ripples through me—she's not Nerezza, but there's a glimmer of similarity in the angle of her chin and the fierce spark in her storm-gray eyes. No, it cannot be. Yet the reminder of that old wound in my heart grates.

I glance down at myself, pressing my palm over the runes scrawled across my chest. They were once potent wards—my own weaving of earthen magic designed to keep me sealed in stone sleep. But something has unraveled them. My skin is dark onyx, shot through with subtle veins of red-gold that glow like hidden magma. I can feel the breach in my wards. I can taste it. Nerezza... that name rattles around my skull, stirring anger and dread.

Movement flickers in the corner of my vision. The purna is trying to stand, leaning heavily on a cracked pillar. Dust coats her cloak, streaks of silver in her hair catch the faint light, and her face is set with a determined scowl. She looks up—right at me. Our eyes lock. In that moment, it feels like every stone in this ruin hushes, waiting.

That's when the bond slams into me like a hammer. A surge of magic weaves between us, forging a thread I can sense in my blood and bones. My breathing grows ragged, molten gold eyes narrowing as I fight to reject this intrusion. I might as well

deny gravity, for the tether is immediate and unyielding. My runes flare in response, the lines on my arms lighting up with shared power.

She presses a hand against her throat, as though she feels it too. There's confusion, wariness, and a sliver of something akin to fear in her eyes. Her voice trembles when she speaks. "What... what are you?"

A swirling hush envelops us, punctuated by the groans of straining stone. "I am Kaelith," I growl, feeling the rasp in my throat from centuries of disuse. Heat flares behind my words. I take a step forward, wings partially unfurling. Dust cascades off the obsidian membranes. My hair, black with streaks of deep silver, falls past my shoulders. "And I am the one you should not have awakened."

She flinches at my tone, but her chin tips up defiantly. "I... I didn't know you were down here. I only?—"

"You only toyed with wards you didn't understand. I heard you and your enemy." My tail lashes, betraying my agitation. I drag a claw through my hair, shaking free more stone fragments. The memory of how carefully I wove that seal resurfaces. My sacrifice was meant to last indefinitely, until the threat beyond could never rise again. "Do you have any notion of what you've done?"

Her shoulders tense, lips pressing into a thin line. "It was an accident. I was?—"

"That doesn't matter," I snap, voice reverberating off the fractured walls. A chunk of rubble tumbles from the ceiling, smashing into the ground with a violent crack. The entire space shudders. I grit my teeth, turning my gaze upward. This temple was never meant to see sunlight again. And now... the entire mountain might bury us both.

The purna coughs, waving dust out of her eyes. She bites her lip, scanning for an exit. Frustration rolls off her in waves. I can taste her fear in the air, tempered by raw

defiance. This is a woman who has faced enemies before—she doesn't cower. "I was cornered," she says, voice slicing through the tension. "I cast a protection spell to keep Drayveth from capturing me. I didn't realize I was breaking that." She gestures at the collapsed glyph on the floor. "It just... happened."

Her mention of Drayveth hammers a fleeting memory loose from the haze of centuries. The name means nothing to me personally, but it reeks of purna. My glare intensifies. "You dabble in forces you can't control, mortal. Now everything I—" A coughing fit rattles in my chest, not from weakness but from the swirling debris choking the chamber. I roll my shoulders back, letting the tension coil in my muscles. "The entire purpose of my sacrifice is undone. And it's your doing."

Her eyes widen, an unspoken question shining in them. "Sacrifice?" She steps forward despite the visible quiver in her legs. Her approach amazes me for the barest second; she's an exiled purna, but she's fearless enough to meet my glare rather than shrink away.

"Yes," I say, raking my gaze over her. She's shorter by nearly two full feet, but there's a fierce quality to her stance. "There was a threat." My mind buzzes with the memory of a once radiant purna turned monstrous—Nerezza, the woman I loved who destroyed everything. "By waking me, you loosened the chains that held that threat at bay." My words echo with wrath at the knowledge that she has no idea what's at stake.

Another tremor runs through the temple. The floor under our feet pitches sideways, sending her stumbling into me. I catch her reflexively. My palm slides over her cloak, fingers pressing into the curve of her waist. Our gazes collide, and the bond crackles like lightning between us, sending a jolt of energy up my arm. She reels back instantly, cheeks flushing.

"You feel that too," I state, voice low, almost accusing. Of course she does. The bond

tugs at me, an unwanted thread tying us together. “Explain it.”

Her lips part, eyes darting across my runes, the dim flicker of my molten veins. “I... I don’t know exactly. It started in the main chamber, after I used the glyph. I felt something latch onto my magic. Then I fell.” She swallows hard. “It must be a tethering spell. Some accidental byproduct of the old wards.” She says this last part with more doubt than confidence.

I step back, letting her stand on her own, though every fiber of me remains tense. My wings shift as I glance around the crumbling chamber. “We can’t discuss this here,” I mutter. “We should move before the entire temple collapses.” A hiss escapes my throat, and I gesture at the corridor behind her. Massive boulders choke the passage, leaving only a narrow opening. “Help me clear that debris.”

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She nods once, determined. We set to work quickly, each of us bracing stones and shifting rubble. My arms burn with reawakened strength, the earthen magic in my blood stirring as I strain. If I dig too deep into that power, I risk unraveling my own wards further. But the alternative is dying under a tomb of broken rock.

Between gasps, she speaks. “You said... you sacrificed yourself. Why?” She winces as a jagged stone scrapes her hand. Despite her attempt at a neutral tone, I sense genuine curiosity behind it.

I exhale, half in annoyance, half in reluctant acceptance that she needs to know. “Long ago,” I begin, prying a slab from the corridor, “there was a purna who sought to twist her magic beyond mortal limits. She embraced chaos, a force too volatile for her. She became...” My throat constricts, recalling Nerezza’s transformation. “An abomination. I sealed her away by binding us both, entombing myself in stone sleep to contain her power. But your meddling has freed me—and freed her.” My stomach churns with the admission.

She falters, blinking. “Are you saying... she’s going to come after us? She’s alive?” Her shock is palpable.

I grunt, pushing another fragment aside. Dust coats my hands and arms, turning the glowing runes an ashy gray. “She was never dead. She was sealed. So yes, she’s likely stirring from her prison at this very moment.” The corridor behind the debris begins to open enough for us to pass. “I’d intended for that prison to remain sealed until the end of time.”

An avalanche of smaller rocks tumbles from above, forcing both of us to scramble

back. The ceiling cracks ominously. She edges closer to me, unsettled. “If we don’t get out now...”

“I know,” I say, exhaling sharply. I roll my shoulders, each muscle protesting, but there’s no time for rest. “Stand aside.” I set both hands on a particularly large boulder blocking the corridor. My claws dig into the cracks, and I concentrate. A familiar hum courses down my spine, the essence of Life/Earth magic that all gargoyles possess. It resonates in the temple floor, in the rock around us, connecting me to the stone.

My runes glow, bright as embers. The boulder groans, resisting, but I push harder, summoning a fraction of the power I once wielded in the old wars. The stone shifts, scraping along the ground with a deafening noise. Sariah covers her ears. Slowly, it tips and crashes aside, opening a gap wide enough to slip through. The act leaves me dizzy, a dull ache spreading in my skull. I sense the unraveling wards I built into my chest, each act of magic scraping away at them.

“Go.” I gesture for her to move first through the passage. She doesn’t argue, slipping into the newly cleared space. I follow, wings folded tight so they don’t catch on the jagged edges. Even stooped, I nearly brush the ceiling. My frame feels unwieldy in such a cramped tunnel, more used to the open skies or cathedrals with vaulted arches.

On the other side, the corridor opens to a half-collapsed walkway. This vantage point reveals a glimpse into the larger ruin—massive pillars tilt at precarious angles, archways splinter, and the entire structure creaks like a dying beast. If we don’t escape soon, we’ll be crushed.

She looks over her shoulder, eyes finding mine. “Do you remember how to get out of here?”

“Not precisely,” I admit. “Things have changed drastically while I slept. Stay close.”

I stride forward, ignoring the constant ache of the bond that buzzes in my chest. Her aura is all around me, tangling with my own. The mixture sets my teeth on edge. I want no part of any purna's magic—and yet I can't deny how it resonates with mine, like two halves of a broken seal.

We press onward, stepping carefully over fractures in the floor. Occasionally, she utters a soft exclamation when the ground shifts unexpectedly. Each time, my instincts lurch, wanting to steady her. I hate it. The tether is messing with my survival instincts, making me aware of her well-being in a way that feels unnatural.

Her breathing is ragged by the time we reach another chamber. A partial cave-in has flooded the space with fresh air from above. Moonlight streams through cracks in the ceiling. Snow-laced wind whips around us, a reminder that we're in the mountains of Prazh—bleak, cold, and unforgiving. We can see stars peeking through the collapsed roof. I pause, scanning for a possible route upward.

“Look,” she says, pointing to a pile of rubble that forms a slope toward a ragged opening. Possibly an exit if we're careful.

I grunt in agreement and fold my wings tight. “We'll try there.”

Together, we scramble up the jagged incline. The air is frigid, but every breath tastes of freedom. My claws dig in, granting me a secure grip on the unstable terrain. Sariah isn't as steady, slipping more than once. The bond zings painfully whenever she's in peril, as though warning me of the risk. My tail bristles in frustration each time. I've never shared a magical link like this with anyone—my last bond was entirely different, a twisted union forced by a dying love. This one feels raw, immediate, and forcibly intimate.

We reach the top of the debris, panting under the clear sky. Above us, the roof has crumbled enough to reveal a gaping hole. It's not too far to climb out. I tilt my head,

calculating the distance. A quick jump, if my wings function well after centuries of slumber. My shoulders twitch as I test them, and a surge of pain reminds me of my unused muscles. I have to try.

“Wait here,” I say to her, voice still gruff. “I’ll see if it’s stable.”

She stares at me, then at the gap. “Are you sure?” Her brow creases, a slight flicker of concern or reluctance. “You just woke up after—well, after a very long time.”

“I’m still a gargoyle,” I reply firmly, as if that explains everything. Crouching, I coil my legs and push off the rubble, launching myself upward. My wings flare open, the membranes stretching wide, each forelimb supporting the extension. A wave of exhilarating agony rips through me as I hover momentarily, the cold air slicing across my skin. Then I latch onto the edge of the broken roof with my claws, hauling my massive frame over.

Stones shift under my weight. There’s enough of a ledge for me to land. Though every muscle in my body aches, I manage to stand. From here, I glimpse the temple’s exterior—a black silhouette of ancient stone spires, half-buried in the slopes of a jagged mountain. The wind is ferocious, carrying specks of ice that sting my face. My hair, thick and slightly unkempt with silvered streaks, whips around my cheeks.

“Sariah,” I call down, ignoring the pang in my chest at the utterance of her name. “Grab my hand.” I extend an arm into the hole. She hesitates for a fraction of a second before stepping forward.

Her fingers clamp around my forearm. Even through the dust and battered cloth, I feel the heat of her skin. The bond thrums like a second heartbeat, an unsettling rhythm that tightens my jaw. Carefully, I pull her up. She struggles for footing, but I support her weight. Once her head and shoulders clear the rubble, I release a small growl of exertion and drag her onto the ledge beside me.

We stand together, catching our breath under the open sky. This vantage point shows the scale of the devastation below—a yawning pit where the temple floor once lay, pillars leaning like broken tombstones. The night sky above is vast, speckled with stars partially hidden by swirling clouds. Prazh’s mountains stretch in all directions, snow-capped and relentless. The cold is biting, but it’s still a welcome reprieve from the suffocating ruin inside.

She brushes debris from her hair, shivering. “Thanks,” she murmurs, reluctant gratitude in her tone. Then she turns to me, eyes scanning my features. I’m aware of her attention shifting from my runes to my stone-like skin, then to the black, silver-streaked hair brushing my shoulders. Her gaze lingers on my wings, and I fold them carefully so they don’t knock her over.

I want to bristle, to demand she keep her eyes to herself, but an unspoken exhaustion weighs on both of us. The adrenaline from our escape is bleeding away, leaving behind raw tension. We can’t stay here. The wind howls across the jagged ledge, threatening to slice through flesh and bone. I can survive extremes, but I know humans—and purna, though they have magic—are far more susceptible to cold.

Behind us, the remnants of the temple entrance lead to a precarious path along the mountainside. My memory stirs: once, a spiraling walkway circled around this complex. I step to the edge, scanning for a route. By moonlight, I can just make out a switchback trail cutting across a slope. It’s half-buried in snow, but it might be traversable.

“Follow me,” I say, voice low. “We can descend this peak if we’re careful.”

She draws her cloak tighter, face pale. “Anywhere is better than being stuck with the entire temple about to come down on our heads.”

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We pick our way across the ledge, carefully hugging the wall. I lead, testing each foothold. Occasionally, I toss a glance over my shoulder. She trudges along, ignoring the small scrapes and bruises from the earlier cave-in. Despite her smaller frame, she manages well enough, though I see how her arms tremble slightly when she grips a ledge. Each time she wavers, a zing of the tether pricks my senses, as if warning me of potential harm to both of us.

When we finally reach a wider landing—an old observation terrace built right into the rock face—I pause to let her rest. My gaze drops to the runes carved into my chest, lines that glow faintly with every breath. I can feel the unraveling inside me, the warding magic I devised centuries ago now compromised. My mind seethes at the realization that Nerezza may already be stirring, that the darkest part of my history is no longer buried.

I sense Sariah's eyes on me. She takes a tentative step closer, one hand braced against the rock wall. "You keep mentioning her."

"Who?" I huff, though I suspect her meaning.

She swallows. "The purna you sealed away. The reason for your sacrifice. You said she was an abomination."

My heart twists with memories I'd rather leave entombed. "Her name," I say, each word clipped, "is Nerezza. Once upon a time, I loved her." I don't elaborate, but the rawness in my voice betrays me. "That was before she became the Nyxari. Before she tried to exterminate my people and twist Protheke's magic to her own ends."

Her expression softens a fraction, though she doesn't offer platitudes. Good. I don't need them. Compassion from a purna is a bitter echo of what I once knew.

A gust of wind whips between us, and she shivers violently. She'll freeze in this climate if we linger. I scan the horizon. The savage beauty of Prazh's mountains is evident, the ridges and peaks stretching endlessly under the moon. Far below, I spot a rocky valley that might offer some shelter from the winds. "We should keep moving," I say, flicking my tail for emphasis.

She inclines her head. "Lead the way."

The descent is harrowing. The ancient path crumbles in places, forcing us to hop between ledges. My wings occasionally flare, catching the wind to keep me balanced. Each time I extend them, a pulse of pain shoots through my shoulders, but I grit my teeth and carry on. At one point, the path narrows so severely that Sariah has to press her back against the rock. She stares down at the lethal drop with a shaky exhalation.

"Just keep going," I tell her, voice tight. She nods, forging ahead, letting me stand behind her in case the footing gives way. The tether's strange tension coils between us, reminding me that her danger is my danger.

Eventually, we reach a plateau that levels out into a stretch of rocky ground half-buried in snow. Sparse vegetation clings to life here—gnarled shrubs bent under the wind's assault, patches of frost-laden grass that no sensible creature would bother grazing on. Dark shapes of distant mountains loom, outlined in starlight.

Sariah exhales, shoulders dropping as she takes stock of our surroundings. "We made it," she murmurs, hugging her cloak around her. Her cheeks are flushed from cold and exertion, silver highlights in her hair catching the moon's glow. Shadows under her eyes speak of exhaustion. I can't blame her. If she's been running from a mentor who wants her dead, then awakened me, she must be spent.

I spot an outcropping of rock a short distance away that could provide partial shelter from the wind. “Over there,” I say, striding toward it. “We’ll rest for a moment. Then we can figure out where you plan to go.” I make no effort to hide my hostility—I have no intention of traveling with her longer than necessary. Yes, the tether complicates matters, but I want to sever it, or at least unravel the magic.

We huddle beneath the jutting stone. The wind is somewhat weaker here, howling overhead instead of lashing directly into us. Sariah drops to a crouch, rubbing her hands together for warmth. I glance around, scanning for any sign of roving predators or other threats. The hush of the night is intense, broken only by the hiss of wind and Sariah’s ragged breathing.

After a pause, she speaks again, voice subdued. “Thank you for helping me escape. You could’ve just left me back there, let the temple collapse on my head.”

Her gratitude leaves me uncertain. I fold my arms, letting my wings drape behind me. “I needed to escape, too,” I say flatly, but the tether throbs in my chest. I can’t deny that if she’d perished, I’m not sure what the bond would do to me. Perhaps it would unravel my magic further—or kill me outright. Better not to find out.

Silence falls. My gaze flicks over her features. Her eyelashes dust her cheeks when she blinks, lips pressed together as though lost in her own worries. I recall the moment I first laid eyes on her in the temple’s depths: dust spiraling around her, raw defiance in her stance. She awakened me without intention. She’s not like the malevolent force that once wore a purna’s face in my memories. She’s... different. But I can’t let my guard down.

I breathe in, letting cold air fill my lungs, then release it in a slow exhalation. The stars overhead sparkle fiercely, unaffected by mortal struggles. My own struggle is far from over. Nerezza is stirring, and I have to figure out how to stop her once more. But first... “We need to address this tether,” I begin, gaze drilling into Sariah’s. “I

feel your magic in my veins, and it's... wrong."

She closes her eyes, as if trying to center herself. "I sense it, too. I tried to pull my power back, but it's locked into you." With a small shake of her head, she adds, "Maybe if we find the right incantation, we can break it."

My jaw tightens. "Then we should do so swiftly. You do not want to be bound to me, and I have no interest in sharing my strength with any mortal, purna or otherwise." That last part emerges harsher than intended, but the truth stands. Everything in me rails against repeating the tragedy that happened with Nerezza.

She tenses, a flash of pain crossing her features at my words. "Fine," she says coolly. "I'll be rid of you as soon as possible."

A bitter laugh leaves my throat. "Agreed." But the tether pulses again, as though mocking our shared determination.

She blows into her cupped palms, teeth chattering softly. Her cloak is inadequate against the biting chill. Gargoyles can withstand far worse conditions, our thick hide and internal magic fueling our resilience, but she must be suffering.

With a short, exasperated growl, I shrug out of a tattered layer of cloth draped across my waist—remnants of an old wrap that survived my stone sleep. The material is sturdy, though worn. Wordlessly, I drape it around her shoulders. She stares, startled.

"What...?" Her voice hitches, uncertain.

I scowl, feeling odd at my own action. "It's not much, but it's better than nothing. A shivering partner is no use."

"I don't need your help," she mutters, but she pulls it tighter anyway, clinging to the

meager warmth. She refuses to meet my eyes, though her cheeks flush deeper.

My tail coils behind me. Once upon a time, I would have been far gentler with a frightened woman. But that gentleness cost me dearly. I stare at the star-swept sky, letting my mind roam. So many questions plague me: how long was I truly sealed? What shape does the world take now? Has the war between gargoyles and purna continued, or have they found new battles to wage? And, crucially, how much of Nerezza's old power lingers beyond the seal?

Sariah clears her throat softly, drawing my attention. "Kaelith," she says, testing my name as if it's a foreign concept. "Is she... is Nerezza truly unstoppable once she awakens? Can we reinforce the seal?"

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My eyes narrow. “I doubt any seal will hold her now that the first one is undone. At best, we might slow her, but she will shatter our attempts if she’s had time to gather strength.” I press my palm against the glowing runes on my chest. “These markings were our final measure, siphoning both her power and mine into that tomb. If she’s free, then the old arrangement is broken.”

She looks stricken, hugging her knees to her chest. “Then... I’ve doomed us all.”

A cold laugh tumbles from my lips. “Don’t blame yourself too quickly. Nerezza always had a knack for seizing advantage.” I pause, bitterness coating my words. “Even had you not disturbed the wards, she might have found a way out after all. The difference is now we have warning.”

“Warning to do what?” She lifts her gaze. “You said you sealed yourself away with her. Why would you do that unless it was the only way?”

I inhale slowly, the memory a fresh lance of agony. “It was the only way. She was unstoppable then, at the height of her corruption, and I refused to kill her outright.” I don’t voice the rest—because I once believed she could be saved. The heartbreak swells in my chest, clashing with the fresh irritant that is Sariah’s bond. “If she rises, the best we can hope for is to contain her or... end her.”

Silence descends. I sense her attempt to wrap her mind around the enormity of that threat. The wind picks up, swirling crystals of ice around our small refuge. A fine dusting of snow settles on my shoulders.

Eventually, she says softly, “I’m sorry.”

The words catch me off guard. I turn my head, leveling her with a puzzled look. “For what?”

She shrugs under the tattered garment I lent her. “Waking you from a rest you chose. Bringing back your nightmare. And...” She licks her lips, uncertain. “It wasn’t my intention, but I can’t change that it happened.”

My wings twitch in agitation, but something in her apology rings with sincerity. I suppress the urge to snap back. “That’s done now,” I settle on, scanning the valley below. “If we remain here all night, you’ll freeze. We need shelter.”

She nods, rising to stand, albeit unsteadily. The exhaustion lines her face, but a determined flicker remains in her gaze. “We could head further downhill, see if there’s a cave or an overhang to block the wind. Maybe start a fire.”

A grudging respect stirs in me. She’s clearly not the type to wilt in adversity. Without another word, I begin moving again, following the faint ridges in the mountainside. She keeps pace, occasionally stumbling but catching herself. Beneath us, Prazh’s wide plains spread out, stark in the silver glow of moonlight. The faint shapes of distant encampments lie beyond, though at this distance, I can’t be certain.

We descend deeper, the air marginally warmer. After a time, we come across a rocky depression half-shielded by an outcropping. My gargoyle senses detect the faint trickle of water nearby. “That should suffice,” I say, pointing to the hollow.

She nods, relief evident in her posture. We slip into the depression, ground littered with broken stones. The wind rages overhead, but only a few gusts cut in at angles. It’s not perfect, but it’s better than being fully exposed.

I examine the ground carefully, mindful of any sign of beasts or burrowing creatures that might inhabit this nook. Finding nothing, I huff in satisfaction and clear away

some smaller rocks. Sariah sets her cloak aside, shaking out the dust, then tries to gather scraps of wood or brush from the area. There isn't much. These slopes are largely barren, but she manages a small pile of brittle twigs from the twisted shrubs outside.

She kneels and arranges them. Her brows knit in concentration, and I feel a flicker of her magic flare, a gentle swirl of purna energy coaxing a tiny spark. Flames lick at the sticks, blossoming into modest firelight. The glow illuminates our stony shelter, painting flickering shadows on the walls. The tension in her shoulders eases as the warmth caresses her.

I stand near the entrance, wings half-flexed as I monitor the night. My hearing is sharper than any human's. If Drayveth or other pursuers are close, I might detect them. So far, only the mountain wind and distant calls of nocturnal creatures greet my ears.

Her voice breaks the quiet. "Kaelith."

I turn, noticing how the firelight catches the silver in her hair, reflecting off her storm-gray eyes. Her face is open, though lines of worry furrow her brow. She gestures for me to come closer, away from the biting draft. I hesitate, then relent, settling on my haunches a few feet from her. My wings fold behind me, tail curling across the ground.

For a long moment, we watch the flames dance, neither of us speaking. The tether hums like a subtle heartbeat between us. Finally, she musters the courage to meet my gaze. "I don't know what I'll do about Drayveth," she admits quietly. "He wants me dead. My old coven... they think I'm corrupt. But you?—"

"You have bigger problems than one coven," I say, the corners of my mouth tugging into a grim line. "If Nerezza has awakened, she will spare no one."

She grimaces, burying her face in her hands for a moment. “Then maybe... maybe we’ll have to face her together.”

I tense. Together. The word grates, yet the bond surges as if in agreement. “We’ll see,” I mutter, unwilling to commit. My entire being rebels at the thought of trusting another purna, no matter how capable or contrite she seems.

She lifts her head, eyes reflecting the fire’s glow. “You can blame me all you want, but if your sacrifice bound her away, and now I share that tether with you... maybe I can help keep her sealed. Or if we have to fight, I can back you up.”

A sardonic chuckle rumbles from my chest. “Fight Nerezza with me, hmm? Are you so eager to go toe-to-toe with a being who twisted entire armies with a single spell?”

Her lips set in a firm line. “I’m not eager. But it sounds like we don’t have much choice.” She gestures to the runes on my chest, then lightly touches the brand on her wrist. “Neither of us is free to walk away unscathed.”

I inhale, considering her words. The truth is, I despise that we’re tethered, but short of discovering a powerful ritual or an ancient relic that can sever this bond, we might remain stuck. My final vow was to keep Nerezza from unleashing her corruption on Protheka again. Perhaps my path now includes this new purna—like it or not.

A low growl escapes my throat, more resignation than anger. “Very well,” I say, flicking my gaze to meet hers. “We survive this night, find a way to break the tether, and if needed... we deal with Nerezza.”

Her nod is solemn, a whisper of determination flitting across her features. The fire crackles between us, but the tension remains thick. I glance toward the mouth of our rocky alcove, scanning the star-peppered sky. With the immediate threat of collapsing ruins behind us, a heavier burden looms on the horizon.

Above all, I sense my own wards continuing to erode. Each moment awake reminds me of how close I stand to a power I once fought so desperately to contain. That power could devour everything I hold dear if left unchecked. If this purna—Sariah—can help, I'll use her. But I must remain vigilant. A single misstep could tip her down the same dark path that consumed Nerezza.

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I fight the urge to close my eyes and slip into the shallow stone doze that gargoyles use for rejuvenation. However, caution keeps my senses sharp. “Sleep if you want,” I grumble, almost an afterthought. “I’ll take first watch.”

She slumps, relief washing over her features as she realizes I’m not about to snap her neck the moment she closes her eyes. In a way, the tether has forced a fragile trust. “Thank you,” she murmurs. Then she shifts nearer the fire, pressing her back against the rocky wall, cloak bundled tight around her shoulders.

I remain where I am, posture rigid. My hair stirs in the stray breeze, and I clench my jaw. My body aches from centuries of immobility, yet my mind churns. Every rustle of the wind, every scuffle of loose pebbles triggers my protective instincts, especially with the bond prickling whenever Sariah stirs.

As the minutes pass, the night’s hush envelops us. I can hear her breathing slow, though she never truly sinks into deep rest—her worry is too fresh, the mountain’s cold too biting, and the threat of Drayveth or other pursuers looms large. Occasionally, I glance at her, half-hoping to see some sign that she’s just another power-hungry purna waiting to break me. But I see only exhaustion, wariness, and an undeniable determination that belies her slender build.

Briefly, I wonder what Nerezza would make of this. Jealousy? Rage? She once swore no other purna would share my presence in any capacity. The memory chills my blood. My wings shift restlessly. If Nerezza wakes, she’ll sense me. She’ll know that I’ve formed a bond—albeit accidental—with another purna. She’ll hate Sariah for it, might even try to corrupt her the way she corrupted herself long ago.

I clamp my teeth, a growl simmering in my throat. This is exactly what I sacrificed everything to avoid. And yet here I sit, next to a mortal woman, forced by magic into an alliance. Fate's twisted sense of humor would almost be amusing if the stakes weren't so dire.

The minutes stretch into an hour or more, the wind carrying faint howls of some distant beast. Sariah's breathing steadies a bit, her eyes closed though not fully asleep. I let my gaze drift to the horizon. The shape of the world outside the temple is new to me, a changed land from the days when gargoyles roamed more freely. Humans and purna have scattered across Protheke, forging enclaves, building their own meager existences. Meanwhile, the dark elves continue their cruel dominion, though that was never my war to fight—until it threatened me and my own.

Shaking my head, I focus on the immediate. Survive tonight. Keep watch for Drayveth. Then find a way to sever this tether and ensure Nerezza doesn't annihilate us all. It's more than enough to occupy whatever hours of darkness remain. My limbs throb with reawakened life, my heart pounding with a mixture of fury and adrenaline. I can't deny a strange thrill, though—to be awake again, to feel the wind on my face, to sense the stirring of magic in my veins.

Yes, I've lost so much, but perhaps there is a chance to right old wrongs. My eyes flick to the purna's resting form. If she can keep from following Nerezza's path, maybe there's hope for a new way forward. My tail coils in agitation, refusing to let me succumb to any illusions of safety.

Eventually, the fire dwindles to embers. Pale moonlight washes over the rocky crags, and the hush of the mountain night weighs heavily on us both. I remain alert, ears pricked for any sign of an approach. None comes, save the ceaseless wind.

When Sariah shifts, opening her eyes to meet mine, neither of us speaks. There's no need. The tether thrums in the cold silence, a living bond forging us together in the

face of impending doom. Far from the temple, from the seal she shattered, from the ghost of a monstrous love I once cherished, we brace ourselves for the unknown.

I clench my claws into the stone beneath me. She huddles closer to the last vestiges of warmth. Above us, the stars blaze, heedless of our turmoil. I am Kaelith, I reaffirm silently, and I will not let the darkness consume me again. Even if that means trusting one last purna—one who awoke me from eternal sleep.

Outside, the mountains stand stoic. The night marches on, indifferent to gargoyles, purna, or ancient nightmares. But within me, an ember of defiance smolders. Though the price of waking might be steep, I will face it—and I will see this through, no matter how fate twists the path ahead.

3

SARIAH

I wake with a start, heart pounding, throat tight. At first, I think the tremors from the temple have followed me into these early morning hours, but the ground remains still. My body, however, does not. Muscles protest with every shift, an unpleasant reminder of yesterday's ordeal—tumbling through that ancient ruin, fleeing Drayveth, then stumbling straight into Kaelith's path. Now, I find myself shivering against the cold, curled beside the dying embers of a fire we managed to start the night before.

My gaze slides sideways. He stands at the mouth of the small rocky alcove, wings half-furled, tail coiling in slow arcs behind him. His posture screams tension. Even from where I sit, I can read the anger brimming beneath his stony expression. Kaelith is not a subtle gargoyle. The broad set of his shoulders, the carved planes of his chest—on which faint runes still glow—radiate power. He's every bit the dangerous figure I pictured when I studied old texts about gargoyles, only multiplied by the

intensity that thrums in the air around him.

A flicker of primal memory surfaces: the moment in the temple when his eyes first snapped open, molten gold shards piercing the darkness. I recall how his hand clamped around my arm as the floor collapsed. Even then, in that life-and-death chaos, his strength was impossible to ignore. Now, in the pale morning light, all of that power aims in my direction—because, in his mind, I am the reason everything he once sacrificed is undone.

I push upright, ignoring the pinch in my ribs. My cloak slips off my shoulders, and I fumble to catch it. The extra cloth he reluctantly lent me last night is still draped across my lap, stiff with dried dust. This small reminder of our forced cooperation draws an uneasy flush to my cheeks. We're bound by necessity more than trust.

He senses my movement and swivels to face me fully, leonine grace in every step. When his eyes meet mine, my pulse stutters. That blazing gold is merciless, with a faint ring of red-gold matching the lines that trace across his obsidian skin. Standing there, he radiates an aura of seething aggression wrapped around something deeply wounded. And I'm the unintentional cause of that pain.

His voice, low and rough, shatters the fragile hush. "You're awake." It's not a question. It's an accusation, somehow.

I swallow. "I am." My words come out quieter than I intend, but I square my shoulders. If I'm going to survive with Kaelith, I can't cower. Not after all I've been through with my coven—and not after tangling with Drayveth.

As if reading my reluctance, he closes the distance in two strides, looming over me. The early sunlight streaming across the mountainside catches the silver threads in his black hair. The lines across his chest pulse once, faint but insistent. "You broke a seal that was never meant to be undone," he rumbles, each syllable radiating

condemnation. “Nerezza stirs because of you.”

Heat flares in my cheeks. I scramble to my feet, annoyed by how I have to tilt my head back to maintain eye contact. “I apologized,” I say, fighting to hold my composure. “What more do you want from me? It was an accident—one I regret. You think I wanted to release some ancient monster?”

He bares his teeth, a silent snarl that sets my nerves on edge. “Wanting has nothing to do with it,” he snaps. “The fact remains: you disrupted a centuries-old prison that I paid a steep price to maintain.”

My heart stutters at the raw edge in his words. It reminds me that he once loved this Nerezza. He sealed himself away to protect the world from her. That kind of sacrifice isn’t made lightly. But I’m too exhausted to coddle his wounded pride. Yesterday was the worst day of my life, and the entire future now looms precariously—and it’s not exactly all my fault. Drayveth pushed me here. My coven’s betrayal forced me to run. I didn’t just waltz into that temple for fun.

I cross my arms over my chest, ignoring the twinge in my shoulders. “I didn’t plan on unsealing anyone or anything. I was trying to protect myself from Drayveth. Either I used the glyphs, or he would’ve dragged me back to my coven—or killed me outright. So yes, I messed up, but I had no choice.”

He huffs, tail flicking in agitation. “No choice? That excuse might matter if the fate of this continent didn’t hang in the balance.”

Anger sparks in my veins. “Don’t talk to me about choices,” I counter, voice rising. “You think Ichoseto become an exile? You think Ichoseto live in fear, always running from the only home I had? My mentor turned on me because I was too strong for his liking, or too unpredictable. My own coven—the people who were supposed to guide me—branded me, calling me a traitor for refusing to bend. If that’s not a lack of

choices, I don't know what is."

Something flickers across his face, a shadow of surprise. He probably didn't expect me to stand my ground. His wings shift, feathers of tension rippling through them. The pressure between us intensifies, two unstoppable forces glaring at one another. I will not back down. I've come too far, lost too much, to let another figure of authority bully me. Even if this gargoyle is monstrous in strength.

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We stare at each other in seething silence. Finally, he mutters under his breath, turning away. The air around him crackles with suppressed fury. “If you think this changes what you’ve done?—”

“I’m not saying it does,” I cut in, tone clipped. “But maybe you could pause and realize I’m not your enemy. I didn’t set out to ruin your sacrifice or free your evil ex-lover. I have my own problems.” My breath quickens, heart racing from this confrontation.

He spins back, stepping so close that I can’t help but inhale the faint scent of ozone clinging to his skin. Gargoyles, with their life-earth magic, often carry hints of stone, iron, even a tang like charged air. The combination is unsettlingly potent. “You are still complicit,” he growls, each word measured. “And now, we’re bound in ways neither of us wanted. You can’t deny it.”

My stomach clenches. The bond. I felt it last night, thrumming in my chest like a second heartbeat whenever he so much as glanced my way. This morning, it’s no weaker. If anything, it’s grown more insistent, as though each passing hour cements its hold. “I’m not denying anything,” I say, forcing calm into my voice. “But raging at me won’t fix our predicament.”

He bristles, but before he can retort, I take a half-step back. The sensation of his anger, combined with the whirling echoes of guilt and frustration, is nearly suffocating. I need space, if only to breathe.

My plan is to storm off a short distance—to prove I don’t have to stand here and endure his hostility. But the moment I pivot, an acute weakness ripples through my

legs, as though the ground beneath them vanishes. My knee buckles, and I let out a sharp gasp, stumbling forward. A wave of dizziness hits me so hard that black spots cloud my vision.

I'd topple face-first if Kaelith didn't lunge, grasping my upper arm. The contact sends a jolt through the tether between us, an electric pulse of shared energy. I gasp, blinking away the sudden stars. He steadies me with far more gentleness than I expect.

"What—?" My voice breaks. "What's happening?"

He exhales, a harsh sound that borders on a snarl. "You tried to leave." He angles his body so I can see his own slight grimace, a tension that draws lines around his mouth. "I felt it too. We can't stray too far from each other without suffering the consequences."

A chill that has nothing to do with the Prazh winds seeps into me. I recall hearing of accidental bonds in ancient purna texts—unique spells that entwine lifeforces, ensuring neither party can stray. Some were used as punishments; others, as forced alliances in times of war. "So if we separate," I whisper, "we both weaken?"

He nods grimly. "Seems that way." There's bitterness in his gaze—he despises this just as much as I do. "We discovered that last night, when you tried to distance yourself at the fire. It was mild then, so I thought it might be exhaustion. But now, it's clear we can't break the proximity limit. Not without risking our own well-being."

My mind reels, recalling the moment at the fire when I shifted a few feet to gather more twigs. I'd felt faint, and the ache in my chest had grown heavier. I assumed it was only hunger or the aftermath of the temple's collapse. But apparently, it's the result of this cursed tether.

“I—” I attempt to straighten, ignoring the wave of residual dizziness. His grip eases, though he stays close enough to catch me if I collapse again. “That means we’re stuck together.” My voice shakes. “At least until we find a way to undo this link.”

His jaw clenches, and I notice the muscle tighten under the faint glow of morning. “Yes,” he says tersely. “Which isn’t going to be easy.” A glimmer of guilt flickers in his eyes, as though he hates acknowledging we need each other. “But we have no choice.”

For a moment, I stand there breathing hard, trying to process the magnitude of this revelation. Trapped with a gargoyle. The ramifications are enormous. My entire being balks at the notion of traveling with someone who views me with suspicion and anger, especially when I have my own pursuers to fear. A fleeting memory of Drayveth’s furious expression ghosts through my thoughts—his ultimatum was clear: come back to the coven or die. Maybe now, ironically, having this gargoyle at my side might be my only shot at staying alive.

Steadying my breath, I release a ragged sigh. “Look, we can fight all day, or we can accept reality and figure out how to fix this.” My voice sounds tired, and I feel as if I’ve aged a decade overnight.

Kaelith’s wings shift slightly, the faintest sign of acceptance. “The second option is the only rational path.”

I nod once, chewing my bottom lip. The tension between us simmers, but at least we’ve reached a kind of stalemate. He helps me step back to the meager remains of our fire. The coals have cooled, so I crouch to rekindle them with what leftover scraps of fuel I can find. He watches me, arms folded, stance imposing. I sense he’s reluctant to show any vulnerability. Typical, I suppose, for a gargoyle who once trusted a purna and paid dearly for it.

As the flames rise to a soft flicker, I draw my cloak tighter. “We can’t linger on this ledge forever,” I say, voice hushed. “Drayveth won’t be far. He might have had to retreat last night because of the collapsing temple, but he won’t give up.”

Kaelith’s mouth twists into a grim line. “Your mentor is the one who hunts you?”

I inhale, dread coiling in my belly. “Used to be my mentor. He’s... not that anymore. Not after what he did.” My tone breaks at the end, unbidden. My past with Drayveth is complicated. He once championed me to the coven, proclaiming my raw power could be harnessed for great things. Then, the moment I questioned his methods, he turned. He accused me of harboring traits that could lead to corruption, manipulating the other purna to cast me out. I close my eyes briefly, shutting out the sting of betrayal.

Kaelith’s gaze intensifies, the gold rim of his irises brightening. “What did he do?” he asks, not gently, but there’s a current of curiosity underneath.

I have this urge to snap at him for intruding, but if we’re going to be forced into alliance, he deserves some context. “He accused me of subverting the coven’s ways,” I say, letting the words come out in a monotone, hoping that strips them of their pain. “Said my magic was ‘unnatural.’ That I was heading down a path like the old horror stories—like the first Nyxari. The coven believed him. They branded me.” My hand finds the scar on my wrist. “Then they banished me under threat of death if I ever returned or used my magic outside their control.”

He exhales, studying the mark on my wrist. His expression is inscrutable, though I notice the flicker of recognition. “So they fear another dark prophecy. One that might mirror what happened to Nerezza.”

“Yes. Drayveth hammered that comparison into them,” I murmur bitterly. “Ironically, by calling me too powerful, he may have forced me into dangerous situations I never

would've chosen otherwise. The more I ran, the more suspicious they became." I shake my head, a hollow laugh escaping. "And here I am, accidentally unleashing an actual threat on the world. I guess Drayveth will feel vindicated if he ever finds out."

A heavy silence wraps around us. Finally, Kaelith says, "So you truly had no intention of playing with ancient wards. You were just... desperate."

I roll my shoulders, bitterness coiling in my throat. "Desperate. Yes." Another memory slams into me: Drayveth's eyes flaring with green-black energy, vines of corrupted magic lashing out at me in some half-lit corridor. I'd barely escaped with my life. If I hadn't found the temple's glyphs, I wouldn't be standing here. "He won't stop until he's certain I'm dead. Or until I grovel back into the coven. I'm not interested in either option."

Kaelith makes a low sound, not quite a growl. "You risk the entire planet to save yourself from that bastard?"

My anger flares again, though at least this time it's tempered by weariness. "Don't twist my words. I'm not happy about any of this. But do you know how it feels to have no safe place left to run? To watch your only allies turn on you because you won't kneel to their demands?" My voice shakes. The memories tumble forth: the fear, the heartbreak, the shame. "He told me he would break me if I didn't comply. So yes, I used the only means I found in that temple. I had no clue it would unravel your sacrifice."

Kaelith's tail thumps against the rocky ground, stirring up a faint cloud of dust. His intense gaze remains fixed on me, evaluating. At last, he nods curtly. "It seems we're both victims of events beyond our control."

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A fragile truce blossoms in that statement. We share a moment of quiet reflection, letting the tension ease a fraction. Finally, I blow on the embers again, conjuring a small flame that flickers around the last scraps of wood. “We need to decide our next move,” I say, trying to sound steadier than I feel. “We can’t stay in the open, and we can’t go wandering aimlessly through the mountains. Drayveth is likely searching for me. So are the rest of the rogue purna who follow him.”

Kaelith arches a brow, or the gargoyle equivalent of it. “You think they’re numerous enough to mount a serious hunt in the mountains?”

I grimace. “They’re determined, I’ll give them that. If he’s convinced I’m dangerous, he’ll rally as many as he can. My hope is that Prazh’s harsh climate deters them for a while. But Drayveth’s not easily intimidated by terrain.”

His mouth settles into a hard line. “Then we find safer ground. Possibly locate a place where we can study this tether—and figure out how to break it.” He glances at me. “Unless you have some hidden knowledge about undoing accidental magical bonds?”

I let out a short, humorless laugh. “If I did, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. My coven’s lore is fairly broad, but they hoard the darkest spells. I doubt they’d be enthusiastic about me rummaging through forbidden tomes.”

He shifts his weight, the runes on his skin pulsing faintly under the early sunlight. “Then we may have to consult older sources. Something from gargoyle history, or from purna archives outside your coven’s sphere.” A flicker of reluctance passes over his face; clearly, he isn’t thrilled about interacting with anyone.

“Do you know where we can find such archives?” I ask, nerves tingling with cautious hope.

His gaze drops momentarily, as though searching his centuries of memory. Then he lifts his head. “There were once hidden libraries in the old cities—somewhere across the ocean. But the world has changed drastically since I sealed myself away. I’m not certain any of those strongholds remain intact.”

My stomach sinks. “Traveling across an ocean... that’s not a small journey.” I recall scattered rumors about gargoyle enclaves in distant lands, but crossing seas in this hostile environment is no trivial feat. The dark elves rule many ports, and they’re less than friendly to humans—especially humans with magic.

His tail swishes in an irritated arc. “True. Perhaps we start smaller,” he allows grudgingly. “Are there any reclusive purna enclaves here in Prazh? Or human outposts that might have records of old spells? If nothing else, we might glean hints of who to approach next.”

My pulse skitters. My people. The purna enclaves that remain in these mountains are hidden for a reason. But not all covens are united. There is the Snowfall Glen Coven, deeper in the range, rumored to practice more esoteric forms of magic. My own coven was strict, nearly militant. The Glen, I’ve heard, is more secretive and matriarchal in a different sense, focusing on forging alliances with nature. “Snowfall Glen,” I say slowly, “might be a possibility. They’re extremely wary of outsiders, even other purna, but if we can convince them we mean no harm, they have extensive knowledge of transformation spells and old wards.”

Kaelith folds his arms, runes glowing in mild interest. “And you’re certain they won’t turn on you for being exiled?”

I huff out a breath. “Not certain. But they’re separate from my original coven, so

maybe they don't share Drayveth's vendetta. The real question is how to approach them. They may see a gargoyle and react with... open hostility. Especially if they recall the ancient wars."

His lips peel back in a grimace, revealing the hint of sharp canines. "Yes, purna and gargoyles were not exactly peaceful neighbors." He exhales, tension in every line of his posture. "Still, it's a lead. And we can't remain here."

I nod, though my stomach churns with apprehension. "It's a start. If the Glen won't help, maybe they'll at least point us somewhere else." My gaze drops, sweeping the small space we occupied last night. We have no real supplies, no map, hardly any protective gear. Just a smoldering fire, scraps of cloth, and the uncertain alliance tying us together.

Standing, I test the steadiness of my legs. The fleeting dizziness from earlier has subsided, which means Kaelith is close enough for the tether to remain stable. He watches me with a keen, cautious expression, as if expecting me to topple again. I swallow my pride. "I'm fine," I mutter, brushing ash from my knees.

His stare lingers another heartbeat before he nods. "Then let's go. The more distance we put between ourselves and Drayveth, the better."

I can't argue with that. Gathering my cloak, I do my best to secure it around me. The wind is brisk up here, though some of the morning sun's rays take the edge off the mountain chill. Kaelith's presence is a living furnace of warmth, which is both comforting and disturbing. I resent that I notice such a detail. Focus, I chide myself.

We pick our way out of the rocky depression, careful to keep within a few paces of each other. The tether tugs faintly, an invisible cord that intensifies whenever we move too far apart. Each time the pull sharpens, I see Kaelith's jaw tense and feel a matching ache beneath my ribs. The entire situation is beyond surreal: a purna on the

run, tethered to a gargoyle who once loved the deadliest Nyxari in history. If someone told me this story a week ago, I would've laughed them out of the coven.

Yet here we are, forging a precarious alliance. The path downhill is no safer than before. Loose rocks slip underfoot, and the mountain's slope dips steeply in places. Kaelith is more agile than I'd expect, especially for someone so large. His wings fold in tight to avoid snagging on jagged outcroppings, and his tail helps him balance. Even so, the precarious terrain forces us to move slowly. A single misstep could send us tumbling into a ravine.

The silence between us stretches, weighted by tension. We pass around a tall rock spire, the wind whistling over it in eerie pitches. I can't help but glance at Kaelith, noting the wariness that stiffens his spine. His head turns fractionally, scanning the horizon. It's the posture of a sentinel, someone who expects to be ambushed.

We press on. The day advances, with sunlight creeping higher, illuminating swathes of the mountain range. The air remains crisp, but the rising temperature melts small patches of snow, creating slick puddles and rivulets trickling down the rocks. After a time, the path opens onto a wider plateau. From here, the view is sweeping: harsh plains stretch out like a vast gray-green tapestry, broken by distant clusters of stunted trees and sharp ridges. Farther off, I glimpse a hazy line of cliffs. No sign of Drayveth or any other purna, but that doesn't mean they aren't out there.

While I pause to catch my breath, Kaelith sweeps his gaze across the horizon. His wings twitch, as though longing to spread wide and take flight. I recall from the old scrolls that gargoyles manipulate the planet's magnetic fields to fly, combining that ability with their natural winged physiology. My eyes drift to the cords of muscle running along his shoulders, the wide arc of his wings. A flicker of unbidden curiosity swirls in me, accompanied by an uncomfortable twinge of fascination. Stop staring, I scold myself, clearing my throat.

He turns, catching me in the act. A faint sneer tugs at his mouth. “What?” he asks, as though he already assumes I’m passing judgment.

I force a shrug, feigning nonchalance. “Just wondering if you plan to fly us down this mountain. It’d be faster.”

He raises a brow ridge, his intense gaze flicking to my smaller frame. “Carrying you while I fly would be... inefficient.” There’s an edge of dryness in his tone. “And I’m not sure my wings are fully capable after centuries of disuse. If we plummet, the tether ensures we both die.”

A shiver skitters across my skin. I guess that idea’s off the table. “Right. Walking it is.”

We continue, stepping cautiously over loose scree. I sense Kaelith’s annoyance at the slow pace, but we have no other viable path. We slip into a companionable silence of necessity rather than choice. At least he’s not berating me again about Nerezza. I’ll take the win.

With each hour, my legs ache from the unrelenting trek. Memories drift uninvited: Drayveth’s disapproving stare, the branding iron’s searing heat on my wrist, the look of triumph in his eyes when the coven cast me out. I fight back a surge of bitterness. If I let that anger consume me, I’ll end up no better than the tyrants I despise. Focus on moving forward. Surviving is the priority.

At midday—my best guess based on the angle of the sun—we reach a flatter expanse littered with boulders. The environment remains stark, but at least the slope isn’t so punishing. Kaelith halts, scanning for signs of a water source or anything we can use for shelter. A faint breeze rustles my hair, carrying the distant cry of some avian predator.

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“We should rest,” he declares, though his voice lacks any warmth. “No sense pushing ourselves to collapse.”

“Agreed,” I say, grateful for the reprieve. The dryness in my throat suggests we’re both running low on energy. We scout around until we find a shallow depression behind a large rock cluster—enough cover to shield us from the wind and prying eyes.

I settle onto a flat stone, massaging my calves. Kaelith stands a short distance away, gaze constantly roving. He looks like a coiled spring, ready to pounce at any flicker of movement. The bond hums faintly, a reminder of our forced closeness. Too much distance and we’re crippled. Lovely. I groan, pressing the heel of my hand to my forehead.

He notices, crossing the space between us with quiet steps. “You’re in pain.” It’s not quite a question, but there’s a sliver of concern beneath the gruffness.

“Exhaustion,” I correct, trying not to snap. “I’ve been running for days, and you’re not exactly a gentle traveling companion.”

An exasperated growl leaves him. “I’m not here to coddle you. But if you collapse, we both suffer.” He tilts his chin in the direction of my cloak. “We should eat something. There might be small game in these mountains, or perhaps fruit if we find lower altitudes.” He sounds less than thrilled by the prospect of foraging. Gargoyles, from the stories, prefer meat and are indifferent to foraging. But hunger is hunger.

I nod, rummaging in my cloak’s pocket for the last of the dried rations I grabbed

before fleeing. It's a pitiful handful—some jerked meat and a stale biscuit that's more crumb than bread. I chew slowly, wincing at how bland it tastes. Kaelith eyes me, probably verifying I'm not about to pass out.

He steps around the large rock formation, scanning the horizon once more. The midday sun highlights the interplay of obsidian and red-gold in his skin. Despite my wariness, I can't deny he's extraordinary, a testament to gargoyle resilience and raw power. My gaze flickers over the runes etched into his torso, noticing how they pulse softly, as though in rhythm with his heartbeat. A subtle glow emanates from the lines, reminiscent of magma hidden beneath the surface.

Focus, Sariah. I push the last crumb into my mouth, ignoring a pang of curiosity about those runes. They must be part of the seal he created to imprison himself with Nerezza. The fact that they remain even after the seal is broken hints at residual power or deep scarring of his own magic.

Eventually, he returns, his expression somber. "No immediate sign of Drayveth," he reports, "but we can't be complacent. We should keep moving soon, at least until we find a decent place to set camp for the night."

"Agreed," I murmur, rising to my feet. A wave of weariness passes through me, but I grit my teeth. The tether might ensure we don't stray far, but it doesn't promise us any relief from endless trekking.

Before I can suggest we continue, Kaelith steps closer, lowering his voice. "I propose we keep watch in turns once evening falls. If Drayveth is tracking you, he could attempt an ambush under darkness."

"I've done it before—kept watch, I mean," I say quietly. "I'm not helpless."

He arches what might be a brow. "I've noticed you're not helpless, but exhaustion

can make even the strong vulnerable. Last night, you almost?—”

“I was fine,” I interrupt, though we both recall how quickly I drifted off. We were lucky Drayveth didn’t find us. My shoulders slump. “All right, fine. We’ll split watch. We’re apparently joined at the hip anyway.”

A flicker of amusement ghosts across his features, gone so quickly I almost miss it. Then he glances past me, scanning the rocks beyond. “Let’s go,” he murmurs, voice tense once more. “We’ll cover as much ground as we can before sunset.”

We resume our slow journey downward. The rocky terrain gives way to patches of gnarled shrubs, some tough grasses, and the occasional cluster of stunted conifers. My boots crunch over frost-laced ground, and each step sends a dull ache through my ankles. I keep expecting Drayveth’s voice to slice the hush, or dark shapes to crest a ridge and block our path, but the afternoon stretches onward without incident.

At one point, we pause by a narrow rivulet of meltwater trickling down a slope. I kneel, scooping a handful to drink. It’s so cold it stings my throat, but it’s fresh and revives me somewhat. Kaelith stands watch, scanning the surrounding hillside. The tether tugs faintly whenever I shift out of range, a subtle reminder we share a link I still don’t fully understand.

As dusk creeps in, the light softens, painting the mountainsides in shades of amber and violet. I can’t help a tiny pang of awe at Prazh’s savage beauty. Even in this bleak environment, there’s a strange splendor. Perhaps my coven, fixated on controlling magic and shaping the world to suit them, never taught me to appreciate it. Or maybe I just never listened.

Kaelith, for his part, maintains a relentless vigilance. His wings shift occasionally, as though testing the night wind. I can sense his discomfort, like an animal pacing the confines of a cage. The tether is no boon to him either. More than once, I catch him

scowling if I move too far, the shared pain or weakness flickering in his eyes.

When the sun finally tips behind a ridge, we find a shallow cave tucked into a slope. It's barely more than a rocky overhang, but at least it's some shelter. I gratefully collapse onto a patch of moss near the entrance, dropping my meager belongings. Kaelith inspects the interior, claws scraping over stone. Satisfied that nothing lurks within, he settles near the mouth, scanning the darkening horizon.

A heavy sigh escapes me. The day's exhaustion weighs on my body like an anchor. "I'll gather wood for a small fire," I say, pushing back to my feet.

He grunts an acknowledgment, glancing at the sky. "Quickly. Don't go far."

The bond flares in mild protest when I wander outside the cave's immediate vicinity. I keep Kaelith in sight, rummaging for dead branches and any kindling. After a while, I return, arms brimming with enough scraps to start a modest blaze. Soon, sparks leap into flame, casting dancing light across the worn stone. The warmth soothes my aching limbs, though a part of me remains on edge, half expecting Drayveth to appear from the shadows.

We settle around the fire, the tension between us a near-constant presence. Despite that friction, there's a strange comfort in not being alone. I recall the countless nights I spent shivering under the stars, terrified that Drayveth or the coven's hunters would corner me. Now, at least, I have a fearsome gargoyle who might stand with me if it comes to a fight—albeit grudgingly. My gaze drifts to the stone arcs of his wings. If he chose to, he could protect me from multiple pursuers. The notion unsettles me almost as much as it reassures.

He notices my stare and rolls his shoulders. "What?" he demands, voice rough.

"Nothing," I say quickly, tossing a twig into the flames. "Just thinking."

“About?”

I hesitate, then force the words out. “All this time, I thought the greatest threat was my own coven. Drayveth. Now, apparently, we have an ancient Nyxari on the cusp of returning. I’m trying to process it.”

Kaelith’s expression darkens. “Nerezza is beyond anything your mentor could conceive. If she wakes fully, all of Protheke will pay a price.”

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A shiver quakes down my spine, and not from the cold. “How certain are you that she’s not awake already? That I didn’t free her the same moment I freed you?”

He looks into the fire, a muscle in his jaw twitching. “I’m not certain. She may be stirring somewhere else, using her power to gather strength. My runes haven’t fully unraveled, which suggests she isn’t yet at peak form. But each day we tarry, she could be regaining lost ground.”

My heart throbs with guilt and fear. “Then we have to hurry. Yet we also need to find a way to break this tether. And that might require time.”

He inclines his head, gold eyes reflecting the flames. “Our best option remains finding someone with knowledge of advanced wards. You mentioned Snowfall Glen. It’s a risky bet, but we may have no other immediate recourse.” He hesitates, wings rustling. “Tomorrow, we’ll chart a path there.”

The flicker of hope kindles in my chest, mingling with dread. “They might not accept us, but it’s worth trying.”

“Agreed.” He turns his gaze to the outside gloom, as though expecting an ambush at any second. “I’ll keep first watch again.”

I should argue that I can handle the first shift, but exhaustion drags at my bones. Despite my best intentions, I stifle a yawn. The day’s trek has drained me. So I nod, huddling nearer the fire. My cloak and the ragged piece of cloth he gave me last night are the only things between my skin and the mountain’s biting chill. I sense him shifting behind me, his presence looming large. A gentle swirl of rocky dust and the

faint scent of ozone cling to him.

Closing my eyes, I attempt to still my racing thoughts. The flicker of the bond pulses faintly, a constant reminder that we share a forced closeness. If I dwell on that too long, panic threatens to claw at my throat. Instead, I focus on the small comfort of the fire's warmth and the knowledge that, for tonight, Drayveth isn't here.

Time passes in fits and starts. I drift in and out of a doze, lulled by the crackling flames and the distant sigh of the wind. At one point, I jolt awake, my heart hammering, convinced I heard footsteps outside. Kaelith is already on his feet, wings partially unfurled, intense gaze aimed at the cave entrance. Yet nothing materializes; perhaps it was only a shifting rock, or a creature skittering across the mountainside.

He slowly relaxes, resuming his post. I exhale, heart pounding. The bond's tension eases when we both realize there's no immediate danger. My eyelids slide shut again, and I sink back into uneasy rest. My dreams are fitful—jumbled images of Drayveth's brand, the glyph's blinding light, and the terrifying shape of a woman's face twisted by dark magic.

When I next surface, Kaelith is shaking my shoulder gently. The fire has dimmed to embers, and a chill grips the air, turning my breath white. "Your turn," he murmurs, voice subdued.

I nod, scrubbing sleep from my eyes. He retreats to the far wall, body partially in shadow, but I sense his exhaustion despite his stoic facade. We've only known each other a short time, yet the tether reveals subtle clues about his state. I poke at the coals, feeding them a few remaining sticks, then settle in to watch the cave's entrance. The night is eerily quiet, with only the distant moan of wind to keep me company.

Kaelith dozes, or at least pretends to. His stone sleep, if he chooses to fully embrace

it, can make him nearly invincible, but I sense he refuses to become that vulnerable around me—even though I doubt I’m a threat. My head throbs with the weight of everything: the betrayal by Drayveth, the shattered seal, the ancient lover turned monster, and this forced bond. What a grand mess.

Time slips by in slow increments, measured by the crackle of burning twigs. I keep my ears pricked, half-expecting the crunch of boots or the hiss of Drayveth’s sorcery. But nothing disturbs the darkness. Eventually, the sky begins to lighten, heralding a new day. My mind drifts to the journeys ahead: forging a path to Snowfall Glen, praying they won’t kill us on sight, and somehow unraveling the tether before Nerezza unleashes unimaginable terror.

A pang of mingled fear and determination settles in my chest. I’m not sure how to fix any of this, but I’ve already chosen to fight. I can’t lie down and let the coven slaughter me, or let Nerezza destroy the world because of my accidental blunder. I glance at Kaelith’s sleeping form, noting his broad back and the faint glow of runes along his arms. He might be the only ally I have left, even if he remains furious and distrustful. I’ll take that over facing the darkness alone.

As dawn’s first rays peek over the horizon, painting the cave entrance in pale gold, I stand and stretch, my joints protesting. Another day awaits. I catch my reflection in a small puddle of melted snow near the rock wall: a woman with hair in disarray, silver highlights threaded through chestnut waves, gray eyes ringed with fatigue. Dark smudges underscore them, courtesy of too little rest and too much turmoil. I no longer recognize the naive purna I was in the coven. But maybe that’s a good thing.

Behind me, Kaelith stirs, eyes opening to reveal that molten intensity. I wonder if the bond alerted him the moment I moved. He rises with predatory grace, dusting off shards of rock clinging to his wings. Outside, the wind picks up again, rattling the sparse shrubs.

“You kept watch,” he says, voice rumbling with subdued gratitude. He doesn’t say thank you, but I sense an unspoken acknowledgment. Progress, in its gargoyle form.

I nod. “Nothing disturbed us. But we should get going before the day grows old.”

He presses his palm to the runes on his chest, expression grim. “Yes. Nerezza won’t wait. Nor will your Drayveth.”

I swallow, stifling the pang of anxiety that arises at the mention of my old mentor. “Right.” My voice steadies. “Let’s move.”

Without further discussion, we douse the remaining embers of our tiny fire and gather our scant belongings. Stepping out of the cave, we inhale the icy morning air. The horizon stretches before us, the path uncertain but inevitable. Side by side—bound by a cursed tether, dogged by enemies, tethered to a fate we never asked for—we descend from the mountain heights, forging our next step toward either salvation or doom.

I feel Kaelith’s presence at my shoulder, a towering guardian who brims with resentment and reluctant concern. The bond hums, anchoring us together in a dance neither of us chose. My heart hammers, a mixture of apprehension and something deeper, an unspoken pull that might prove dangerous if I let it grow. Because for all his gruff hostility, I sense in him a sorrowful loyalty that resonates with my own battered spirit.

Neither of us trusts easily. Yet, as we begin this day’s journey, I can’t help thinking—maybe in our shared desperation, we’ll find a way to heal more than just an ancient seal. Perhaps in the bleakness of Prazh, two exiles can forge a new fate, one that defies betrayal and fear. The wind pushes against our backs, urging us forward, and I tighten my grip on my cloak. No matter how dark the road ahead, I

won't run from it.

For better or worse, Kaelith and I are in this together. And while that idea sparks dread, it also kindles a tiny ember of hope.

4

KAELITH

I stand at the cave's entrance, silent as dawn stretches its pale glow across the rugged slopes of Prazh. My breath steams in the cold air, but it does little to warm the chill seeping through my veins. For centuries, I knew exactly who I was: a gargoyle warrior, bound by my own choice to that stone prison. Now, everything has changed. The vow that once guided my entire existence is broken, undone by this mortal woman who sleeps fitfully only a few paces behind me.

Sariah. A purna with eyes that hold the same fierce spark I once admired in another. It unnerves me how easily my memory slips from the present to the past, how the shape of Sariah's determined chin conjures fleeting echoes of Nerezza. That single name twists a blade in my chest, stirring guilt and regret. My sacrifice was meant to ensure that Nerezza could never threaten Protheka again. Yet here I stand, free—and so, undoubtedly, is she.

I drag in a slow breath, trying to ground myself in the moment. Last night's frost still clings to scattered stones, painting the ground in a silver sheen. The sky overhead gradually shifts from inky black to a softer lavender, edged with gold near the horizon. This place is undeniably beautiful, a stark contrast to the roiling conflict in my soul. I want to just launch into the air, spread my wings to catch the biting winds, and escape. But the tether ensures that isn't an option. I can't fly off without jeopardizing Sariah—and, by extension, myself.

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Curse this bond. A soft growl rumbles through my chest, echoing off the stone walls behind me. I refuse to dwell on the discomfort too long. There are too many pressing concerns. Drayveth, a dangerous purna, hunts Sariah. Nerezza, the Nyxari I sealed away, likely stirs somewhere in the shadows of this continent, or perhaps beyond. And I'm tethered to a mortal who rattles my carefully constructed defenses every time our eyes meet.

A shifting sound reaches my ears. I turn to see Sariah stirring from her makeshift bedding: a thin cloak and the few scraps of cloth we salvaged. Shadows cling beneath her gray eyes, and there's tension in the set of her shoulders. She rises slowly, wincing as if her body protests the new day's demands.

Her gaze flicks to me, and for an instant, an unspoken awareness passes between us—remnants of the unbreakable link that binds our magic and forces us into uneasy proximity. I don't want this. I sense she doesn't either. Yet we can't deny the necessity of staying together. Not if we hope to end this curse and prevent a darkness far greater from swallowing the world.

She clears her throat, voice scratchy with sleep. "Morning."

I incline my head in a curt nod. "It is." My words emerge harsher than intended, but I don't apologize. I can't afford softness. Not when my last attempt at gentleness led to heartbreak and betrayal.

Stepping away from the cave's mouth, I examine the meager supplies we gathered the previous day. We managed to scavenge a bit of dried wood for a fire, but our food is practically gone. Neither of us is in top condition for a long journey. And journey we

must—Sariah mentioned a coven, Snowfall Glen, hidden deep in these mountains. That might be our only lead for undoing this tether. If those purna don't kill me on sight. The ancient grudges between gargoyles and purna still linger in living memory, though I'm not the same as the monstrous raiders that once terrorized these lands.

"I'll see if I can find anything edible," Sariah murmurs. Her voice carries a tentative note, as if uncertain how I'll react.

My wings flex involuntarily. "Stay close enough that the bond doesn't weaken you," I reply, glancing pointedly at the cave's exit. "We can't risk you collapsing again. If I have to track you down, it'll be a waste of time we don't have."

She bristles, crossing her arms. "I'm not eager to separate. That nearly knocked me flat before." A wry edge tinges her tone. "I'll forage nearby. You can watch my every move if you like."

I exhale sharply, trying to rein in my frustration. "Go, then. I'll gather more kindling. We'll need a fire for tonight." It's a small concession—allowing us to split up within a certain radius. The tether's invisible boundary extends only so far, but we have enough room to search a broader area without stepping on each other's toes.

Sariah rolls her shoulders, shifting the cloak around her. Without further comment, she heads downhill, where stunted shrubs and patches of moss cling to the rocky soil. I watch her go, every muscle tensed in case she strays too far. The connection hums in my chest, a subtle vibration that doesn't belong. Once I'm confident she's still within range, I move in the opposite direction, scanning for dried branches or anything that might serve as fuel. The morning light grows stronger, revealing the stark majesty of Prazh's peaks. Snow-capped summits gleam under the sun's first rays, while shadows pool in the deeper valleys below. In many ways, it mirrors my own existence: half drowned in darkness, half struggling toward daylight.

My thoughts drift again to Nerezza. The memory of her once-luminous face taunts me—how she laughed with such warmth, how she claimed she wanted peace between our races, how she risked everything to protect me from the purna’s wrath. But as the wars escalated, she delved into forbidden magic, culminating in a transformation that left her unrecognizable. The bitterness of that betrayal still tastes like iron on my tongue. She loved me, or so I believed, yet she nearly destroyed all I held dear. Did I fail her, or did she choose her path? I’ll never know, because by the time I realized the danger, she was too far gone. Sealing us both was the only option. But that seal is broken now.

Clenching my jaw, I force myself to focus on the present. My vow was undone by Sariah’s meddling, but ironically, her presence might be the only way to restore what I lost. Whether that means recasting the seal or devising a new strategy, I can’t do it alone, not when my ancient wards unravel day by day. My gaze flickers to the runes etched across my chest—faint lines of luminous red-gold that once glowed fiercely to maintain the prison. Now they flicker like dying embers. If I use my earth magic too recklessly, I might degrade them further.

Shaking off the grim thought, I lean down to pick up a handful of branches. They’re brittle, easy to snap. At least they’ll burn without too much smoke. I pile them under my arm and continue along a narrow ledge, searching for anything else of value. The slope here is treacherous, dotted with hidden crevices that could swallow a careless traveler. My tail lashes behind me, aiding my balance on the uneven ground. With each step, I smell the crisp bite of snow, the tang of raw stone. Occasionally, the faint breeze carries a trace of Sariah’s scent—something slightly floral, with an undercurrent of magic. I still find it disconcerting to be so attuned to her proximity.

By the time I return to our makeshift camp, the sun has climbed higher, painting the rocky outcrop in stark relief. Sariah arrives moments later, her cloak draped with a small gathering of wiry grasses and a handful of pale berries cupped in her palm. She eyes the branches under my arm. “At least we’ll have a fire,” she says by way of

greeting. Then she holds out the berries, carefully balanced. “They’re sour, but edible. The grass might be worthless, unless you want to attempt weaving something.”

I shrug, depositing the branches near the cave’s entrance. “Better than nothing.” I glance at the meager handful of berries, my lips pressing into a thin line. We’re in dire need of proper sustenance, but at least it’s a start. My gaze flicks back to Sariah, noticing how the shadows under her eyes appear more pronounced in full daylight. She’s pushing herself hard, likely because the tether demands we keep moving.

She must sense my scrutiny. “We can’t linger,” she says softly, fingertips brushing away a stray wisp of hair that falls across her cheek. “Snowfall Glen is a long trek, and if Drayveth closes in before we get there...” She doesn’t finish the sentence, but tension tightens her features.

I nod. “Yes, we move.” My voice emerges gruff, but it’s the closest I can come to agreement without revealing the swirl of tangled emotions roiling inside me. It’s better not to dwell on how her eyes flash with that resilience I once admired in another. The reminder churns my gut, so I push past it. “Eat quickly. We’ll head out.”

We share the handful of berries, their tartness biting my tongue and jarring me awake. The hunger in my belly is far from sated, but it’s enough to stave off the gnawing pit. As we prepare to leave, Sariah crushes some of the wiry grass in her hand, releasing a faint, pungent scent. “Might repel certain insects or small predators,” she remarks with a half-hearted shrug. “Old purna trick from foraging lessons.”

“Whatever helps,” I say, not sure whether I believe her. Still, knowledge is a weapon, and if she can offer small bits of wisdom, I’ll accept them.

Within minutes, we extinguish the remnants of our fire and set off along the rugged path. The terrain slopes downward in places, which should bring us closer to the

valleys—and, eventually, toward the rumored location of Snowfall Glen. My memory of Prazh is centuries out of date, but some landmarks haven't changed. Craggy peaks remain the same, and the sun traces a familiar path across the sky. If not for the tether, if not for the threat of a furious ex-mentor trailing us, and if not for the specter of Nerezza looming over my every step, I might even appreciate this trek.

“Kaelith,” Sariah says, an uncertain note in her voice. She walks a pace behind me, careful to match my stride so we don't strain the bond. “Have you thought about how we'll approach the Snowfall Glen purnas? If they see a gargoyle marching into their domain?—”

I snort. “They'll likely try to kill me on sight, yes. Or chain me in stone. I'm aware. But do we have an alternative?” I glance over my shoulder, meeting her storm-gray eyes. That fleeting moment of connection sends a jolt through the bond, stirring an inexplicable warmth in my chest. It sets my teeth on edge. I tear my gaze away. “We need answers. If that means risking their wrath, so be it.”

She exhales, footsteps grinding over loose gravel. “You're right. It's not like I have friendly purna allies to smooth things over. The only people who might help me are the very ones who exiled me.” Her voice trails off, a slight tremor betraying the lingering pain.

A pang of sympathy twists in me. It's unsettling, how quickly my anger at her role in breaking the seal tangles with something akin to reluctant compassion. Stay focused. I keep my tone impersonal. “We'll approach with caution. If they show hostility, we retreat.”

Sariah nods, hugging her cloak tighter. The wind picks up, whipping across a narrow pass ahead. Beyond it lies a broader plateau dotted with rocky spires. Each step demands careful footing, especially for her smaller stature. My wings remain partially folded, tails of them flicking with my movements. I sense her glancing at me

occasionally, though she remains silent.

In that quiet, my thoughts drift once more to Nerezza. I picture her the way she was before everything went dark: luminous white hair, eyes alight with cunning and ambition. She wasn't cruel at first. She was bold, brilliant, unafraid of bridging the gap between gargoyles and purna. We fought side by side against a common threat—dark elves, orcs, even vile creatures conjured by Wildsponts. For a time, we believed our combined magic could reshape Protheke into a safer realm for both our peoples.

But then the corruption spread within her. She delved into chaos magic, twisting it to shatter the boundaries of life and death. She believed she could harness pure void, bending reality to spare my race from extinction. Instead, she unleashed an abomination that nearly destroyed gargoyle clans, purna covens, and entire stretches of land. I sealed us both, foolishly unable to raise a hand against her. Even centuries later, my chest constricts at the memory.

A harsh voice in my mind reminds me: This can happen again. Sariah is also powerful, also purna. If she follows that path?—

No, I scold myself. They aren't the same. Sariah is exiled, despised by her own people. She lacks the ambition that drove Nerezza to unspeakable lengths. And yet the potential for darkness lingers in every magic wielder. I can't let my guard down. The tether complicates matters further, forging an intimacy I never wanted. I won't repeat my past mistakes.

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“How far did you travel before you found that temple?” I ask abruptly, hoping to distract myself from spiraling thoughts.

Sariah glances at me, brow creased. “I’d been running for weeks, ducking between abandoned settlements and old watchtowers. Prazh’s terrain isn’t too welcoming, which worked in my favor. My pursuers didn’t expect me to survive in these mountains for long.” She gives a mirthless chuckle. “Neither did I, honestly.”

I nod, imagining her stumbling upon the half-buried ruin purely by chance. Fate has a twisted sense of humor. “The temple was once a gargoyle stronghold, centuries past,” I offer, though my recollection is hazy. “It might have been converted by purna at some point, or at least partly. The wards you tampered with were a collaboration of sorts—my magic, layering upon old purna glyphs.”

She considers that, stepping carefully over a jutting rock. “That explains why the incantations seemed half-familiar. I recognized some purna script, but there were entire sections written in runes I couldn’t decipher.” She sighs. “I wish I’d known what I was touching, but desperation clouds judgment.”

A flicker of understanding passes through me. Didn’t I also act out of desperation when I locked myself away with Nerezza? I keep that thought to myself. The path narrows ahead, forcing us to walk single-file. My focus shifts to picking a way through loose stones. The tether hums whenever she lags behind, a subtle pull urging us to remain close.

The hours slip by under the relentless sun. We cross precarious ridgelines, weave around jagged crags, and descend slopes that threaten to spill us into deep ravines.

Occasionally, we spot a flash of movement far below—maybe wild goats or other hardy creatures adapted to Prazh’s harsh environment. Each time we see signs of life, Sariah’s eyes light with a flicker of hope. She’s probably thinking about hunting for food, though I suspect chasing agile goats over cliff faces isn’t the best plan.

Midafternoon finds us pausing near a small stream trickling through a rocky cleft. We kneel to drink our fill, the icy water a shock to my system. My thirst barely abates, but it’s refreshing to have any relief from the dryness of the altitude. Sariah cups her hands, water dripping from her chin as she sips. She looks up, blinking at me, droplets clinging to her lashes.

“You know, you never told me where gargoyles originated,” she says, as if the question has been gnawing at her. “I mean, I know the old stories of how your kind and the purna fought vicious battles. But there’s not much in our archives about your creation. My coven mostly taught that you were a plague conjured by dark elves or something equally ridiculous.”

I let out a low snort. “That’s nonsense. Though ironically, gargoyles were once dark elves. The first generation, at least.” I pause, recalling the moment I realized the truth. Over time, the knowledge was buried, and gargoyles shaped their own identity. “A twisted magic turned them into what we are now. But we thrived, spread across different regions. Some remained hidden in the mountains, others in fortress-cities. We believed we were chosen to bring balance.” A bitter note enters my voice. “The rest of Protheka never quite agreed with that assessment.”

She exhales softly, eyes reflecting a hint of sympathy. “That explains why your architecture has certain similarities to old elven stonework. Our coven records mentioned that, but we always chalked it up to... well, coincidence.” Her gaze lingers on me, curiosity woven with caution. “You’re far from the monstrous beasts we pictured.”

A sardonic grin pulls at my mouth. “We can be monstrous. Many gargoyles treat weaker races with indifference, or worse. We have a vicious reputation for a reason.”

She looks away, perhaps uncertain how to respond. “Still,” she murmurs after a moment, “you don’t seem all that vicious.” The statement carries a hesitant gratitude, as though acknowledging that I haven’t mauled her for her mistakes.

I straighten, ignoring the strange warmth that flickers inside me at her observation. “Drink up,” I say. “We should keep moving before nightfall.” I move a few steps away, tension crawling up my spine. The tether vibrates, a subtle reminder that I can’t get too far. Damn this bond. I remain close enough that she can feel safe, but not so close as to encourage idle chatter.

She rises, brushing water droplets from her lips. “We should find a place to rest soon. Another cave, perhaps?”

I nod curtly. “We’ll search the lower valleys. The terrain should flatten enough for a campsite.”

We set off again. My mind churns with old memories that surge unbidden: Nerezza’s laugh, the swirl of her hair, her voice when she promised she’d save my people. Guilt gnaws at my gut. If I’d been stronger, if I’d seen the darkness creeping into her heart sooner, could I have stopped it? Or was I always doomed to lose her? The path we walk now echoes the one I traveled with her, long ago—though that journey ended in heartbreak.

A sudden slip of Sariah’s foot snaps me back to the present. She yelps, sliding down a short embankment of loose gravel. Without thinking, I lunge, my arm shooting out to grab her. My claws clamp around her wrist, preventing a painful tumble. The tether flares, intensifying for a heartbeat, sending heat rushing through my chest.

“Careful,” I growl, pulling her upright. “You’d break a leg in that ravine.”

She breathes hard, leaning into my grasp for a moment. Her eyes dart to where the ground drops off. If she’d fallen, it might have been a nasty injury. Slowly, she lifts her gaze to meet mine, cheeks flushed. “Thank you,” she says, voice shaky.

I nod once, swallowing the jumble of emotions. “Try not to die. We have a curse to break, remember?” My words come out harsher than I want to, as if deflecting the sudden closeness. The memory of her pulse fluttering under my fingers unsettles me.

She slides her wrist from my hand. “Right,” she whispers, averting her gaze as she regains her footing. The tether’s energy gradually settles, but my skin still tingles where we touched.

We continue on, more cautious now. The afternoon wanes, throwing elongated shadows across the mountain ridges. Eventually, the path dips into a rugged valley filled with irregular stones and a few scraggly evergreens. I spot what looks like a natural alcove in the rock face ahead. Approaching warily, we discover a shallow cave about a dozen paces wide, partially protected from the wind by a protruding ledge.

“This should do,” I remark, stepping inside. My voice echoes faintly. The ceiling is high enough that I can stand comfortably without scraping my horns or wings. The stone floor is relatively even, with scattered pebbles and minimal debris.

Sariah examines the entrance, eyes narrowed. “It’s not too deep,” she says, “but it’ll keep us safe from the wind tonight.”

I grunt in agreement, setting down the branches I carried. It isn’t much, but it’ll last for a small fire. As twilight creeps in, the temperature drops. I feel the chill keenly, though gargoyles are more resilient than humans. Sariah stands near the cave mouth,

arms wrapped around herself, eyes scanning the valley. The wind ruffles her hair, sending a few silver-streaked strands across her face.

I exhale slowly, stepping behind her. “He won’t appear out of nowhere,” I say, referencing Drayveth.

She startles slightly, turning to face me. “You can’t be sure. He’s cunning, and he can track my signature if he’s close enough.”

I shake my head, crossing my arms over my chest. “This valley is broad. We’d spot a group approaching from a distance. Even if they traveled at night, the noise alone would give them away.” I hesitate, noticing the tension in her shoulders. “We’ll keep watch in turns, as before. No point in letting our guard down.”

She nods, expression strained. “Right. I’ll take first watch this time.” A small flash of determination glints in her eyes.

I regard her for a moment, assessing her endurance. She looks exhausted, but I suspect letting her stand guard might grant her a sense of control. “Fine,” I concede. “But you’ll wake me if anything seems off. No playing hero alone.”

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Her lips twist as though she wants to argue, but she just inclines her head. “Okay.” With that, she crouches near the branches, flicking her fingers. A tiny spark of purna magic arcs from her hand to the wood, and soon a flicker of flame dances upward. She watches it intently, perhaps finding solace in the warmth.

I move to the opposite side of the cave, rolling my shoulders to ease the stiffness from the day’s hike. The runes on my chest pulse faintly, their light subdued in the gathering darkness. My tail coils restlessly against the stone floor. Inside me, an unfamiliar knot of tension refuses to dissolve—a mixture of resentment for my broken vow, dread of what Nerezza might be doing, and a vexing awareness of Sariah’s every move.

As the fire crackles softly, she settles in, cloak wrapped around her legs. Occasionally, her gaze drifts to me, but we don’t speak. Our uneasy alliance hovers like a fragile bridge between us, built on necessity rather than trust. Eventually, I close my eyes, letting my body slip into a shallow doze. Stone sleep has always been my means of regeneration, but I can’t fully transform into immobile rock while traveling. Not when threats lurk at every turn.

Time slips by in a haze of flickering firelight and the muffled sigh of wind beyond the cave. Sariah’s breathing remains steady, occasionally punctuated by a soft intake of breath if a sudden gust rattles the branches. My senses hover on the edge, alert to any intrusion. Nothing disturbs the night. Eventually, a gentle touch on my arm rouses me fully. I snap my eyes open, meeting Sariah’s uncertain gaze.

“Your turn,” she whispers. “I’m... tired.”

I nod, pushing to my feet. The night has deepened, stars glittering in the vast sky beyond. The fire is reduced to glowing embers. “Rest,” I say, my voice low. She looks about to protest, but her exhaustion is evident.

She settles against the cave wall, hugging her cloak, eyes drooping. Soon, her breathing slips into the slow rhythm of sleep. Standing beside the dying embers, I quietly feed a few leftover twigs to the coals until they flare once more, casting dancing shadows on the cavern walls. Then I position myself near the entrance, scanning the valley. The starlight reveals a rugged expanse of stone, the contours softened by night’s embrace.

A memory resurfaces unbidden: Nerezza, her face illuminated by moonlight, leaning against me after a hard-won battle. She’d pressed her hand to my chest, feeling the runes etched there, whispering that she’d find a way to end the war once and for all. I believed her then—believed she was the hope our world needed. My tail flicks in agitation, banishing the recollection. That dream ended in darkness.

I focus on the present. Sariah’s presence looms behind me, quiet except for her slumbering breaths. The bond hums at a low frequency, a constant reminder that we share energy, fates entwined whether we like it or not. Romance is a concept I never thought I’d entertain again, not after what happened. Yet the spark of attraction that sometimes flares when our eyes meet is undeniable. I sense her strength, her vulnerability, her stubborn will. It’s dangerous to dwell on these thoughts, but isolation and forced closeness can warp even the fiercest hearts.

Not again, I warn myself. I must keep my distance. The last time I allowed a purna into my confidence, it cost me everything. If that means I must guard my emotions as well as my body, so be it. The tether complicates matters, but it doesn’t have to dictate them. We’re reluctant partners, joined for a common cause.

Throughout my watch, the valley remains silent, save for the wind that occasionally

moans through rocky fissures. I periodically pace the cave's perimeter, resisting the urge to step outside. The stars overhead seem infinite, a canopy of light that has no regard for our mortal struggles. A wave of weariness settles over me. I haven't had true stone sleep since my awakening, and my body craves deeper rest. But the threat of Drayveth—of Nerezza—drives me onward.

As the horizon begins to lighten, heralding the approach of dawn, I finally let out a long breath, stepping back toward the fire. The embers glow faintly, enough to cast a warm halo over Sariah's sleeping form. Her chest rises and falls in soft rhythm. Strands of her hair spill across her cheek, silver glinting where it catches the weak light. She looks fragile, yet I know the power that thrums beneath her skin. She's a puzzle—a purna who stands defiant of her coven's rules, who inadvertently unleashed me, who claims she only wanted to survive.

A pang of reluctant admiration tugs at my chest. I push it down. This alliance is forced, not chosen. If we manage to break this bond, we'll go our separate ways. I can't afford anything else. Remember Nerezza. The memory churns, stoking my guilt and reminding me how easily trust can be shattered.

When the first rays of dawn stretch into the cave, I crouch beside Sariah and gently shake her shoulder. She stirs, blinking groggily at me. Then, realization floods her expression, and she shifts upright, rubbing a hand over her face. "It's morning?" she asks, voice hoarse.

"Sun's rising," I confirm. "No sign of Drayveth or other threats."

She breathes in relief, glancing at the cave entrance. "Thank you." She must notice the fatigue etched in my posture, because she presses her lips together, regret in her eyes. "You should have woken me sooner, so I could take a second shift."

I shrug. "I'm used to vigilance."

She stands, shaking out the stiffness in her legs. “You’re not infallible, you know.” Her tone is softer than usual, lacking the edge I’ve grown accustomed to. “We’re in this together.”

I meet her gaze, the bond crackling faintly. “Yes, well. Let’s just say I prefer it that way for now.”

A flicker of confusion crosses her face, but she doesn’t press. Instead, she lowers her voice. “We’ll need to find better food soon. If we keep pushing ourselves, we’ll be too weak to face any real danger. There must be a village or at least a traveling route if we venture far enough down this valley.”

I consider her words, eyes narrowing. “Humans sometimes form encampments in Prazh,” I say slowly. “Though the dark elves rarely bother colonizing these lands. Maybe we can find such a place, trade for supplies if they’re friendly.”

Her lips twist in a wry smile. “Humans in Prazh aren’t usually friendly to purna—and I doubt they’ll be thrilled with a gargoyle at my side.” She sighs. “But it might still be worth the risk. We need something to sustain us on the trek to Snowfall Glen.”

I grunt in agreement, though doubt gnaws at me. The forced companionship of a gargoyle and a purna will raise eyebrows everywhere, maybe incite violence. But my logic returns to the same point: we can’t keep wandering until we collapse. If we find a settlement, we’ll have to rely on Sariah’s cunning, maybe her illusions or transformation skills, if she has any. And I’ll stand watch in case negotiations turn bloody.

“Let’s go,” I say at last, stepping out of the cave. Light spills over the valley, revealing an overcast sky tinted with pale gold near the horizon. Thin wisps of cloud streak the sky like strokes of white paint. The air is crisp, the wind whispering across the rocky terrain. Another day of uncertain alliances.

She trails after me, boots crunching on scattered pebbles. My wings twitch as I scan our surroundings. “If we head east, the mountains eventually slope into rolling hills,” I recall aloud. “There might be a path or old roads that lead to human encampments.”

Sariah nods, pulling her cloak tight. “Then east it is.” She draws beside me, and for a heartbeat, we walk in step. The bond settles, a curious warmth pulsing at our shared center. I clamp down on the sensation. We are partners—nothing more.

As we proceed, the terrain gradually shifts, becoming less sharply inclined. Clumps of hardy grass appear, interspersed with patches of loose gravel. I keep my senses on high alert, mindful that if Drayveth catches wind of our path, an ambush could await us around any bend. Sariah remains quiet, occasionally scanning the horizon for movement.

By midday, we crest a small rise and spot a narrow track below—a trail that winds between low hills. My gaze sharpens. Trails often indicate travelers or at least a route used by beasts. Sariah breathes out, an almost hopeful sound. “If there’s a road, maybe it leads to some semblance of civilization.”

I grunt, scanning the dusty path. “We should follow it—but carefully. If we meet strangers, we must be prepared.” My tail tpuanas, a reflex that betrays my wariness. “I’ll stay hidden if we spot anyone. The least we need is a mob attacking us.”

Her mouth quirks. “Agreed. My kind aren’t exactly revered either, but at least humans won’t think I’m a man-eating monster.”

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I cast her a sidelong look. “Humans have called gargoyles worse.”

She almost smiles, tension in her eyes. “I’m aware. Let’s just hope they’re too hungry or desperate themselves to start trouble.”

We descend toward the trail, each step a jarring reminder of sore muscles and gnawing emptiness in our bellies. A faint breeze picks up, scattering dust across the ground. When we reach the path, we find footprints—human or at least humanoid—leading east. Fresh enough to suggest a small group passed by recently. Sariah kneels to examine them, her brow furrowed. “They’re not heavily booted, so maybe not soldiers.” She glances at me. “Shall we try to catch up?”

I nod curtly, though a flicker of caution flares. “We’ll keep our distance until we know who they are. If it’s a caravan, they might trade with us. If they’re bandits, we’ll have to handle them differently.”

She stands, brushing grit from her hands. “All right. Let’s move quickly.”

Following the trail is a relief after scrambling over boulders. The path is narrow but relatively even, winding between low hills draped with patches of dried grass. From time to time, I see animal droppings and more footprints, confirming it’s in regular use. We stay vigilant, Sariah scanning the horizon with each twist in the road while I listen for any echo of conversation or hoofbeats on the wind.

After about an hour, the tether hums a subtle warning—though I realize it’s not the bond but my own instincts flaring. I halt, lifting a hand to signal Sariah. She stills, eyes darting around. Then I hear it: the faint murmur of voices carried by the breeze.

A small ridge rises ahead, beyond which the voices seem to emanate.

Cautiously, we approach the slope. I let Sariah take the lead, crouching so my tall frame doesn't silhouette against the sky. My wings rustle, and I carefully fold them, pressing them tight to my back. It will complicate things if whoever's on the other side see a gargoyle creeping over the ridge.

Sariah eases forward, peeking around a cluster of rocks. From my vantage, I catch glimpses of what lies below: a ragtag group of maybe four or five humans. They've set up a makeshift camp, a small fire crackling near some pack animals. No uniforms, no obvious insignia. They look like wanderers or refugees. Some battered blankets, a half-collapsed tent, and lines of fatigue on their faces.

My eyes narrow. They don't appear heavily armed, though one man holds a crossbow. Another fiddles with a rusted sword. Definitely not a well-organized militia. My posture relaxes fractionally. This might be an opportunity. If they have food or directions, we can attempt to trade. But the presence of weapons means we can't be careless.

Sariah crawls back toward me, chewing her lip. In hushed tones, she reports, "They look harmless enough, but they're armed." She swallows. "I can try approaching them alone. You stay hidden until we see how they react."

I clench my jaw. "If they turn hostile, I won't remain hidden." A flicker of protective instinct rears its head—both from the tether and the memory of what transpired the last time I let a purna fight alone. I will not watch another turn to dust before my eyes, even if it's not the same situation.

She nods, face set with determination. "I understand. Just... let me handle it first. If it goes well, we can both approach. Maybe we'll finally get some real supplies."

I shift, folding my arms. “All right. I’ll be within range.” The tether ensures I can’t venture too far anyway. “Don’t do anything reckless.”

A wry smile flickers across her lips. “I’m trying to avoid that, believe me.” She takes a breath, steadies herself, and rises, cloak draped around her to conceal the worst of her travel-worn appearance. Then she steps over the ridge, following the path toward the unsuspecting group below.

I crouch behind a rocky outcrop, tensing. My senses sharpen, every nerve keyed to any sign of conflict. Sariah walks slowly down the slope, arms raised to show she isn’t wielding a weapon. The group notices her almost immediately—the crossbow man jumps to his feet, leveling the weapon at her. She pauses, speaking in a low tone I can’t fully catch, but her posture is calm. Their voices drift upward, disjointed but not yet filled with violence.

Minutes pass like hours. I watch the men’s stances. One woman in the group approaches Sariah, glancing warily at the path behind her as if expecting more travelers. Sariah gestures around, likely explaining she’s alone or at least not an immediate threat. Gradually, the tension seems to ease. The crossbow is lowered, though the sword-wielder still grips his hilt.

My chest loosens a fraction. This might actually work. I stay hidden, but inch forward just enough to keep them in sight. Sariah points to the battered packs they have, and then at her empty cloak. The woman nods sympathetically, rummaging through a small crate. They exchange more words, and I catch a snippet of Sariah’s voice: “We have coin.” Her hand moves to her pocket, though I doubt she has much to offer—maybe a few trinkets from the temple or leftover coins from her time in the coven.

The man with the crossbow mutters something that makes the others tense, but Sariah stands firm, head tilted in that defiant way she has. Another volley of conversation

passes, and then the crossbow man spits on the ground, turning away as if in disgust. The woman glares at him, then shares a quick, hushed discussion with Sariah. Finally, the woman nods and calls out to the others. I see them rummage for something. Moments later, they produce a small satchel that looks like dried rations.

Sariah's shoulders sag in relief. She trades what appears to be a small silver bracelet from her wrist. The woman examines it carefully, a flicker of awe on her face, then hands the satchel to Sariah. The crossbow man is clearly displeased, but he doesn't intervene. Perhaps the woman outranks him or they have some agreement. Either way, no fight breaks out.

I exhale slowly, my tail uncurling from its taut position. The tension across my shoulders ebbs slightly. So far, so good. Sariah and the travelers share a few more words. I see Sariah gesture eastward, as if asking directions. The sword-wielder points, then mimes a winding route, presumably describing a better path. Sariah nods, adjusting the satchel under her arm.

She steps back, offering a polite inclination of her head. The group resumes their own business, though crossbow man keeps a suspicious glare pinned on her. She doesn't linger, turning and trudging back up the slope. My relief grows. She did it, I think, somewhat impressed. Negotiations without violence or exposure to them of a gargoyle lurking in the shadows.

When she crests the ridge, I rise from my crouch, searching her face for signs of trouble. Her cheeks are flushed with the effort of staying calm. She clutches the satchel, which she carefully opens to reveal strips of dried meat, a few wafer-like biscuits, and something that might be salted roots. It's meager, but more than we've had in days.

She exhales a shaky laugh. "They're refugees from a dark elf raid, heading west to avoid further conflict. Didn't seem thrilled at the idea of more strangers wandering

around, but the woman took pity on me when she saw the mark on my hand.” Sariah rubs the scar self-consciously. “She said she’d known others in a similar situation.”

I nod, scanning the ridge to ensure the travelers haven’t changed their minds about being generous. They appear to be packing up their camp, likely wanting to move on. “Let’s go,” I say, lowering my voice. “I’d rather not tempt them to question us further.”

She agrees, and we slip down the opposite slope, putting distance between ourselves and the refugees. Once we’re confident no one’s following, we pause under a twisted pine. Sariah lets out a long breath, offering me a share of the meager rations.

“Here,” she says, voice gentle. “Take what you need. You did gather all that firewood, after all.” There’s a playful edge to her tone, a tiny attempt at humor.

I blink, accepting a couple of dried meat strips. I tear a piece free with my teeth, savoring the salty flavor. My stomach clenches in gratitude. “Good job,” I say, meeting her gaze briefly. “You handled them well.”

She flushes a little. “I guess I have some negotiation skills left after all.” Then she sobers. “They said we should follow this trail until we reach a fork near the next ridge. If we take the eastern branch, it loops around to a wide valley that eventually leads to the Snowfall Glen territory.” She shrugs. “The woman didn’t know about the Glen specifically, but she’d heard rumors of purnas in those mountains.”

I chew thoughtfully, finishing my bite before responding. “Then that’s our next step. No more scrounging across these peaks. We’ll use the path and hope we find the Glen before Drayveth finds us.” A grim resolve settles in my chest, fueling me forward. The vow to remain in stone sleep is undone. Now, I have a new vow—to ensure Nerezza doesn’t plunge the world into chaos once more. And if that means forging a deeper bond with Sariah, at least until we break this tether... so be it.

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She nods, softly whispering, “Yes. Let’s hope.” For a moment, her eyes flick down to my chest, where the runes glimmer faintly under the sunlight. Then she meets my gaze with an earnest question in her expression, though she doesn’t voice it. We both know this alliance is fragile, riddled with secrets and haunted by the past.

But as we set off again, side by side, neither of us retreats. The invisible chain binding us tugs, ensuring that every step forward is shared. Despite the lingering resentment, the unspoken fears, and the looming threat of a monstrous force awakening somewhere in Protheka, we move as one—reluctant partners venturing into the unknown. And ever since my eyes snapped open in that temple, a tiny part of me wonders if perhaps this forced alliance might be the key not only to saving the world from Nerezza, but to finding a new purpose in the uncharted future that lies ahead.

5

SARIAH

Cold air bites at my cheeks as I trudge across the rugged trail, boots crunching over loose gravel and stiff patches of half-frozen grass. The sky overhead is blanketed in slate-gray clouds, promising snow or a bitter drizzle before the day ends. The entire world seems hushed, as if bracing for a storm. My heart pounds, more from the tension that lingers between Kaelith and me than the climb itself. Every step forward reminds me that we are bound together by magic we barely understand.

We’ve been following the narrow road east for most of the morning, shadows from the hills stretching across our path. The group of refugees we encountered yesterday

pointed us in this direction—toward a lowland valley that supposedly leads into the realm of Snowfall Glen. I repeat the name in my mind like a whispered mantra, half-hope, half-dread. If the purnas of the Glen reject us, or if they spot Kaelith before I can explain... it won't end well.

Glancing sideways, I catch a glimpse of him. He walks a few strides ahead, broad shoulders tense, leather wraps around his hips and thighs the only armor he has. His obsidian-hued skin appears almost gray in this dim light, the runes carved into his chest faintly glowing with every breath he takes. He's massive next to me, an imposing, silent guardian—except he's no knight in shining armor. He's gruff, moody, and bound to me by a curse I accidentally triggered. The constant tension coiling in my stomach stems from both my lingering fear of him and something deeper, more complicated.

I rub a hand to the brand on my skin, feeling the raised scar through my threadbare glove. It's an eternal reminder that I was once part of a purna coven, now exiled for being too unpredictable, too free-spirited, too powerful. They said I was dangerous. Sometimes I wonder if they're right, given how my magic is intimately wrapped around Kaelith's. I sense his power through the bond—a low thrumming that sometimes flares with his moods, echoing in my blood. And I can't deny there's an uncomfortable allure in that shared current.

He stops abruptly, scanning the trail that winds around a jagged outcrop of rock. I nearly slam into his back. My reflexes kick in just in time for me to step to the side, closer than I'd like to the steep dropoff on our left. Loose pebbles scatter under my soles, sliding down into the valley below.

“Careful,” he growls, offering me his forearm by reflex. My heart jostles at the unexpected gesture, but I quickly recover my footing without taking his assistance.

“I'm fine,” I insist, mustering as much confidence as I can. He nods, though a faint

grimace tightens his mouth. I know he's only worried I might slip, which would risk both our lives. The tether ensures we share more than just awkward companionship—my danger is his danger.

We continue onward in stiff silence. The wind picks up, tugging at my hood and sending stray locks of my chestnut hair whipping around my face. A streak of silver catches the corner of my vision, reminding me of how my magic has physically changed me over time. Another little sign that I'm not exactly the coven's perfect student anymore.

At last, the path widens enough for us to walk side by side. I'm grateful, partly because it means I can keep a wary eye on Kaelith's mood, and partly because I'm tired of feeling like I'm chasing after his imposing figure. We pass a cluster of frost-kissed shrubs, their branches rattling against one another like brittle bones. My nose catches the smell of damp earth, as though the ground is preparing for another snowfall.

In the quiet, my mind churns with all the secrets we haven't addressed: the question of how to sever the tether, the threat of Drayveth finding us, and the looming horror of Nerezza's possible return. Fear clenches my stomach. The exiled burnas of my old coven whispered Nyxari legends to scare novices into submission. The idea that I might be partially responsible for awakening that monstrous figure is enough to make my blood run cold.

I shudder at the thought, then realize Kaelith has slowed his pace, falling in step with me. His tail swishes once, stirring dust from the trail. When his gaze flicks to me, molten gold irises glinting, a ripple of heat travels through the bond.

"Are you afraid of me?" he asks, voice low, as though he's been mulling it over.

I hesitate, uncertain how much honesty to reveal. "Sometimes," I admit softly.

“You’re... unlike anything I’ve encountered.” My eyes dart to his runes. “And it doesn’t help that I awakened you from a centuries-long sleep you never wanted to leave.”

He snorts, lips curving in a bitter approximation of a smile. “Yet here we are.”

I gather my courage. “I’m not helpless, Kaelith. I might fear what you can do, but I don’t cower in terror. I won’t cower.”

He gives me a sidelong glance, evaluating me with those intense eyes. “I’ve noticed you don’t cower.” The faintest note of grudging respect tints his words.

A tense silence follows, the two of us trudging on. Eventually, I break it, my voice unsteady. “You saved me. Back there, when I almost slid off the path. You could’ve just let me tumble and tried to find another way to break the tether, but you didn’t.”

He exhales, wings twitching in slight irritation. “If you fell, we’d both suffer,” he says, tone gruff. “It’s not exactly altruism.”

I arch a brow, even though he might not see it under my hood. “So you keep saying. But you don’t push me away, not entirely. Sometimes you even... look out for me. That’s more than just survival instinct. Admit it.”

He rumbles a noncommittal sound, refusing to confirm or deny. But the rigid set of his shoulders loosens a fraction, as if he’s not wholly denying the truth in my words.

That flicker of shared acknowledgement lingers as we continue. There’s chemistry between us, electric and uneasy. I catch the tension in his jaw when he glances at me, and I know my own heart betrays a fast beat whenever he’s too close. Fear and fascination coil together, leaving me unsettled. I can’t let attraction blind me to our precarious reality, but a small part of me thrills at the attention—maybe because I’ve

lived so long in isolation, with only Drayveth's shadow chasing me.

I shake off the thought, focusing on the stretch of road ahead. It curves around a boulder-strewn hillside, revealing a more open vista. Far below us, a wide valley fans out, dotted with patches of dull, scrubby vegetation. The wind whips over the ridge, chilling my cheeks. Kaelith lifts his head, scanning the horizon. I sense his heightened alertness. Searching for threats—or for something else?

We descend to the valley's floor by late afternoon. Thick clouds roll across the sky, dimming the light. A scattering of snowflakes flutters around us, melting when they land on my cloak. The road is less defined here, broken by old tracks and dried mud. Whatever traffic once passed through this area has diminished. My memory of these parts is hazy, gleaned from half-remembered lessons in the coven. Prazh is vast and underpopulated; entire stretches remain wild or haunted by old magic.

After half an hour of walking, Kaelith halts by a rocky outcropping that juts from the ground like a curved spine. He kneels, running a clawed hand over something carved into the stone. My curiosity piques. I step closer, crouching beside him. Faded symbols etch the surface: a series of curling lines interspersed with a diamond shape repeated several times. Moss clings to the crevices, obscuring parts of the design.

“What is it?” I ask quietly, brushing aside some of the moss.

His eyes narrow, the runes on his chest flickering in resonance with whatever he senses. “They're old wards. Gargoyle script, I think. Hard to decipher after centuries of wear.” He tilts his head, tracing one symbol with a careful fingertip. “This shape... it resembles the sign we used to denote the boundary of a sealed territory.”

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My heartbeat quickens. “Like the wards in the temple where you slept?”

“Similar, but not quite. There might have been a network of markers across Prazh, controlling or monitoring certain magical threats. If this boundary is still active, it might be tied to the same corruption that once fueled Nerezza.”

A chill races through me at her name. Even the wind seems to hush, as though eavesdropping on our discovery. “Are you saying... Nerezza might have had influence here?”

He nods grimly. “She traveled far in her quest for power. I wouldn’t be surprised if she left her mark across the continents. This region might have been fortified against her, or else she tried warping it for her own ends.”

My throat tightens. The very land might remember the scars of her chaos. “Does that mean she could use this place as a gateway to return?” My voice shakes slightly.

He presses his palm harder against the carving, as if testing its integrity. The glow of his runes intensifies, then fades abruptly. “The wards are mostly broken, their power too degraded. If she’s returning, I doubt this marker alone would stop her. But it’s a clue.” There’s a hard edge to his voice, laced with cold panic beneath the surface. Seeing him unsettled drives home how serious this is. If he’s afraid, the rest of us should be downright terrified.

A surge of guilt makes my chest ache. “So she really could be stirring everywhere,” I whisper. “I’ve made everything worse, haven’t I?”

He stands slowly, fixing me with a stare so intense it feels like it could burn through my skull. “You didn’t create Nerezza. You just... cut the final thread holding her sealed. She might have escaped. I can’t dwell on what ifs.” He exhales, scanning the horizon as if looking for signs of her approach. “But we’d better move. This place feels wrong.”

I help pull away more moss, searching for any writing that might give us a hint about the wards. My heart pounds whenever I brush against Kaelith’s arm. The bond hums, an unwelcome reminder that, like it or not, his presence steadies me. We find a few more faint markings—something about “the watchful stones” and “vigil of the fallen.” Not enough to piece together a coherent message. Frustrated, I slump back, the brand on my wrist itching with latent magic.

“Let’s go,” he says, offering a hand to help me stand. I hesitate, then accept his grip. It’s warm and solid, and for a moment, our eyes lock. Electricity crackles along my spine. Fear, attraction, confusion... it all flares under his unwavering gaze. Then I pull away, heart stuttering.

We continue onward, leaving the half-buried ruin behind. Dusk creeps over the valley, painting everything in shades of purple and navy. Snow drifts lazily from the clouds, a gentle threat of a heavier storm to come. By unspoken agreement, we search for a place to set up a minimal camp. The landscape is largely flat with a few knolls, but eventually we spot the remains of what might have been a small hut—just a few crooked stones forming partial walls near a shallow gully.

Kaelith inspects the structure, eyes narrowed. “It’ll break the wind, at least.” He gestures at the leaning rock slab that might act as a roof. “We can gather wood nearby. Doubt we’ll find much, but anything’s better than freezing.”

I nod, exhaustion tugging at my limbs. As we work together to salvage a campsite from the broken stones, I feel a tentative sense of partnership solidifying. We speak in

low tones, exchanging short phrases when necessary. Despite his surly demeanor, Kaelith helps me maneuver a slab of wood from the rubble so we can lean it against the wall for extra shelter. I catch glimpses of his profile, jaw clenched in a way that betrays deeper turmoil. It occurs to me that in another world, another life, maybe we'd have become allies by choice.

We piece together a tiny fire with scraps of brush and a handful of dried branches we managed to collect along the road. My purna magic sparks the flames to life. It's a relief to feel warmth against my numb fingers, though the smoke is pungent and acrid. We settle on opposite sides of the flickering light. Kaelith's wings partially wrap around him to conserve body heat, a faint rumble in his chest signifying the slow rhythms of a gargoyle forced to remain conscious instead of slipping into deep stone sleep.

After a few bites of the last rations we traded for, silence engulfs us. The brand on my wrist itches again, reminding me of the life I left behind. I can't help but think about Drayveth, and whether he's still hunting me. Possibly, he's not far behind. A pang of dread churns in my gut. I can't let him find us, not when he'd see Kaelith as a threat to exterminate. He might not be entirely wrong, a small voice whispers, conjuring images of gargoyles rending humans limb from limb. But Kaelith isn't like that... is he?

The flames pop, throwing sparks into the cold air. Wind rattles the edges of our makeshift shelter. My eyes travel across Kaelith's strong silhouette, the planes of his face illuminated by dancing firelight. His runes glow a soft ember-red, pulsing in sync with his heartbeat. The effect is mesmerizing. He notices my stare, and something shifts in his expression.

"Why do you keep looking at that mark on your wrist?" he asks suddenly, voice a rumble that slices through the hush.

I stiffen, hugging my knees to my chest. “It’s a reminder of what I lost,” I say, hating how my voice trembles. “My identity, my home, my belonging. All because I wouldn’t submit to Drayveth’s demands.” I glance down at the brand, a spiral-and-line symbol that was once a proud sign of coven membership. Now it’s a scar of shame. “Sometimes it hurts, or itches, like the magic is pulling at me.”

He’s quiet for a moment, wings rustling. “Does it remind you of them in a way you’d prefer to forget?”

A wave of anger wells in me, mingled with sorrow. “Yes,” I admit. “But it also reminds me of why I left. I couldn’t stand their hypocrisy, their fearmongering. They saw my potential, yet they tried to clip my wings.” I huff a bitter laugh. “Now I wander Protheka with a gargoyle who’s tethered to me against his will. I guess you could say I have a knack for bad luck.”

Kaelith’s expression softens, just a fraction. “I didn’t say I was entirely unwilling,” he mutters, then shakes his head as though annoyed with himself for admitting it. “We have to do this. I’m not thrilled, but we have no choice if we want to stop Nerezza and break this bond.”

A flicker of warmth blooms in my chest, a tiny spark of camaraderie. “Thank you,” I say softly. “For not abandoning me. Even if it’s partially self-interest, you’ve still saved my life more than once.”

He glances away, letting the firelight paint half his face in shadow. “You’ve done well enough yourself. Negotiating with those refugees back on the ridge took courage.” He exhales. “In the temple, it might have been easier for me to let you die, so I’d be free from the tether’s immediate grip. But that’s not who I am.”

His words hang in the air. My pulse jumps. He’s admitting, in his own guarded way, that he isn’t the heartless monster I sometimes feared. I swallow, suddenly very

aware of how the tension between us has shifted. There's still caution and wariness, but now threads of acceptance weave in, binding us more tightly than the tether alone.

I decide to act on this fragile moment of goodwill. "When I read about gargoyles in old scrolls, there was mention of them forging soul-bonds with their mates," I say carefully, watching his reaction. "Is that anything like what we're experiencing?"

His tail lashes once, and he shoots me a hard look. "No." The denial is firm, layered with something that feels like a pang of regret. "True gargoyle mating is a choice, a sacred vow shared by two who trust each other with their lives. This... bond... is forced, an accidental merging of our energies. Don't mistake it for anything else."

A flush rises to my cheeks, part embarrassment, part relief. "Right. I just wondered."

He exhales, tension riding his shoulders again. "I can't let it become something deeper. Not after what happened with Nerezza. She was once... everything to me." His voice fractures on the last words, and I hear the raw pain that lingers behind them. "I failed her. Or she failed me. Either way, it ended in destruction."

I'm not sure what to say, so I place a hand on the rocky ground between us. "You're not the only one who's lost someone," I offer gently, thinking of my mother, who died before I could truly know her, and the other novices in my coven who turned their backs on me at Drayveth's word. Loss is universal, though the scale of Kaelith's heartbreak dwarfs mine. "Maybe the best we can do is move forward, find a way to ensure the future isn't a repeat of the past."

He lifts his gaze to mine. For a moment, I see a flicker of vulnerability in those molten gold eyes, like a wound that never truly healed. Then he clamps down on it, turning rigid. "Yes," he says softly. "Forward."

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We lapse into quiet, the firelight crackling in the background. My mind whirls with the new depth of understanding I feel toward him. Behind his stoic, formidable exterior is a man haunted by a love that rotted into darkness. I empathize more than I care to admit, because my own brush with isolation and betrayal has left me unsure who to trust.

When Kaelith shifts closer, my breath catches. The tether surges with a faint pulse, as though acknowledging our heightened awareness of each other. I inhale slowly, letting the moment settle. My fear of him doesn't vanish, but now it mingles with a cautious attraction, a strange sense of connection that defies the logical part of my brain.

Before anything else can be said, the distant roll of thunder rumbles across the valley. We both glance up, noting how the clouds have thickened into a uniform steel-gray sheet. Snow transitions to sleet, pattering against the shattered walls of our makeshift shelter. Kaelith stands, wings partially unfurling to check the sky.

"It might storm hard tonight," he observes, voice tense. "We should gather more cover if we can." He picks up a loose rock slab, attempting to wedge it along the gap in the broken walls. I help, though my arms quiver from the effort. Together, we manage to brace it in place, forming a crude roof extension that shields most of the fire.

Lightning flashes in the distance, illuminating the valley for a heartbeat. A surge of wind rattles our structure. I press a palm to my chest, feeling my heart race. For the first time today, I realize how vulnerable we are. If the storm intensifies, we could be trapped. Kaelith seems equally uneasy.

He steps back inside, crouching near the embers. “Stay close,” he mutters, eyes flicking to me. There’s an unspoken message in his stance—we only have each other to rely on.

Huddling near him, I wrap my cloak tighter, every muscle tense against the biting cold. Lightning arcs again, a jagged fork across the sky. Thunder crashes, and the wind howls, sending sleet slashing in sideways. Our half-formed shelter groans under the assault. I brace a hand against the wooden slab, praying it holds.

A sudden gust tears at the edges of the rock wall, dislodging a chunk that crashes to the ground behind us. I scream involuntarily, stumbling backward. The bond jolts, and Kaelith catches me with a strong arm. “Easy,” he murmurs, but I hear concern in his tone. We’re safe for the moment, though the structure is precarious.

Pressing close together, we endure the onslaught of wind and sleet for what feels like hours. My teeth chatter, and his body radiates warmth that seeps through my soaked cloak. The tension between us morphs again, overshadowed by survival instinct. I can’t afford pride or fear. I cling to him, letting his solid presence anchor me against the storm.

Time blurs. The wind’s howl becomes a constant roar in my ears, and the raw cold saps my strength. My eyelids droop, exhaustion dragging me downward. Vaguely, I register Kaelith’s rumbling voice, urging me to stay awake, to keep my blood flowing. My brand itches something fierce, but it’s overshadowed by the numbing cold.

At some point, the storm quiets to a dull moan, leaving behind a world dusted with glistening sleet. I come to awareness, finding myself half-curled against Kaelith’s broad chest, his wings angled to block the worst of the wind. Heat creeps up my neck as I realize how intimately we’re positioned, but I’m too drained to pull away. My breath forms pale clouds in the frigid air.

He senses my stirring and releases me carefully. The bond thrums, as if acknowledging the shift. “It’s nearly dawn,” he says, voice raspy from lack of sleep. “The storm died down a bit.”

I nod, blinking away the remnants of drowsiness. My limbs ache, but at least I’m alive. Outside, faint light filters through the cracks in our makeshift shelter. Snow and ice cling to the ground, painting the valley in a uniform white sheen. Our fire still smolders, an orange glow against the gloom.

“Thank you,” I whisper, clearing my throat. I’m not sure if I’m thanking him for saving me from the falling debris, or for sharing his warmth, or for not leaving me in the cold while he found better shelter. Maybe all of the above.

He looks away, a silent acknowledgment flickering across his features. Then he stands, stiff from hours spent crouched in the frigid air. I do the same, my legs protesting with every movement. Despite the discomfort, I feel a strange sense of closeness to him now. We survived the storm together, physically pressed against each other in a way that forces me to confront the raw tension thrumming beneath the surface of our forced partnership.

“We should check if anything’s salvageable outside,” he says, stepping gingerly around the slick floor. “And see if the road is still passable.”

I pull my cloak around me, nerves humming. “Right,” I answer. My cheeks still burn at the memory of clinging to him, but I bury my embarrassment beneath practicality. We’re in survival mode, and there’s no room for complicated emotions or fear of what I might be feeling.

Outside, the wind remains a steady breeze, sharp with chill, but nowhere near as violent. Our surroundings look like a world freshly minted in silver and gray. Thin ice crackles under my boots, and each breath is a visible puff in the frosty air. Kaelith

sweeps his gaze across the horizon, wings folded tightly.

“At least we can see footprints,” he notes, pointing to a set of half-frozen tracks. Probably ours from the previous evening, but it reaffirms that we’re still on a road. “If the path remains somewhat clear, we can move on.”

I nod, hugging myself to ward off a shiver. “We should. The Glen is still far, and we can’t risk more storms. Not without proper shelter or supplies.”

He grunts in agreement, stepping forward. I follow, careful not to slip on the icy patches. The faint crunch of ice underfoot reminds me how fragile this environment can be. A few paces from our shelter, Kaelith halts abruptly. He crouches low, examining something in the snow. My heart catches. Tracks? Or signs of Drayveth?

“What is it?” I ask, creeping closer.

He runs a clawed fingertip along a faint indentation in the snow, then scowls. “It’s older than the storm, but not by much. Looks like someone passed here during the night, maybe just before the weather worsened.” He points to a partial boot print and a swirl, like the hem of a cloak dragging.

Fear slides icy tendrils up my spine. “Drayveth?” My voice wavers.

Kaelith’s jaw flexes. “Possibly. Or other travelers. But these steps circle around, as if they were searching.” He straightens, scanning the landscape. “If it was Drayveth, he’s close. Or was.”

My heart thunders. Anxiety prickles at the base of my neck, and I rub the brand on my wrist reflexively. “We need to move—now.”

He nods, wings shifting restlessly. “Agreed. The faster we put distance between us

and whoever left those prints, the better.” A note of protective anger edges his tone. Seeing him bristle at the thought of Drayveth cornering me kindles an odd sense of reassurance, even as my rational mind warns that this could all end in violence.

We quickly gather what little we have left—hardly anything beyond the clothes on our backs—and set out eastward again. My shoulders remain tense, expecting an ambush at any moment. But the valley remains silent, broken only by the hush of wind ruffling icy bushes. The road is slippery, forcing us to walk slower than we’d like.

Throughout the morning, Kaelith and I exchange terse banter to keep our spirits up. He teases me about nearly sliding off the mountain path yesterday, while I retort that perhaps his stone sleep made him sluggish in spotting the storm. It’s lighthearted on the surface, but each jibe carries an undercurrent of vulnerability. We’re testing the waters of how much trust we can place in each other, prodding at the boundaries of fear and grudging respect.

That interplay grows, small sparks of connection lighting up the gloom. Once, I slip on a hidden patch of ice. He catches me by the elbow, a smirk tugging at his mouth. “Again?” he murmurs. I make a face, swatting him lightly and stepping away. The bond thrums in my ears, leaving me warm despite the bitter cold.

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Time passes in this uneasy dance between caution and attraction. By late afternoon, the terrain starts to shift, leading us through a series of shallow ravines draped in thin ice. Kaelith picks the route with an unerring sense of direction. I spot outcroppings that might be remnants of old structures, but they're too eroded to be sure. I think of the wards we found earlier, how they hinted at Nerezza's shadow looming over these lands. If she's truly stirring, every clue we stumble upon could be a sign of her influence.

Just as the sun dips low, painting the sky in muted lavender, we round a bend and discover a crumbling stone archway bridging two boulders. Ancient carvings run along its surface, half-buried in drifting snow. My chest tightens. Another relic, perhaps from the era of gargoyle dominance or purna wards. Kaelith moves forward, nearly reverent as he traces the carvings. I can't help but notice how his expression tightens.

"What do you see?" I whisper, drawing near.

He points to a section where the stone has collapsed, revealing deeper layers of runes in the arch's interior. My breath catches at the design: swirling lines reminiscent of the glyphs in the temple. Anxiety thrums in my veins. Kaelith's molten gaze flicks to me. "I recognize these symbols," he says, voice low. "They speak of the Nyxari's return, how the watchers must remain vigilant until the end of time."

My blood runs cold. "So it's a prophecy about Nerezza?"

He nods, jaw set. "Yes. This structure must have been part of a greater network of wards, maybe even an outpost dedicated to containing her. Which means her

influence reached here. If the prophecy was known, the watchers might have tried to hold her back. Clearly, it was never finished or maintained.”

A wave of dread settles over me, made worse by the faint snow drifting from the gray sky. “That means we’re crossing ground once used to keep Nerezza from spreading her corruption.”

His lips press into a thin line. “If we linger, we risk whatever old magic remains—broken wards can be unpredictable, sometimes attracting lesser creatures or illusions.”

My heart pounds. “Right. We should go.” I turn, ready to leave this place and the uneasy sensation prickling my skin. Yet an unspoken question lingers in my mind: What if Nerezza is already using these neglected wards to her advantage? The thought is too horrifying to voice.

We press on, the discovery fueling our urgency. Kaelith’s posture is taut, riddled with quiet panic. I sense it in the rigid line of his wings, the clench of his tail. The brand on my wrist stings anew. My own fear roils. If she truly rises, none of us are safe: not me, not Kaelith, not any mortal or immortal who stands in her path.

As dusk settles into full night, we find a rocky shelf to make a minimal camp. We don’t bother with a fire this time, relying on layers of clothing and gargoyle warmth to keep from freezing. The wind is calmer than before, though the temperature is still punishing. Huddling close to Kaelith is both necessary and unnerving, the bond singing whenever our bodies make contact. I can’t deny the comfort in his presence, no matter how reluctant we both are to acknowledge it.

I try to rest, but my mind cycles through old memories—my coven training, Drayveth’s cold eyes when he sentenced me to exile, the temple ruins where I awakened Kaelith. Now add the looming return of an ancient evil that threatened

entire races centuries ago. My pulse pounds just thinking about it. Despite everything, a spark of hope flickers in me when I recall how Kaelith seemed genuinely concerned about me clinging to him during the storm. We're forging something new here, out of necessity but also choice. Maybe that bond will see us through the trials ahead.

Glancing at Kaelith in the dim moonlight, I find him watching the darkness with unwavering focus. His wings shift slightly when I move. The synergy between us has deepened, shaped by forced proximity and a flickering sense of trust. My chest tightens with conflicting emotions—terror of Nerezza's threat, guilt over the broken seal, and an undeniable draw to the hulking gargoyle at my side.

Amid the hush of the winter night, I speak softly, words escaping before I fully plan them. "Thank you for not giving up on me."

He stiffens. "I haven't decided if it's for your sake or my own."

A soft laugh slips from my throat, surprising us both. "Aren't those the same thing now?"

He turns to me, eyes glinting like molten embers in the faint moonlight. Slowly, he exhales, the tension around his mouth easing. "Yes," he admits, "maybe they are."

Something inside me unclenches. We share a moment of silent understanding, gazes locked. The wind gently nudges the branches overhead, and a few stray flakes of snow drift between us. In that stillness, with my heart in my throat, I realize the seeds of trust have taken root. Whether they flourish or wither depends on how we face the dangers ahead—together or divided.

We sink back against the cold stone, wariness draping our every breath. Yet an undercurrent of warmth lingers, a tenuous thread of connection that defies my fear of the future. I nestle closer, ignoring the wild flutter in my chest. He doesn't pull away,

doesn't snarl or roll his eyes. Instead, he adjusts his wing to shield me from the wind's bite, the bond humming in quiet satisfaction at our nearness.

In the distance, thunder rumbles once more, but faintly. Snow flutters across the frozen ground like whispered secrets. We remain alert, listening for any sign of Drayveth's pursuit or the crackle of unleashed magic. But for this moment, it's just us: two exiles navigating a broken world haunted by an ancient evil. My breath mingles with Kaelith's, tension gradually giving way to a fragile harmony. The mark on my wrist twinges, a reminder of everything I've lost and the uncertain path before me. Yet, I feel the stirrings of hope, woven from necessity, fear, and a fledgling trust I never expected to find in the arms of a gargoyle.

We might be fumbling in the dark—both literally and metaphorically—but we're not doing it alone. Tomorrow holds fresh challenges, but tonight, a spark of something more than mere survival flickers in the space between our hearts. And that small, precious glow is enough to keep me from succumbing to the shadows closing in around us.

6

KAELITH

Inhale the crisp morning air, forcing it to steady the agitation coursing through my veins. Snow clings stubbornly to the surrounding hills, a pale hush blanketing the earth. Above, the sun fights to pierce a curtain of gray clouds, casting a weak, silvery light over the valley where we've made camp.

Sariah stands a few paces away, rolling her shoulders in a series of stretches. Even from this distance, I sense her restless energy. Our bond hums between us, like a gently vibrating wire tethered around both of our hearts. I scowl at the sensation, though I should be used to it by now. This forced link. This mortal's magic entwined

with mine. My wings twitch with irritation, but necessity demands I adapt.

She frowns as she catches me staring. “What?” she asks, as if bracing for another argument.

I exhale, letting the cool air burn down my throat. We have to do this. We have to harness her purna power so it won’t catch us by surprise in a true fight. More importantly, she must learn that magic alone won’t save her from the terrors lurking in these mountains—or from Drayveth, if he ever shows his face. My methods might be harsh, but that’s all I know. “We’re training this morning,” I say, voice gruffer than I intend.

Her brows shoot up. “Training?”

I fold my arms across my chest, ignoring the part of me that notices how the wind teases her hair, that single silver streak framing her face. “You heard me. No more stumbling around with half-formed spells. You nearly got us killed back at the temple when you lost control?—”

Her posture stiffens, shoulders squaring. “I was desperate?—”

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“I’m not blaming you,” I interrupt, though my tone suggests otherwise. “But if we’re to stay alive, you need more control. We’re tethered, remember? When you flare up with raw power, it affects me too. I won’t have you unleashing a surge at the wrong moment.”

Her storm-gray eyes flash. “Don’t act like I’m the only liability here. You keep hurling us into danger with your rigid?—”

“Enough,” I growl, cutting her off. A brief pulse of guilt follows. We’ve done enough snapping at each other these past days. “Look,” I continue more calmly, “this is for both our sakes. If you push your magic beyond your limits, the bond could destabilize, or you might draw attention to us. If Nerezza is stirring, we need subtlety, not explosions.”

She exhales, arms dropping to her sides. “Fine,” she says tersely, as if conceding a reluctant truce. “We train. So where do we start?”

A faint smirk tugs at my mouth. Good question. My approach to teaching is rooted in gargoyle tradition, which values rigorous physical tests alongside magical discipline. With Nerezza, we sparred often—No, I refuse to think about her right now. Instead, I step closer to Sariah, letting the bond’s subtle warmth seep into the distance between us. “We start with the basics,” I say, voice low.

She bristles at the implied insult. “Basics? I was a purna acolyte for years. I know how to shape energy.”

I cock my head, meeting her gaze. “Then prove it.” There’s a spark of challenge in

my tone. “We’ll clear a space over there.” I gesture to a relatively flat patch of snow-dusted ground. It’s hemmed in by tall, jagged boulders that provide some measure of privacy, shielding us from any roving eyes.

She huffs, but I notice a flicker of excitement passing over her features. She wants this. Good. It will help her hone that raw potential. And maybe it’ll relieve the tension building between us since that stormy night we spent pressed together for warmth.

We move to the makeshift arena. I shrug off the thin cloak I’ve been wearing, stretching my wings to their full span. The cold gnaws at my skin, but gargoyle resilience keeps me functional, even in punishing conditions. Sariah pulls her hood tighter, though a determined light sparks in her eyes.

“All right,” I say, stamping one massive foot in the snow to test the solidity of the ground. “Show me how you conjure a simple energy shield.”

She lifts her chin, mouth set in a defiant line. “That’s... elementary.”

“And that’s the point,” I counter. “Demonstrate. Let me see your control.”

She sighs, raising both hands. Closing her eyes, she begins to mutter an incantation under her breath. Her voice slips into an old purna dialect—one I’ve heard centuries ago but only partially remember. As she chants, a bluish gleam radiates from her palms, forming a translucent barrier just in front of her. The air crackles with magic, stirring my senses. She’s more powerful than she admits.

I wait, letting the shield shimmer for a few heartbeats. Then, without warning, I lash out with a controlled burst of my own power—a wave of kinetic force, a gargoyle technique that vibrates in my runes. It’s not enough to hurt her, but it slams into the barrier with a resounding crack. Blue arcs of energy spark, and Sariah staggers back two steps. Her shield wavers but holds.

Her eyes snap open. “What the?—?”

I fold my arms, wings partially flared. “I needed to test how stable it was. You did well to maintain it.”

She scowls. “A little warning might’ve been nice.”

“You think your enemies will warn you before they strike?” My retort is harsh but I refuse to soften. “You’re alive because your shield stayed intact. Next time, brace your stance better. You nearly fell over.”

She steps toward me, jabbing a finger in my direction. “If you want me to trust you, Kaelith, at least give me a sign before you?—”

I lift a hand in a dismissive gesture. “Enough talk. Try again.”

Annoyance flames in her eyes, but she grudgingly complies. She re-forms the shield, this time planting her feet more solidly, crouching slightly. I circle around her, letting the bond feed me hints of her tension. She’s braced for another attack.

Good. I propel another bolt of kinetic energy. It hits her shield from the side. This time, she absorbs the impact, a faint snarl on her lips. The shield ripples, a swirl of blue and silver, then stabilizes. Snow kicks up around her ankles.

Her grin is triumphant, a flash of pride. “See? I can learn.”

“Yes,” I concede, letting a trace of approval slip into my voice. “Better.”

The bond hums with her satisfaction, a pleasing warmth that seeps into my chest. Damn. I step back, trying to ignore the subtle thrumming. “Now let’s see if you can maintain that shield while casting something else at the same time.”

Her confidence falters. “Multitasking spells?”

I raise a brow. “In a real fight, do you think your enemies will politely wait while you protect yourself? You need to strike back or create multiple defenses. That’s what I mean by control.”

She exhales sharply, shifting from foot to foot. “Fine. I’ll try.” Her gaze hardens with resolve.

Again, she lifts her arms, summoning the bluish barrier around her. The swirl of magic sends a prickling sensation through the tether, as if Sariah’s power resonates in my own bloodstream. She closes her eyes, brow furrowing with concentration. A faint glow appears near her left palm, tendrils of energy coalescing. My keen senses pick up the hum of gathering arcane currents—she’s forging a secondary spell.

A small sphere of shimmering light forms just outside her barrier, flickering uncertainly. I watch, enthralled despite myself. The sphere hovers, pulsing with raw force. Potential. If harnessed, it could become a projectile, a means of both defense and offense.

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That's when she wavers. The shield quivers, and the orb flickers. She clenches her teeth, obviously struggling to maintain both spells simultaneously. Another moment, and the orb fizzles out with a crack of static. Her shield collapses, leaving her panting.

She lets out a groan of frustration, bracing her hands on her knees. "I—I almost had it." Fatigue laces her voice.

I suppress a sigh. My own chest tightens with the memory of a purna who once juggled spells so effortlessly she seemed invincible. But that path led to horrors. "Focus," I say quietly. "Don't overreach yet. Start smaller."

Her gaze snaps up, irritation plain on her face. "I'm not?—"

"You are," I insist. "You're channeling too much at once. Try again with half the power on your shield."

She presses her lips together, standing upright. Snow swirls around her boots as she re-centers. "All right. One more time." This time, her shield appears thinner, a paler shade of blue. She breathes through the incantation, calmer, more controlled. Then she conjures the orb again, steadily feeding it energy. My runes tingle with the sense of her magic weaving multiple threads at once.

I nod to myself. This is better. The orb stabilizes, floating in front of her. I circle her slowly, letting the tension build. Then I fling another pulse of force. The orb trembles under the assault, but Sariah's shield remains up, though barely. Sparks dance across its surface. She grits her teeth, extending her left hand to direct the orb.

It flares bright, then streaks toward me. Surprised, I tense. She's sending a direct attack—a small bolt of condensed arcane force. I half-smile. Good. With a swift motion, I unfurl my wings and summon my gargoyle barrier—similar to harnessing the earth's resonance. The orb hits my invisible shield, bursting into a harmless shower of sparks. Her shield collapses as her energy falters, and she staggers back, exhausted.

She's breathing hard, but her eyes sparkle with triumph. "I did it," she gasps.

A reluctant grin tugs at my lips. "You did. Not bad."

She shoots me a challenging look. "Not bad? That was?—"

"Passable," I interrupt, though the warmth I feel for her success is genuine. "We'll keep practicing until it becomes second nature. You won't have time to think in a real fight."

She exhales, rolling her shoulders. The brand on her wrist flickers under the faint sun, and I sense a pang of sympathy for the burden she carries. "Fine," she says, though her tone is less defensive now. "Just give me a moment to breathe before you throw another attack at me."

I incline my head in a curt nod. "Take your time. There's no point in burning you out on day one."

She collapses onto a nearby rock, rubbing her palms together. Her breath comes in visible puffs in the cold. I remain standing, scanning the horizon for any signs of movement—Drayveth, or worse. The valley is still, except for the whistle of wind over the snowy plain. My tail flicks in restless arcs.

My mind drifts to gargoyle combat training. It's typically brutal, forging warriors

who can fight off orcs, monstrous beasts, even rival gargoyles. The purna approach is different—focused on spellcraft, cunning, and layered wards. Yet Sariah stands in that intersection, needing to blend both worlds if she hopes to survive. It might just be enough to tip the scales in our favor.

She exhales slowly, then stands again. “I’m ready,” she announces, sounding almost eager. There’s a determined gleam in her eyes.

I let a rare smile curve my lips. “Good. This time, we’ll practice close quarters. No spells unless absolutely necessary. Use your physical agility.”

She snorts. “I’m not exactly built like a gargoyle, you know.”

“I noticed,” I say drily. Indeed, her lean frame is a stark contrast to my heavy musculature and stone-hard skin. “But you can still dodge, parry, and redirect attacks. If you fight Drayveth or any purna trained in melee, you’ll need more than spells.”

She squares her shoulders. “All right. Let’s do it.”

I shift into a combative stance, legs braced. My wings extend slightly for balance. When she draws near, I feint a blow at her upper arm—not enough to injure, but to test her reaction. She yelps and ducks, stumbling a little. I track her movement, tail thrashing behind me to keep balanced. She glares, then tries to jab me in the side. My stone-like skin barely registers the impact, but I appreciate her tenacity.

“Sweep the leg,” I instruct, blocking her next strike with my forearm. “Use your momentum.”

Her eyes narrow. “Fine.” She ducks low, swinging her leg in an arc. It meets my calf with a surprising amount of force. I barely budge, but she capitalizes on the moment to pivot around me, fists raised. A flicker of admiration sparks in my chest—she’s

quick. If she had more practice, she could catch me off-guard.

We continue this dance: she attacks, I counter, occasionally letting her land a glancing blow to build her confidence. Yet her movements remain stiff, uncertain. She's not used to grappling with an opponent who can't be easily toppled.

Frustration colors her cheeks pink. "You're barely moving," she accuses, breath ragged.

My tail lashes against the snowy ground. "Because your hits need more follow-through. Try shifting your weight." I show her by example, sweeping my clawed hand low in a single fluid motion. She jumps back, cursing under her breath. The tether pulses in my chest, reflecting her heightened adrenaline.

"Again," I order.

She squares off, and we clash once more. This time, she uses a trick: chanting a swift incantation under her breath while faking a punch. A burst of shimmering force collides with my shoulder—stronger than I expected. I stagger, wings flaring to maintain balance. She seizes the opportunity, hooking her foot behind my ankle, attempting to topple me. It's a bold move, one that might work on someone closer to her size.

I grunt in surprise as my foot slips on the icy ground. For an instant, I lose traction. My tail whips around, but the slick snow thwarts me. I crash onto my back with a jarring impact. A whoosh of air leaves my lungs, and Sariah stumbles forward, momentum carrying her. She ends up half sprawled across my chest, cloak tangling around her legs. By the Thirteen...

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We remain there, momentarily stunned. My wings are pinned under me, the stone-like ridges scraping against the packed snow. She lifts her head, bracing her hands on my chest, eyes wide with a mix of triumph and shock. “I... I knocked you down?” she whispers, exhilaration leaking in her voice.

I blink, inhaling cold air. “So it would seem.” My chest rumbles with a grudging chuckle. Maybe I underestimated her cunning. The bond thrums, an intimate warmth that draws me too close to her racing heartbeat. Her breath mists in the frigid air, tangling with mine.

“Ha,” she exhales, her lips curved in a grin. Then realization dawns that she’s practically draped over me. Our gazes meet, and everything shifts. The teasing, combative tension morphs into something hotter, more potent. I feel her pulse thrumming under the brand on her wrist, sense the quickening beat in her veins through our tether. Heat coils in my core, and for an instant, I forget the cold altogether.

Her cheeks flush deeper. She tries to scramble off me, but her foot tangles in my tail. She squeaks, and I shift to help untangle us. Our limbs collide, and she ends up braced over me, face mere inches from mine.

I swallow, awareness roiling in my chest. Her hair, streaked with silver, drapes over her shoulder, nearly brushing my face. The tether’s hum intensifies, filling my ears like the echo of my own pulse. I can smell her skin—salt, a hint of a faint floral note that clings to her, and the unmistakable tang of magic.

She inhales sharply, eyes flicking to my mouth, then back to my eyes. “I—sorry, I

didn't mean—" she stammers.

"It's fine," I rasp, voice rougher than usual. My hands move instinctively to her waist, steadying her. Beneath my palms, I feel her warm, lean frame. A surge of conflicting emotions tangles in my chest: the part of me that yearns for closeness after centuries in stone sleep, and the part that remembers Nerezza—what it meant to be intimate with a purna and how devastatingly that ended.

Sariah's breath hitches, her gaze locked with mine. For a heartbeat, I almost lean closer, drawn by the magnetic pull of her presence. The bond crackles, a current that begs to be acknowledged. But a wave of caution douses the fire in my veins. I cannot repeat the past. I forcibly clear my throat, shifting to break the moment.

She scrambles away, cheeks blazing. I sit up, ignoring the dull ache in my back from the fall. An awkward silence descends, broken only by our ragged breathing. I run a hand through my hair, dislodging bits of snow. She busies herself brushing ice from her cloak.

She mumbles, "So... that was, um... your demonstration in melee?"

I snort softly, half-laughing at her attempt to lighten the mood. "I'd say you demonstrated more than me, knocking me flat like that." My tone is a touch gentler than before, grudgingly impressed.

She rubs her arms, probably from the cold but also from lingering embarrassment. "I took a risk. Didn't think it would work." A hesitant smile ghosts her lips. Her eyes flicker with a mix of pride and a leftover spark of that heated moment.

"You did well," I acknowledge. "You combined a minor spell with a physical maneuver. That's what I meant by synergy—using magic and body in tandem."

Her expression brightens. “Really?”

I nod, forcing my voice to remain steady. “Yes. Keep practicing. Next time, I won’t go easy on you.”

She exhales a soft laugh, stepping back. “I’m almost afraid to see what not ‘going easy’ means for a gargoyle.” Then, sobering, she adds, “But thanks, I guess. For showing me how to push beyond what I learned in my coven.”

I grunt. “You’re welcome. Now let’s?—”

A sudden noise in the distance startles us both: a harsh caw, perhaps from a carrion bird, or maybe a raven. We both go still, scanning the horizon. I’m instantly on alert, wings half-raised. Sariah stands poised as well, the slight glow of magic flickering around her hands.

After a moment, the sound doesn’t repeat. I relax marginally, though my heart still pounds from the scare and that unexpected near-intimacy. “Probably just wildlife,” I murmur, though I remain vigilant. The bond’s tension has sharpened, as if reflecting our combined wariness.

Sariah looks at me, worry etched in her features. “We should do a perimeter check before we settle down. We don’t need a random predator or Drayveth’s scouts catching us off-guard.”

I incline my head. “Agreed.” Then, as we gather our cloaks and prepare to move, I add, “We’ll continue training tomorrow. For now, let’s be certain we’re safe.”

Her expression shifts to something approaching relief, though a trace of lingering heat remains in her eyes. “Sure. Tomorrow.” The word holds an undercurrent of promise—and wariness.

We leave the small clearing, trudging side by side across the snowy expanse to our makeshift campsite. The earlier tension from our sparring still crackles in the air, though we keep our distance. My back aches from where I hit the ground, but a faint sense of amusement underlies the pain. Sariah might not realize it, but toppling a gargoyle is no small feat—even if my slip on the ice gave her an advantage.

She glances at me occasionally, as though testing the waters of conversation. The bond hums, making me hyper-aware of her presence. I can sense her pulse calm as the minutes pass, the flush receding from her cheeks. My own breathing steadies, yet my thoughts race with complicated feelings: Admiration, guilt, desire, caution. After centuries sealed in stone, I didn't expect to find myself in such a precarious alliance. Nor did I expect to be so drawn to a mortal woman with a brand on her wrist and fearsome magic surging in her veins.

Before these reflections can trap me, I focus on the immediate task. We circle the perimeter of our camp—a shallow depression behind a tangle of rocks—and find nothing amiss. The wind picks up, sending swirling flurries of snow in our faces. Sariah shivers, hugging her arms. I step ahead, letting my broad frame shield her from the worst gusts. The bond thrums with subtle warmth, reminding me how closely our fates are entangled.

We return to our shelter, a crude arrangement of stone slabs and the remains of an old wall that we pieced together. The sun hovers low, the sky awash with wan light, creating long shadows across the snow. Evening will come soon, bringing colder temperatures. My wings shift, tail flicking as I scan for anything we can use for firewood. The environment is sparse, but we've managed to scrounge enough dry branches to keep a small flame alive each night.

Sariah helps arrange the kindling, her breath puffing in the cold. She kneels, murmuring a soft incantation. A spark of purna magic ignites the sticks, and flames crackle to life. I settle on a flat rock opposite her, letting the heat wash over my stone-

cold limbs. My runes glow faintly, resonating with the comfort of open flame.

For a while, we sit in companionable silence. The day's training weighs on Sariah, I can tell—her eyelids occasionally droop, and she rubs her temples as though warding off a headache. I wonder if the tether amplifies her fatigue, or if it's the bruises forming on her arms from our sparring. Guilt twists in my gut. I'm pushing her hard, but we have no choice. We're running out of time, out of safe spaces. Better she be bruised in training than dead in a real fight.

Eventually, she clears her throat, looking at me over the fire. "You mentioned synergy. How exactly do we... use that?"

I arch a brow. "You felt it just now, didn't you? When you combined your spell with your physical strike. My power responded, as if our energies recognized each other."

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She nods, eyes flicking to the runes etched on my chest. “Yeah, but it was fleeting. Do you know how to make it more... purposeful?”

I press my lips together, recalling a time long ago when I synchronized magic with a purna in battle. “I have ideas,” I say cautiously, “but it requires deep trust. You must let me channel my gargoyle magic through you, while you weave your purna spells around it. If either of us hesitates or resists, it could backfire.”

She grimaces. “Trust is... complicated.” Her gaze falls to the brand on her wrist, the memory of betrayal flickering in her eyes.

I inhale slowly. “I know,” I murmur. My own baggage threatens to surge up, memories of Nerezza’s corruption and the way she used synergy to twist her magic into something monstrous. “We’ll proceed carefully. But synergy can amplify your spells, make them stronger than you could manage alone. That might be the edge we need if we ever face Drayveth... or worse.”

She stares into the flames, silent for a long moment. Then she nods, a tremor in her voice. “All right. I’m willing to try. If it means we stand a chance against what’s coming, I’ll do it.”

Her courage, tempered by apprehension, stirs a flash of admiration in me. “We’ll work toward it,” I promise. “Slowly.”

She smiles faintly. A swirl of gratitude and relief flows through the tether, and I can’t help but notice how the connection between us grows more tangible with every hour we spend together—combative or otherwise. It’s as though our souls are learning

each other's rhythms, forging a reluctant harmony. Dangerous, I remind myself, yet perhaps necessary.

Night descends, and the wind howls over the ridge, carrying the distant cries of wild creatures. We stoke the fire to maintain warmth, sharing a pitiful ration of dried meat and brittle roots we scavenged. The conversation dips into quieter territory: the potential route to Snowfall Glen, the possibility of forging alliances with purnas who might greet a gargoyle and an exiled purna with hostility. We speak in hushed tones, acknowledging how precarious every step is.

At one point, she touches the brand on her wrist, gaze distant. "Drayveth said I was too reckless, that I'd become a threat like the Nyxari. You've seen me in combat now. Am I truly so dangerous?"

I watch her, recalling her raw bursts of energy, the fierce determination in her eyes, the thin line between control and chaos. "Dangerous?" I say softly. "Yes, you are. But that doesn't mean you'll become a Nyxari. Power doesn't corrupt on its own. It's how you wield it."

She exhales, blinking. "Thanks... I think."

I shift, wings flexing. "It's a compliment. If you harness that power responsibly, you could do great things." A slight pang accompanies those words, the memory of once believing the same about Nerezza. And that ended in tragedy. I clamp down on that thought.

Sariah's expression softens, though uncertainty lingers in her eyes. "I never wanted to be a threat, just... free."

I tilt my head, meeting her gaze across the fire. The tether pulsates gently, a shared heartbeat. "Freedom," I echo, quietly. "That's what we both want, isn't it? From

curses, from hunts, from old ghosts.” My runes pulse in time with the next breath, as though underscoring my meaning.

She nods. “Yes.”

Silence folds over us, a delicate hush, broken only by the crackling of flames. The moment stretches, laden with unspoken confessions and the unmistakable hum of attraction that has plagued us since our forced bond first sparked. My pulse quickens. I recall the warmth of her body against mine on the training ground, that fleeting, dangerous closeness. No, I warn myself, I can’t let this become more. But the awareness doesn’t vanish.

Eventually, she looks away, rummaging in her pack for a spare cloak to drape around her shoulders. “We should sleep in shifts again,” she murmurs, voice subdued. “Just in case.”

I grunt, nodding. “I’ll take first watch.” My tail coils around my ankles, a habitual gesture of readiness.

She starts to protest but then thinks better of it. “All right,” she whispers. Gathering the cloak around her, she settles down beside the fire, exhaustion painting dark circles under her eyes. “Wake me if anything’s off.”

“I will,” I say, leaning back against a slab of rock. As she drifts into a light doze, I let my gaze roam the edges of our camp, every sense sharpened. The sky above is starless, heavy clouds reflecting the faint glow of moonlight. Shadows stretch across the snow, flickering whenever the wind stirs the fire.

Time slips by, measured by the crackle of burning wood and the gentle rise and fall of Sariah’s breathing. I remain vigilant, wings half-furled, attuned to any hint of an intruder. My thoughts stray to the training session. I recall the surge of pride I felt at

her progress... and the dizzying flush of desire when she landed on top of me. My tail thuds lightly against the ground as I wrestle with the emotions that conjures.

The night grows deeper. My runes glimmer faintly, reflecting the subtle tension I can't quite shake. Finally, after hours of silent watch, I move to wake Sariah for her turn. She stirs, blinking groggily as I crouch beside her. Our gazes meet in the dim firelight, and for a moment, there's a softness there that neither of us can deny.

"Your watch," I say quietly.

She rubs her eyes, nodding. "All right."

We switch places, and I slump against the rock, allowing a shallow doze to claim me. My body craves true stone sleep, but that would render me immobile, helpless. Not an option in these conditions. At least a partial rest might steady my nerves.

When I drift into half-sleep, memories swirl: the temple, Nerezza's face twisted with power, Sariah's triumphant expression as she topples me, the brand on her wrist glowing with a faint silver tinge. My heart tightens at the collision of past and present. I must not fail again.

Sometime later, Sariah wakes me gently, her hand on my shoulder. Dawn's pale light creeps across the snow. We exchange a few tired words, gather what remains of the firewood, and prepare for the next leg of our journey. Despite our fatigue, there's a charged anticipation in the air—our training has shown that synergy is possible, that we can fight as a unit. A small victory.

We set off once more, the bond humming steadily, as if acknowledging our renewed determination. The tension remains—both the friction of two very different people forced together and the subtler strain of an attraction neither of us wants to admit. Yet beneath that friction, trust stirs: forged by the act of knocking each other around in

the snow, the bruises we wear like badges of progress, the spark of magic we tested in tandem.

And so we walk, side by side, an exiled purna and a gargoyle warrior, both haunted by mistakes and longing for freedom. Our footprints trail across the snowy plain, weaving a path toward uncertain horizons. The morning wind is chill, biting at our exposed skin, but the ephemeral heat of shared purpose shields us from the worst of it.

In my chest, the runes glow softly, accompanied by a quieter glow in the place where Sariah's magic touches mine through the bond. I sense her glancing at me with a mixture of caution and something else—something that sends a prickle of warmth through my veins. I don't let it show on my face.

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This is the strangest alliance I've ever formed, equal parts necessity and something that could become more if we let it. But for now, we focus on survival and strengthening our defenses. If I'm to ensure that Nerezza remains a dark legend rather than a living nightmare, I need Sariah at her best—fierce, controlled, and unafraid of her own power. Let the old grudges and half-forgotten betrayals linger in the past. Let tomorrow's threats come. We'll be ready. Or as ready as two outcasts can be.

A faint grin touches my mouth, invisible to anyone but the wind. You did well, purna. With each step, the tension of our tether morphs into a tenuous camaraderie, laced with the possibility of deeper synergy—both in battle and, perhaps, in the intangible space we share between heartbeats.

7

SARIAH

The cold morning air cuts through me, but I barely feel it. I'm too focused on the flutter of tension that's taken root in my belly since our sparring session. Kaelith and I have been trekking for hours across frosty plains, each step crunching through ice-crusted earth. The wind nips at my cheeks, and though I clutch my cloak tightly, I can't banish the warmth burning in my core—the memory of him sprawled beneath me, momentarily vulnerable, our faces inches apart.

It's been two days since that moment. Two days of restless nights, either forging ahead by moonlight or huddling together in meager camps. We've repeated our training drills each dawn, practicing wards, illusions, and tactical maneuvers. The synergy that sometimes flickers between our magics is exhilarating, if also

frightening. We're growing more synchronized, trusting each other's reflexes and power. And that trust has begun to bleed into other areas—like the way we sometimes catch each other's eyes over a campfire, or how my pulse quickens whenever our hands brush.

Now, we journey over a gentle slope that leads toward a valley scattered with black-limbed trees. Twisted branches stretch skyward like claws. Thin snow lines the ground, making the terrain slick. Kaelith walks a few strides ahead, scanning the horizon. His massive wings remain half-folded—ready to extend at the slightest hint of danger. I note the tension in his shoulders. He's more wary than usual.

"Do you sense something?" I ask quietly, matching his pace. My breath puffs white in the frigid air.

He narrows his golden eyes, runes glinting faintly on his chest. "Not sure. The land feels... uneasy." His voice is low, tinged with the same undercurrent of caution I feel pulsing through our tether. "We should keep alert."

I nod, drawing my cloak tighter. The brand on my wrist itches, a sign of mounting nervous energy. A day ago, we spotted fresh boot prints near a half-frozen creek, which could indicate travelers or potential foes. Drayveth. The name stirs dread in my heart. My old mentor would be relentless, especially if he's convinced I'm well on the path to Nyxari corruption. And if he finds Kaelith...

I swallow hard, pressing forward. The valley dips into a narrow ravine, where the wind whistles between rocky outcroppings. Runnels of ice cling to the stones. Kaelith lifts a hand to caution me as the path narrows. "Let me go first," he murmurs, voice pitched low.

We edge carefully around a protruding boulder, the ground dropping off sharply on our right. My boots skid on a patch of concealed ice, and he clasps my elbow,

steadying me. Heat flares where he touches me—an unwelcome reminder of that tension crackling between us. I catch my breath, glancing up at him. He meets my gaze, wings shivering in the breeze. For an instant, something unspoken passes between us. Then he retracts his hand, stepping forward again as if nothing happened.

We navigate the ravine in silence, the wind's keening cry our only companion. I keep scanning the craggy walls for any sign of movement. My brand itches more fiercely, fueling my unease. Kaelith is right—something about this place sets me on edge.

By midday, we emerge from the ravine into a small clearing lined by skeletal trees. Thin sunlight filters through overhead branches, illuminating patches of snow. I take one wary step, then freeze. My hair stands on end. There's a hush here, as though the wildlife has fled. Kaelith halts beside me, wings half-extended. He feels it too.

A faint sound behind us—barely more than a whisper—pricks my senses. I spin around just as four shapes detach from the shadows, stepping into the clearing with lethal grace. My heart seizes. They're purna, or at least they wear the insignia of a rogue faction. Hooded figures, each brandishing a staff or dagger. At their center, I recognize the taut line of Drayveth's shoulders, though his cowl hides most of his face.

"Sariah," Drayveth intones, his voice slicing through the brittle air. "I expected you to be halfway to your grave by now."

My pulse pounds. "Drayveth." A swirl of mixed emotions storms in my chest. Anger, fear, betrayal. "You won't be rid of me that easily."

His cold laughter echoes. The other rogues fan out, encircling us. I sense Kaelith tensing at my side, a rumble vibrating in his chest. My brand burns with raw energy, a sign that my magic's stirring in response to the threat. Stay calm, I tell myself.

“Just surrender,” Drayveth says, stepping forward. The sunlight glints off the brand on his wrist—similar to mine, except he’s turned it into a twisted mark with added runes. “Your destiny is written, Sariah. Don’t make this more painful.”

Kaelith’s low voice rumbles. “You corner us with four purna assassins, and you expect a polite surrender?”

Drayveth’s hood shifts, revealing a sneer. “Ah, the gargoyle. We suspected you’d be with her. Only a matter of time before your corruption seeps into her. Or perhaps she’s the one corrupting you. Either way, we end this now.”

My heart clenches. They truly believe I’m beyond redemption, just like Nerezza was. Fury ignites, fueling my determination. “You know nothing about me.”

One of Drayveth’s companions, a wiry woman with shaved hair, brandishes a staff. “We know enough. You unleashed forbidden magic, and you’ve allied with a monster.” Her staff glimmers with swirling runes, the hum of necromantic energy lacing the air. “Stand aside, or we’ll kill you both.”

Kaelith bares his canines, runes pulsing a warning. “Try it.”

I feel the tether surge, connecting us with heightened clarity. Energy swirls in my chest, but also in him. This moment, fraught with danger, crystallizes: Fight or die. Drayveth lifts a hand, power crackling at his fingertips. “Take them.”

The ambush snaps into motion. The woman with the staff lunges, chanting a string of necromantic words. Shadows coil along the ground, writhing toward Kaelith’s legs. He slams a foot down, stone magic rippling outward, shattering the creeping darkness. Another rogue leaps at me, dagger slashing. I duck, adrenaline sparking across my nerves.

Kaelith roars, wings flaring wide, swiping a clawed hand at two attackers who try to flank him. They scatter, hurling magical bolts that blaze with chaotic color. He blocks one with a quick upward slash of his own kinetic wave, but the second hits him in the side. He staggers, growling in pain.

I snarl, raising my hands. My mind races, sifting through old incantations. Focus, Sariah. Combine your training. I conjure a shimmering ward around Kaelith. The tether hums, enabling me to sense exactly where he's hurting. My barrier absorbs another blast from the necromancer's staff.

Drayveth steps into my peripheral vision, chanting under his breath. My instincts scream. He's summoning something vile—shadows swirl around his fingers like ribbons of living darkness. "You left the coven once," he hisses. "Now you'll die by the power you once revered."

I grit my teeth. My brand flares painfully, reacting to the magic Drayveth wields. Old ties, twisted with malice. No. I gather my own arcane strength, forging a sphere of radiant light in my palms. The purna next to Drayveth tries to intercept me, but Kaelith lunges, fists crackling with earthen force. He knocks the rogue away, sending them sprawling in the snow.

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Drayveth releases his conjuration: a skeletal serpent of pure shadow that slithers across the ground toward me. Terror quakes in my chest. The serpent's crimson eyes glow with unholy light. "You should never have defied me," Drayveth intones.

Before it can strike, I hurl my sphere of light. The two magics collide in a dazzling flash, arcs of black and silver dancing across the clearing. My sphere wavers, the serpent pushing back, venomous fangs snapping inches from my face. I grit my teeth, pouring more energy into the sphere. Come on, Sariah!

Behind me, Kaelith is grappling with two rogues. I sense his pain through the tether, feel the grit of his determination. He thrashes, claws raking across an attacker's chest. A scream echoes. The second rogue flings a blade wreathed in greenish flames. Kaelith barely dodges, stone shards erupting underfoot.

"Sariah!" he roars, voice straining. "Don't lose yourself!"

I see his fight out of the corner of my eye, but Drayveth's serpent demands my full attention. My arms tremble as it lashes against my sphere. Drayveth's power is stronger than I remember, fueled by hate and twisted convictions. "You're a stain on the purna legacy," he growls, voice echoing. "Better to kill you than let you become Nyxari."

Rage flares inside me. I am not another Nerezza. The memory of all I've lost, all I've struggled for, ignites a fierce resolve. With a cry, I channel my synergy with Kaelith, drawing on the faint echoes of his earthen magic that linger in the tether. A swirl of fiery energy merges with my sphere, intensifying it into a searing, brilliant beam.

The serpent screeches, black coils thrashing. Drayveth's eyes widen in alarm, but it's too late. My beam engulfs the creature in a burst of white-hot radiance. It unravels, leaving behind a swirl of fading shadow. For a heartbeat, Drayveth looks stunned. Then fury contorts his features, and he hurls a final bolt of chaotic magic at me.

I barely dodge, stumbling sideways. Pain explodes in my left shoulder as the bolt grazes me. Agony burns through my arm, and I gasp, dropping to one knee. Drayveth advances, but Kaelith roars across the clearing, shattering the last rogue's staff. He wheels around, wings thrusting him forward in a lunge that puts him between me and Drayveth.

"Touch her again," Kaelith growls, "and I'll tear your spine out."

Drayveth snarls, whirling to block Kaelith's strike. His movements swirl with dark magic, forcing Kaelith to shift to defense. The remaining rogues form up behind Drayveth, battered but not broken. My heart races. We're outnumbered, and Kaelith is wounded. We need to break free.

Mustering my strength, I rise unsteadily, ignoring the pain in my shoulder. Lightning flares from one rogue's dagger, aimed at Kaelith's flank. Without thinking, I fling a desperate spell—part shield, part raw energy wave. It crackles through the air, intercepting the dagger's strike. The blast rips across the clearing, swirling with chaotic sparks. Everything erupts in a flash of white.

For a terrifying moment, I lose myself in a surge of raw power that tears across my vision. It's not a neat, controlled spell. It's a torrent of energy, fueled by adrenaline and anger. The ground shudders, snow flying in every direction. I hear Kaelith's shout, then feel the tether yank painfully in my chest. I can't see anything but white brilliance. The aura of the blast expands outward, a near-lethal wave that slams into friend and foe alike.

When the flash finally subsides, my vision spots with dancing motes. I blink rapidly, chest heaving. What have I done? The clearing is scorched in a rough circle, the snow melted away. The two remaining rogues lie sprawled, unconscious or close to it. Drayveth is on one knee, gripping his staff with trembling hands, face twisted in shock. Kaelith stands a few paces from me, braced on one arm, eyes wide. He looks rattled, as if he barely weathered the explosion.

My knees threaten to buckle. The force of that blast lingers in my bones, a raw, lethal power I didn't know I possessed. "K-Kaelith?" I whisper, voice shaking.

He staggers up, runes on his chest flickering. A cut bleeds along his temple, and his left forearm is scorched. But he's alive. "Sariah," he manages, tone hushed. "Are you...?"

I nod weakly, though my shoulder blazes with agony. Beyond us, Drayveth's eyes lock on me, a mixture of fear and rage contorting his face. "You see?" he rasps. "She's a walking catastrophe. She'll become a Nyxari for sure." Blood trickles from his brow. Even so, he tries to stand, dark magic swirling in his hand.

Kaelith lunges forward before Drayveth can release another spell, knocking him to the ground with brutal force. Drayveth's staff cracks against a rock, splintering. The old purna curses, clutching at Kaelith's wrist. For a moment, it looks like Kaelith might strike a killing blow. I gasp, chest tightening.

"No!" I croak. "Don't—please, just... let's get out of here." My voice shakes. For all my anger at Drayveth, the horror of unleashing that near-lethal blast still buzzes in my skull. I don't want more blood on my hands.

Kaelith hesitates, snarling at Drayveth. Then he wrenches free, turning to me. "Come on." The tether pulses with urgent energy. The other rogues remain down or dazed, not a threat. Drayveth is incapacitated for the moment, though the hatred in his eyes

burns into my soul. I cringe under that glare.

We scramble to the edge of the clearing, stumbling over charred branches and melted snow. My shoulder throbs, vision spinning. Kaelith loops an arm around me, half-supporting me as we flee. A roar of anger echoes behind us, but we vanish into the thick stand of trees, forging a path deeper into the forest. My entire body trembles with shock, the brand on my wrist blazing with residual magic. I can barely keep up.

Somehow, we make it out of earshot, weaving between frost-laden pines until we find a hollow beneath a low cliff. Kaelith helps me crouch, chest heaving. My mouth is dry. A swirl of conflicting emotions tangles in my mind: relief that we escaped, terror at the power I unleashed, guilt that I used it so recklessly. My arms shake as I try to catch my breath.

Kaelith kneels beside me, inspecting my wounded shoulder. “You’re bleeding,” he mutters. He pulls aside the tear in my cloak, revealing an angry burn where Drayveth’s magic grazed me. My vision flashes with pain, and I clench my jaw to stifle a cry.

I look up, noticing the cut on Kaelith’s temple again. Blood smears the side of his face, a stark contrast against his onyx skin. “You’re hurt too,” I manage, voice ragged.

He exhales. “I’ll heal. Gargoyles regenerate slowly unless we stone-sleep, but I’ll survive.” His molten gaze flicks to my arm. “You, on the other hand, need tending immediately.”

I nod, tears threatening. My adrenaline fades, leaving behind a hollow ache in my chest. “I... I almost lost control,” I whisper, voice trembling with the admission. “I could’ve killed us both with that blast.”

He hesitates, meeting my eyes. A shadow crosses his expression. “I felt it through the tether,” he admits quietly. “For a moment, it was... unstoppable.” He drags a clawed hand through his hair, tension radiating from him. “If I hadn’t shielded us at the last second—” He stops, shaking his head. “It’s done now. Let’s handle your wound.”

I clench my teeth, tears burning my eyes. Unstoppable. The word resonates in my skull. Is this how Nerezza started, harnessing too much power in desperation? Fear knots my stomach. “Okay,” I mumble, too ashamed to meet his gaze.

With surprising gentleness, Kaelith tears a strip from his own cloak, pressing it to my shoulder to staunch the bleeding. I hiss at the searing pain. The mark on my wrist pulses, reminding me of the cost of purna magic. My lips quiver, a surge of guilt and despair welling up. I try to swallow it down, but the tears slip free anyway.

He notices my trembling. “Easy,” he murmurs, voice softening in a way that tightens my chest. “We’re alive. That’s what matters now. Here—let me see if I can brace this better.” He pulls me closer, positioning himself behind me so he can wrap the makeshift bandage around my arm and across my shoulder. His breath grazes my ear, warm against the chill air.

I shudder, overwhelmed by the swirl of shame, pain, and something else—an undeniable awareness of him pressed against my back. My heart thrums. The tether pulses. In the silence of the forest, with only the sigh of wind and our ragged breaths, I can’t ignore the heat radiating from his body. He’s so large, so solid, and the memory of that lethal magic blast lingers in my mind.

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He finishes tying off the bandage, his arms momentarily circling me. I exhale a shaky breath. My face burns with tears and confusion. Why does this closeness feel so... comforting? I have the impulse to jerk away, to bury my face in my arm and scream at my foolishness. But I remain still, too exhausted and wounded to fight the wave of conflicting emotion.

“You’re all right,” he murmurs, half to me, half to himself. His voice holds a note of relief. “The bleeding’s slowed.”

I twist slightly, looking at him over my shoulder. His eyes flick to my tear-streaked cheeks. Something in his expression softens further. The hush wraps around us, broken by the distant rustle of branches. My brand’s throb eases, replaced by a different pounding—my pulse in my ears, spurred by the realization that we’re sitting so close. My injuries, my guilt, the fear of Drayveth... all coalesce into a raw vulnerability.

“Kaelith,” I whisper, voice catching. “Thank you.”

His molten gaze flicks to my lips, then to my eyes. “You don’t need to thank me,” he says gruffly. “We’re... in this together.” A quiet quake of tension sparks between us, charging the air like a static field. I feel it in the tether, an upsurge of heat that brings my senses into sharp focus.

Before I can overthink it, I reach up with my good arm, brushing my fingers over the injury on his temple. He flinches slightly, but doesn’t pull away. Blood mats his hair, and I gently wipe it aside. Our breath mingles in the cold. My heart pounds so loudly I swear he can hear it.

The silence stretches, each second weighted with the swirling of unspoken feelings—relief, gratitude, lingering terror, and an undeniable draw. My pulse throbs. With a trembling inhale, I lean in, letting my forehead rest against his, careful not to aggravate his wound. It's such a small gesture, yet intensely intimate.

A low rumble vibrates in his chest, maybe uncertainty or acceptance. My lashes lower, tears slipping free again, but for a different reason. We're alive. We're surviving. Maybe that's enough. Kaelith's breath hitches. One of his hands lifts, gently cupping the side of my face. My skin tingles under his touch, the heat from his palm a stark contrast to the chill that's seeped into my bones.

We stay like that, suspended. The wind whips through the trees above us, scattering brittle leaves. My lip quivers, a swirl of yearning gnawing at me. I recall how easily he fended off Drayveth's attacks, how fiercely he roared when they threatened me. That protective edge tugs at something deep inside me. I didn't think I could ever trust like this again, not after the coven's betrayal.

The tension cracks. Suddenly, his mouth is on mine—urgent, heated. I gasp, every nerve firing. My heart lurches at the shock of contact, a delirious wave of warmth flooding my senses. There's desperation behind the kiss, but also gentleness. He's careful not to press too hard against my injured shoulder, his hand sliding around my waist, anchoring me.

Time blurs. I surrender to the surge of feeling that roars through me, tangling my fingers in his hair. The tether pulses wildly, magical energy dancing under my skin, intensifying the taste of him on my lips. For a breathless moment, the world melts away—no Drayveth, no curses, no monstrous ex-lovers from centuries past. Just Kaelith and me, breathing in unison.

Then logic slams back into me like a wall of cold water. What am I doing? Fear and confusion churn in my gut. I break the kiss, pulling back with a stifled gasp. My

breath fogs in the air as I stare at him. His eyes mirror the shock and lingering hunger I feel. My heart hammers, a swirl of emotions tangling my thoughts.

“I—I’m sorry,” I stammer, voice trembling. “That was... I mean, we’re—this is?—”

He looks torn, an echo of longing shadowed by guilt. “Don’t apologize,” he manages hoarsely, though he’s already shifting away, wings tensing as if he’s ready to bolt. “I—Sariah, I...” Words fail him, and he exhales, pressing a palm over the runes on his chest. Nerezza, the memory flickers in his gaze, a haunting sorrow.

I rub my hands to my heated cheek, panic creeping in. “Kaelith, I’m—are you?—”

He exhales raggedly, then lifts his eyes to meet mine. “We... can’t do this,” he says, voice laced with conflict. “Not now. Not while Drayveth is still after us and Nerezza’s shadow looms. We can’t risk repeating old tragedies.” Regret thrums beneath each word.

Tears sting my eyes anew. I want to argue, to say that we need each other, that I’m not Nerezza, that we can forge a different path. But he’s right, at least about the danger swirling around us. My mind reels. I’m torn between the heady rush of that kiss and the sobering truth that we’re literally on borrowed time. Am I truly heading down the same route as the monstrous Nyxari?

I force a shuddering breath, nodding. “I know.”

He lowers his gaze, fists clenching. “We’ll talk about it. Later. Right now... we should keep moving. Drayveth might rally again.”

I bite my lip, hating how my body still throbs with the imprint of his lips, even as fear knots in my stomach. “Okay,” I whisper, voice raw. We help each other stand, ignoring the pangs in our battered bodies. My shoulder screams in protest, and

Kaelith hisses at the cut on his temple. But we manage to gather ourselves enough to limp deeper into the forest, leaving behind the site of our near-death skirmish.

As we trudge onward, the hush of snowfall accompanies us. My mind reels from the collision of violence and that dizzying kiss. My heart feels torn wide open, guilt creeping in at the edges. Have I doomed him to heartbreak? Or maybe we've both clung to each other in desperation. Either way, we can't simply ignore what just happened.

The mark on my wrist still smolders with residual magic, a reminder of how close I came to unleashing something unstoppable. My lips tingle where his mouth crushed mine. Contradictions swirl in my head, mirrored by the bond's flickering pulses.

We don't speak much as we seek cover in a new hiding spot—a hollow at the foot of a massive pine. The thick canopy overhead shelters us from the falling snow. By the time we settle, night is creeping in, the sky turning a leaden gray. Kaelith busies himself setting wards around the perimeter, using a combination of gargoyle glyphs and bits of leftover purna wards we scavenged. I rummage for anything to start a fire. My shoulder throbs every time I move.

Eventually, we collapse into a tense, breathless quiet. I concentrate on igniting a small flame with trembling fingers, ignoring the swirl of longing and guilt that roils in my chest. He observes me from the corner of his eye, runes faintly glowing in the gloom. The wariness in his posture is tangible, layered with a flicker of regret. We're both reeling. We're both uncertain how to proceed after that moment we shared.

At last, a meager fire crackles, dancing shadows over the snow-packed ground. I cradle my injured arm, trying not to wince. Kaelith folds his wings around himself, gaze distant. "We'll rest here," he mutters. "At dawn, we move again. If Drayveth recovers, he might try another ambush."

I nod numbly. Silence stretches between us, thick with unspoken words. My body aches, my magic hovers dangerously close to the surface, and my lips still burn with the memory of that kiss. Anxiety churns in my belly, but part of me clings to the hope that this was more than a momentary lapse born of adrenaline. Yet, if I dwell on it, I might unravel.

I shift, curling my cloak around me for warmth, leaning against the trunk of the pine. Kaelith remains near the fire, arms folded, jaw set in a grim line. The tether hums with our ragged emotional states. I feel his gaze slide to me occasionally, as though he can't help but check that I'm still breathing. Despite the tension, that awareness soothes me more than I'd like to admit.

As the night wears on, exhaustion claims us. My eyes droop, head throbbing. I drift in and out of a restless doze, haunted by nightmares of Drayveth's shadow serpent, the lethal burst of my own magic, and glimpses of Nerezza's twisted visage. I jolt awake, heart hammering, only to find Kaelith crouched beside me, murmuring words I can't fully decipher. His hand brushes my forehead, and I slip back into uneasy slumber, comforted by his presence.

When dawn finally creeps into the sky, pale light reveals a fresh dusting of snow over the pines. My shoulder is stiff, the bandage crusted with dried blood. Kaelith stands at the edge of our camp, scanning the horizon. The injury on his head has partially clotted, though dark bruises color his arms. He seems lost in thought, or perhaps just waiting for me to stir.

My cheeks warm as I recall the kiss—and the confusion that followed. We haven't addressed it. The moment we locked eyes earlier, he'd turned away, his expression a mix of longing and pain. Maybe it's better to focus on survival. I push myself up, biting back a groan.

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“We should go,” I say softly, my voice echoing in the hush. “We have to put as much distance between us and Drayveth as possible.”

He nods, turning. In the morning light, his features appear drawn, tension shadowing his eyes. “Agreed.” He hesitates, then speaks in a low tone. “Your wound... does it need new dressing?”

I glance at my shoulder, wincing at the seeping blood. “Yes, but it can wait until we’re in a safer spot.”

His gaze flickers to my lips, then moves to my eyes—so quick I might have imagined it. He nods. “Let’s move.” No mention of the searing kiss or the raw emotions swirling beneath the surface. I swallow the sting of disappointment, reminding myself we have bigger concerns right now.

And so we set off through the forest, forging a path east. Our footsteps crunch over frozen ground, the tether binding us in a closeness we can’t fully escape, no matter how much physical distance we try to keep. My mind lingers on the ambush, on Drayveth’s promise that I’m destined to become what I fear. A chill that has nothing to do with the weather grips my spine.

But I recall the fierce way Kaelith protected me, how he confronted Drayveth and shielded me from that vile serpent. And I remember the way he kissed me, as if it were the only way to prove we’re alive in a world determined to snuff us out. That memory fuels my tired legs, even as shame flickers at the edges—fear that I might break him like Nerezza broke him before.

We walk for what feels like miles, wreathed in silence. The brand throbs like a silent warning. Perhaps it's telling me I'm dancing too close to a line that once consumed a great sorceress. Or maybe it's urging me to fight harder. I can't decide.

Occasionally, I catch Kaelith studying me, runes faintly glowing, as though checking I'm still stable after unleashing that near-lethal magic. I offer no words of reassurance. My mind is too muddled, stuck between longing, guilt, and the iron will to survive. He doesn't press. Our bond resonates with unspoken tension, tangible as the frosty air.

Midmorning brings a weak sun that does little to warm us, but at least the wind eases. We find a slope dotted with pine trees, their needles thick enough to block Drayveth's line of sight should he try to track us. Once we're under their canopy, Kaelith finally gestures for a halt.

"Let me see your shoulder," he says, voice subdued. The air between us crackles with the memory of last night's closeness.

I nod silently, letting him peel away my torn cloak. He refashions the bandage with quiet efficiency, careful not to jostle my injury. Each brush of his fingers sends flutters through my stomach, tinged with guilt-laced desire. I sense his own tension in the press of his lips, the measured control in his motions.

When he finishes, we stand there, uncertain. My gaze drifts to his bruised arms, the wound on his temple. "You... you should rest too," I manage softly. "At least let me?—"

He shakes his head. "I'll manage." A beat of silence, then his expression softens. "We can't keep ignoring what happened. But we can't dwell on it either. Not when Drayveth might be hunting us."

My chest feels tight. “I know. I’m sorry.” For everything—my recklessness, the kiss, this entire situation. The apology hovers in the cold air.

He exhales, looking at me with an unreadable gaze. “Let’s just survive first. Then... then we’ll figure out what we are to each other.” The flicker of vulnerability in his eyes twists my heart.

I nod, swallowing back a surge of conflicting emotions. “All right.”

And so we forge onward once more, leaving behind the harrowing echoes of that ambush and the scorching imprint of our first kiss. My shoulder throbs, my magic simmers dangerously near the surface, and every step reminds me that Drayveth’s words still linger, sowing seeds of doubt in my mind. Am I truly fated to bring destruction?

But a quiet whisper of hope resounds in my chest, carried by the tether’s persistent hum. Kaelith stands beside me, battered but steadfast. For better or worse, we’re bound together, forging a path through a world that wants us both undone. Maybe if we hold onto that fleeting spark of intimacy, we can keep the darkness from consuming us—both the external threats and the shadows lurking in our own hearts.

I breathe in, steel my resolve, and place one foot in front of the other, determined to prove Drayveth wrong... and to discover whether that singular, heated moment between a gargoyle and an exiled purna can blossom into something stronger than fear.

8

KAELITH

The sky churns with bruised clouds, roiling in dark swaths that blot out what little

light remains of the day. I can sense the building pressure in the air, a raw electric charge that tugs at the runes etched into my skin. Snow—and perhaps something far more violent—will strike soon. I glance at Sariah, who trudges beside me, cloak drawn tightly around her shoulders. Despite the outward calm, I detect her own swirling anxiety through our bond.

We've been pushing through these ravines for hours, dogged by the specter of Drayveth and his rogue purna. My side still aches from a glancing blow of necromantic magic, and her shoulder is heavily bandaged after that brutal ambush. We shouldn't keep moving in this condition, I think grimly, but shelter is scarce in this craggy wasteland.

Wind gusts across the barren slopes, pelting us with icy flecks that sting my face. My wings bristle in protest. The temperature is dropping swiftly, and an unnatural hush settles over the land. Lightning flickers in the distance, thunder rumbling close behind. Sariah raises her eyes to the threatening sky. I see the reflection of fear there, but also an unwavering resolve—a steel in her posture that continues to surprise me. Even battered and exhausted, she marches onward, determined not to yield.

I shift closer, scanning the rock formations for any hint of a cave or outcropping that might shield us from the incoming tempest. My gargoyle senses prickles with the nearness of static, as if the atmosphere itself sizzles with latent magic. “Storm’s coming,” I say, voice rough.

Sariah’s lips quirk in a humorless half-smile. “I noticed.” She’s trembling—whether from cold or the aftermath of our battles, I’m not certain.

I press a clawed hand to her uninjured arm. Instantly, the tether twangs in my chest, a reminder that her presence is as integral to me now as my own flesh and blood. “We need cover.”

Her gaze meets mine, tension flickering in those storm-gray eyes. Storm within and storm without. She nods. "I think... I see something ahead." She gestures toward a dark cleft in the rocks, partially obscured by fallen debris. It might be a cave. Or it might be a dead-end. Either way, we have no real choice.

We move rapidly, bracing against the rising wind. The sky deepens into a swirling cauldron of black and purple. Lightning spears across the clouds, thunder shaking the earth. My runes buzz, reacting to the sudden influx of chaotic energy. When we reach the cleft, I help shift aside a slab of broken rock. A narrow passage yawns beyond, leading into darkness.

She hesitates on the threshold, brow furrowed. I sense her wariness. Caves can be traps. But out here, with the storm intensifying, staying in the open is suicide. I angle my body to slip inside first, wings folding tight. I move with practiced caution, a faint glow from my chest runes illuminating jagged walls of stone. The air smells damp, tinged with minerals. Water drips somewhere, echoing in the cramped corridor.

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I beckon for Sariah to follow. She ducks under the low entrance, cloak catching on a jut of rock. With a curse, she tugs it free. Her exhalation clouds in the cold. Further in, the corridor widens enough for me to stand at my full height, though the ceiling remains uncomfortably close to my horns. We walk carefully, each step accompanied by the gritty crunch of gravel underfoot.

The tunnel branches left and right. We choose the left by unspoken agreement, the faint sound of wind funneling from that direction. Soon, we emerge into a broader cavern, perhaps twice my wingspan across. The walls bow inward like an ancient ribcage. Boulders litter the floor, but the roof is intact. Best of all, the air is less biting. We can make camp here, at least for the night.

A deafening peal of thunder reverberates outside, and Sariah flinches. She presses her back to the wall, breathing raggedly. Her face is pale, either from exhaustion or the toll of too many close calls. I gasp at the sight, my chest tightening. I want to ask if she's all right, but the bond already provides me with an echo of her swirling turmoil. Guilt, fear, anger, a throbbing sense of vulnerability. And something else, an undercurrent of wanting that mirrors my own.

Tentatively, I lift a hand to her good shoulder. She doesn't recoil—her eyes flick from my palm up to my face, and I catch the flicker of conflict there. "Let's rest," I say, voice gentler than usual. "I'll see if the walls are stable."

She nods mutely, letting me guide her to a relatively smooth patch of ground where she can sit. Outside, the storm unleashes a barrage of hail, the clatter echoing through the corridors. The temperature plummets further, wind howling. I search around for any stray debris or dried vegetation that might serve as kindling. There's little to be

found, but I scrape together enough to form a small mound. Better than nothing.

Sariah stirs, kneeling to touch the pile. Her purna magic flickers at her fingertips, conjuring a spark. The twigs glow, embers dancing to life, casting a shaky light across the cavern. Warmth doesn't truly radiate from the meager flame, but psychologically, it's a lifeline. We huddle around it, wings brushing shoulders, breath mingling in the gloom.

Lightning flashes, illuminating the entrance, momentarily revealing the swirling fury outside. The wind shrieks with inhuman force, as if the gods themselves rage. Our bond resonates with the environment's chaotic energy, heightening every sensation. My runes flare, responding to both the storm and her presence.

"You're hurt," she says suddenly, nodding to the red stain peeking through the tear in my side. I'd almost forgotten the wound inflicted by that rogue purna's blade. A shallow cut, but it never had time to properly heal.

"I'll manage," I reply, forcing nonchalance. In truth, my side throbs fiercely.

She eyes me, then tears a strip from her cloak. "Let me bandage it. It's bleeding again."

I consider refusing, but the tether hums in a low, urgent manner. Accept help. She's stronger than before, but I sense her guilt from that last confrontation with Drayveth's faction. This small act might ease the tension.

"All right," I concede. Slowly, I slide back a portion of my leathery wrap so she can reach the wound. The air stings as cloth peels away from dried blood. She inhales sharply, probably at the sight of dark rivulets. I keep my gaze fixed on the faint, flickering flame.

Her fingers press against my side, applying the cloth strip to stem the flow. Instinctively, my wings bristle at the contact. Her touch is careful, but the bond magnifies the sensation, sending an unexpected jolt of heat through me. She's kneeling close, each breath stirring the air around my face. Focus on the pain, not the pull.

"Sorry," she murmurs, feeling me tense. "I'll be gentle."

My voice emerges gruffer than intended. "I know." She focuses on the bandage, brow furrowed, lips parted in concentration. Her face is pale with fatigue, but there's a certain softness in her expression that banishes my usual wariness. The brand on her wrist glows faintly, an echo of my runes. Two currents of magic, forced to flow in tandem. The storm's energy crackles beyond these walls, fueling an undercurrent of raw power that swells in my veins.

At last, she ties off the makeshift bandage with trembling hands. "That should help," she whispers. Her gaze flicks to mine. So close. The tension between us brims, poised on a knife's edge. Thunder booms again, shaking loose a trickle of dust from the cavern ceiling.

She doesn't pull away. Nor do I. The faint glow of the fire plays over her features, highlighting the silver strands in her hair, the parted curve of her lips. My heart thrums in my chest. We nearly died. Again. This knowledge tangles with the leftover adrenaline, fueling a surge of primal need. Our eyes lock, and the bond roars to life, thickening the air with possibilities.

"Sariah," I say, voice low.

She swallows, chest rising and falling in ragged rhythm. "Kaelith."

A single moment. A single breath. Lightning flashes once more, painting her face in

stark light. The brand pulses with an otherworldly glow. I realize I'm half-lifting my arm, drawn to her by a force I can't resist. She leans in, eyes alight with the same restless craving that churns in my gut.

The distance collapses. Our mouths meet in a crushing kiss, the tether flaring. It's not the tentative brush from before. This is raw, desperate, and hungry—born from too many close calls, from the swirl of our powers, from the need to confirm we're still alive. I groan into the kiss, hands sliding around her waist, pulling her flush against me.

She gasps, an edge of pain in that sound, probably from her injured shoulder, but she doesn't stop. Her fingers tangle in my hair, nails scraping my scalp with heated urgency. My runes blaze, responding to the closeness of her magic. Sparks dance at the periphery of my vision, as if the storm outside has found a mirror in our union.

We kiss until air becomes a secondary need, until the flickering fire almost dies for lack of attention. Our bodies align, my claws pressed lightly to her back, her hand snaking beneath my wrap to feel the curve of my side. Every brush of skin sends molten sparks through my veins. The gargoyle side of me—predatory, dominant—surges in my chest. Yet something deeper, gentler, tries to tether that ferocity, mindful of her recent wounds.

When we break apart, panting, her eyes shine with tears or desire—or both. "I don't want to lose control," she breathes, voice quivering. "After what happened with my magic?—"

I rest my forehead against hers, inhaling the faint floral note that envelops her. "Then let me ground you," I murmur, runes still flaring with an unholy glow. "We can anchor each other." Or plunge together into the chaos. I try not to recall Nerezza's twisted journey. Sariah is not her.

She bites her lip, a shudder coursing through her. A flash of lightning illuminates the cavern, revealing the swirl of unspoken hunger in her gaze. “Just... promise me we won’t let this bond devour us.”

A pang resonates in my chest. “I promise.” My gargoyle instincts bristle with need, but I force them to yield. This moment must be more than mindless rutting. We’ve both lost so much. Gently, I guide her down, my wings folding around us, a dark canopy that wards off the storm’s furious light.

She exhales, tension uncoiling as she allows me closer. The small flame sputters at our side, shadows dancing across stone. Outside, the hail intensifies, hammering the earth, as if the planet itself roars its disapproval. But in our cramped sanctuary, we forge a different tempest—one of heated skin, ragged breaths, and the trembling vulnerability that comes from defying fate.

With careful hands, I trace the curve of her body, mindful of the bandages on her shoulder. She arches against me, each movement stirring the tether. A faint glow emanates from our combined magic, lighting the cavern with a ghostly aura. She moans softly, burying her face in the crook of my neck, lips brushing the runes at my collarbone.

“Sariah,” I whisper, losing myself in the feel of her breath. My mind reels with conflicting emotions: protectiveness, lust, fear, longing. I slip a clawed finger under the edge of her cloak, revealing more of her chilled skin. She doesn’t protest—her trembling is from desire, not reluctance. She meets my gaze, nodding once, giving silent permission that floods me with relief. This is consent. This is need. This is the moment we choose to cling to life, no matter the cost.

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In the hush, we shed what garments we can, though caution rules our movements. Our injuries demand care, but urgency spurs us onward. Each brush of skin electrifies my senses, her presence weaving with mine until I can hardly separate where my body ends and hers begins. The tether pulses in time with our pounding hearts, forging a loop of shared sensation. She gasps as my lips trail along her collarbone, and I fight the urge to lose all coherence.

“I need you,” she breathes, voice trembling with raw honesty. It’s not a plea of helplessness, but a confession of shared desperation.

My response is a husky growl, part agreement, part promise. Our mouths collide again, tongues tangling. The primal side of me demands to claim her, to brand her as mine, but I wrestle with it, refusing to let pure ferocity overshadow the fragile trust blossoming here. Instead, I hold her in a protective embrace, letting my tail curl around her ankle, a gentle tether of its own.

Time blurs. We succumb to the storm raging inside us—an onslaught of touch, taste, whispered names. Every movement is rough, almost feral, but underpinned by a silent vow not to inflict further harm. She moans into my ear, nails raking across my shoulders. I hiss at the exquisite sting, wings trembling. The cavern resonates with our ragged breathing and the hiss of sleet outside. Our bond flares, fueling the intensity.

Midway through this fevered embrace, something shifts in the air. A swirl of raw power floods the space, cresting like a wave. My runes blaze, reflecting the synergy between us—a synergy we only glimpsed in training. Sariah arches her spine, magic crackling around her fingertips, illuminating the stone with flickers of bluish light.

The mark on her wrist pulses, and I feel its rhythmic beat as if it's my own heartbeat.

“Kaelith—” she gasps, eyes half-lidded, face contorted in rapture and awe. She's letting me sense her magic's full potential: wild, untamed, lethal. Yet in this moment, it melds with the earthen might coursing through my gargoyle veins. The energies entangle, forging a current that leaps between our bodies with soft static pops.

I groan, every nerve electrified as her hips roll against mine, her wet heat grinding along the length of my cock. The sensation is maddening—like drowning in fire and lightning at once. My tail lashes, coiling tighter around her thigh, dragging her closer until there's no space left between us.

“Gods—Kaelith—” Sariah gasps, her voice breaking as my hands grip her waist, lifting her just enough to angle her perfectly before slamming her back down. She takes me in deep, her tight walls fluttering around me, and I hiss through my teeth, my wings shuddering.

“Look at me,” I demand, voice rough as gravel. Her eyes snap open, hazy with pleasure but still holding mine. “You feel that? How fucking perfect you take me? I think you're made for me to do this, Sariah. To experience this.”

She whimpers, nails biting into my shoulders as I thrust up into her, each movement sharp and desperate. “Y-yes— gods, yes—” Her head falls back, long hair spilling like ink over her bare skin, and I seize the chance to scrape my fangs along her throat, not hard enough to break skin but enough to make her cry out.

“You taste like ambrosia. I swear, nothing can compare to your taste.” I lick her neck, holding my breath. It has been centuries since I last felt a woman's body like this. Nothing can compare to Sariah's warmth, though.

“Oh, what are you doing?” she gasps as I kiss her chest, trailing to her nipple. I such

the circular tip softly, and rolling it in my mouth.

“Kaelith!” she screams, grabbing my hair as magic crackles between us, her power surging in time with each ragged breath. The runes along my arms blaze hotter, matching the pulse of the mark on her wrist. I can feel her—every shudder, every clench of her pussy around me, the way her thighs tremble as I drive her toward the edge.

“Come on, Sariah,” I growl against her lips, my tail tightening possessively. “Let go. I want to feel you come on my dick. You have to get my cock so wet, so you can clean it up later.”

“Kaelith!” her eyes sparkle as he gazes at me. “Yes! Yes!”

Sariah sobs, her back arching as the first wave crashes over her. “Kaelith—ah!” Her climax rips through her, magic sparking like live wires between us, and I’m lost in the sensation—her pulsing around me, the way her body bows like a drawn arrow, the raw, shattered sound of my name on her lips.

“Yes, I’m coming, too!” I don’t last much longer. With a snarl, I flip her beneath me, pinning her to the stone floor as my thrusts turn erratic, brutal. “Mine At least tonight,” I rasp, my claws scoring the rock beside her head. “Say it.”

Her legs lock around my hips, pulling me deeper. “Yours,” she gasps, her voice wrecked. “Never felt this good?—”

The admission undoes me. My release slams into me like a storm surge, my wings flaring wide as I spill inside her, our magic detonating in a shockwave of light and heat. Sparks arc across our sweat-slicked skin, the cave trembling around us as the force of our union rattles the very earth.

For a heartbeat, I'm certain the ceiling will collapse—until the energy dissipates, leaving only the echo of our panting breaths and the distant howl of the wind.

Sariah's fingers trace the curve of my horn, her touch featherlight. "That was..." She trails off, dazed.

"Insufficient?" I smirk, though my voice is still rough with spent desire.

She laughs breathlessly, swatting my chest. "A start."

When the flare of lust and magic subsides, I find myself trembling, every muscle spent. The bond pulses in the aftermath, heavy with new threads woven between us. Sariah lies against me, her chest rising and falling in shallow gulps of air. My heart races as if I've run a marathon, and the runes on my chest flicker like dying embers.

A hush wraps around us, broken only by distant thunder and the muted hiss of hail on the rock outside. My mind grapples with the enormity of what just happened. It wasn't merely physical—our magic fused, tangling more intricately than ever. A primal part of me rejoices at the closeness, while another part cowers, recalling how such bonds can lead to destruction if left unchecked.

Sariah shifts, wincing at her bandaged shoulder. I cradle her gently, careful not to aggravate her injuries. The rawness of my own body smarts, but I can't bring myself to disengage. Her breath tickles my collarbone, the brand on her wrist pressed to my chest as if she's unconsciously marking me.

A swirl of guilt, relief, and wonder tangles in my chest. "Sariah," I whisper, voice thick. "What have we done?"

She lifts her gaze, cheeks flushed. Her lips part, a thousand emotions warring in her eyes—vulnerability, lingering passion, a flicker of alarm. "I... I don't know," she

admits softly. “That was—” She falters, searching for words.

“Too much,” I finish, swallowing. “Or maybe just enough.” My wings twitch, folding around us like a protective veil. I sense her confusion mirrored in my own heart. A deep ache resonates in my chest. I swore I would not let myself be tethered again, not after Nerezza, not after the ruin that followed. But Sariah is not Nerezza. She’s a battered, determined purna who shares my desperation and, apparently, my bed.

She closes her eyes, tears welling. “I’m scared,” she confesses, voice trembling. “That I’ll lose control again, that this magic—this bond—will unravel everything. But I... I needed this, needed you. Is that wrong?”

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I brush a thumb across her cheek, wiping a tear. Her vulnerability carves a pang in my chest. “It’s not wrong to want comfort.” My voice is quieter than I expect. “But it complicates things.” The tether thrums, reinforcing the truth of those words. We’ve gone from reluctant allies to something more entangled. I can practically feel the magic weaving thicker cords between our souls.

She nods, biting her lip. The flickering firelight catches the silver in her hair. “I know,” she whispers. “But for once, I don’t regret it.” Her hand slides hesitantly over my chest, tracing a faint line near my runes. The contact sends a subtle shiver through me.

A faint, sad smile curves my lips. “Nor do I,” I admit. The confession hangs in the stale air, as real and palpable as the leaden storm beyond the cave walls. Another peal of thunder rumbles, softer now, as if the tempest begins to move off. The air thick with ozone and the lingering tang of arcane energy weighs us down.

I shift to prop myself on one elbow, gently disentangling our limbs. She winces when my movement tugs on her shoulder, so I cradle her head in my palm, mindful of every bruise. A swirl of guilt resurfaces. “Are you... all right?” I ask quietly, scanning her expression for any sign of regret or pain I might have missed. I was rough, more than I intended, but she clung to me just as fiercely.

Her cheeks flush, but she doesn’t shy away. “I’m... a bit sore, but I’ll manage.” A rueful note creeps into her voice. “We should have been more careful.” Then she tries to smile, though tears still shimmer in her eyes. “But I wanted it. I still do.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. The tether pulses with relieved

warmth. “Good.” An awkward hush follows as we both grapple with the enormity of this shift in our relationship. I feel the tension weaving tighter around my heart—awareness that this is more than a fleeting tryst. It’s a step toward something raw and irreversible.

Outside, the storm’s wrath lessens, hail turning to sleet. The wind’s cries recede, though the echo of thunder lingers at the fringes. Our meager fire sputters, hungry for more fuel. With reluctance, I shift away, searching the floor for stray bits of wood. My body protests, a dull ache radiating from multiple bruises, the reopened cut in my side stinging under the fresh bandage. Sariah murmurs a quiet protest at the loss of contact, but she shifts to prop herself on an elbow, cloak half-draping her body.

I deposit a handful of leftover twigs onto the fire, coaxing the flames higher. Shadows dance across the cavern walls, revealing our disheveled forms—her hair tangled, my wings still half-unfurled. The sight cracks something inside me. I once swore never to be this vulnerable again. Yet here I am, entwined with a purna who nearly blasted half a clearing with untamed magic. My pulse pounds, a mixture of dread and exhilaration.

She sits up, the cloak sliding to reveal a bruise along her rib. I grimace. “I did that,” I realize out loud, guilt twisting my gut.

She glances down, cheeks coloring. “We were both... intense.” She pulls the cloak around her, trying to hide the bruise from my view. “It’s all right. I’m not fragile.” A shaky breath escapes her, and I see the flicker of memory—the vicious fight, the near-death confrontation with Drayveth. “We needed a release.”

Her words hold truth. Fear, anger, longing, desperation—they all churned into that fervent encounter. Yet as the echoes fade, the weight of what it means to share this bond looms larger. I rake a hand through my hair, dislodging bits of dust and stone. “We’ll figure it out,” I say finally, more a vow to myself than a statement of fact. Or

we'll sink beneath the tide of powers larger than us.

She nods, brushing silver-streaked hair from her eyes. "I want that too." Her gaze meets mine, uncertain yet resolute. "No more running from it, right? We—" Her words falter, but I sense her unspoken hope: maybe this bond can be something other than a curse.

A swirl of conflicting emotions surges in my chest. Am I capable of offering her something that won't end in tragedy? I recall Nerezza's face, the betrayal that cost thousands of lives. Focus, Kaelith. Sariah is not Nerezza. I force the comparison aside, leaning in to press a gentle kiss to her forehead, tasting the salt of her sweat and tears. She relaxes into me, exhaling a long, trembling breath.

We rest like that for a time, enveloped by the diminishing storm's distant rumble and the smoldering remnants of our own fiery union. My body throbs with spent adrenaline. She eventually dozes, head pillowed against my shoulder. I remain alert, scanning the cavern for any threats. The tether grows quieter, as if sated for the moment but still coiled tight at our core.

An hour, maybe two, passes. The hail tapers to a drizzle, pattering over the rocks outside. I sense the storm drifting away, leaving behind a raw hush. My thoughts drift to practicalities: once the weather clears, we must continue east, seeking Snowfall Glen in the distant mountains. Drayveth might still be hunting us. Nerezza's shadow looms—somewhere, she stirs, a ticking bomb that threatens the entire world.

And now, there's Sariah—my tethered partner, my ally in battle, and unexpectedly, my lover. The word churns in my mind, both thrilling and terrifying. She sleeps fitfully, brow knitted even in rest. I brush a stray lock of hair from her face. She's so small compared to me, yet her magic wields terrifying force. The blast she unleashed could have wiped us out if I hadn't shielded at the last instant.

Eventually, she stirs, blinking hazy eyes. “I’m awake,” she murmurs, voice thick with fatigue. She notices my watchful posture and sits up, cringing at her bruises. “We... survived the storm, then?” Her gaze darts to the cave entrance, where a faint glow indicates the weather’s easing.

I nod. “It’s mostly passed.” A weighted silence stretches, acknowledging that bigger storms still brew within our hearts. Romance was never meant to be simple. With a grunt, I haul myself to my feet, ignoring the protest of my injuries. “We should see how the path looks. Maybe we can move while the break in the weather lasts.”

She huddles in the cloak, the flush on her cheeks returning when she notices the state of our rumpled clothes. Tension thickens—awareness of what we shared. She slowly stands, picking up the garments we hastily tossed aside. I turn to give her space, though the tether aches subtly at the increased distance. My own body is a patchwork of bruises and dried blood, but I tug on my leathers, wings shifting uncomfortably. The fresh bandage at my side remains sticky with congealed gore.

When we’re both clothed again, we gather around the feeble fire, wordlessly sharing a ration of stale dried meat and whatever leftover water we can find in the cave’s drips. The atmosphere is uneasy, overshadowed by the knowledge that something monumental transpired between us. Do we talk about it now, or bury it?

She’s the first to break the silence. “Kaelith,” she says softly, fiddling with a loose thread on her cloak. “I... about what happened?—”

I raise a hand, halting her. My wings half-furl behind me, tail flicking over the cavern floor. “We can discuss it,” I say carefully, “but not here. Not when we’re still vulnerable, and the storm might only be pausing.” My chest tightens at her crestfallen look. I’m not rejecting you; I’m protecting you. I slip a finger under her chin, tilting her face up. “I haven’t changed my mind about anything, but we have to stay alive.”

She gives a shaky nod, eyes brimming with emotion. “All right,” she whispers, leaning briefly into my touch. I sense her gratitude for not brushing her off completely. We’re both learning how to navigate this precarious bond.

We extinguish the fire, scattering the ashes so no accidental smoke betrays our presence. Then, with renewed caution, we make our way back to the tunnel. The wind outside is calmer now, though a cold drizzle persists, turning the snow into slushy mud. My wings bristle at the icy wetness, but gargoyles endure worse.

Sariah stays close, as if drawn by the fresh vulnerability we share. Each time her hand brushes mine, the tether hums, reminding me that our fates are entwined more deeply than ever. My mind spins with possibilities: the synergy we displayed might become an asset in facing Drayveth or even greater threats. Yet the danger is real. If we lose ourselves in this bond, we might tread the path that once doomed an entire legion of gargoyles under Nerezza’s sway.

I won’t let that happen. My jaw sets. We’ll harness this connection carefully, forging a weapon from our shared power without succumbing to madness. Sariah glances at me, reading something in my expression, her mouth turning up in a faint smile. I sense she’s also resolved to keep forging forward. We are survivors.

Outside, the landscape is battered. Broken branches and chunks of ice litter the ground, the air pungent with ozone. The sky remains overcast, but the worst of the storm has indeed passed. A bleak hush settles over the ravines, as if everything cowers from the aftershock. We set off, each footstep squelching in the sodden ground. Despite our exhaustion, we push onward.

Every so often, Sariah winces, pressing a hand to her shoulder or her ribs. I catch glimpses of fresh bruising at her collarbone, bruises that I—at least partly—left behind in the throes of passion. My chest constricts with guilt, but she never complains. Instead, she occasionally meets my gaze and offers a small nod, as though

to say I'm fine. The bond hums softly, laced with quiet solidarity.

We walk in near-silence for hours, the drizzle soaking our cloaks, the cold creeping into our bones. My side bleeds anew, but I grit my teeth. No choice but to keep going. Eventually, the land slopes downward, leading us to a cluster of pine trees that block the wind. There, we pause to catch our breath, rummaging for any scraps of edible roots or berries. The entire time, the memory of that fierce intimacy in the cave lingers like an unspoken phantom between us.

When the thin sun slides behind thick clouds again, we decide to make camp in a hollow beneath the largest pine. Sariah casts a minor ward around us, her magic flickering in her eyes. I sense her caution—she's controlling her power so she doesn't inadvertently replicate the lethal burst that nearly destroyed us before. I press a palm to her shoulder in silent encouragement, ignoring the spark that leaps along the tether. She shivers, not entirely from the cold.

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Once our modest camp is arranged, we huddle in the meager dryness. We have no fresh wood, so we can't start a fire. We must rely on body heat and the partial shelter of the pine's needle-laden branches. I prop myself against the trunk, wings half-wrapped around me, tail curled by my side. Sariah settles close, hugging her knees.

The hush that falls is thick with unspoken questions. The tension between us has eased somewhat, but the magnitude of what we've done weighs heavily. She lifts her head after a while, exhaling a cloud of white breath. "Kaelith," she says quietly. "That cave... that storm... everything?—"

I nod, heart pounding. "I know." My voice emerges calmer than I feel.

She clenches her fists, then relaxes them, as though wrestling with how to frame her thoughts. "I don't regret it," she whispers at last. "But I'm terrified of what it means." Her eyes flick to the brand on her wrist. "We're supposed to be fighting for our lives, not?—"

"—not forging deeper ties?" I finish softly, watching her expression. "I share that fear. But it happened. We can't deny it."

She rests her forehead on her knees, words muffled. "If Drayveth saw us now, he'd claim this is proof of my corruption. That I've enslaved you, or you've ensnared me with gargoyle magic... or some nonsense about me turning Nyxari." Her voice shakes. "But it isn't like that. I feel... more human than ever."

A wave of tenderness tugs at me. She is human, for all that the purna consider themselves above normal mortals. Carefully, I shift closer, hooking a wing around her

to shield her from the chill. She glances up, startled, then sighs, leaning into me. The weight of her body against mine conjures a gentle ache of longing. My mind replays the image of her pressed under me in the cave, magic sparking like lightning.

“You’re not corrupted,” I say, voice resonating low. “If anything, your willingness to question your power proves it. Still... we need to be vigilant.” A pang resonates in my chest. “I lost someone once who thought she could control everything. She surrendered herself to darkness, believing it was strength. I can’t watch that happen again.”

She reaches for my hand, interlacing her fingers with mine. The small gesture sends a pulse of warmth through the tether. “I won’t become her. I promise.” Her gaze is unwavering. “But I need you... to keep me anchored.”

My throat tightens. The sincerity in her voice, the trust flickering in her eyes—it’s a potent combination, stirring something protective and profound in me. “Then we anchor each other,” I murmur, brushing my thumb over her knuckles. “Neither of us can outrun fate alone.”

She nods, eyes glistening. A fragile smile trembles on her lips. “Together,” she echoes, the word a vow that resonates in the hush. We share a breath, hearts beating in tandem. Outside, the drizzle tapers, leaving a faint hush over the pines. We remain close, letting exhaustion lull us. Our bond hums with a strange comfort, as though content in the knowledge we’ve taken a step closer to unity—dangerous though it may be.

In that quiet, I sense the aftermath of our intimacy twining around us. The tether feels more entrenched, like fresh vines that have latched onto deeper roots. It’s more than mere lust. I know that with a dread-laced certainty. We cannot walk away from each other easily now. The knowledge brings both solace and fear. What if we fail to harness this bond? What if Drayveth is right about purna and gargoyle couplings

ending in ruin?

Yet, as Sariah's eyes drift shut against my shoulder, I steel myself with silent resolve. We'll find a way to survive—and if that means forging a new path for purna and gargoyle alike, so be it. My wings curve protectively around her as we slip into a restless doze, haunted by the echoes of the storm behind us and the uncertain battles ahead.

Yes, we've taken a dangerous step, forging an intimacy that transcends simple alliance. But maybe, in the heart of this savage world, that intimacy is exactly what we need—something worth fighting for, something that can ignite our combined magic without consuming our souls. And if that means facing the ghosts of our pasts, then I vow to do so, no matter the cost.

We are bound together now, I think, as her slow, steady breaths lull me toward partial sleep. And there's no turning back.

9

SARIAH

I wake to the echo of dripping water and the smell of damp pine needles. My entire body feels weighed down by last night's exhaustion—and by the thousand emotions tangled beneath my skin. The cave is gone, the memory of that storm swirling in my thoughts, but the pine boughs overhead remind me that we haven't ventured far. We're tucked against a tree trunk somewhere in the ravines. Through the fuzzy haze of sleep, I recall Kaelith's arms wrapped around me during the night, wings partially sheltering us both from the bitter cold.

I open my eyes slowly, half-expecting to find him looming inches away. But the space beside me is empty. An immediate pang hits my chest, a strange mixture of

relief and disappointment. Relief because I'm still rattled by the intensity of what we shared—disappointment because another part of me secretly yearns for his presence. My cheeks burn at the memory of how intimately we clung to each other in that cave, the firelight dancing across our bruised bodies. The tether thrums at my core, a living testament to the deepening connection that both terrifies and excites me.

Guilt and longing twist together, forming a knot in my stomach. Too good, my mind echoes. It was too powerful, too consuming, as though the line between my magic and his blurred in the heat of that moment. Now, in the thin sunlight, I feel exposed. My brand twinges, as if scolding me for letting my guard slip so completely.

I push myself upright, wincing at the soreness in my shoulder. The bandage there has stiffened with dried blood. My ribs protest every movement. It's hardly surprising, given the feral way we fought, the savage battles with Drayveth's rogues, and then... the storm of passion that followed. I'm battered, inside and out.

Drawing a shaky breath, I look around. A makeshift ring of pine needles circles our sleeping spot. Kaelith must've tidied up some wards last night. My chest clenches; he's so meticulous about protecting me. Or is it just survival, given our tether forces us to share fates?

Shoving the thought aside, I shuffle out from under the tree's drooping boughs. Morning sunlight fights through a swirl of gray clouds overhead, casting pale beams onto the ravine's rocky floor. Hints of frost cling to the ground, shimmering faintly. The hush that blankets this place feels uneasy, as though the world holds its breath. We're not safe, I remind myself, hugging my cloak tighter. Drayveth could be anywhere. Or worse, that monstrous threat Kaelith once sealed away.

I find him a short distance away, crouched beside a small trickle of water that cuts through the rocks. His onyx-toned back is partially exposed, the runes carved into his skin catching the stray sunlight. He's trying to rinse dried blood from a tear in his

leathers, jaw set in a tight line. My heart pangs at the sight of his injuries: fresh bruises purpling the skin near his shoulder, scarring from old battles marking his ribs. The beast and the guardian, all in one.

He hears me approach. His molten gaze flicks up, intense as ever. I can't tell if he's angry or merely guarded. My pulse quickens. My mind whirls with regrets and half-formed apologies, uncertain how to begin. We can't just pretend last night didn't happen.

I clear my throat. "You're up early."

He grunts, returning his attention to the tear in his side. "Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd see if I could stop this from getting worse." His voice holds that rough edge I've come to recognize—part fatigue, part suppressed emotion.

I hesitate, hugging my arms. "Does it hurt?"

Kaelith glances at me, runes flickering faintly. "We're gargoyles. We heal slow, but we handle pain." He pauses, then adds more softly, "I'm all right." I sense the unspoken tension: But are you? Are we?

My gaze drops to the water, the slow drip forming tiny ripples that distort our reflections. "You left before I woke," I say quietly, not sure if I sound accusatory or just sad.

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His shoulders tighten. “I needed space... to think.” Another brief pause. “It was a lot.”

I nod, a lump swelling in my throat. We’re in the same boat, then—both reeling from how easy it was to drown in each other. I chew my lower lip. “It’s all right. I get it.” But do I? My brand stings, an uncomfortable reminder of the power we unleashed.

He wipes water from his hands, stands slowly, wings folding with restless energy. “We should get moving soon,” he says, voice laced with a hint of briskness. “Our rations are low. The land around here seems picked clean by whatever travelers pass through. Drayveth could find us if we linger. Or other threats.”

I blow out a breath, frustration welling. Always the practical concerns. “Yes, you’re right.” My gaze sweeps the ravines. “But do we even know which direction is safe anymore?” My mind conjures the image of a war-torn field behind us, Drayveth lurking somewhere in the shadows, and looming over everything...the possibility that Nerezza truly stirs—the monstrous Nyxari who once nearly destroyed Kaelith’s entire race.

He exhales, tail flicking. “We aim for Snowfall Glen, remember? That was the plan. The purnas there might know how to sever or stabilize this tether, or at least give us insight.” He avoids meeting my eyes when he mentions the tether, as though it embarrasses him now. After we used that bond so intimately.

I muster courage. “We... we can do that.” My voice wavers. “Are we... good?” The question is small, uncertain, a reflection of the swirling fear in my chest.

Kaelith finally meets my gaze, golden irises tinged with something I can't name. "Sariah, last night—" He breaks off, jaw working. "It isn't that I regret it. But we face too many dangers. If Nerezza is truly?—"

A sudden sound interrupts him: the faint scuff of footsteps against gravel. We both whirl. My heart leaps, conjuring Drayveth's face. Kaelith tenses, wings half-flaring in a protective stance. Then, from behind a rocky outcrop, a figure staggers into view, clutching their side. The shape is smallish, cloaked, hunched in obvious pain. As they approach, I spot a familiar brand on their wrist—a purna mark. Another rogue? My stomach clenches.

Kaelith growls, stepping forward. "Who's there?"

The stranger rasps, "Wait—don't attack." Then they crumple to their knees. Shock ripples through me; beneath the hood, I catch a glimpse of a sallow complexion, eyes wide with terror. Blood stains their cloak. They can't be more than a youth, older than me by a handful of years, but still somewhat young for a purna. My brand tingles, resonance flaring.

Kaelith glances at me, uncertain. I swallow, stepping closer, magic crackling at my fingertips just in case. "Who are you?"

They lift their head, breath ragged. "Please... help... ran from Drayveth. He's hunting anyone who won't follow his cause." Their voice cracks, heavy with desperation.

A chill seizes my spine. Even among rogues, Drayveth fosters no mercy. I exchange a look with Kaelith. He's tense, but a flicker of pity crosses his features. "We can't trust them," he mutters. "They could be bait."

The stranger coughs violently, slumping forward. Blood spatters the ground. "No..."

no trap. Drayveth... not far... but I escaped... to warn... to warn that—" Their words cut off with a ragged gasp.

I step forward, ignoring Kaelith's restraining hand. My heart almost stops at the sight of so much blood. No one deserves to die like this. "Easy," I whisper, crouching. A tang of iron stings my nose. "What do you need to tell us?"

They clutch my sleeve, eyes fevered. "Nerezza," they choke out, voice trembling. "The Nyxari. She's... awakened. The seal... it's shattered." They cough again, flecks of blood staining their lips. "Drayveth raves that... you... you're... Sariah's the cause." Their gaze flicks to me, terror gleaming. "He says Nerezza can sense your magic... wants you taken or killed... oh gods..."

My pulse pounds so loudly I barely register the continued pleas. Nerezza. Awake. Ice floods my veins. The unthinkable is happening. Kaelith's sacrifice was undone when I broke that ancient ward, and now the worst nightmares come to life. My brand throbs in protest, as if scorning my stupidity. I did this. Did I truly?

Kaelith growls, stepping around us. His runes flare a moment, darkness sharpening his face. "Impossible," he hisses, though desperation weaves through his tone. "She can't be fully active. The wards would require more time?"

The wounded purna coughs a wet laugh, eyes rolling. "She's... she's... unstoppable now. Drayveth's band... cowering. Some have joined her... oh gods, oh gods." Their voice cracks, ending in a choking sob. "She destroyed a coven. They say... she left no survivors. The darkness consumed them." Tears glisten in their eyes, echoing pure horror. "A few refused to bow, so she... turned them to stone, or something worse. We fled." Their gaze meets mine, raw with fear. "You must run... she wants you. She wants the one who awakened the gargoyle. She wants... the power she senses in you. Drayveth was... so determined to find you first."

Terror grips my chest like a vise. Nerezza is truly out there. That monstrous threat Kaelith sealed centuries ago. My heart stutters, guilt raging. Is it truly my fault? My accidental unsealing led to Kaelith's freedom—and hers. Kaelith curses, tail lashing the ground. The bond hums with his dread. I try to swallow the mounting panic.

The purna's eyes flutter, breath rattling. Blood trickles from their mouth. "Please... help me..." they whisper, voice breaking.

I glance at Kaelith, reading the same turmoil in his expression: we can't just let them die. My brand flares with twisted guilt—this is a fellow purna, possibly manipulated by Drayveth. "Hold on," I murmur, pressing my palm to their chest. My magic flickers, hesitating. Healing spells are not my forte. But I can at least staunch some bleeding. The air crackles as I channel a wave of purna energy into them, focusing on the wound in their side.

They whimper, body arching, but the bleeding slows. Sweat drips down my forehead. I grit my teeth, trying to recall the simpler healing incantations my coven taught me. Focus, Sariah. Don't let your fear of losing control hamper you. Gradually, the purna's breathing steadies, though they remain ghost-pale.

Kaelith stands guard, glancing around warily. "We can't stay here," he mutters. "If Drayveth is near, or if Nerezza's minions are prowling, we're easy targets."

I nod, heartsick. This is the "shocking news" you dreaded. "We'll carry them somewhere safer," I say, mind racing. "Maybe find a small shelter, let them recover."

Kaelith's jaw tightens, runes flickering. "One wounded purna is too big a liability."

I bristle. "They came to warn us."

He exhales, tension sliding from his shoulders. "Fine. But be quick. If they can walk,

good. If not, we move carefully.”

I help the purna sit up, explaining that we need to move. They groan, half-conscious. My magic alleviated some immediate danger, but their face still gleams with sweat. “I can... manage,” they whisper, trembling. “Just... not fast.”

Kaelith extends a reluctant arm. “Lean on me.” He addresses them curtly, ignoring their fearful reaction to his gargoyle features. The purna flinches, but ultimately accepts the support when they realize they have no choice. My heart aches seeing the terror in their eyes. I used to feel that same dread about gargoyles... until Kaelith showed me there’s more to them.

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We begin a slow trek across the ravine floor, heading toward a cluster of pines that might offer some concealment. I keep one hand hovering near the wounded purna, ready to bolster them if they falter. My mind churns with the significance of their message: Nerezza is active. Kaelith sealed himself away centuries ago to stop her. And now that seal is undone, and the horror is no longer hypothetical. We thought we had time. That she'd be weakened. But apparently, she's already claiming territory.

Adrenaline buzzes in my veins. I force down the swirl of guilt: I freed her. I freed both of them. The urge to run is overwhelming, to vanish into the wilderness, to avoid entangling myself in an ancient war I barely comprehend. But Kaelith is bound to me, and Nerezza is drawn by that same link. Would I abandon him to face her alone? Could I live with myself if I run?

My brand throbs, recollecting Drayveth's accusations that I'm on the path to become a Nyxari as well. He used to say it was my "destiny." I refuse to believe that. Yet the fear lingers. I glance at Kaelith's profile—he moves with grim purpose, supporting the wounded purna, scanning for threats. If I leave him, I free myself from the risk of becoming entangled in Nerezza's hunger. But... I also doom him to fight alone. And we're tethered. Perhaps we'd both die if we separate too far.

We find a shallow hollow among the pines, shielded from the open ravine. Kaelith lowers the purna onto a patch of mossy ground, eyes scanning the surroundings. "I'll keep watch. Patch them up more thoroughly if you can." His tone is clipped, a reflection of the swirling urgency.

I crouch beside the purna, reapplying the healing incantation with trembling hands. Their eyes flutter open, gaze flicking between me and Kaelith. "Thank you," they

whisper, voice raspy. “I—didn’t know... if you’d kill me on sight. Drayveth says you’re... lost to darkness, but I see... you’re not.”

A hollow laugh escapes my throat. “He’s the one consumed by darkness.” Or at least allied with it. “And you said Nerezza is... unstoppable now?”

They shudder. “That’s what they believe. She attacked the outskirts of an old purna settlement. The survivors talked about black wings, stone-limbed creatures answering her call. Gargoyles, but twisted.” Their eyes flick nervously to Kaelith, who stands at the perimeter. “No offense... but these gargoyles are monstrous, nothing like him.”

My heartbeat stutters. Twisted gargoyles? Spawned from Nerezza’s corrupted lineage? Kaelith warned me that she used chaos magic to transform his kin before. If she’s truly resuming that practice, Protheka is in grave peril. “What about the other purna? Are they rallying? Or do they fear Drayveth more than Nerezza?”

The wounded figure shakes their head, eyes distant. “They fear her. Some want to negotiate, to bend the knee rather than face annihilation. Others believe Drayveth’s cause might shield them from her wrath. Many are scattering, seeking refuge in hidden enclaves—like Snowfall Glen.”

My pulse quickens. “Snowfall Glen. That’s where we’re headed.” Though the path is fraught. “Do you know a safe route?”

The purna winces, pressing a trembling hand to their bandaged side. “Maybe. West of the ravine, there’s an abandoned lookout. The old trails behind it lead to a pass that crosses the mountains near the Glen. But it’s rumored that both Drayveth’s rogues and Nerezza’s new brood watch those paths.”

I blow out a breath, anxiety coiling. We either brave that route or wander lost in these ravines forever. The purna coughs, leaning back, their energy spent. “I’m sorry,” they

mumble. “I can’t come with you. Not strong enough. I’ll hide here, rest. If Drayveth or Nerezza finds me first... so be it.”

A chill runs down my spine. “That’s... no.” I glance at Kaelith. He meets my eyes, expression grim. We can’t drag a half-dead purna along. But leaving them to fend alone feels cruel. Yet what choice do we have?

Kaelith speaks up, voice low and measured. “I can leave wards to mask your presence. It won’t be perfect, but it may give you time to recover.” He steps closer, studying the purna with a mix of caution and pity. “If you value your life, you’ll remain hidden. Drayveth is lethal, but Nerezza...” He trails off, voice tight.

The purna closes their eyes, tears slipping down their cheeks. “Thank you. I’ll stay out of sight. The pass to Snowfall Glen... it’s your best chance.” Their eyes flutter open, focusing on me. “You must stop her, or warn the Glen. They have power. They might join you.”

I swallow hard, a swirl of fear tangling with duty. “We’ll do what we can.” My voice trembles. I never asked to be the one who has to stand between a monstrous Nyxari and total annihilation. Yet Kaelith and I are tethered, and we can’t outrun the past.

We linger a few more minutes, Kaelith scrawling rudimentary wards across nearby stones with his claw, using faint glimmers of gargoyle magic. The purna watches him with awe and a hint of fear. My heart clenches. That used to be me, seeing gargoyles as looming nightmares. Now I see Kaelith as... something else.

When the wards are in place, we depart, leaving behind a whispered prayer that the purna recovers. The tether pulses with a sense of urgency—Nerezza is awake. Neither Kaelith nor I speak as we pick our way through the ravine, heading west in search of that old lookout. We’re in motion again, but the weight is heavier now. The faint drizzle of earlier has subsided, leaving the air thick with tension.

After an hour of silent walking, I can't bear the quiet. "She's truly back," I murmur, voice taut. "I... didn't want to believe it."

Kaelith's shoulders tense, wings flexing. "I knew it was a risk. When you undid my seal, you undid hers too. But I hoped we had more time. Or that she'd still be weakened."

A bitter laugh escapes me. "She's apparently strong enough to destroy entire covens." My chest aches with guilt. "Kaelith, I?—"

He stops abruptly, pivoting to face me. His eyes burn with repressed turmoil. "Don't," he growls softly. "Don't shoulder all blame. She always had the cunning to break free eventually. My seal was never a permanent fix." His tail lashes the ground. "She's unstoppable alone. But maybe not if we stand together."

My throat tightens. Stand together. The memory of the cave, the fierce intimacy, the synergy of our magics surges in my mind. "That's just it," I whisper. "I want to escape, stay away from you, from this bond... from the fear that I'll become another Nyxari. If I keep tapping my magic, if we keep letting the tether deepen..." My voice wobbles. "I'm terrified. Yet... I can't leave. Not after everything." I stare at my bandaged shoulder, at the brand that marks me as a purna. "My conscience won't let me abandon you. And maybe... I don't want to."

He exhales, stepping closer. The ravine walls press in, a confining corridor of rock. I sense him battling his own instincts—gargoyle wariness, the lingering scars from Nerezza's betrayal. "I understand," he murmurs, a quiet admission that slices through my chest. "I've considered pushing you away to keep you safe. But we're tethered, in more ways than one."

Tears prickle my eyes. "So what do we do?" My voice cracks. "Fight a monstrous Nyxari with half-baked synergy, hoping we don't blow ourselves up in the process?"

A faint, bitter smile touches his lips. “That’s the gist of it.” He lifts a hand, brushes it gently along my arm. My body reacts to the contact, the tether flaring with a complicated warmth. “I know you considered leaving. But it would kill me... likely kill both of us, or at least shatter this bond in a catastrophic way.”

I nod, swallowing the knot in my throat. The choice was there, a fleeting thought to slip away, hide from the war. But I can’t do it, not now. Guilt, duty, and the echo of affection swirl in my chest. I won’t run. “Then we face her,” I say, quiet but resolute. “We warn the Glen if we can, gather allies. We survive.”

He inclines his head, gold eyes flickering. “Agreed.” For a moment, we stand in the hush, ravine shadows stretching around us. My heart thunders with a swirl of fear and an odd sense of relief. We made a choice—to stand together.

We press on, each step forging deeper into uncharted territory. The landscape changes slowly, the ravine walls giving way to rocky foothills. The midday sun peeks out, painting the slopes in pale gold. Despite the precarious future, a small spark of hope ignites in my chest—like the faint sunrise after a punishing night. We have a goal, at least. With Nerezza awakened, we have no illusions of safety, but maybe we can find a path to fight back.

Before long, we crest a ridge and glimpse what might be an ancient lookout perched on a rocky promontory. Collapsed walls rise from the ground, half-buried in rubble. Kaelith narrows his eyes, scanning for movement. “No sign of watchers.” He frowns. “That doesn’t guarantee it’s empty.”

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I bite my lip. “Should we skirt around it? The purna said there might be patrols.”

He tilts his head. “We could. But we need vantage. If Nerezza truly has gargoyle brood flying these skies, I’d rather know.” A tension lines his jaw. He’s worried about twisted gargoyles—dark reflections of his own kind. My heart constricts at the thought.

“All right,” I concede. “We’ll approach carefully.”

We descend the slope, each footstep deliberate. The tether hums at a steady pitch, no immediate danger thrumming across it. That doesn’t ease my nerves. By the time we reach the perimeter of the ruins, my hands are clammy despite the cold. Broken pillars and scattered stones mark a once-proud structure. I guess it served as a vantage point centuries ago—maybe for purna or some other race. Lichen covers the fragments, giving them a mottled green hue. The wind sighs through the cracked archways.

Kaelith lifts a warning hand. I freeze, following his gaze. A large block of stone stands near the half-collapsed entrance, and behind it, I see something dark. My pulse spikes. We edge closer. No movement. Then I catch a whiff of decay. Rot. My stomach twists.

Rounding the block, we find a corpse—a purna, half-covered in rubble, eyes wide and sightless. My breath catches. Their brand is burnt black, as though forced to channel a lethal amount of magic. Kaelith grimaces, kneeling briefly. “They were killed recently,” he mutters, touching the cold flesh. “Possibly by a chaotic surge.” He glances at me, concerned. “Drayveth or Nerezza, no doubt.”

My hands tremble. Another casualty. “Can we do anything?”

He shakes his head. “Too late.” Gently, he shifts a stone aside, revealing the purna’s rictus face. A chill creeps down my spine. No wonder so many are fleeing. War is here, whether we like it or not.

Swallowing revulsion, we slip deeper into the ruins. The interior is partially open to the sky, columns toppled or eroded by time. At the far side, a spiral stairway leads up, presumably to a vantage platform. Cautious, we climb, ignoring the rubble underfoot that threatens to twist an ankle. My heart hammers with each step, the brand on my wrist tingling with that uneasy sense of being watched.

At the top, we step onto a crumbling balcony. A chunk of the wall has collapsed, revealing a panoramic view of the rolling mountains beyond. In the distance, I spy a jagged peak, behind which looms heavier cloud cover. Snowfall Glen must be somewhere in that direction. The air up here feels sharper, tinged with faint magic. A hush coats the scene, broken only by the wind.

Kaelith scans the horizon, expression grim. Then his focus zeroes in on something to the north—a black speck swooping through the sky. My breath catches. “Is that?—?”

He tenses. “Gargoyle. Possibly one of hers.” The shape is too far to see details, but it dips and rises with a fluid grace reminiscent of Kaelith’s flight. But this one... might be twisted. My pulse kicks. So Nerezza’s brood is truly in the skies. They’re not even trying to hide.

I step back, heart pounding. “They’ll see us,” I hiss, fear lacing my tone. “We need to move.”

He nods curtly. “Agreed.” Before we can descend, though, a faint groan from behind the broken wall makes us spin. My blood runs cold. Another survivor?

Moving swiftly, we circle the platform's edge. Behind a collapsed archway, we find a purna soldier—cloaked, pinned under a slab of stone. They moan softly, eyes rolling. My chest tightens. Another wounded figure. This place is a battlefield, or was. Kaelith curses under his breath, shoving the stone aside with a heave of gargoyle strength. The slab shifts, revealing the soldier's contorted leg. They whimper, face contorted in pain.

I kneel, brand pulsing as I attempt to conjure a minor healing wave. But as I press my hands to the soldier's chest, I freeze. This person wears an insignia on their cloak—Drayveth's mark. My heart stutters. Kaelith sees it too. His eyes flash with warning. We might be saving someone loyal to our enemy.

The soldier's eyes flutter open, glimpsing Kaelith's towering form. They snarl, though it's weak. "Back... filthy gargoyle—" They cough, spitting blood. "Where is Drayveth?"

My throat tightens. "He's not here," I say, voice unsteady. "We found you under this rubble. Who attacked?"

They choke, trying to speak. "A single... creature... black wings... carved through us." Their pupils dilate with terror. "We tried to hold this lookout. Then... darkness fell, and it... oh gods... it was her."

Nerezza. The soldier shudders violently, tears leaking from the corners of their eyes. "She laughed... said we were unworthy, that we'd served our purpose. Drayveth was gone by then, left us behind to slow her. Everyone's dead. I hid, but the arch collapsed."

Kaelith's jaw clenches. "Drayveth fled, leaving his own men to die?"

The soldier closes their eyes, chest hitching with ragged sobs. "He said... Sariah is

the key. Must find her... must kill her... or Nerezza will take her. He left us here to buy him time, but she found us first." They let out a broken laugh. "We failed... all of us."

My pulse roars, sickness rolling in my gut. I'm being hunted by both sides. "You're... you're Drayveth's soldier, yet you blame him for your plight?"

A bitter sneer contorts the soldier's lips. "He used us. Said we'd be heroes, stopping the next Nyxari. But he never cared about our survival. Just his own twisted vendetta. Now... it's over." Their gaze shifts to me, flickering with hatred and despair. "If you truly are Sariah... run. She'll find you. She'll devour you from within. We're all doomed."

My brand sears, an echo of the soldier's final declaration. They slump back, breathing shallowly. I can sense they're close to death. Kaelith stands behind me, face carved in grim lines.

In an impulsive burst of pity, I press my hand to the soldier's wound, trying to channel a flicker of healing. But their injuries are catastrophic—shattered leg, likely internal bleeding. My magic does little beyond granting them a few fleeting heartbeats. They cough, spitting blood, eyes distant.

"Leave... me," they croak, voice barely audible. "No point." A final shudder wracks their body, and their eyes glaze. A pang of horror seizes me. Another death, thrown away in a conflict swirling around me. I clench my teeth, fury rising at Drayveth's ruthless abandonment and Nerezza's merciless slaughter.

Kaelith rests a hand on my shoulder, tension humming in the tether. "We can't linger," he says, voice tight. "They might have reinforcements, or worse, that black-winged creature could return."

A swirl of despair and determination churns in my chest. "I know," I whisper, pulling back from the corpse. My mind replays the soldier's final words: She'll devour you. We're all doomed. With trembling hands, I wipe away tears of frustration.

We hurry down the broken spiral stairs, hearts hammering. Once outside, Kaelith and I keep a watchful eye on the skies. That black speck of a gargoyle brood might be circling overhead. We slip into the foothills, forging a winding path away from the ruins. The gravity of the purna's revelations weighs on us. Nerezza is on the move, cutting down Drayveth's men as well as innocent covens. My brand itches with a sense of foreboding. She wants me, wants Kaelith, wants the power we share. Because I inadvertently freed her?

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My thoughts spiral, half-lost in self-blame, half-lost in the swirl of fear. If she's unstoppable, what hope do we have? The memory of last night's closeness stings anew, overshadowed by the looming war. Every muscle in my body clenches, the brand's dull ache unrelenting. Another wave of panic threatens, urging me to break away from Kaelith, to hide in the far corners of Protheke until all this madness passes.

But that fleeting urge collides with the bond's tether. My chest tightens. I can't abandon him. No matter my fear, I can't walk away from the only ally who might stand a chance against Nerezza's tyranny. My conscience flares too. If I run, Drayveth or Nerezza will still find me. Hiding solves nothing. And a deeper, quieter truth: I don't want to leave him. Not after he's risked so much, not after we forged something raw and intimate in the cave. My heart lurches with a mixture of shame and longing.

We press onward for several hours, hardly speaking. The terrain grows rugged, the wind biting. Eventually, we find a rocky ledge overlooking a narrow valley. I lean against a boulder, panting from the climb, body screaming in fatigue. Kaelith stands near the edge, scanning the horizon. His runes glow softly in the dimming daylight. The bond resonates with his internal conflict—fear for the future, anger at Nerezza's betrayal centuries ago, concern for me. We are so entangled now.

Swallowing hard, I approach him, ignoring the protest of my aching ribs. "Kaelith," I say, voice hushed. He turns, eyes reflecting the last rays of sun. My chest feels tight. "I'm... staying. I thought about running, but I can't. We face her together."

His expression softens, relief warring with tension. "I didn't doubt you," he murmurs, though I sense that part of him was bracing for my departure. He lifts a clawed hand to

cup my cheek, gently, mindful of my bruises. The tether hums. “Whatever comes, we stand as one.”

Emotion tightens my throat. I lean into his touch, tears blurring my vision. “I’m... so sorry,” I whisper. “For unleashing this on you, on everyone.” The guilt surfaces again, raw and unfiltered. “But I won’t abandon you.”

He exhales, pulling me closer, wings shifting as if to shield me from the rest of the world. “We had a false victory, Sariah,” he says quietly. “We thought we could outrun the consequences. That a bit of training and synergy would suffice. Now we see the truth: Nerezza is here, strong, and she wants us.” His molten eyes search mine. “We find the Glen, warn them, and then... we decide how to fight.”

I nod, lips trembling. In his embrace, I feel both solace and dread. The knowledge that Nerezza’s returned devours any sense of short-lived peace. The half-formed illusions of safety we clung to vanish. We’ve reached a turning point, a midpoint in a story that can only end in confrontation. My heart thuds with a potent mix of fear and adrenaline. We must rise to the challenge or be consumed.

Gently, I press my forehead to Kaelith’s chest, listening to the subdued rumble of his heartbeat. The runes etched in his skin glow with quiet warmth, resonating in time with my brand. In that contact, I sense his acceptance of me, bruises, regrets, and all. My arms slip around his waist, fighting tears. We don’t have to speak. The bond thrums with shared resolve.

A final sliver of sunlight dips behind the mountains, painting the sky in bruised oranges and purples. We stand in silence, hearts pounding with the weight of a new understanding: Nerezza is free. And so are we, in a twisted reflection—free to choose how we face this destiny, free to cling to each other despite the terror. The tether binds us in ways we never expected, forging a path we can’t walk alone.

At length, Kaelith lifts his head, scanning the darkening valley. “Nightfall soon. We need shelter,” he says, practical as ever, though his arms linger around me. My heart twists with gratitude for his presence. We’re battered, but we’re alive. And together, we might stand a chance. The memory of Drayveth’s terrified rogues, of the twisted gargoyles under Nerezza’s command, fuels my determination.

I step back, drawing a shaky breath. “Right. Let’s keep going.” My voice wavers, but the flicker of conviction brightens behind my eyes. The brand pulses in silent agreement: we can’t turn from this fight. We can’t cower, nor can we sever ourselves from the bond that might be our best weapon.

So we descend the ridge, forging onward through the twilight, every footstep a vow that we refuse to let Nerezza shape our fates. The hidden flames of last night’s passion still simmer between us, an unbreakable link that staves off despair. My regrets remain, but they no longer drown me—there’s too much at stake. Every time Kaelith’s gaze meets mine, I sense the same fierce resolve, echoing the promise we made. We’ll face the looming war side by side.

And though fear tangles in my stomach—though a monstrous fate looms on the horizon in the form of an awakened Nyxari—I dare to hope. Because for the first time, I’m not alone in this fight. I have him. I have the bond that anchors us both. And in that unity, maybe—just maybe—we’ll find the strength to save ourselves, and possibly the world, from the darkness unleashed.

I keep that hope close, letting it burn in my heart as we journey through the night, heading east toward the uncertain refuge of Snowfall Glen. A bitter wind nips at my cheeks, but Kaelith’s warmth lingers at my side. The brand on my hand pulses a steady beat. With each step, the tether hums with the unspoken vow that we will not falter, no matter what horrors Nerezza brings.

KAELITH

Ipace through the narrow canyon, my wings half-furled and scraping against the jagged rock whenever the passage narrows unexpectedly. The frosty air bites at my skin, but I don't care. My thoughts churn like a raging tide, fixated on her—Nerezza. The name sits on my tongue like an open wound, equal parts dread and grief. I keep replaying that purna's warning, how they claimed she's already set her brood upon unsuspecting enclaves.

I prayed we had more time. Foolish. Now, we're forging ahead in desperation, Sariah beside me, both battered and haunted by the knowledge that the worst evil I've ever known stalks this land once more. We push ourselves hard. The stony ground crunches beneath our boots, each step echoing with the unrelenting tension between us. I sense Sariah's fatigue thrumming along our tether—an undercurrent of her emotional and physical strain.

She said she wouldn't leave me, that she'd stand against Nerezza with me. But I can't banish the creeping fear that my presence endangers her more than anything else. If Nerezza truly focuses on me—on the bond I now share with Sariah—then we've already walked into the crosshairs of the darkest force in Protheka.

A cold wind gusts, cutting through the ravine with a lonely howl. I catch a glimpse of Sariah's face, flushed from the chill. Her eyes glimmer with resilience, but I note a lingering shadow there: the guilt of unleashing me—and in so doing, unleashing Nerezza. I want to reassure her that I hold no illusions of blame. Nerezza might have been freed; my sacrifice was never infallible.

But how can I offer comfort when the memory of Nerezza's betrayal resurfaces in every silent moment? My tail flicks in agitation, stirring dust from the rocky path. Sariah notices, though she doesn't comment. We've said all that needs saying for the moment. Our footsteps quicken, spurred by the rising sense that something lurks just

beyond the next turn.

At last, the canyon broadens into a small clearing of sorts—a wide, flat space hemmed by towering cliffs. Dull sunshine filters through overhead, revealing a patchy scatter of pine needles and uprooted bushes. The place feels strangely deserted, almost too still. My instincts scream caution.

Sariah halts beside me, chest heaving slightly from our brisk pace. “Kaelith?” Her voice wavers with uncertainty, and the tether tightens in my chest. “This spot... it feels off.”

I raise a hand, silently signaling her to stay alert. My wings tense. “I sense it too.” A presence. A subtle shift of magic, like a swirl in the air that defies the natural breeze.

We creep forward, scanning for movement. The rocky walls loom on all sides, forming a cul-de-sac of jagged stone. An unearthly hush blankets the space, devoid of normal wildlife sounds. Even the wind seems to hold its breath. My runes flicker on my chest, responding to the faint tang of power that crawls across my skin.

Abruptly, a ripple of energy cascades through the clearing—a silent shockwave that prickles my scalp. Sariah stiffens. She glances at me, alarm flaring in her eyes. I nod, fists clenching. My tail lashes the ground, stirring bits of gravel. Something is here.

Then it manifests: a shimmer in the air, distorting the view of the cliff face. At first, it looks like heat haze, except the temperature is far too cold for that. Gradually, it coalesces into a figure, tall and regal, draped in layers of dark, flowing cloth that ripple like living shadows. My heart seizes. Nerezza.

She appears both translucent and solid, her visage half-illuminated by an eerie radiance. Her eyes glint with that chilling red sheen I remember all too well—once they were bright with cunning, now they burn with voidlike intensity. My chest

tightens. The same woman who once soared beside me under a different sun, centuries ago. The same woman who tore gargoyle clans asunder.

Sariah inhales sharply, brand flaring with reflexive magic. I step protectively in front of her, wings partially spread. The tether thumps in my chest, adrenaline surging. This can't be her corporeal form. She's projecting an apparition—some advanced sorcery, perhaps. But the power behind it is unmistakable.

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“Nerezza,” I say, voice echoing off the cliffs. The name tastes of ashes. I try to keep my tone steady, though my mind roils with the memory of her laugh, the shape of her mouth, the warmth we once shared. She stands before me now, changed beyond recognition, yet heartbreakingly familiar.

She smiles, a slow, predatory curl of her lips. My stomach churns at the glimpses of sharp canines. “Kaelith,” she purrs, voice resonating with that old seductive timbre. “It’s been too long.”

My claws dig into my palms. “Not long enough,” I growl.

She chuckles, sound echoing unnaturally. “I see you’re awake—and tethered to another purna, no less.” Her gaze slides to Sariah, eerie red eyes raking over her. “How easily you replace me.” Her tone is mock-hurt, layered with cold amusement.

Sariah stiffens behind me, magic coiling at her fingertips. “He doesn’t belong to you,” she snaps, anger flaring. I feel her fear trembling through the bond, but she stands her ground. My chest warms with grudging admiration.

Nerezza’s laugh hushes the air. “Little purna, you have no idea how deep my hold on him runs.” Her attention shifts back to me, voice dripping with nostalgia. “Remember what we shared, Kaelith? The nights we soared through the sky, the promises of peace. I can restore it. I can fix what was broken.”

My heart twists. She’s dangling the memory of our bond as if it still matters. “I remember how you turned that dream into a nightmare,” I snarl. “You twisted gargoyles, killed thousands.” Pain claws at my gut, memories of my kin reduced to

mindless abominations. “I sealed us away to stop you.”

She tilts her head, dark hair drifting around her shoulders like living tendrils. “Yes, you sealed me—and yourself. I’ve forgiven you for that, you know.” A hint of wry amusement flickers in her tone. “We were both misguided. But now, the seal is undone, and our time has come again.”

Sariah’s brand flares with tension, a pulse of magic that resonates in my runes. “Stay back,” I hiss over my shoulder, wanting Sariah to remain behind me. I can’t bear the thought of Nerezza’s illusions sinking their claws into her.

Nerezza’s mouth curves in a sly smile. “Oh, Kaelith. Always the protector. But you forget—I was the one who sought power to protect you. The curses that devoured your kind were accidents at first, a side effect of the raw chaos I wielded. I only wanted to preserve gargoyles, to shield them from extinction.”

She sweeps a hand, the motion trailing dark ribbons of energy that swirl around the edges of her apparition. “And I succeeded... in a fashion. Look at the brood I now command—your kin, reborn and improved. We can restore them all, if you rejoin me.”

My wings flex reflexively, an ache settling in my chest. She claims the monstrous brood is my kin, improved? A swirl of revulsion and lingering guilt tangles inside me. “You turned them into twisted shells,” I bite out. “Slaves to your chaos. That’s not salvation.”

Nerezza shrugs, eyes gleaming with unnatural light. “Semantics. They thrive, unstoppable. We can guide them, together. Let me fix that inconvenient bond you share with the little purna. Let me free you of it, so you can return to me unbound.”

A wave of cold rakes my body. My wings twitch in alarm. She’s offering to sever the

tether that Sariah and I have struggled with. A temptation. The memory of how deeply I disliked being bound to any purna resurges. But I recall the night in that cave—how fiercely I clung to Sariah, how our synergy might yet be our only hope. My eyes dart to Sariah, seeing the fear tightening her features. Nerezza's words sow doubt. Am I dooming Sariah to a fate like Nerezza's?

"You know nothing about our bond," Sariah retorts, voice trembling with anger. "We don't need your so-called help."

Nerezza's gaze drifts to her, a predatory interest lurking behind that regal façade. "Are you certain? This tether might consume you both. Perhaps you'll share Kaelith's bed for a while, but eventually, it will twist your soul, purna. You risk walking the path I once did." She smiles, chilling and knowing. "Raw power can corrupt so easily."

Sariah flinches. I feel a spike of anguish flash through the tether. Nerezza's sowing seeds of doubt. My own heart clenches. What if Sariah is truly heading down that road? Could she become the next Nyxari? The question robs me of breath.

Nerezza must sense my hesitation, because her lips curve in triumph. "Ah, you sense it too, don't you, Kaelith? The darkness in her brand, the lethal potential. She could follow my footsteps, willingly or not. But if you rejoin me, I can guide you both. I can spare her the agony of repeating my mistakes."

My mind spirals with old guilt. I failed to stop Nerezza once. Could I be failing again, letting Sariah inch toward a dark fate? No. I banish the thought, though it claws at my gut.

"Stop," I growl, voice raw. "Stop twisting the truth. You want me enslaved to your cause." I gather my courage, wings flaring. "I'll never go back to you." Despite my resolve, my chest aches with an echo of the love I once felt for the woman she used to

be.

Nerezza's expression softens fractionally, a fleeting glimpse of something almost human. "I'm not the one who sealed us, Kaelith. You did. Yet I forgave you. We can rebuild a new dawn for gargoyles, purna—any who bow to us. Or we can do it the hard way, with me crushing all opposition."

She floats closer, her apparition gliding without touching the ground, dark cloth trailing behind her. Sariah tenses, power crackling around her fingers. My runes flare in response. The tension in the clearing builds, suffocating.

"You speak of forging a new dawn," Sariah snaps. "But you cause only devastation. Drayveth's men, entire covens. You think Kaelith wants any part of that carnage?"

Nerezza's gaze flicks to Sariah, a sneer curling her lip. "The little purna presumes to know Kaelith's heart. How quaint." She laughs, a hollow, melodic sound. "He was always mine. We soared together for years, shared a bond far older than your fleeting romance."

My tail cracks against the ground. The mention of our history sends a pang through me, but I push it down. "That time is gone," I state firmly. "Whatever you once were, you're a monster now."

Her eyes flash with red fury. "A monster?" She sighs theatrically. "I gave everything to protect your race—your precious gargoyles. All I asked was your support, your faith in me. But you turned on me, sealed me away." Her glare intensifies, voice dripping with old rage. "It was you who betrayed us, Kaelith."

A fresh wave of guilt surges. She still sees me as the traitor. I grit my teeth. "I did what I had to do. You left me no choice." My voice wavers at the end, memories of that final cataclysmic battle swirling behind my eyes.

She hovers closer, ephemeral face inches from mine, and I catch the faintest scent—like burnt flowers, a twisted echo of the perfume she once wore. My gut clenches in revulsion and longing all at once. She's using illusions to unnerve me.

“Time has softened your edge, my warrior,” Nerezza murmurs, voice a seductive hush. “Look at you now, tethered to a second-rate purna, battered by battles you barely survive. Come with me, and I'll restore your full power. I'll make you unstoppable again, like the warrior I once loved.”

My runes pulse, responding to her proximity, stirring old memories. I want to recoil, but a part of me is rooted by the conflict raging in my chest. She's lying. Yet I recall the days we defied an entire continent, forging an unlikely alliance between purna and gargoyle. She was so vibrant, so passionate—until that passion curdled into something monstrous.

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Behind me, Sariah's voice quivers with protective fury. "Don't listen to her. She's playing mind games." I feel her hand brush my wing, a fleeting contact that sends a spark through the tether, reminding me of the connection we share.

I snap out of my reverie, stepping back from Nerezza's ghostly form. "Your illusions won't sway me," I declare, forcing conviction into my tone. "Go haunt someone else, or better yet, go crawl back to whatever void you crawled out of."

Nerezza's expression twists with disdain. "How you wound me, dear gargoyle." She sighs, turning her attention back to Sariah. "You cling to him like a prized trophy. Do you really think you can hold his devotion? Do you know what darkness lurks in his heart? The guilt that weighs on him for failing to save me, for failing his own kind?"

Sariah stiffens. The brand on her wrist flares, silver lines shining. "Whatever guilt he carries, it's not your business anymore." She stands firm, though I sense her trembling.

Nerezza waves a hand dismissively. "So sure, little one? He's a gargoyle bound to a purna, exactly the scenario that once drove me to madness. You think you won't share my fate? Chaos can be seductive, especially when forced to juggle lethal synergy. You're on that path already, Sariah—one slip, and you might outdo even my record."

A chill crawls down my spine. She's sowing seeds of fear. Sariah's powers are vast, I know that. I also know she dreads turning into a monster. Nerezza senses that vulnerability.

A surge of protective rage slams through me. I lunge forward, summoning a pulse of gargoyle magic. “Enough,” I roar, unleashing a kinetic blast. It ripples the air, scattering dust. If she were physically present, the force would slam her. But Nerezza’s apparition merely flickers, intangible.

She smirks at my display. “Still so hot-tempered.” She drifts back, as if bored. “Very well. Continue your charade with your new purna.” Her gaze spears me. “Remember this: when your illusions shatter, I will be waiting with open arms. One day, you’ll beg me to fix what you and your little mortal toy cannot handle.”

With that, she dissipates in a black mist, shadows unraveling into the air. The sudden vacuum of her presence leaves the clearing eerily empty. My heart pounds so hard I feel it in my skull. My wings remain half-spread, adrenaline coursing through my veins. She’s gone.

Sariah exhales, shoulders slumping. “An apparition,” she breathes. “A projection of her power. But it felt so... real.”

I nod, chest tight with roiling emotion. My mind replays her final taunt: One day, you’ll beg me to fix what you and your mortal toy cannot handle. My fists clench, claws digging into my palms. I refuse to let that prophecy come true.

Sariah steps closer, brand still glowing with residual tension. “Kaelith, are you?—”

I jerk away from her touch, tail lashing. Panic tangles with my shame. I can’t let her see the cracks Nerezza reopened. My old guilt surges, images of the woman I once loved turned monstrous. The fear that Sariah might follow that path. I must keep her at arm’s length.

“Stay back,” I order, voice sharper than intended.

Hurt flickers in her eyes. “What?”

I turn, refusing to meet her gaze. The bond thrums painfully, but I force it away. “She’s right about one thing: I failed once to stop a purna from tipping into darkness. I can’t let that happen again.” My throat constricts, each word biting. “The more you cling to me, the more we risk a repeat of Nerezza’s story.”

Sariah’s face pales. “You... you think I’d become like her?” Indignation wars with heartbreak in her tone.

I drag a clawed hand on my jaw, frustration burning in my gut. “I don’t know,” I hiss. “I can’t ignore the possibility. I sense the potential for massive power in you, Sariah. That blast you unleashed against Drayveth... it was nearly catastrophic. Now Nerezza—she sees that potential too.”

She draws a shaky breath, tears glimmering at the corners of her eyes. “You’re pushing me away because you’re afraid I’ll morph into another Nyxari?”

Guilt stabs me. Yes. And no. “I’m trying to protect you—and myself,” I snap. “She wants you as a weapon, or maybe she just wants you out of the picture. Either way, it’s safer if you stay... at a distance.” My runes flicker with agitation, the bond throbbing as if protesting this logic.

She stares at me, lips pressed in a tight line. “I thought we agreed to face this together.” Her voice trembles with hurt. “Or was that a lie?”

My chest hurts, memories of our intimate union tangling with the image of Nerezza’s sneer. “I—no. I just—” I ball my fists, searching for the right words. “We can’t be reckless. I let my guard down once, and she nearly destroyed the world. I can’t let that happen again, Sariah. I can’t watch you slip into darkness.”

The tears in her eyes threaten to fall. Her brand pulses, silver lines fracturing the gloom. “So you’d rather keep me at arm’s length, treat me like a bomb about to go off?” She gives a hollow laugh, heartbreak lacing it. “That’s not fair.”

I exhale shakily. “Fairness has nothing to do with it. Nerezza is awake. She singled you out. That alone means we must be cautious.” My voice gentles, though I keep an edge of resolution. “I won’t let her corruption claim you, or me.”

She stands rigid, tears sliding down her cheeks. “You’re letting her words poison your faith in me. She wants exactly this outcome—planting seeds of distrust. She said she could sever our bond. Are you tempted by that?”

A surge of longing. A bondless existence, no risk of repeating my mistakes. But then the memory of how Sariah’s presence saved me from turning cynical, how her synergy with me might be our only shield... Confusion churns. “I—maybe,” I whisper, honesty tasting bitter. “I’m torn.”

She flinches, blinking away tears. “So I see.” The brand’s glow subsides, leaving her face etched with sorrow. “You’d cut away what we share, just in case I become another Nerezza. That’s what you think of me, then? A ticking time bomb?”

My gut twists. I can’t bear the devastation in her eyes. “I don’t want it,” I say quietly, “but Nerezza has a way of making nightmares real.”

Silence weighs between us, thick with unsaid apologies. The tether buzzes with a current of grief and anger. Sariah tears her gaze away, hugging herself. “Fine,” she manages, voice trembling. “Keep your distance if it helps you sleep at night. But you can’t push me out completely. We’re bound—physically, magically—and I... I won’t run.”

She swallows hard, tears glittering. “She’s already stolen so much from you. Don’t let

her steal this too.”

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Her words cut deep, lodging in the hollow of my chest. She's right. Nerezza is playing mind games, using my guilt as a weapon. Yet I feel cornered, as though every path leads to heartbreak. But Sariah deserves better than my cold rejection. I close my eyes, struggling to breathe.

"Sariah," I begin, voice fractured, "I'm sorry." The tether shivers, reflecting the sincerity of that apology. "Nerezza's reappearance... it shook me more than I expected. Old wounds reopened."

She says nothing, but her posture loosens a fraction, arms slipping from around her waist. Her tears still cling to her lashes, but she's listening. At least she isn't storming off.

I draw a ragged breath, forcing my wings to relax. "I... I won't sever the bond. Not now. Not if it means letting her manipulate me again." My throat aches. "But I need time. I need to be sure we aren't hurtling toward the same tragedy."

Sariah nods, jaw tight. "Then let's find a way to prove it. Together." Her voice is laced with quiet determination. "Nerezza wants us to crumble under fear. We can't give her that victory."

A flicker of admiration stirs in me. She's so damn steadfast, even when I lash out. I exhale, searching her gaze. "All right. We keep going. We keep each other safe."

Sariah swallows, lifting her chin with a trembling nod. Her eyes brim with a swirl of emotion: heartbreak, hope, and a fierce vow. "Yes."

Our silent accord stands as we gather ourselves. My tail flicks across the ground, stirring a small cloud of dust that glitters in the waning sunlight. The rocky clearing remains empty, no sign of Nerezza's apparition. But her presence lingers, a ghostly tension that won't dissipate so easily. She's tested our resolve, and we teeter precariously between old ghosts and new loyalties.

"Let's leave this place," I say, voice still tight. "I sense no reason to remain."

Sariah nods, wiping her cheeks with a trembling hand. We set off, forging a path toward the narrower exit. My mind whirls, half-locked on the memory of Nerezza's face, half-consuming itself with worry for Sariah. The tether pulses with our combined distress, but also with a quiet thread of solidarity. We're shaken, but not broken.

We pass through the ravine's corridor in tense silence. The sky overhead bleeds into dusk, painting the horizon with muted pink and violet. I keep scanning for any sign of twisted gargoyles or Drayveth's rogues, but none appear. My runes flicker, still unsettled from the confrontation. Her face was heartbreakingly familiar—like a half-remembered dream turned nightmare.

Eventually, the canyon walls recede into a rolling stretch of rocky terrain. We halt near a large boulder that partially shields us from the sharp wind. Sariah runs a shaking hand through her hair. She looks drained, brand faded to a dull silver. The swirl of pink across the sky casts gentle shadows on her face, accentuating the weariness in her eyes.

I bite back a wave of regret for my harsh words. "We'll rest here," I say quietly. "Nightfall approaches. No sense wandering blindly." My voice is calmer now, though the tension still vibrates in my chest.

Sariah swallows, wiping at her cheeks again. She nods, kneeling to check her pack

for any leftover rations. “I’ll see if we can start a small fire,” she murmurs, voice subdued.

I watch her rummage, a pang in my chest. She’s trying to hold it together, but Nerezza’s threats rattled her deeply. And I contributed to her pain by letting my fear overshadow my trust. I’m a fool.

The wind howls softly around us, tugging at my hair. I tear my gaze from Sariah, scanning the empty horizon. Nerezza could show up anywhere, at any time. She’s proven she can project illusions—or maybe it was some twisted astral form. Regardless, we’re not safe. We must keep pressing onward.

But for tonight, we huddle against this boulder. Sariah manages to coax a weak flame from a few scraps of kindling we salvaged. I stand guard, arms crossed, wings folded tight. The tether thrums with unspoken tension. In the flicker of firelight, I glimpse Sariah’s pained expression each time she catches me looking. My heart twists. She sees me second-guessing everything.

Eventually, she sits down, exhaustion folding her posture. I settle beside her, though I leave a few inches between us. My mind replays Nerezza’s words: She can fix your bond. She can spare Sariah from repeating my fate. A kernel of doubt nags at me—am I being selfish, chaining Sariah to me despite the risk? But I can’t forget how fervently Sariah declared her choice to stay.

Minutes stretch. The night sky glitters with distant stars, oblivious to our turmoil. Sariah clears her throat softly. “Kaelith,” she murmurs, “we’ll face her together, won’t we?” A tremor underlines her question.

I meet her gaze, breath catching. She’s so vulnerable now, but still unwavering. My voice emerges low. “Yes. I swear it.” The tether pulses, reaffirming the vow. “But... I won’t let her poison your mind. If I sense you slipping into darkness?—”

She tenses, tears threatening. “You’ll do what, exactly?” Her tone is guarded.

I grimace. “I... I don’t know.” The admission pains me. “I can’t lose you the way I lost her. I’d sooner carve out my own heart.”

Her expression softens, though tears shimmer. “Then stop pushing me away because of your fear.”

I swallow, reaching for her hand. When she doesn’t pull back, I gently clasp her fingers. Our eyes lock in the flickering firelight. “I’m sorry,” I manage, voice hoarse. “I let her words—my guilt—cloud my trust in you.” My chest feels tight, old wounds bleeding anew. “I see so much of her in you, but you’re not the same. I need to remember that.”

She exhales shakily, offering a small, trembling smile. “Thank you. I’m... not sure who I am these days, but I’m not her. I promise.”

A quiet hush falls, the tension between us easing by a fraction. We remain close to the fire, letting the warmth chase away some of the night’s chill. The star-strewn sky stretches overhead like an indifferent witness to our confessions. We’re battered, but not broken.

I watch Sariah’s face, illuminated in the soft glow. Traces of tears cling to her lashes, bruises smudge her cheeks, but she’s still so achingly strong. In the hush, I realize how deeply I care for her—this mortal who stumbled into my prison and freed me, who shares a tether that both saves and dooms us. Romance in the midst of a rising cataclysm. It defies logic, but it’s real.

When I gently squeeze her hand, the tether pulses with a reassuring warmth. She leans her head against my shoulder, sighing softly. My wings unfold to wrap around us both, forming a protective arc. I bury my face in the scent of her hair, ignoring the

swirl of shame that lingers from my earlier outburst. Nerezza's illusions can't strip this from me.

We sit like that, listening to the wind, letting the crackle of flames fill the silence. At length, Sariah dozes off, exhaustion claiming her. I stay awake, guarding her rest. My mind churns with images of Nerezza's translucent form, that sneer, her whispered promises. The question of whether I might have given in if I'd been more alone gnaws at me. No, I tell myself, that life is over.

Yet the bond's presence in my chest reminds me how precarious everything is. Nerezza's shadow looms, and she knows how to manipulate me. She called to me, reminding me of what we shared, the seductive dream of unstoppable power. I must remain vigilant.

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Glancing down at Sariah's sleeping face, I vow I'll protect her from that corruption. From Nerezza's manipulations—and from my own misguided fears. Sariah is not Nerezza. Repeating that truth in my head, I stroke a clawed finger across her hair, ignoring the pang of guilt for having doubted her. She needs me steady, not riddled with self-loathing.

A new wave of determination surges in my chest. We have to reach Snowfall Glen. We have to rally what forces we can, warn them, find a real solution. If Nerezza roams Protheka, slaughtering or enslaving any who stand against her, we can't confront her alone. Not yet. We must gather allies. Strengthen our synergy. Only then can we stand a chance.

My gaze lifts to the stars, their pale glow reminding me of the nights centuries ago when I soared with Nerezza under a different sky, believing we'd found a way to save gargoyles. We were so young, so blind. My jaw tightens. Never again.

Gradually, the night deepens, the fire dying to embers. I maintain my watch, ignoring the ache in my ribs. The tether throbs softly with Sariah's rhythmic breathing, a comforting pulse that anchors me in the present. Nerezza can taunt me all she wants. I won't falter. The memory of that fleeting moment we shared in the cave—the raw intimacy, the collision of hearts—reminds me I have more to fight for now than just revenge. I have Sariah's future in my hands as well.

Morning will come, and with it, another day of perilous travel. Nerezza's brood might hunt us from the skies, Drayveth's rogues might ambush us from the ground, and our own fears might tear us apart from within. But for tonight, Sariah rests in my arms, alive, defiant, refusing to let me face my past alone.

I curl my tail around her ankles protectively, wings forming a shelter from the biting wind. As my eyes skim her sleeping face, a fierce tenderness floods my chest. I won't let Nerezza's manipulations destroy this bond. She might have threatened me with old guilt, might have tried to paint Sariah as the next monster—but I won't succumb to that twisted narrative.

When Sariah stirs in her sleep, I murmur a low reassurance, feeling the tether soothe her nightmares. The storms of my mind calm, replaced by a quiet vow that resonates in every breath:

We will face Nerezza.

We will survive her illusions and her manipulations.

And if she dares to strike at what we share, she'll learn the gargoyle she once twisted beyond recognition has grown wise enough—and strong enough—to stand against her darkness.

I hold Sariah tighter, letting the faint dawn's glimmer on the horizon signal the end of this tumultuous night. The first appearance of Nerezza has shaken us to the core, yet I feel a renewed fire burning in my soul. My guilt no longer shackles me completely; my determination to protect Sariah—and to keep her from turning into the monster Nerezza claims she could be—fuels my every breath.

Tomorrow, we move closer to Snowfall Glen, closer to answers. But for now, in the last hours of night, I guard the woman who awakened me. Despite the turmoil swirling around us, a fragile hope sparks in my chest. Nerezza won't break us.

As the sky grays with approaching dawn, I kiss Sariah's temple, a silent promise that I'll stand by her side, no matter what horrors the day brings.

SARIAH

I struggle to keep my balance as the wind whips past, sending loose gravel skittering across the rocky ledge. Kaelith and I have been traveling nonstop since that harrowing encounter with Nerezza's apparition, searching for a path through these twisting mountains that might lead us to Snowfall Glen. Our nerves are frayed. Every distant echo in the ravines sets our hearts pounding, and every shadow overhead rouses fear that Nerezza's warped gargoyles have found us.

The days blur: hunger gnaws, the chill stings, and the tension between Kaelith and me sometimes flares. We skirt each other in awkward silence at times, weighed down by the memory of Nerezza's taunts. Yet we share fleeting moments of closeness when the fear overwhelms us—our tether humming with a quiet comfort that reminds me we're in this fight together.

Now, as afternoon light slants across the jagged slopes, we pause near a narrow trail twisting upward between two sheer cliffs. Scraggly pines cling to the rocky ground, their roots twisted around boulders in a desperate attempt to survive. Kaelith crouches beside me, scanning the path with cautious eyes. His wings remain folded tight, a sign of how tense he feels. My brand itches beneath my glove, that constant dull ache telling me trouble lies close at hand.

"Do you sense anything?" I ask softly, trying not to disturb the hush. My voice comes out rough, laced with fatigue.

Kaelith exhales, the faintest trace of vapor drifting in the cool air. "No illusions—yet," he murmurs. "But something's off. The wind is carrying strange echoes." He tilts his head, listening. A pulse of protective anger flickers through our tether, hinting at how ready he is for a fight. "We should move carefully."

I nod, standing. My entire body aches: bruises, half-healed cuts, and the constant anxiety eating at me. But we can't stop. Snowfall Glen, if we're even on the right path, offers our only hope of finding allies to stand against Nerezza—and maybe gleaning how to break or manage this bond in a way that won't destroy us.

We climb the twisting path, boots scraping on loose stone. The sunlight overhead feels weak, as though the day itself has grown exhausted. Kaelith paces just ahead, watchful, while I remain a step behind, scanning the cliffs overhead for ambush. Each step takes concentration, the grade steep enough to threaten a tumble if I'm careless. I catch glimpses of Kaelith's runes glowing faintly whenever his muscles flex. That subtle glow is strangely reassuring—like a beacon in hostile terrain.

We round a jagged bend in the trail, and my breath freezes in my throat. Standing across the path, partially silhouetted by the angled sun, is a figure I've dreaded encountering again: Drayveth. He blocks our way with calm arrogance, staff in hand. My heart slams hard against my ribs. He's here. Again. And this time, he isn't alone.

Flanking him are at least six other purna, all bearing the same brand on their wrists I once shared with pride. My old coven insignia, twisted by Drayveth's authority. They're armed: some hold staves pulsing with low-level necromantic energy, others clutch daggers that flicker with pale greenish runes. My palm goes sweaty around my own staff, which I've kept strapped to my back. Kaelith halts, wings bristling. A silent wave of tension runs through our tether, locking us both in high alert.

Drayveth inclines his head in greeting, a mockery of courtesy. He's tall, robed in black embroidered with silver threads. His once-kind face is now a mask of cold resolve and bitterness. "Sariah," he says, voice carrying easily through the thin mountain air. "You've caused me quite a bit of trouble."

I can't help but bristle. The man who raised me from a novice to an adept, now looking at me like I'm an enemy. "Drayveth," I respond, forcing my voice not to

tremble. “You won’t turn me in to Nerezza, I hope?” The quip rings hollow, but I cling to bravado.

He snorts, ignoring my jab. “You keep running, Sariah. You left our coven behind for...this.” His gaze slices toward Kaelith, lips twisting in disgust. “A gargoyle, of all creatures? Have you truly sunk so low?”

Kaelith growls softly, tail scraping the rock in warning. I sense the violent urge in him, to lash out and end this confrontation before Drayveth can spew more venom. But Drayveth’s allies stand poised. If we fight now, we might be overrun. And I refuse to see more bloodshed if it can be avoided. My battered limbs twitch with dread. We’re outnumbered.

“What do you want?” I demand, trying to keep my voice steady. My pulse hammers. Drayveth and I share too much history—he was once my mentor, a figure I trusted. Now he hunts me like a rabid hound.

He lifts his chin. “I want you to do your duty. Return to the coven. Renounce this gargoyle. Kill him, if you must. You know what rumors swirl, Sariah—that you’re dabbling in forbidden magic, doomed to become another Nyxari. That brand on your wrist is already tarnished.” His eyes gleam with a sharp, dangerous light. “If you come back to us, sever this bond, you might salvage your place among the purna. But if you persist... we’ll be forced to treat you as an abomination.”

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My stomach clenches painfully. He's giving me an ultimatum. Return and kill Kaelith, or face condemnation as a Nyxari. The brand pulses in protest, as though the very notion of turning on Kaelith repels me. "I can't—" My voice cracks. "You can't expect me to murder him because you've decided he's unfit for me."

A sneer curls Drayveth's mouth. "He's a gargoyle. A monstrous relic that once warred with our kind. Don't be naive, Sariah. This alliance you've forged? It's unnatural. Proof enough you're walking a dangerous path."

From the corner of my eye, I see Kaelith's claws tighten, runes glowing more fiercely. Anger flares through our tether. He's insulted, furious. We both are. "My path is my own," I snap. "I left your coven because you tried to control me. Now you want me to kill someone who's fought at my side, saved my life? No. I won't."

Drayveth exhales, as if dealing with a stubborn child. "You foolish girl. Do you realize how precarious our situation is? Nerezza is rising. The world stands on the brink, and you're aligning with an ancient threat from the gargoyle tribes? You might as well sign a pact with chaos itself." His staff crackles with a swirl of necromantic energy, a demonstration of power that sends goosebumps skittering down my arms. "We're here to ensure you don't become the next abomination that devours Protheka."

I want to protest that Kaelith is not an ancient threat, but my voice fails me for a moment. Fear squeezes my lungs. Drayveth's purna allies shift, forming a loose semicircle around us. We're pinned: the rocky slope behind us, Drayveth's band in front. My mind races: Can we slip free? If we fight, can we survive?

Kaelith inches closer to me, wings flaring just enough to show he'll fight if forced. "She's not the next Nyxari," he growls. "Nerezza is out there, Drayveth—that's your threat. Not Sariah." The rumble in his chest resonates, making the air vibrate. "Focus your efforts on the real enemy, or you'll doom yourselves."

Drayveth's eyes glint with dark amusement. "Ah, yes. Nerezza. We know she's awakened, the seal undone. One monstrosity unbound leads to another, it seems." He gestures dismissively. "But for all we know, you're in league with her. After all, you were once allied to a powerful purna who sought to reshape gargoyles. History might be repeating. Perhaps Sariah is your new puppet, or you're her puppet—does it matter? In either case, you threaten the stability we fight to preserve."

Fury sears my chest. "That's a lie!" I protest, voice echoing. "We want to stop Nerezza, not join her. She nearly destroyed Kaelith's people. She's already slaughtering innocent covens. How can you stand here accusing us of being the threat?"

Drayveth's expression hardens. "In times of crisis, those who break from the covenant must be dealt with. You refused to submit, Sariah. Your chaotic power is unregulated, your brand tarnished. The covenant demands your loyalty—or your end. There's no middle path." His staff glows brighter, and I hear a low chant ripple among his allies. They're preparing to cast something. My heart leaps in my throat.

Kaelith shifts his stance, wings flaring in response. "Don't," he warns, voice a deep rumble that sets my heart pounding. "We don't want this fight—but we won't surrender to you."

One of Drayveth's subordinates, a tall woman with a shaved head, snarls. "Sariah, you know what you risk by refusing. If you won't kill the gargoyle, at least bind him. Bring him back in chains. The covenant can decide his fate. Then maybe we can spare you from condemnation."

The old pang of belonging tugs at me—my memories of training sessions, shared meals, late-night study with these same purna. Once, they were my family. Now they talk of chaining Kaelith like a beast. I glance at him, the tension etched on his face. He meets my eyes, wordless. The tether throbs with our shared anguish. They see him as a monster. But I've grown to see him as...I swallow. As something so much more than a reluctant partner. As someone I trust, someone who, in the darkest moments, gave me reason to hope.

"I can't," I whisper, voice cracking. "I'm not delivering him to you like a sacrifice."

Drayveth's shoulders slump, a flicker of true sadness crossing his features—for an instant, I almost believe he regrets this confrontation. But then his expression steels. "Very well. The coven has issued its mandate. If you won't obey, if you won't renounce this gargoyle, then you leave us no choice." He lifts his staff, and the necromantic aura crackles around him, swirling greenish-black tendrils into the air. "By the authority granted to me, I label you a traitor—and a potential Nyxari."

I tremble, tears burning. A potential Nyxari. The brand on my wrist aches as though mocking me. My old nightmares swirl: that I'd somehow walk the same path as Nerezza, that my power would lead me to destruction. Drayveth is threatening to make that prophecy real in the eyes of the coven. "You can't do this," I plead. "I'm not the enemy. Don't force me to?—"

He cuts me off, thrusting his staff forward. The energy crackles. "Your actions have chosen your path, Sariah." He glances at Kaelith with disdain. "If you defend that beast, you side with darkness."

Kaelith snarls, and I place a hand on his arm, trying to keep him from launching into an unwinnable fight. We're outnumbered, battered, still reeling from Nerezza's reappearance. We have to be smart. My mind scrambles for a solution. Can we talk them down?

But Drayveth's subordinates step into an attack formation, chanting half-remembered incantations that make my skin crawl. I sense necromantic threads weaving around them, building toward a deadly strike. They're done talking. My pulse thunders.

I grip Kaelith's forearm, speaking in a low, urgent tone. "We have to run. We can't fight them head-on."

His runes blaze with anger. "They'll chase us," he growls, though I feel him shift slightly. He's not suicidal; he knows the odds.

A bolt of necromantic energy arcs from one purna's staff, sizzling through the air. Kaelith lurches sideways, pulling me with him, and the bolt slams into a nearby boulder, shattering rock and sending shards flying. The explosive impact shakes the ground. Terror grips my chest. They mean to kill us if I don't comply.

"Sariah, kill him," Drayveth roars over the din. "Or we kill you both."

"No!" The scream tears from my throat, raw with despair. Painful memories flood me: my earliest lessons under Drayveth, how he once shielded me from harsh coven discipline, how I thought he cared. Now, he's become a vessel of cruelty. Or maybe he was always this ruthless.

Another purna unleashes a swirl of green flames. Kaelith counters with a pulse of kinetic force, wings flaring. The collision throws up a shower of sparks, rattling my teeth. He moves with fluid power, but we're pinned on a narrow ledge with no easy escape. My brand sears under the tension, as if urging me to do something drastic. But what? Submit? Betray Kaelith? The idea nauseates me. Never.

Adrenaline surges. My staff hums with latent energy. "Stop!" I shout again, though my voice cracks in the chaos. I fling a small shield spell, intercepting a dagger of green flame headed for Kaelith's chest. The collision blinds me momentarily, arcs of

white-hot magic dancing at the edge of my vision.

When I blink away the spots, Drayveth stands only a few paces away, staff raised. “You once called me Mentor,” he spits, voice resonating with betrayal. “How far you’ve fallen.”

Tears burn my eyes. “No, you’re the one who turned on me. You condemned me the moment I questioned you.”

His expression is grim, not even a flicker of remorse. “You brought this on yourself, Sariah. Embrace the coven’s will. Prove your loyalty by destroying that gargoyle. If you do, I’ll vouch for you. If not...” He waves a hand, the circle of purna tightening, ready to strike. “We brand you Nyxari. No one will protect you. The entire coven will hunt you down.”

The words land like daggers in my heart. They’ll label me a monster, the same way they labeled Nerezza. My gaze darts to Kaelith. His eyes lock on mine, molten gold flickering with steady resolve. The tether thrums with an undercurrent of sympathy, anger, and unwavering support. He knows I’m torn.

My old life, or the gargoyle who’s become more than a partner, more even than a friend. The man I... a swirl of complicated emotion blinds me. I can’t kill him. I won’t. Something inside me hardens. I raise my staff, brand flaring. My voice shakes with raw heartbreak, but I speak each syllable clearly: “I refuse. He’s under my protection. If you label me as a Nyxari, so be it.”

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Drayveth's lips press tight, sorrow flickering momentarily. "Then you choose death," he says softly. "I tried to give you one last chance."

His subordinates unleash a coordinated barrage of necromantic bolts, swirling green flames, and crackling illusions that distort the air. My pulse spikes. Kaelith roars, wings sweeping out to shield me from the brunt of the assault. Stone shards explode around us, rattling my bones. A chunk of rock nearly clips my shoulder.

I channel the synergy we practiced—both our magics weaving. The tether flares, letting me sense Kaelith's raw earth-and-stone energy. With a trembling chant, I draw on his strength, forging an arcane shield that envelops us. Vicious necromantic tendrils slither across the translucent barrier, spitting sparks where they clash with my purna wards. My brand sears like a brand fresh from the forge. This is pushing me dangerously close to the meltdown that nearly happened last time.

Drayveth's eyes widen at our combined magic, his staff blazing with dark power in response. "Fools," he snarls, pumping more energy into the next assault. "You think that synergy can save you? You'll only accelerate your corruption."

Kaelith snarls back, sweat beading on his brow. "She's not the one slaughtering innocents on a whim." He braces a clawed hand against my back, lending me stability as I maintain the shield. We can't keep it up for long.

Lightning arcs from two purna staves, fusing into one crackling spear that slams my shield with deafening force. My barrier wavers, hairline fractures rippling across the surface. My breath hitches. It's too strong. The synergy is powerful, but we're exhausted and outnumbered.

“We need to break free!” Kaelith yells over the roar of clashing magic.

I nod, sweat burning my eyes. “On my signal.”

He shifts, runes blazing, preparing a kinetic wave. My entire body thrums with tension, the tether humming at a near-painful pitch. Drayveth’s allies chant in a furious crescendo, swirling illusions conjuring phantasmal shapes that claw at our shield. My brand pulses, heartbeat stuttering. I won’t be labeled Nyxari. I won’t let them kill him.

“Now!” I scream, unleashing the shield’s energy outward in a sudden burst. Kaelith simultaneously channels a kinetic blast, the combined forces slamming into our attackers. There’s a thunderous crash. Several purna are knocked sprawling, spells fizzling mid-air. Drayveth himself staggers, staff scraping over the rocky ground.

An opening. Kaelith grasps my uninjured arm, pulling me with him. We dash sideways, diving between two purna who are still reeling from the shock. One flails at me with a dagger—my staff parries on instinct, and I grunt, twisting away. My brand twinges with each motion, but adrenaline propels me forward. Kaelith bashes another purna aside, wings flaring as we sprint for the narrow pass behind them.

“Stop them!” Drayveth roars, regaining his balance, staff sparking ominously. But we’re already past the ring of purna, pounding up the slope. Rocks scatter beneath our feet. My lungs burn.

A necromantic bolt flies past my head, scorching the cliff face. I flinch, nearly stumbling. Kaelith tightens his grip, practically dragging me along. My heart slams wildly, tears blurring my vision. I fought my own family. He’s right—I’m a traitor. But they threatened to kill Kaelith. How can they expect me to betray him? Guilt and heartbreak twist like knives in my chest.

We scramble higher, forging a desperate path along the cliff's edge. Behind us, I hear the purna regrouping, shouts echoing. "After them!" Drayveth's voice reverberates, carrying that old commanding authority I once revered. Each word feels like a lash against my soul. I used to love him, respect him, see him as a father figure. Now he hunts me with lethal intent.

A biting wind tears across the ridge, nearly throwing me off balance. Kaelith's wings snap open, catching the gust. For an instant, I think he might try to fly us out of here, but the terrain is too narrow, the updraft unpredictable. He's still wounded, and I recall how precarious gargoyle flight can be when not at full strength. Too risky.

Instead, we press on, stumbling around a jagged boulder. The path narrows to a thin ledge overlooking a dizzying drop. My heart plummets at the sight of the yawning chasm below. One misstep, and we're done. Kaelith halts, cursing under his breath. Dead end. The ledge ends abruptly, the cliff curving away in a sheer fall.

Footsteps ring out behind us. Drayveth and his purna appear, fanning across the path. Trapped. My stomach knots, brand throbbing. Nowhere left to run. Kaelith's tail lashes, runes flaring with grim resolve. We might have to fight to the death.

Drayveth points his staff at me, voice like ice. "This is your last chance, Sariah. Separate from the gargoyle—kill him if necessary. Prove your loyalty."

I meet his gaze, tears welling anew, voice cracking. "You're asking me to murder the only ally who's ever believed in me without trying to control me. The one who's fought for me against Nerezza's nightmares. I can't... I can't do that."

His eyes harden. "Then you are truly lost. The coven cannot abide a rogue purna with your potential. By the authority of the High Circle, I name you Nyxari. Your life is forfeit."

A sob shudders from my chest. He raises his staff, energy coalescing into a lethal swirl. The purna beside him follow suit, forming a volley of crackling spells ready to reduce Kaelith and me to ash. My grip on my staff trembles. I can't hold off so many. Even with Kaelith's synergy, we're battered, exhausted, pinned on a ledge with nowhere else to go.

I glance at Kaelith, tears streaming down my face. He meets my gaze, claws flexing, jaw set with unwavering determination. "I won't let them harm you," he growls, low enough only I hear. The tether resonates with a fierce protectiveness that breaks my heart. We're in this together, to the bitter end.

Drayveth's expression is blank, as though he's steeled himself for an unpleasant duty. "May the Source show you mercy, child," he intones, staff rising. His allies do the same, spells glimmering with finality.

My mind spins. Is there no other way? If I hurl an explosive wave, I might bring the cliff down on us all. The brand burns like fire, begging for release. If I tap that power fully... I might kill them or kill us all... or become the monster they claim I am.

The tension builds, a heartbeat away from carnage. Then, from somewhere above, a thunderous roar echoes—no, not thunder. A new presence. Everyone jerks their heads upward, including Drayveth. My pulse flutters, confusion mingling with dread. The sky overhead darkens. A massive shape swoops into view, wings outstretched, fanning dust and gravel across the ledge. A gargoyle. But... twisted? Nerezza's brood?

Panicked shouts fill the air as the newcomers dive, unleashing arcs of greenish-black fire upon Drayveth's formation. Screams erupt. My brand pulses, alarm spiking. Kaelith curses, yanking me back against the cliff as shards of rock and magical flame rain down. Drayveth's purna scatter, their assault on us forgotten in the face of this new threat.

One of the twisted gargoyles—skin a mottled gray with black veining—snarls, claws raking at the nearest purna. The poor soul tries to raise a shield but is slammed aside. More monstrous shapes swirl overhead, at least three or four, each one enormous and menacing, eyes glowing a sickly yellow. My chest constricts. Nerezza's brood has found us.

“This is bad,” Kaelith mutters, scanning the chaos. Drayveth's contingent fights back, hurling necromantic blasts that scorch the stone. But the twisted gargoyles are relentless, diving in to rend flesh. Their screeches reverberate, sending a chill down my spine.

In that instant, the ultimatum Drayveth gave me dissolves into utter anarchy. We're all pinned on a precarious ledge with monstrous gargoyles overhead. Rocks crumble under the onslaught, dust choking the air. Drayveth tries to rally his purna, shouting commands, staff blazing as he flings lethal bursts of greenish flame at one of the brood. But the creature shrugs it off with terrifying ease, screeching in defiance.

Kaelith tugs my arm. “We have to get off this ledge,” he hisses. “They'll bring it down.” Already, cracks run through the cliff face, pebbles tumbling into the abyss below.

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I hesitate, scanning for Drayveth. He's pinned behind a boulder, two of his allies covering him while the brood circles for another pass. Part of me hates him for what he's done, but another part still clings to the memory of the mentor who once protected me. My heart twists. I can't leave him to die like this.

Kaelith sees my turmoil. "He tried to kill you," he says, voice taut. "Do you really want to risk your life for him?"

Tears line my eyes, but I set my jaw. "He's still... my family, in a twisted way. I can't just watch him get torn apart." Guilt wracks me. Is this foolish compassion, or the last shred of humanity?

The ledge shudders again as one of the twisted gargoyles lands with a thunderous impact, blocking the path we came from. Its sinewy wings fold, claws skittering on rock. It roars, drooling black saliva. My stomach lurches. This is no normal gargoyle.

"All right," Kaelith grinds out, "but we do this fast. If Drayveth tries to kill us again, I won't hold back."

I nod, heart pounding. Together, we lunge forward, weaving between the scattered purna. One tries to strike Kaelith with a reflexive spell, but I deflect it, shouting, "We're helping you!" The purna gapes at me, confused, but doesn't attack again.

We reach Drayveth, who crouches behind a boulder, face streaked with dust and raw fear. He looks up, expression slack with shock to seemerushing to him. "Sariah?" he gasps, eyes flicking to Kaelith. "Why would you?—"

A screech overhead interrupts. One of the brood dives, claws extended. Kaelith roars, meeting the attack with an upward slash of kinetic energy, sending the beast spiraling off course. I seize Drayveth's arm, helping him to his feet. "We need to get off this ledge. Now."

He's trembling, staff shaking in his grip. "You... you're not killing me?" His voice cracks.

I glare at him. "You might be a bastard, but I'm not a murderer." Even as I say it, part of me rages at how close he came to slaughtering Kaelith. But the ledge quakes under another blow, dust swirling in my throat. No time for righteous fury.

One of Drayveth's subordinates is pinned by a twisted gargoyle, shrieking as the beast's claws dig into flesh. Before I can react, Drayveth hurls a necromantic blast that tears the creature away, freeing the pinned purna. "Fall back!" Drayveth orders, voice scraping with panic. "We can't hold them on this terrain."

Shouts ring out, confusion mounting. Some purna attempt to retreat, but the brood overhead cuts off the escape. Another chunk of the ledge crumbles, falling into the chasm. Pebbles bounce around my boots. My brand pulses with alarm.

Kaelith hisses, wings partially extending as he surveys the sky. "We might have to fight our way through them. Or risk the cliff's other side. I see a narrow path that might lead down."

I follow his gaze, spotting a precarious route snaking along the cliff face. One misstep and we'd plummet. But staying here means certain doom. "Let's do it," I say, swallowing my terror. My voice shakes but I push forward. "Drayveth, come with us if you want to live."

He hesitates, still reeling from the fact I'm offering him any aid at all. But another

gargoyle swoops in, forcing the purna to scatter. Drayveth clenches his jaw. “Fine,” he spits. “We regroup on stable ground.”

Chaos reigns as we dash across the trembling ledge. Kaelith stays close, deflecting stray attacks from the brood with pulses of his stone-laced magic. Drayveth does the same on the other side, staff blazing. I’m caught in the middle, flinging a ward or two to keep necromantic flames from crossing. The other purna scramble behind us. I can’t even see how many remain alive. Screams echo, overshadowed by the brood’s shrieks. My heart feels like it might burst.

We reach the narrow path Kaelith spotted. It clings to the cliff face in a hairpin turn. Without hesitation, Kaelith steps onto it, his wings pressed tight to navigate the cramped space. I follow, gulping at the sheer drop below. Drayveth and two of his subordinates come after us. Another purna lags behind, pinned by debris. She screams for help, but we can’t turn back. It kills me to ignore her cry, but the brood descends again, ripping the ledge apart. We have no choice. Tears burn my eyes.

The path slopes downward, each step precarious. Drayveth’s allies cling to the rock, panting. A savage wind tears at us, kicked up by the gargoyles’ wings overhead. Dust and small stones rain down. My brand throbs, every nerve fraying. We’re alive—for now. But the price is horrifying.

At last, after a tense scramble, we descend to a marginally wider plateau. The brood above is busy ripping apart the ledge, turning its wrath on whatever remains of Drayveth’s forces. Screams echo, then fade. My stomach twists. We’re cornered still, but the twisted gargoyles might not see us hidden by the cliff overhang. Our group huddles, gasping for air.

Kaelith sets me down gently (I hadn’t even realized he was half-supporting me). My shoulder throbs, bruises sting, everything spins. Drayveth collapses to his knees, staff clattering. The two purna with him are wide-eyed, trembling. Silence wraps around

us, broken by the distant roars above.

For a long moment, nobody speaks. Then Drayveth lifts his head, eyes pinned on me. Fury and confusion swirl there. “Why?” he croaks. “Why help me after I... after I demanded you kill your gargoyle?”

My voice trembles. “Because no matter what you did, I can’t stand by and watch you get torn apart by Nerezza’s brood. We have bigger foes to worry about.”

He exhales a shaky breath. “You remain naive as ever, Sariah.” But there’s a quiver in his voice that suggests relief. “They truly are her spawn,” he mutters, shuddering. “I’ve never seen such monstrous gargoyles.”

Kaelith rumbles softly. “She corrupted many. Now they serve her without question. You’d do well to realize we aren’t your true enemy.”

One of Drayveth’s subordinates glares at Kaelith. “But... you’re—” She falters, glancing at the wreckage above. “Gods, I don’t know. Maybe we all die anyway.” She buries her face in her hands.

I clench my fists. “We need to get out of these mountains. Or at least find cover from the brood. Snowfall Glen is our aim. They might stand a chance. But if you still want to kill Kaelith, we’ll just part ways here.” My voice wobbles, but I force conviction. I can’t go back to the coven. That door is slammed shut. They labeled me Nyxari.

Drayveth drags himself upright, leaning heavily on his staff. His face is a mask of turmoil. “You truly believe these purnas will help us?” he asks, surprising me with his uncertainty.

I shrug, tears burning the corners of my eyes. “Better than wandering aimlessly until Nerezza or her brood picks us off. They might not be allied with our coven, but they

despise monstrous threats that devour entire enclaves.” I stare him down. “Come with us or don’t. But I’m not betraying Kaelith for you.”

His jaw works as if he wants to protest. The woman behind him shifts uneasily. Then Drayveth bows his head, voice hollow. “Perhaps we have no choice. The coven wants your blood, yes, but right now, half our forces are scattered or dead. That brood caught us off guard.” He meets my gaze, shame flickering. “I can’t even muster the energy to condemn you further. We barely escaped.”

A swirl of conflicting relief and heartbreak courses through me. My mentor, broken and uncertain. I whisper, “Then you’ll let us be?”

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He rubs a trembling hand across his face, lines of exhaustion etched in. “Temporarily,” he says, bitterness lacing his tone. “Until we see what the purnas propose, or if we can regroup with the coven. If you truly mean to face Nerezza, maybe we can arrange a truce. Or maybe the coven kills us all anyway.” His mouth twists. “I see no easy path.”

Kaelith’s wings shift, a sign of uneasy acceptance. “We can share the trail for now,” he says, voice still thick with distrust. “But if you threaten Sariah again, I’ll end you.” The promise rumbles in his throat like distant thunder.

Drayveth nods stiffly. “If I wanted her dead at all costs, I’d have let the brood tear you both apart. I...” He trails off, a flash of raw emotion passing over his face. For an instant, he looks like the mentor I once knew, the man who guided my initial steps in magic. Then the moment is gone, replaced by a grim warrior who’s lost too many allies.

I exhale, tears slipping down my cheeks. My brand aches, but for the first time, the pain feels overshadowed by the grief of my sundered ties. He was my family, but that’s shattered beyond repair. “All right,” I manage. “We find a safe route down the mountain. Then figure out the next step.”

Drayveth glances at the battered purna flanking him, who nod uncertainly. The woman with a shaved scalp is bruised, blood staining her sleeve, but she scowls. “I still don’t trust the gargoyle,” she mutters.

Kaelith snorts, tail flicking in irritation. I grab his arm in silent request for calm. We’re all battered. No need to escalate.

Together, we limp away from the crumbling ledge, forging a path deeper into the rocky gullies below. Our progress is slow, every step echoing with tension. The sun slips lower, painting the sky in muted oranges and pinks. Shadows lengthen, but we press on until we find a sheltered nook among the boulders where we can at least rest and nurse our wounds.

Silence reigns, broken only by ragged breaths. A hush of shared exhaustion. Kaelith helps me settle against a slope of rock, while Drayveth's subordinates huddle at the opposite end, glaring warily at Kaelith. Drayveth stands a short distance away, staff propped at his side, face lost in thought. Once upon a time, he'd kneel by my side, check my injuries, talk me through the fear. Now, the gulf between us is immeasurable.

Darkness creeps across the mountain, and we light a small fire with the scraps we carried. Kaelith's wings cast looming shadows on the rock walls, the flicker of flames dancing over his obsidian skin and runes. Drayveth watches him with a haunted look, as if seeing a ghost. He probably still thinks gargoyles are savage. But we just saved each other's lives.

Eventually, Drayveth approaches me, face drawn. I tense, glancing at Kaelith. He shifts, ready to intervene. But Drayveth lifts a placating hand. "I'm not here to fight," he says quietly. Then he kneels, voice so low only I can hear. "Sariah, I... I was harsh. I threatened to kill you. But you must understand: the coven sees you as a threat. Your raw potential. The taboo with a gargoyle. They fear another Nyxari, like Nerezza. I had to obey their edict."

My throat constricts, tears pricking. "And you personally? You want me dead too?" My voice is soft, laced with heartbreak.

He exhales, gaze slipping toward the fire. "I don't want you dead. I want you safe—from yourself, from that gargoyle, from Nerezza's corruption. But I see now,

maybe... maybe I was wrong to push so hard. I don't know. I only know the coven demands your loyalty, or your blood." His eyes flick up. "You saved me from the brood. That means something."

My heart aches. "You'd still label me Nyxari?" I murmur, tears slipping. "Even after everything?"

He lowers his head, voice heavy. "I have no choice but to report to the High Circle. But you've earned a stay of execution, at least. If this Snowfall Glen can provide a solution—some vow that you won't topple into darkness—maybe the coven can be swayed." He scoffs bitterly. "Or maybe Nerezza devours us all first."

I wrap my arms around myself, brand throbbing. "If the coven tries to force me to kill Kaelith again, I'll resist. I can't... I won't do that. I'd rather be called Nyxari than betray him."

He studies me for a long moment, reading the naked emotion on my face. "He means that much to you?" Drayveth asks, voice barely above a whisper.

Heat floods my cheeks. I recall nights spent huddled together in the cold, the bond forging an unexpected closeness. The memory of that storm-lashed cave, of his arms around me, flares. "Yes," I say quietly, not shying away. "He does."

A flicker of sadness crosses Drayveth's features. "Then I see how far we've drifted," he murmurs, a note of finality. He stands, staff tapping the ground. "Rest, Sariah. We'll discuss next steps tomorrow."

He moves away, returning to his subordinates. My entire body sags, tears slipping free. Kaelith appears at my side, silent. I sense his protective aura, the tether's gentle hum. Without words, he sits down next to me, close enough that our shoulders brush. The contact soothes the raw edge in my heart.

After a moment, I lean my head against his arm, tears dampening his worn leathers. He sets a clawed hand on mine, tension easing. We stare at the small fire, glowing embers casting dancing lights on the stony ground. My brand's ache subsides slightly, replaced by a quiet sorrow for what we've lost—and a grim acceptance of the precarious future we face.

“Are you all right?” Kaelith asks eventually, voice hushed. The tether resonates with concern.

“I'm... alive,” I whisper, voice trembling. “He gave me an ultimatum. Kill you or become Nyxari. And now we're forced into some uneasy truce because we're all hunted by Nerezza's brood.” A humorless laugh escapes. “It's a sick joke, isn't it?”

His runes flicker softly. “It is,” he concedes, tail curling around his ankles. “I'm sorry you had to face that choice.”

I exhale a shaky breath, turning to meet his eyes. In the firelight, they gleam a warm gold, filled with unspoken compassion. “I couldn't choose them over you,” I say, throat tight. “I refuse. No matter how they threaten me.”

Something in his expression softens. He moves his hand to gently brush a stray tear from my cheek. The tether thrums with resolve—no matter the cost, we won't turn on each other. A wave of warmth floods my weary limbs, reminding me there is still a bond stronger than Drayveth's condemnation.

Behind us, Drayveth and his subordinates converse in hushed tones, too far for me to catch the words. I sense hostility, but also exhaustion. The brood's attack shattered their confidence, forcing them to realize Kaelith and I aren't the only threat. Perhaps this reprieve will last long enough for us to reach the purnas.

Night drapes the sky, the moon rising in a pale arc over the cliff. Our small group

remains in uneasy proximity, pinned by the knowledge that venturing out in darkness with the brood overhead is suicidal. We huddle by the fire, each lost in thought. The tension between Drayveth's purna and Kaelith remains thick, but no one dares reignite hostilities after barely escaping those twisted gargoyles.

With the night deep, we sleep in shifts. I doze against the warm bulk of Kaelith's body, wings half-folded around me, the tether offering a faint comfort. I'm labeled Nyxari by the coven, a brand of exile and condemnation. But I also feel a paradoxical sense of liberation: I've chosen my path, chosen my loyalty, no matter how dire the consequences. My heart remains heavy, thinking of those purna who once stood as my friends. Now they see me as an outcast, tainted by a gargoyle's influence. And yet... I can't regret saving Kaelith. I'd choose him again.

When dawn breaks, pale light washes the stony hollow in shades of gray. Drayveth stirs, looking haggard. His allies rise, grim-faced. They eye Kaelith warily, but no one brandishes a weapon. We share meager rations—silent, tense, but cooperative enough to keep from starving. The fresh morning chill stings my cheeks as I stand, mind racing. We must keep moving, before the brood returns. Or before Drayveth changes his mind about letting me live.

Kaelith exchanges a brief glance with me. The tether's current conveys a single unspoken question: Are you ready? I nod. No other choice. We gather ourselves, bracing for another grueling trek. Drayveth clears his throat, voice rasping. "If we travel together, we do so with caution. My subordinates won't harm you as long as you keep your gargoyle on a tight leash, Sariah."

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A flicker of anger sparks in Kaelith's eyes, but I grip his arm in silent restraint. "He's not on anyone's leash," I say, voice sharper than I intend. "But we'll keep the peace if you do."

Drayveth's lips press together, but he doesn't argue. He's out of options. The looming threat of Nerezza's brood overshadows our personal vendettas. For now, a fragile truce stands. We set off, forging a tenuous alliance of necessity. Bad guys close in indeed—except now we're forced to partner with some of them to survive the bigger evil. My soul aches at the irony.

As we wind down the rocky trail, the day's light growing stronger, I cast one last look at Drayveth. Our gazes lock, thick with unspoken pain. I'm torn between the family I once knew and the gargoyle who's become more than a reluctant companion. My heart is shredded. But I remain resolute. I won't kill Kaelith. I won't betray him. If that damns me as Nyxari, so be it.

Better to stand with a gargoyle who has shown me genuine care and respect than a coven that demands I betray my conscience. The brand throbs, but the sting is less punishing now, overshadowed by the quiet conviction that this path—dangerous though it may be—is mine. And as Kaelith lopes beside me, vigilantly scanning the sky, I feel the flicker of fragile hope that together, we might forge a future the coven never imagined.

We descend into the next valley, Drayveth's condemnation echoing in my mind: Kill him or be Nyxari. I chose the latter. My tears are spent, replaced by a fierce determination. Come what may—Nerezza, the brood, or the coven's wrath—I stand by Kaelith. And in that vow, I find an odd solace, even as danger grows with every

step.

The covenant's label burns, but my heart—held in the tether's gentle thrum—tells me I made the only choice I could live with. For now, that has to be enough.

12

KAELITH

The chill wind biting at my face offers no comfort, but I welcome it anyway, letting the sting anchor me in the present. I need any reminder that I'm alive, not drowning in ghosts from centuries ago. The mountains stretch before us in a rough silhouette of jagged peaks and treacherous ravines, dimly lit by the dying embers of sunset. We're halfway between daylight and darkness, as if caught in some vast cosmic pause before the night begins in earnest.

Behind me, I hear the faint shuffle of Sariah's boots on gravel. The tether thrums in my chest, a muted steady beat that marks her presence, though I refuse to lean into it. I must keep my distance, I tell myself, for her sake. Because every time I let her slip close, every time I let the bond flourish, I see echoes of Nerezza's downfall, an all-too-familiar pattern that might lead Sariah down the same spiral.

I pick my way over a rocky rise, scouting ahead. The tension in my muscles never eases. Ever since that clash with Drayveth and the arrival of Nerezza's twisted brood, I've been on edge, half-expecting more gargoyles to dive from the sky or more of Drayveth's purna to ambush us. My tail flicks in short, agitated arcs, betraying my turmoil. The air up here is thin, cold, and thrums with leftover arcs of necromantic magic from the recent battle. No peace. No breathing room. Even the sky feels oppressive, streaked with purples and grays that foretell another storm.

"Sariah," I murmur over my shoulder. My voice comes out harsher than I intend.

“Stay close to the path. The ground’s uneven.”

She says nothing, just nods. But I hear her faint sigh. The tether relays her bruised emotions—uncertainty, lingering sorrow—and I grit my teeth, trying not to let it seep into my own mind. I can’t let her see my own guilt and fear. She’s better off if I maintain a wall, keep her from relying on me too much. Then, if the worst happens, maybe she’ll have a chance to survive without turning monstrous.

We crest the rise, peering down into a shallow canyon. The rest of the ragtag group—Drayveth’s purna—follows at a guarded distance, their wariness thick as fog. It’s a fragile ceasefire, forced by mutual necessity. Even Drayveth, for all his resentment, can’t deny that the brood has changed everything. We’re safer together than picking each other off. Safe is a relative term, though. One misstep, one flicker of suspicion, and everything shatters.

I scan the canyon floor, searching for potential camp spots. We’ve walked nonstop for hours, needing to put distance between us and the brood’s last known location. My body screams for rest. But an unrelenting ache in my chest, separate from the tether, reminds me how little rest I truly allow myself. I’m haunted, plain and simple, by the memory of what Nerezza and I once had, and the utter devastation it became.

“Kaelith,” Sariah says gently. She’s come up beside me, close enough that I catch her scent—subtle, tinged with pine needles and the faint floral undercurrent that always lingers in her clothes. The tether thrums. I force myself not to inhale too deeply, not to indulge in that comfort.

“What?” I respond, wary. I keep my gaze on the terrain below, where a cluster of large boulders forms a semi-enclosed pocket. “We could make camp there,” I say, pointing. “The rocks will shield us from the wind.”

She nods, hugging her arms. The brand on her wrist glimmers in the twilight, taunting

me with the danger I sense in her. Her power. Her potential. The place in my mind that once welcomed partnership now recoils, imagining how easily she could tip into darkness if pressed. I recall Nerezza's mocking words: She's on the same path. My runes flicker with suppressed agitation.

Wordlessly, we descend. Each step demands focus; the ground slips under my boots. Sariah stumbles on loose gravel, and without thinking, I reach out, grasping her elbow to steady her. Our gazes collide—her eyes flicker with gratitude, and for an instant, the tether pulses warm. This is the closeness that both sustains and damns us. My heart twists. I release her arm quickly, stepping away.

“Careful,” I mutter, trying to sound impersonal.

She pulls back, shoulders tight with hurt. But she says nothing, only nods and continues downward. My chest aches at the distance I'm putting between us. I'm doing this to protect her, I remind myself. If we grow too close, if we entangle our fates, what if I fail her again?

We reach the boulders. Drayveth and his two subordinates trail behind, breath ragged from exhaustion and tension. The moment we pause, the purna disperse in a defensive half-circle, staves at the ready, eyes darting warily at me. I pretend not to care. Let them be suspicious. I might share a temporary alliance, but I have no reason to want their acceptance.

Sariah finds a level patch of ground sheltered from the worst of the wind. She places her pack down with a weary sigh. I sense the swirl of her exhaustion through the tether. Let me help her, a voice inside me begs. But I remain silent, forcing myself to keep that emotional distance. Better if she doesn't rely on me for comfort. Because if—when—I fail again, she'll be better off unentangled.

We set up a small perimeter. Drayveth murmurs about taking turns on watch. His

voice is subdued, no longer laced with the raw hostility of our last confrontation, but the resentment remains. I can see it in his eyes whenever he glances at me—a flicker of disgust, suspicion, maybe even jealousy. He senses something more than camaraderie between Sariah and me. The knowledge tightens my gut. All the more reason to keep my distance, for her safety.

Dusk settles in full, cloaking the canyon in deep blues and grays. A meager fire crackles at the center of our rocky enclosure, its heat a meager balm against the mounting cold. Sariah kneels by the flames, her face painted in flickering orange light. Drayveth lingers on the opposite side, huddled with his subordinates. I stand a short distance away, leaning against a boulder, arms folded, trying not to let my gaze wander to Sariah. But I can't stop it. She's the only warmth I see in this bleak place.

The group shares a miserable meal of dried rations. No one speaks much. We're all too aware that the twisted gargoyles could find us. Or that the tenuous alliance might crack. I sense Drayveth's glare on me, but I ignore it. Let him scowl. My runes flicker in the dark, an ever-present glow that betrays my tension.

When the last scraps are eaten, Drayveth and his subordinates claim they'll rest. Sariah offers to take first watch. I open my mouth to object—she's exhausted—but I bite back the words. We're not alone in this. She doesn't need me hovering, especially after the distance I've maintained. Drayveth's people hunker down, weapons at their side. In minutes, they drift into restless half-sleep.

I remain standing, scanning the dark canyon. The tether pulses softly, alerting me that Sariah lingers nearby. She steps over, voice hushed. "Kaelith," she says, heartbreak threaded in her tone. "Why won't you even look at me? Did I do something wrong?"

My jaw clenches. She's the last person who's at fault. "No," I force out, still not meeting her gaze. "I'm just... it's complicated."

“Everything about us is complicated,” she murmurs, taking a cautious step closer. The tether hums, beckoning me to turn. But I fight the urge. If I see her face, I might break. “Please, talk to me. Don’t shut me out.”

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A raw ache pulses in my chest. I can't explain the swirl of guilt. "Go rest," I say, voice harsher than intended. "You're tired."

She inhales, frustration coloring her words. "I offered to stand watch, remember? I'm wide awake." She folds her arms, defiant. "And I'm not leaving until you tell me what's going on."

Tension coils in my muscles. She's persistent. Finally, I exhale, forcing myself to glance at her. The firelight catches the silver strands in her hair, highlighting the brand on her wrist. She's so alive, so fierce, and that only heightens my dread. I recall Nerezza's transformation: how her eyes glowed with that same intensity once, before it warped into something monstrous. Could Sariah meet a similar fate?

"Fine," I say through gritted teeth, stepping away from the boulder to a quieter alcove behind it. "Talk, but keep your voice down. The others are trying to rest." And I can't bear their scrutiny. Sariah follows me, concern etched in her features.

Once we're out of earshot, I let out a long breath. The starlight overhead glimmers faintly, the moon partially veiled by clouds. The tether pulses in my chest, reminding me how intimately we share space. I cross my arms, wings shifting behind me in restless agitation.

She waits, letting the silence fill up. Her eyes gleam with unshed tears. "Whatever's haunting you," she says quietly, "I want to help. We survived Drayveth's ultimatum, we survived the brood... but you act like you'd rather face them alone than let me stand by you." Her voice catches. "Why?"

A thousand answers churn in my mind, all of them leading back to one core truth: I fear losing her to the same darkness that claimed Nerezza. But how do I articulate that without sounding paranoid or insulting her strength? My wings droop slightly. “You saw what Nerezza said,” I finally manage, voice low. “She planted seeds of doubt—about you, about us. She wants to tear us apart from within. I... I can’t pretend it didn’t work. She reopened wounds I thought I’d buried.”

Sariah’s lips part in pained understanding. “Kaelith, she’s trying to manipulate you. Me. Both of us.”

“I know,” I snap, more harshly than intended. Then I scrub a clawed hand over my jaw, sighing. “I know,” I repeat, softer. “But it doesn’t stop the memories. She was once like you—passionate, determined, convinced she could harness any magic for the greater good. Then it twisted her, made her something horrifying. I see parallels, Sariah, and it terrifies me.”

She takes a deep breath, tears threatening. “I’m not her,” she says, trembling. “Don’t you trust me enough to see that?”

My gut twists with guilt. “I do trust you,” I say, voice rough. “But I didn’t see Nerezza’s corruption until it was too late. What if I’m blind again? What if, by letting you rely on my magic, I’m steering you down the same path?” My runes pulse, the tether tugging painfully.

She stares at me, heartbreak shining in her eyes. “I won’t become her. I won’t let that happen. You’ve seen me fight, seen me resist Drayveth’s demands that I kill you. I don’t want unchecked power—I just want to be free, to stand against Nerezza.” She swallows hard, lips trembling. “And... I want to stand with you.”

My heart clenches. She wants me. The knowledge cuts deep. Yet the old guilt roars inside, reminding me how I once let love blind me to the cracks in Nerezza’s soul. “It

was partially my fault,” I rasp, the confession slipping out unbidden. “Nerezza wanted to save my people, the gargoyles, from extinction. I... I never realized how far she’d go. I didn’t stop her early enough. I failed her. I failed everyone.” My wings sag in remembered grief. “She became the monster because I was too late to see her fall.”

Sariah’s expression softens with pained sympathy. “You can’t blame yourself for her choices. You said she was messing with chaos magic, forging pacts that no one could have foreseen. You did what you had to—eventually—by sealing her away.”

“Too late,” I mutter, voice hollow. “Thousands died first. My kin twisted, entire enclaves leveled. If I’d acted sooner, none of that might’ve happened. I bear that sin, Sariah. Every day, it gnaws at me.”

She reaches out slowly, placing a hand on my arm. The tether quivers in recognition. “I’m sorry,” she whispers. “Truly. But punishing yourself forever won’t bring them back.”

I stiffen at her gentle touch. My reflex is to pull away—I don’t deserve comfort. But the tether’s warmth seeps into my chest, loosening some of my rigidity. “I know,” I admit, voice tight, “yet I can’t shake the fear that if I let you in too close, I’ll repeat the same mistake. Or worse, that I’ll watch you become a new Nyxari and be forced to seal you away too.”

She flinches, tears slipping free. “So you’d rather push me away preemptively? Let me stumble alone, risking my life and sanity because you’re afraid you’ll fail me?”

Her words strike like a blade to the gut. My claws curl into my palms, drawing faint crescents of pain. “I’m not... it’s not that simple.” But I can’t deny she’s partly correct. I am trying to protect her by distancing myself. “If you rely on me too much—on our synergy—the tether grows stronger. That power can be addictive.”

She exhales shakily. “Kaelith, we’re already bound. Running from it doesn’t make the bond disappear—it just leaves me confused and alone, unsure if I can count on you when Drayveth or Nerezza corners me.” Her tears glisten in the moonlight. “I need you with me, not half-heartedly hovering.”

My throat tightens. The longing in her voice resonates with the tether, stirring my own deep-seated desire to shield her, to be her partner in every sense. “Sariah...” I whisper, fighting the swirl of conflicting urges. “I?—”

Before I can finish, a faint shout echoes from around the bend. We both jerk, hearts pounding. Another threat? I spin, wings half-flared. But the shout fades into muffled conversation. Probably Drayveth’s subordinates bickering about guard rotations. Sariah and I share a tense exhalation.

She rubs her arms, returning to a whisper. “We keep getting interrupted,” she murmurs, voice trembling with frustrated tears. “I can’t stand this. One crisis after another, and you won’t even let me in.”

Guilt hammers my chest. “You think I don’t want to hold you, to trust you fully?” I hiss, stepping closer than I should. “The tether drags me toward you, and every fiber of me wants to yield. But then I see Nerezza’s face, hear her laughter, recall how we soared together and how that ended. I can’t shake the dread that you’ll follow her footsteps. I won’t watch another woman I—” I bite my tongue. Another woman I love? Too bold. My runes flicker, and I clamp down on the thought.

Sariah’s eyes widen, tears glistening. “Another woman you what?” she demands, voice raw. “Kaelith, do you care for me, or do you only see me as a liability you need to manage?”

My heart twists painfully. She’s cornering me, forcing me to confront the truth I’ve tried to bury. The tether pulses, urging me to speak. “I care,” I admit, breath ragged.

“More than I should. And that’s precisely why I’m afraid.”

Her features soften, relief mingled with heartbreak. She steps closer, the brand on her wrist pulsing in quiet synergy with my runes. “Then stop punishing yourself. Stop punishing me. Let’s figure this out together, not sabotage it from fear.”

A tremor runs through me as I meet her gaze. Her storm-gray eyes hold a fierce sincerity that chips away at my defenses. She’s not Nerezza. I remind myself of the times she shielded me in battle, the nights she stayed awake tending my wounds, the unwavering loyalty she displayed against Drayveth’s demands. Maybe—just maybe—she’s strong enough to resist the pull of chaos that once ensnared Nerezza.

“I—” I start, voice cracking. “I’m trying. I promise I’ll try. But please, understand if I slip back into caution. The past is a wound that won’t close.”

She exhales, tears trembling on her lashes. “Then we’ll face it one at a time.” Her hand lifts to graze my runes with delicate fingers, sending a jolt through the tether. I exhale shakily, the urge to pull her against me colliding with my ingrained fear.

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“Thank you,” she whispers, eyes full of sorrow and relief. Slowly, she draws me into a brief, tentative embrace. Her arms wind around my waist, and my wings stiffen in surprise. After a heartbeat, I allow myself to circle her shoulders, pressing my face into her hair. My chest twists with longing, guilt, and a flicker of fragile hope.

We stand like that for a moment, the mountain wind ruffling our clothes, the muted crackle of the distant fire mingling with the faint hum of our tether. I want to lose myself in the warmth of her presence, but I force myself to remain vigilant. We can’t afford any illusions of safety.

At last, we break apart, breath mingling in the cold air. She runs a trembling hand across her cheek, blinking away the last tears. “Let’s go back,” she says softly. “Try to get some rest before the next crisis.”

I nod, swallowing the lump in my throat. We rejoin the others, each lost in their own troubled thoughts. Drayveth’s subordinates keep a wary eye on us, but no one speaks. The air is thick with exhaustion, the aftermath of battles and betrayal.

Night deepens. Stars peek through scattered clouds, their pale glow revealing the harsh lines of the canyon. The wind picks up, carrying a faint scent of ice. Sariah and I settle near the dying embers of the fire, a respectful distance from Drayveth’s group. She claims she’ll keep watch, but her eyes droop with fatigue. Without a word, I step in, offering to take over.

She tries to protest, but her exhaustion is evident. Reluctantly, she slumps against a boulder. I see the bruises on her arms, the strain in her posture. My chest aches. I want to cradle her, let her rest against me. But I maintain a careful space, recalling the vow

I just made to try without smothering her. It's a delicate line.

When the others drift into restless slumber—Drayveth included, though he sleeps with his staff in hand—I remain awake. My wings partially unfurl for better balance, tail coiled around my ankles, scanning the dark perimeter. The tether pulses gently, a reminder of Sariah's presence. She dozes, her breathing rhythmic.

Time crawls. The moon arcs overhead, painting the cliffs with silver. Memories assault me when I stand guard, half-lulling me into a waking dream. Nerezza's laughter once echoed off these kinds of mountains, back in an era when we believed ourselves unstoppable. I soared with her, free and brimming with hope. Then I watch that memory fracture into images of her twisted brood, entire villages burned, gargoyles mutated into horrifying creatures. My heart clenches. It was partially my fault.

Yet Sariah's face flickers into my thoughts, shining with determination, refusing to betray me even when Drayveth demanded it. The tether hums with her quiet breath, anchoring me to the present. Maybethis time, I can do something right. Maybe I can let her in without dooming her to the same fate.

The night wears on. My watch remains uneventful, though tension coils in my limbs, expecting an attack at any moment. Before long, the moon drifts lower, heralding the approach of dawn. The sky lightens imperceptibly, shading from black to a deep, dusky blue.

I hear Sariah stir behind me, a faint rustle of cloth. Glancing over my shoulder, I see her push herself upright, rubbing her eyes. The tether warms at our renewed proximity. She notices I'm still up, exhaustion framing her face. "You didn't wake me for my shift?" she asks, voice husky with sleep.

I shrug, adjusting my wings with a rustle. "I wasn't tired." A half-truth. The guilt-

fueled nightmares are worse than mere exhaustion.

Her gaze flicks around the camp—Drayveth's band dozing fitfully, the dim coals of the fire, the endless mountains. She sighs. "We're living on borrowed time." Then she pats the ground beside her, a gentle invitation. "Sit with me, at least until dawn."

I hesitate. But the quiet sincerity in her eyes tugs at the bond, reminding me of my promise to try. Wordlessly, I cross the short distance and ease down next to her. The rocky ground feels cold against my thighs, and the dying embers offer scant warmth, but there's a fragile comfort in the simple act of sitting together.

For a few moments, we say nothing, letting the hush of predawn cloak us. The sky turns a lighter gray, revealing distant peaks like jagged teeth on the horizon. Sariah wraps her cloak tighter, rubbing warmth into her arms. Her brand is partially visible, the scarring still raw from the last intense surge of magic. I want to reach out and trace it, to remind her that she's more than a brand or a condemned purna. But I hold back, unsure if that intimacy would help or hinder.

She glances at me, eyes reflecting the faint glow of approaching dawn. "We're on the brink, aren't we?" she whispers. "At the edge of either merging deeper or shattering apart."

My chest constricts. She's echoing my own fears. "Yes," I say, voice barely audible. The tether thrums in quiet sympathy, intensifying the sense of closeness that I both crave and dread.

Her shoulder sags. "I keep thinking about all the times you saved me, all the times you shielded me from Drayveth or the brood. How we survived everything together." She turns her face to mine, tears glistening. "Despite your fear, you haven't once abandoned me. And I can't abandon you either. Not even if it means risking your walls or your doubts."

A lump forms in my throat. “I... I don’t deserve your loyalty. I’m the one who keeps pushing you away.”

She gives a tiny, sad smile. “Loyalty isn’t about deserving. It’s about choosing to stand by someone.” Her fingers curl in her lap. “I choose you, Kaelith, even if you still wrestle with old guilt. Even if you think you’re saving me by locking me out, I choose to be at your side.”

I lower my gaze, runes flickering. Her words wrap around my heart, stirring a profound longing to let my guard drop, to hold her and release the burden. But can I be that selfish?

Before I can respond, she shifts closer, her hand reaching out. The tether hums as she lays her palm lightly on the top of my wing where it meets my shoulder. A jolt of sensation crackles through me—gargoyles rarely allow anyone to touch their wings uninvited. It’s a deeply personal gesture, akin to letting someone see your vulnerabilities. My first instinct is to recoil, but something in me softens. This is Sariah, not Nerezza.

In the faint predawn light, I see hope mingled with caution in her expression. She waits, as if expecting me to pull away. Instead, I muster a trembling breath, letting the contact stand. My wing relaxes slightly under her touch, an unspoken acceptance. I want her near.

She strokes the leathery membrane gently, eyes flicking to mine for permission. It’s an intimate moment, more revealing than any display of raw power. My pulse thrums, the tether sizzling with quiet tension. Her breath hitches, her brand glowing faintly, as if responding to our synergy. We’re forging a deeper connection, both magical and emotional.

Silence swallows us. The dawn brightens incrementally, painting the eastern sky with

pale gold. I feel the bond's resonance hum between our hearts, a calm and tentative chord that soothes the frantic storms in my head. The memories of Nerezza's betrayal are still there, but Sariah's presence layers over them with promise and honesty.

At length, I find my voice. "Sariah," I murmur, staring at the horizon, "I'm trying to be better. To trust you without fear. I can't erase the past, but... you're not her. You're stronger, kinder, and you challenge me in ways I didn't expect." I swallow, vulnerability making me clumsy with words. "I'm sorry if my distance hurt you. I just... I can't lose you like I lost her. I can't relive that horror."

She shifts her hand from my wing to my arm, gentle and sure. "You won't lose me," she says, voice quivering with the weight of her promise. "We stand together. Nerezza's fate... it's not mine."

A wave of relief, heartbreak, and cautious optimism collides in my chest. The tether flares with a soft warmth, as if acknowledging our shared vow. For a moment, I close my eyes, exhaling a trembling breath.

We remain like that, perched on the edge of camp, while the sky transitions from gray to soft pink. Gradually, the others stir—Drayveth's subordinates, still bruised and wary, gather their staves. Drayveth himself emerges from restless sleep, eyes bloodshot. The brief moment of calm between Sariah and me feels like the first truly peaceful watch we've shared in days, perhaps weeks.

"I guess we should prepare to move," Sariah whispers, pulling her hand away reluctantly. My wing tingles where her touch lingers.

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I nod, though my heart aches at the loss of contact. “Yes,” I say, voice steadier. “We still have a long way to Snowfall Glen.”

She rubs her arms, brand flickering under her glove. “We’ll face it together,” she murmurs once more, a quiet reassurance.

I bow my head in agreement, turning to stir the dying embers of our modest fire. My tail flicks with a subtle resolution: I won’t push her away again. Not like that. It might mean risking heartbreak if my fears come to pass, but she deserves my faith. And I deserve another chance to protect someone I care for without failing them.

The morning unfolds in a subdued flurry of activity. Drayveth and his purna, wary as ever, glare at me and Sariah’s closeness but don’t voice objections. They know we’re stronger fighting the brood if we keep our synergy. We gather our meager belongings, dividing watch shifts as we trek further. There’s little conversation; the fear of another ambush by Nerezza’s creations looms too large.

Yet, despite the tension, an undercurrent of possibility laces the day. My guilt and fear remain, but Sariah’s unwavering support offers a fragile bridge across the chasm of my past mistakes. I sense we’re near a pivotal juncture—either we fuse deeper or we shatter.

As we march, our connection buzzes with a gentler resonance than before. Sariah occasionally meets my gaze, sending a faint smile that says, I’m here, and I’m not leaving. And for what feels like ages, I let a glimmer of hope light my thoughts.

Yes, we’re haunted by Nerezza’s specter, hounded by the brood, and burdened by

Drayveth's hatred. But in that quiet moment around the dying fire, I realized that fear can't control me forever. Sariah isn't Nerezza. And if I keep pushing her away, I'll only replicate the very tragedy I want to avoid. I must do better.

We climb another ridge, the sun rising overhead, casting long shadows across the mountain trails. Drayveth leads his subordinates with muted authority, occasionally pausing to consult with Sariah about magical reading of the terrain. I hang back, content to let them talk tactics, though I keep a watchful eye on them. Sariah stands straighter than before, less weighed down by my rejection. The brand on her wrist glows subtle silver in the midday light, reminding me how her magic resonates with mine.

Halfway through the climb, she glances back, her expression questioning. I step forward, bridging the gap. We exchange a few words about the route—nothing personal, but the tether thrums with unspoken synergy. My old guilt tugs at me, but I push it aside. One day at a time, I repeat.

By late afternoon, we find a narrow plateau where we can rest. The tension among Drayveth's purna simmers, but no open hostility surfaces—our combined fear of the brood overshadows old grudges. Sariah and I set our packs down, exhaustion lining our faces. I catch her eye, offering a small nod. She returns it, a flicker of gratitude in her gaze, as if she senses I'm fighting to let her in, inch by inch.

Night creeps in once more, and we form a small camp. I watch Sariah as she arranges wards around the perimeter, her incantations weaving faint lines of magical light across the stony ground. She's so capable, so resolute, and a flicker of admiration sparks in me. Her determination might be what saves us from repeating the past.

Later, while Drayveth and his subordinates bicker over guard rotations, Sariah and I end up sitting by the fire again. It's the calm before tomorrow's unknown storms, a rare peaceful watch in the hush of darkness. Her hair drapes across her shoulder,

silver strands catching the flicker of flames. She meets my gaze, a tentative smile curving her lips, and I feel my heartbeat quicken. Yes, we're near the brink. But maybe we'll survive it.

She shifts closer, cloak rustling. "Thank you," she whispers, "for not shutting me out again."

My throat constricts. I lower my eyes to the dancing embers. "I can't promise I won't slip," I admit, voice husky. "But I'll try not to push you away."

Her hand settles on mine, gentle yet firm. The tether pulses, enveloping my chest in a comforting warmth. We share that moment in silence, the rest of the camp lost in their own concerns. The wind rattles against the rocks, but it feels less biting now that we face it together.

In the quiet, I recall how my old love changed, how we once sat around fires with the same sense of closeness, only for it to twist into betrayal. Fear nips at me, but I banish the ghosts, focusing on Sariah's heartbeat so close to my own. She's not Nerezza. We're forging a new story, with different choices.

We linger there, letting the night envelop us in a fragile sense of peace. And though we stand on the edge of war, confronted by Drayveth's ultimatums and Nerezza's looming terror, I dare to believe that maybe—just maybe—we can weather this storm. My armor may have cracks, but Sariah's presence reminds me that sometimes vulnerability is what helps us endure.

So I sit with her, letting the tether hum in contentment, letting the fire's light play over our entwined fingers. Tomorrow, we face the uncertain path to Snowfall Glen, the brood overhead, and Drayveth's brittle truce. But for tonight, we claim this fleeting moment of closeness. It feels like it has been centuries since I feel a spark of hope flicker inside the fortress of my heart, chasing away the shadows of a past I

feared would forever chain me to guilt and solitude.

13

SARIAH

Itaste blood on my lips as I scramble over fractured rock, lungs burning from the uphill sprint. Dusk bleeds across the sky in violent shades of crimson and purple, painting the rugged terrain in ominous hues. Cold wind whips past, carrying the stench of something foul—rotting flesh and the sharp tang of alien magic. Every nerve in my body screams that we're out of time.

Behind me, Kaelith's ragged breathing hitches, telling me he's in pain. I feel it too through the tether, a dull throb echoing in my core, intensifying with every jarring footstep. Fear flares; he's hurt, badly. My brand pulses on my wrist, fueling a surge of desperate adrenaline that keeps me moving.

A roar echoes off the cliffs—one of the lesser gargoyles awakened by Nerezza's twisted magic. So far, these new spawn aren't as powerful as the brood that attacked Drayveth's group, but they're numerous and vicious, driven by a gnawing hunger and an unnatural devotion to the Nyxari. There must be at least five or six of them circling behind us, clawing at the rocks, howling for blood. I'm not certain how many we've already fought off, and I'm terrified to discover how many more lurk out here.

"Sariah," Kaelith growls my name, voice breaking. He lags a step, wings half-extended as though he considered taking flight but thought better of it. His onyx skin gleams in the waning light, runes flickering erratically. A deep gash slashes across his right thigh, crusted with dark blood, and his breathing is ragged in a way that scares me more than the gargoyles. He's not regenerating fast enough.

"Just a little further," I say, heart pounding. We crest another rise in the barren slope

and find ourselves gazing down at a narrow gorge. Low, twisted trees cling to the rocky sides, branches heavy with an early, bitter frost. Beyond, a partial cave opening appears—just large enough for us to shelter. My spirits lift. If we can reach that hollow, we might stand a chance of regrouping. Or at least catching our breath before we face them again.

Kaelith's tail lashes, scattering loose gravel. "I sense them closing in," he mutters, golden eyes scanning the gloom. My own senses prickle, the brand on my wrist stinging with each step. A half-dozen monstrous silhouettes scurry over the boulders behind us, shrieking in that guttural, unnatural language. The entire slope quakes with their approach.

My stomach churns. "Run!" I yell, grabbing Kaelith's arm to haul him forward. He lets out a pained grunt but manages to match my stumbling pace. Together, we half-slide, half-jump down the ravine, dislodging small avalanches of stone that cascade after us. One slip, and we'll be easy prey for the lesser gargoyles. Goddess, please, no more missteps.

Lightning arcs overhead—no, not lightning; it's a bolt of corrupted magic from one of the gargoyles. They shouldn't have the ability to cast spells, but Nerezza's influence has apparently gifted them rudimentary chaos power. The searing red bolt blasts a chunk of rock behind us, throwing up a shower of debris that pings off my staff and sends Kaelith reeling. A scream lodges in my throat as we both hit the ground in a painful tumble, dust choking our lungs.

I scramble up first, coughing, reaching for him. He's half-propped on an elbow, runes flaring in disarray. "Kaelith," I gasp, voice raw. He groans, wings twitching, face contorted in pain. My brand practically throbs with alarm, mirroring his agony. No, no, no. Don't you dare die on me now.

The gargoyles shriek again, bounding closer. I can hear the scrape of their claws on

stone. My heart roars in my ears. We have to move. Summoning the last dregs of strength, I hook my arm under Kaelith's, ignoring the burning protest in my battered shoulder. He's huge, easily capable of pressing three times my weight overhead when uninjured. But now he's nearly dead weight, leaning heavily on me. The tether hums in frantic alarm at our combined distress.

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I half-drag him down the last stretch of slope, stumbling across the scree. The cave mouth is no more than a dozen strides away. “Just... hold on,” I choke out, tears stinging my eyes. “We’re nearly there.”

We lurch the final distance, collapsing through the narrow opening. Inside, the cavern narrows into a small chamber, walls slick with moisture. A trickle of water drips from stalactites overhead. Dim light filters through an overhead fissure, barely enough to see by. But it’s cover—and maybe it’ll conceal us. If the gargoyles follow...

“Get back,” Kaelith rasps. He twists, forcing me behind him as if preparing to shield me from any immediate onslaught. My brand flares with frustration; he’s in no condition to fight, and I’m half-spent from days of running and fighting.

A thunderous shriek echoes outside, accompanied by the scrape of claws. I tense, gripping my staff, ready to hurl the last of my magic if they appear. For a moment, I imagine fangs and claws tearing through the darkness, but the lesser gargoyles halt at the cave mouth, sniffing. Maybe they sense the wards or the weird geometry of the cavern that makes it difficult for them to squeeze inside in large numbers. A hiss slices through the air, then recedes.

We wait, panting, for what feels like an eternity. My entire body trembles from adrenaline. My brand’s ache pulses with every labored breath. At last, the hissing and scrabbling fade. They’ve slunk away, perhaps waiting outside for an easier chance. We’re trapped. But at least we’ve gained a fleeting reprieve.

“Sariah...” Kaelith groans, voice dropping. His entire torso sags against the cold stone. My panic spikes. In the thin, gloomy light, I see blood pooling from his thigh

wound, dripping a steady trickle onto the cavern floor. Another slash carves across his side, staining his leathers dark. My heart clenches. He's losing too much blood.

I kneel beside him, staff forgotten. "Kaelith, hey, stay with me." My voice trembles. I press a hand to the gash on his thigh, trying to stem the bleeding. He shudders, runes flickering weakly. This is bad.

He exhales, eyes fluttering. "Stone sleep... I need it," he manages. Gargoyles can slip into stone sleep to heal, but that process makes them vulnerable, essentially immobile rock. If those lesser gargoyles break in while he's petrified, they'll tear him apart. Or if his injuries are too severe, even stone sleep might fail. My brand stings, as if echoing the threat.

Fear surges, tears pricking my eyes. "We can't risk full stone sleep with them out there." My mind races. Unless... I recall that synergy we've discovered. If I feed him purna magic while he's partially sleeping, maybe we can accelerate his healing. My brand pulses, hinting at a more intimate approach. The memory of our last desperate union floods my mind—how merging our bodies and magic stabilized him for a while. It's dangerous, but what choice do we have?

"I—" I swallow, adrenaline spiking. "We can do the synergy, like before. Skin-to-skin. I can funnel my power into you, help your stone sleep regenerate faster." My cheeks burn, recalling the last time we tried anything like that, when we ended up crossing the boundary into fierce, overwhelming intimacy. This time, he's far more gravely wounded. The magnitude of what we need might be double. And the tether has grown stronger.

He grimaces, eyes half-lidded with pain. "That... might kill you," he warns, voice slurred. "Or twist your magic too far. But..." A tremor racks him. "I'm dying anyway. Better we try."

A sob threatens to choke me. I can't lose him. "We'll be careful," I promise, though my insides quake with uncertainty. The tether hums, urging me to save him, no matter the cost. "If things get too intense, I'll pull back."

He nods faintly, fresh blood leaking from the wound on his side. "Do it," he breathes.

I force my panic down, focusing on what must be done. My brand stings like it's been seared with hot iron. It's now or never. Gently, I strip away the torn remnants of Kaelith's leathers around his thigh and side, exposing the raw, ugly wounds. The sight makes my stomach twist. Bruises darken his obsidian skin, runes flickering erratically like a sputtering flame. A gargoyle's normally robust vitality is draining away with each heartbeat.

"Sariah," he murmurs, eyes meeting mine. They shine with a mixture of pain, trust, and desire. He's letting me see him at his most vulnerable. My heart clenches.

I nod, tears gathering. "I won't let you die." My voice shakes, but my resolve hardens. I push aside my cloak, fumbling with the fastenings of my tunic to expose more skin. The tether thrums at the prospect of close contact, recalling how our synergy soared last time. We have no time for embarrassment.

He tries to shift into a comfortable position, but pain contorts his face. "Hurry," he rasps.

I settle beside him, leaning my torso against his, letting my bare arms press against the warm stone of his chest. Electricity crackles through the tether. The brand flares with a low, agonizing burn. I sense Kaelith's breathing hitch. Our bodies align, skin to skin, a flush of heat blossoming where we touch. The tension in the cave thickens with a dangerous promise. We're about to open ourselves to each other's magic, intimately.

My pulse races, memories flicking of how we once unleashed this synergy in that desperate night. This time, the stakes are even higher. I close my eyes, willing the swirl of magic in my blood to flow outward. “Focus on your stone sleep,” I whisper. “I’ll channel what I can. Let me in.”

He exhales, trying to slip into the half-stone trance. I feel the telltale ripple under my palms as portions of his skin harden slightly, runes glowing. But he’s too weak to complete the transformation without a push. Gritting my teeth, I murmur a *purna* incantation that draws from the brand, funneling arcs of silver-blue energy into his chest, letting them seep into those flickering runes.

The sensation is raw, overwhelming. My brand sears, as if a spigot of power has opened. Kaelith’s body stiffens, wings twitching violently. A ragged groan escapes him, half-pain, half-relief. Stone creeps across his limbs, but the progress halts around the gashes, as though the injuries resist solidifying.

I grit my teeth, tears spilling. “Stay with me,” I gasp. My heart hammers so loud it drowns out the hiss of wind outside. Heat roars in my veins, reminiscent of a fever. The tether surges, and I know from our previous synergy how quickly this can tip from healing to something far more charged. But he’s still bleeding. He needs more.

“Sariah,” he groans, voice thick with desperation. “Gods... I feel your magic. It’s... intense.”

I swallow a sob. “It’s the only way.” My trembling hands slide over the jagged edges of his wounds, channeling a healing current. His runes glow, pulsing in time with my brand, forging a closed circuit of power. The searing sensation rips a cry from my throat—my entire body feels like it’s on fire, an excruciating ecstasy that threatens to consume me.

Adrenaline floods my system. Our hearts pound in unison, the tether bridging every

boundary. Kaelith tilts his head, forcing himself to meet my eyes. The anguish there mingles with a fierce desire, the same desperate longing that flared between us once before. My magic swirls around him, seeking a deeper connection, and I realize with a dizzying jolt that we can't half-do this. To heal him, I must embrace him fully—body, magic, soul.

My clothes hamper the contact, so I yank them aside, ignoring the protests of my battered limbs. Kaelith's arms slip around my waist, pulling me against his chest with surprising strength, given his injuries. The moment our torsos align, my brand flares like molten silver, sending a shockwave of sensation through every nerve ending. We're forging that synergy, the same that nearly overwhelmed us last time.

He gasps, runes blazing so bright they illuminate the cave. "Sariah," he rasps, voice choked with pain and need. I feel a new wave of power swirl from him—his gargoyle essence merging with my purna magic. The synergy doubles, feeding on our closeness. We're bridging life and stone, forging a healing conduit.

My breath comes in frenzied gasps, tears and sweat mingling. "I—hold on," I manage. Then we crash into each other, lips meeting in a desperate kiss fueled by adrenaline and terror. It's rough, searing, the taste of blood and tears on our tongues. I moan against him, part of me craving the solace of intimacy while the rest of me tries to remain calm enough to channel healing.

We tumble onto the cold cavern floor, limbs tangling. His wounded thigh presses against mine, prompting a hiss of pain from him. But the next moment, I pour more healing magic into that wound, letting it seep into the stone edges creeping across his skin. The tether flares, a flood of energy that makes me arch my back, a cry slipping from my lips. It's so strong.

He groans, half delirious, lips trailing over my neck, across my collarbone. My brand ignites with a near-blinding glow that reflects in his runes, and I sense the life force

we share swirling dangerously. Blood still trickles from his side, but I feel the wound's edges knitting under the combined assault of stone sleep and purna magic. My heart leaps with hope. It's working.

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Still, the raw synergy sets my nerves aflame. We're pressed together, flesh to flesh, brimming with power. His claws graze my skin, leaving faint red welts, but I don't care. We're lost in a heady cocktail of fear, relief, and undeniable attraction. My desire for him surges, colliding with the knowledge that we might die if we fail.

"Sariah," he gasps, voice raw with longing and agony. "I—" The words choke off in a groan as I shift my hips, trying to find a better angle to cradle his wounded side. But that movement drags us deeper into a frenzied urgency. Our bodies align, the tether throbbing with unstoppable momentum.

I realize in that moment—I love him, despite the danger, despite the heartbreak and risk. The truth slams into me like a lightning bolt. I don't want to lose him, can't bear the thought of a world without his fierce presence. Tears blur my vision as I bury my face against his neck, letting the synergy roll over us.

The desperation crescendos into a frenzied joining—no longer just bodies, but a collision of need, magic, and shared survival. His cock presses against me, thick and demanding, and I arch up to meet him, my pussy already slick with want. The first thrust steals my breath, a searing stretch that melts into unbearable pleasure as he sheathes himself fully inside me. Sex, yes, but laced with swirling magic. Every pulse of our bodies resonates with power, each snap of his hips driving the synergy deeper, as if we're forging the bond with flesh as much as spirit.

"Kaelith... yes, take from me. Take me. Brand me, make my yours," I beg, gasping for more, pushing my magic to the max. I direct every sliver of it to his wounds.

"Sariah... you undone me," he groans, burying his face on my neck as his hips

pistons faster as much as his injured body can allow him. Our magic entertwines more and more, swirling together, the tendrils dancing in union to each other.

“Kaelith...” I pant against his ear, nails biting into his shoulders as he moves, the rhythm rough and relentless. Tears slip down my cheeks—from overwhelm, from the way his runes blaze hotter with every thrust, the stone creeping up his torso in partial sleep mode, knitting flesh even as he fucks me into the cavern floor.

“Gods!” he groans as I let out a moan of ecstasy. Our moans echo off the walls, raw and unchecked, mingling with the wet slap of skin, the hiss of sleet outside. The air thrums with energy, charged like the moment before a lightning strike.

At some point, the pain from our injuries dulls, replaced by a frenzied euphoria. My brand crackles, arcs of silver lightning leaping from my fingertips to the stone now creeping across Kaelith’s arms. We cling to each other as if drowning, his cock filling me so completely I can’t tell where he ends and I begin. His tail lashes around my thigh, possessive, dragging me harder against him. Each second is a precipice—lust, healing, chaos.

“Sariah,” he murmurs, lips brushing mine in a fleeting, tender kiss, a contrast to the brutal pace of his hips. “Don’t let go.”

“I won’t,” I vow, voice breaking as I press my palm to his wounded side. The bleeding has slowed, flesh sealing beneath the stone’s embrace, but I barely register it—not when he angles deeper, when the head of his cock grinds against that spot inside me that unravels all thought. Another wave of magic surges, my brand flaring blindingly bright, and a scream tears from my throat as pleasure-pain arcs through every nerve. It’s too much.

Yet I can’t stop. I don’t want to. Kaelith gasps, wings shuddering, his thrusts turning erratic. His eyes glow molten gold, pupils blown with need, and when he surges

against me, I meet him with equal hunger, my hips rolling to take him deeper. The synergy magnifies, my mind fracturing under the intensity—every drag of his cock, every pulse of magic, every ragged breath between us tightening the tether until I’m certain we’ll fuse into one being.

Tears streak my face as we crest the wave, his rhythm stuttering, my pussy clenching around him. Then—the shattering peak.

“I’m coming!” His roar is half-gargoyle, half-man, as he spills inside me, his release a scalding flood that triggers my own. My vision whites out, magic detonating between us in a shockwave that rattles the cavern walls, dust raining from the ceiling.

“Gods!” I let out a keen scream of pure, unadulterated pleasure that burns every fiber of my being.

For a heartbeat, I’m nothing but sensation: the throb of his cock still buried in me, the aftershocks wracking my body, the bond singing with brilliant, terrifying unity. My skin burns, brand glowing with a subdued silver now, and Kaelith’s runes glimmer with a renewed steadiness. His thigh wound has partially sealed, stone plating covering the torn flesh. The gash along his side, once a gaping hole, is now a crusted seam. My heart bursts with relief. He’s healing.

Panting, we collapse together, limbs tangled, sweat-slicked skin cooling in the cave’s damp air. His softening cock slips from me, but he pulls me tighter against him, his tail curling around my waist like a vow. Alive. His. Ours.

He lifts a hand, brushing my sweat-matted hair from my face. “You... you saved me,” he whispers, voice cracked. “Again.”

My chest tightens, tears slipping. “We saved each other,” I manage. Then I collapse onto his chest, exhausted beyond words, trembling with the comedown from that

magical high. My entire body hums with leftover energy. The synergy recedes slowly, leaving behind warmth and the tang of fear. Because I sensed it: the darkness tugging at me.

In that final burst of magic, I felt a shadow, a flicker of chaos that beckoned me to push further, to unleash more. It was the same siren call that lured Nerezza, a promise of unstoppable power if I only let go of my caution. I resisted this time, but just barely. It's there, lurking.

Kaelith senses my tension. He cradles my face, concern etched in his eyes. "Sariah, what's wrong?"

I swallow, tears still wet on my cheeks. "I... I felt something," I whisper, voice trembling. "A pull, like if I used just a bit more power, I could've healed you instantly or destroyed half the mountain. It was... exhilarating—and terrifying."

His runes flicker with worry. "Darkness tugging at you?"

I nod, pressing my forehead to his. The tether's gentle hum offers a respite from that shadowy temptation. "Yes. For a moment, it felt so easy to sink into that raw chaos. I'm scared, Kaelith." My voice cracks. "What if... what if I lose control one day?"

He exhales, tightening his arms around me. "We'll face it together," he vows. "I won't let you slip alone. We'll find a safer way to harness this synergy."

My heart aches at his words. Relief wars with lingering dread. He's healing, but at what cost to me? If I keep tapping into that forbidden well, I risk the fate Drayveth warned about, the path Nerezza carved in blood. But as I lie here in Kaelith's arms, I can't bring myself to regret saving him. I'd do it again. I love him.

A trembling sigh escapes me. "We need to rest," I say, voice barely above a whisper.

“The lesser gargoyles might still be out there. If we’re found like this, we’re done.”

Kaelith nods, though his wings twitch with leftover tension. “Yes. But let me hold you a moment.” His gaze flicks with tenderness. “After that... I’ll keep watch.”

Tears spill anew as I gently cradle his cheeks, brushing away specks of dust. He kisses my palm, eyes closed. My brand flares with a gentle warmth, reminding me that for all the danger, for all the potential for darkness, there is also extraordinary light in this bond. I love him, the thought resonates, steady and sure.

So I nestle against him, letting our breathing even out. His stone-laced body is surprisingly warm, the partial petrification receding now that the worst of his injuries have stabilized. Outside, I hear the distant hiss of the lesser gargoyles, but none approach the cave mouth. The synergy we unleashed must have frightened them off—or they lurk, waiting for us to emerge. I can’t dwell on that now. We have at least this moment of peace.

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Eventually, after minutes of silence, I shift to retrieve what remains of my clothing, skin still tingling from our frantic union. Kaelith helps me, though he hisses once or twice when a movement strains his half-sealed wounds. Guilt wracks me, but he shakes his head, forcing a small, reassuring smile.

“Sariah,” he murmurs, voice thick. “You saved me. And you said something... or maybe I heard you in the synergy. Something about love.” His eyes search mine, raw with emotion. “Was it real, or just the magic?”

Heat floods my cheeks. I must have let that slip during the climax of our synergy. My chest tightens. Part of me wants to lie, to keep that vulnerability hidden. But I can’t after what we’ve shared. “It was real,” I admit softly, tears stinging again. “I love you, Kaelith. Even though it terrifies me.”

His runes glow a fraction brighter, a mixture of wonder and relief crossing his battered face. “Then we share that terror. Because, Sariah, I... I can’t deny I love you in return. Despite everything.”

My heart soars painfully in my chest, tears finally flowing unchecked. We hold each other again, a gentler embrace this time. The rotting smell from outside and the damp chill of the cave fade from my awareness, replaced by the heady rush of hearing him confess a love I never expected.

But overshadowing our confessions is the knowledge that I nearly tapped into a well of chaos to heal him fully. Darkness tugs at me, a whisper in my mind. If I keep using synergy this way, if I keep forging deeper bonds with Kaelith, am I summoning the same demons that claimed Nerezza? The thought casts a shadow over my raw joy.

Kaelith must sense my lingering unease, because he presses his forehead to mine, voice somber. “We’ll figure it out,” he whispers, runes dimming to a steady glow. “We won’t let the darkness claim us.”

I nod, tears slipping in silent agreement. We remain there, tangled in each other’s warmth, half-dressed, half-injured, hearts pounding with an uncertain future. Outside, the lesser gargoyles might still roam, Drayveth’s condemnation waits, and Nerezza’s shadow looms. But for this fragile moment, we’ve chosen each other, clung to love in a world determined to tear us apart.

Time slides past in a haze. Eventually, I coax Kaelith into a shallow rest, letting him slip into a partial stone doze while I stand watch near the cave entrance. The brand on my wrist flickers with residual magic, and I fight off the lingering echoes of that dark temptation. I won’t let it claim me, I vow, repeating his words. We love each other enough to stand on the brink without falling.

As the night deepens, I hold a battered staff, scanning the silent mountain pass. No gargoyle silhouettes appear, no shrieks echo. Only the quiet drip of water and the distant moan of a high wind. My body aches in every muscle, but an ember of fierce determination glows in my chest. If we can survive this, if we can hold onto the tenuous alliance with Drayveth’s group or find new allies in Snowfall Glen, maybe we stand a chance against Nerezza. And maybe I can harness my magic for good, not darkness.

Tears glimmer in my eyes as I replay Kaelith’s confession. He loves me too. The tether pulses in comforting manner, as though to confirm that for the first time, we openly embraced the bond. My brand stings, but it no longer feels like condemnation. Instead, it’s a symbol of the power I wield—and the responsibility I must carry. I can do this, I tell myself, knuckles whitening around my staff. We can do this, together.

I glance over my shoulder, seeing Kaelith’s stone-laced form resting on the cavern

floor, his breathing calmer now, runes steady. A wave of tender warmth floods me. He's safe. For the moment.

Outside, the stars twinkle over the rugged peaks, indifferent to the mortals below. The night is uncertain, but we're alive—and we share a bond deeper than fear. I vow I'll keep fighting, keep forging a path that defies Nerezza's shadow and Drayveth's condemnation. I refuse to fall.

Because love tethers us, even in a world on the brink of darkness. And though I glimpse the pull of chaos in my peripheral vision, for now, that love anchors me enough to push forward. So I stand guard by the cave mouth, staff in hand, watching for danger with renewed hope beating in my chest—hope that our desperate union might be the key to saving both Kaelith and me from the fate that hunts us.

By the time dawn's first pale light filters through the cavern fissure, Kaelith stirs from his partial stone doze. His injuries still look brutal, but the edges are sealed by petrified flesh that gradually recedes as he regains consciousness. I hurry to his side, brand tingling with relief. He blinks at me, runes glowing softly, voice groggy. "We made it?"

I brush dust from his hair, nodding, tears of exhaustion flooding me. "For now," I whisper. "The gargoyles didn't return. We're safe for the moment."

He presses a clawed hand over mine, a gentle squeeze. "Thank you." Emotions swirl in his gaze—gratitude, love, the leftover anguish from nearly dying. "I can walk?" He tests his legs, flinching slightly. But the gaping hole in his thigh is now a ragged scar. My chest floods with gratitude.

"Careful," I urge, sliding an arm around his waist. He leans on me, though far less than last night. The tether hums at our proximity, reminding me how intimately we fused our powers. Heat flushes my cheeks. I can still feel the echoes of that desperate

lovemaking. He must sense it too, because his runes flicker in a moment of silent acknowledgement. Our gazes meet, and the memory of our union pulses, overshadowed by the raw tenderness we share now.

Wordlessly, we gather what little gear we have left. I check the cave mouth: no sign of lesser gargoyles. The morning sun peaks over the mountains, the sky painted in soft peach and lavender. We exchange a relieved breath, stepping outside onto frost-crusted stone. The slope below is littered with half-frozen debris from the night's fight, but no monstrous silhouettes appear.

Kaelith glances at me, voice husky. "We should find Drayveth and the others, if they survived. Or continue toward Snowfall Glen if we're on our own." I sense the tension in him—he hates dealing with Drayveth but acknowledges we might need all the help we can get.

I inhale, scanning the horizon. The brand twinges, a reminder of Drayveth's condemnation. He labeled me Nyxari if I refuse to kill Kaelith. I refuse. But perhaps he's out there, battered, needing us as much as we once needed him. "We'll search briefly," I decide. "Then press on. We can't linger too long. Those gargoyles might return."

Kaelith nods, wincing slightly as he flexes his thigh. "Lead the way."

We descend from the cave's perch, moving cautiously across the rocky paths. My entire body aches, but my heart is steadied by Kaelith's presence at my side, by the tether's subdued warmth. We overcame another brush with death. Each test cements our bond further. A flicker of fear surfaces as I recall the shadow I felt creeping at the edges of that synergy. I must remain vigilant.

Despite the swirling doubts, I steal a glance at Kaelith, seeing him upright, runes glowing with renewed life. My lips curve in a small, private smile. Love. A fragile

bloom in the midst of carnage, but real. The sight of him alive, leaning on me only slightly, fills me with a fierce sense of triumph. No matter what darkness tugs at my magic, this feeling is worth fighting for.

We find no trace of Drayveth's group in the immediate vicinity—only scuffed footprints and scattered debris. They must have fled or been attacked elsewhere. With time pressing, we decide to press onward. Snowfall Glen awaits, rumored to be hidden deeper in these mountains. If they have wards or spells that can block Nerezza's brood, it might be the only safe haven.

The rising sun warms the rocky slopes enough to melt some of the frost, leaving slick patches of mud. We trek slowly, mindful of Kaelith's healing injuries, exchanging few words but many cautious glances. The tether pulses with an intimacy we can't ignore. Everything has changed between us, and though dread hovers, the sweetness of that bond outstrips my terror.

At midday, we pause on a ledge overlooking a wide valley. A faint shimmer in the distance might be water or perhaps a shimmering ward line. I squint, trying to make sense of it. Kaelith sets a hand on my shoulder to steady me, wings folding. We stand side by side, battered but unbroken.

"How far do you think?" I ask, swallowing dryness in my throat. My staff weighs heavy in my hand. "Snowfall Glen could be near. I remember hearing they ward their entire territory with illusions."

Kaelith breathes softly, tail curling. "A day's journey, perhaps. If your stories are correct." He meets my gaze. "We'll manage." His runes flicker with quiet determination. "And if more lesser gargoyles appear, we'll fight them—together."

My heart warms, recollecting how we overcame the brood last night. "Together," I echo, a vow under my breath. The memory of that frantic, life-saving union surges in

my mind, a mix of embarrassment, longing, and fierce pride. We did it. We survived.

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Still, I can't banish the flicker of worry about the darkness I felt. Love or not, synergy or not, a part of me wonders if each time we fuse magic, we chip away at my boundaries, letting chaos seep in. A silent vow forms: I must stand guard against that temptation.

Kaelith must sense my tension because he brushes a gentle knuckle across my brand. The tether warms, reassuring. "We've come this far," he murmurs. "We'll see it through."

Tears prick my eyes, but I blink them away, offering a faint, determined smile. "Yes. We will." I lean into his touch, allowing a moment of closeness that no longer feels taboo. The slope of his shoulder is comforting under my palm.

So we forge onward, hearts pounding with both dread and hope. Our path remains fraught—Nerezza's brood hunts these mountains, Drayveth might still rally his purna, and the coven condemns me as Nyxari. But Kaelith and I stand side by side, our tether forging a union deeper than mere alliance. With each step, I reaffirm the love that blossomed in that desperate cave, a love that might just outshine the looming darkness.

And though the shadow of chaos tugs at the corners of my magic, for now, I cling to the fierceness of our bond. I trust that together, we can weather whatever nightmares lie ahead—even if it means challenging Nerezza herself, or facing the coven's wrath. We will not yield.

As the sun slips lower, lengthening our shadows over the rocky path, we brace ourselves for the next trial. But in our shared heartbeat, in the tether's soft hum, we

carry a spark of unbreakable warmth that defies every threat. We survived a desperate union, forging new strength from our synergy, and no matter how the darkness beckons, I refuse to let it claim me.

For Kaelith's sake and mine, I'll fight to keep the love we've found, even if it costs me everything else.

14

KAELITH

Asliver of pink light spills across the rugged slope as dawn breaks, painting the sky in cautious pastels that do little to ease the roil in my chest. My thigh wound, once a bloody crater, now itches under its half-stone scab, a reminder that Sariah's healing synergy saved my life yet again. The tether hums with a subtle current each time I so much as glance her way. She's standing nearby, scanning the mountain pass for any sign of Nerezza's brood. Her shoulders remain tense from everything we've endured.

I should feel relief. The lesser gargoyles that ambushed us retreated hours ago. We survived. But peace is fleeting. A heavy dread coils in my gut—Nerezza is still out there, orchestrating every monstrous turn of events with the casual cruelty I once believed she'd never show. My mind replays her illusions from earlier encounters, the way her spectral form taunted me, hinting at how she might fix my bond with Sariah or sever it altogether. She thrives on sowing doubt and fear.

I rub a clawed hand across my face, forcing those memories aside. We have ground to cover. If Drayveth's group remains alive, they're nowhere in sight. Sariah and I have resumed the trek toward Snowfall Glen alone. The plan is to circle the mountain's base, bypass a steep ravine that's infested with twisted gargoyles, and hopefully find a trail leading to the purnas' territory.

“Sariah,” I murmur, voice echoing softly in the crisp air. “We should move soon.”

She turns, a small, determined smile flickering across her lips. “Yes. The longer we linger, the greater the chance Nerezza’s brood returns.” She shoulders her staff, the brand on her wrist flickering silver. Through our bond, I sense her lingering exhaustion from channeling so much magic to heal me the night before, yet her resolve remains unwavering. My chest aches with fierce gratitude—and guilt. She shouldn’t have to keep bailing me out.

I pivot away from her, scanning the ridgeline for movement. My wings tighten involuntarily at the memory of those lesser gargoyles diving at us, but the sky remains empty. At least for now. “Stay close,” I say quietly, offering her my arm. She hesitates, glancing at the tether’s faint glow.

A flicker of sorrow crosses her face—some silent question about whether I’m pushing her away again. Our talk last night ended with a tentative truce between my fears and her unwavering faith. I promised to try trusting her fully. So I force a small nod. She steps close, hooking her arm with mine. The tether warms, an intimate hum that both comforts and unsettles me. I can’t lose her, but neither can I let her turn into the next Nyxari.

We set off, descending a slope of scattered boulders and slick gravel, the sun climbing above the ridge. The wind is mild, carrying the distant scent of pine, but also a faint undertone of rot that lingers from the monstrous gargoyles. I keep my wings half-extended for balance, tail flicking with each step. Sariah and I exchange minimal words, tension from the previous battles making conversation feel risky. We’re both scanning for threats at every turn.

By midday, we reach a narrow defile, a place where two steep cliffs almost meet, leaving a slim passage wide enough for a single file. My instincts prick at the unnatural hush. A sense of foreboding creeps over me. I motion for Sariah to hang

back, stepping forward to test the rocky ground. The tether pulses with alarm, reflecting her caution.

One more step—and I freeze. A subtle shift in the air triggers a memory of Nerezza's illusions. My skin tingles, runes flickering in protest. Something's off.

"Sariah," I hiss under my breath, "there might be a trap." She nods, staff at the ready, eyes scanning the cliffs. We stand poised, waiting for gargoyles to swoop down. But the sky remains empty. The path, though narrow, appears deserted.

We inch forward another few strides, hugging the rock walls. The ground slopes downward, then broadens into a small plateau. Boulders form a ringlike shape, reminiscent of some ancient gathering site. A tangle of shriveled shrubs clings to the cracks. I swallow, runes flickering faster. I know this clearing.

My heart pounds as recognition dawns. This place... it looks eerily similar to a memory from centuries past, back when Nerezza and I traveled together, forging alliances between gargoyles and purna. My wings tremble. Is this real, or another illusion?

"Sariah," I whisper, voice taut. "We should leave."

She blinks, surprise coloring her features. "Why? It's just a clearing. Might be a decent campsite if it's safe."

Safe? The word tears at me. My claws dig into my palms. "I... I sense Nerezza's presence," I manage. "We can't?—"

The air shimmers, cutting me off. My runes blaze in warning. Sariah gasps, brand flaring silver. Reality warps around us, and the ring of boulders flickers like a mirage in desert heat. My throat tightens. Too late.

A swirl of darkness expands in the center of the clearing, morphing into the regal figure that haunts my every nightmare. Nerezza, or her projection, stands tall in swirling black robes that drift around her ankles like living shadows. Her eyes glow a deep crimson, hair floating in an ethereal breeze that ruffles her illusions. My entire body goes rigid. She's here.

Sariah chokes back a cry, staff raised. I brace myself, wings half-flared, tail lashing the dust. "Nerezza," I snarl, voice echoing in the hush. No illusions of greeting or subtlety this time. She's brazen in her trap.

She smiles, that same seductive, mocking curve of her lips that once made me weak. "Ah, Kaelith. Dearest gargoyle, we meet again." Her gaze flicks to Sariah, dismissive, then returns to me with a predatory gleam. "You've recovered from our little fiasco with the brood, I see."

Sariah steps forward, trembling with anger. "Leave us alone," she demands, brand sizzling faint arcs of light. "We know you're orchestrating these attacks, driving gargoyles to slaughter innocents."

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Nerezza laughs, the sound echoing off the stone walls. “You flatter me. The lesser gargoyles do require... encouragement to follow my commands, but they’re so eager to please.” She eyes Sariah with mild contempt. “And you, little purna, continue to amuse me. Clinging to a gargoyle once beloved by me. Do you truly think you can keep him safe?”

My runes flare at her words. I step protectively between them. “You’re not the same being I once admired,” I growl. “Whatever love we had died centuries ago, with your cruelty.”

Her face flickers with momentary pain, then hardens to cold fury. “You speak of cruelty, Kaelith? Did you not seal me away, forcing me to languish in darkness? We could have soared beyond mortal strife, but you chained me.” She raises a hand, swirling black energy coalescing around her fingers. “I’ve forgiven you, but my generosity has limits.”

Sariah’s brand pulses in alarm. She grips her staff, lips peeled back in a silent snarl. “If you think we’ll kneel to you?—”

Nerezza cuts her off with a disdainful wave. “Kneel? Hardly. I offer you both a chance to transcend mortal shackles.” Her scarlet gaze settles on me again. “Especially you, Kaelith. Do you truly want to spend your time fawning over a lesser purna, watching her totter along, flirting with darkness she can’t hope to master? Why not join me? I can sever that inconvenient tether, restore you to the apex of gargoyle power. We’ll rule together, as we once dreamed.”

My entire body shakes with revulsion, yet I can’t deny the pang of old guilt. We did

dream of forging a utopia, bridging gargoyle and purna. I believed in her so fervently. I clench my claws, forcing the memory aside. “You twisted that dream into horror. I’ll never stand with you again.”

She sighs, a theatrical sadness. “You keep saying that, and yet...” Her eyes flick to Sariah, a malicious smile curving. “You’ve replaced me with a mere child who can barely control her magic. Do you think she’ll spare you from heartbreak when her brand consumes her mind? Drayveth’s coven has already labeled her Nyxari. Face facts, Kaelith. She’s following in my footsteps.”

Sariah sucks in a sharp breath. I feel her heartbreak spike through the tether, recalling Drayveth’s condemnation. My wings twitch, a surge of protective anger flooding me. “Stop it,” I growl, stepping forward. “We see your games.”

Nerezza’s eyes narrow, swirling black energy intensifying around her hand. “Such devotion. Touching. Let me show you how I can free you from that devotion.” She lifts her other hand, and the air warps. My runes blaze in alarm, but the illusion slams into me before I can move.

“No!” Sariah cries. I barely register her voice. Shadows envelop my vision. The world tilts, leaving me disoriented. Nerezza’s illusions. She’s pulling me into her psychic snare, forcing me to relive memories of our past love.

My mind reels as images assault me: Nerezza and I standing atop a mountain peak centuries ago, the sky blazing with sunrise. She laughs, warm and untainted, her white hair blowing across her face as I grin at her. The memory feels so vivid, so heartbreakingly real. This was before everything decayed, before she unleashed chaos.

I stumble in the present, eyes rolling back. The tether’s hum recedes into static. Sariah’s voice fades. Instead, I hear Nerezza’s laughter from that old memory, see her wide smile. Then the vision shifts—her face contorting with pain as she wields

forbidden magic to protect my gargoyle clan from dark elf raiders. Screams echo. Blood splatters. My clan's gratitude morphs into horror as her spell warps them. I see it all from the vantage of that younger self, powerless to stop her.

I gasp, runes sputtering. The illusions swirl faster, yanking me through memory after memory: Nerezza coaxing me to trust her, to support her quest for ultimate power, the moment she used chaos to bind gargoyle souls to twisted stone bodies. My heart breaks anew. I recall the wave of guilt that nearly drowned me then. I watch it replay with brutal clarity, tears burning my eyes.

Through the haze, I dimly sense Sariah shouting my name, brand flaring to break me from the vision. But Nerezza's illusions clamp down, suffocating. She steps closer in the real world, though I can't see it. My consciousness is trapped in the swirl of memory.

Then her voice resonates inside my head: "Submit, Kaelith. Spare yourself—and your new purna—from the fate of my wrath. You know how destructive I can be. If you rejoin me, I'll let her live, let her walk free from the nightmares."

I choke, seeing Sariah's face superimposed over Nerezza's illusions, recalling the synergy, the closeness. If Nerezza truly wants Sariah gone, she could unleash horrors on her. My tail thrashes in the real world, wings shuddering. Wouldn't it be simpler if I surrender, keep Sariah safe?

Tears slip unbidden in the vision as Nerezza conjures illusions of Sariah screaming, consumed by chaos. My runes flicker wildly. No, I can't believe—But the illusions burrow deeper, cracking my resolve. If I just yield to Nerezza, maybe Sariah is spared.

The next scene hits me like a knife to the chest: I watch a twisted version of the future where Sariah, her eyes black with void, stands over my broken body, cackling as she becomes the new Nyxari. My mind reels with horror. No, that can't be real, can it?

But Drayveth's condemnation... Nerezza's manipulations...The fear I've harbored all along rears up, strangling me.

"Sariah," I whisper, voice choked. "I... I don't want this for you." The illusions swirl around me, forcing me to witness unstoppable chaos if she succumbs.If I spare her that by returning to Nerezza... is it worth it?My heart cracks under the weight.

Nerezza's voice purrs in my mind:"Yes, Kaelith, yield. I can seal the darkness away from her. Let me harness your synergy for the greater good. Isn't it kinder to protect her from the path of another Nyxari?"

I'm drowning in guilt and anguish. My limbs jerk in reality. Sariah tries to hold me, brand flaring bright, but Nerezza's illusions intensify, blotting out the real world. In this psychic realm, Nerezza appears in her old, uncorrupted form, gentle smile curving her lips. She extends a hand."Choose me again,"she whispers.

My chest heaves with ragged sobs.I can't watch Sariah become a monster.The illusions feed on that fear, bombarding me with twisted images of Sariah's brand oozing black venom, of gargoyle bodies strewn about.If I do nothing, is that the fate awaiting us?

My resolve cracks. In the vision, I find myself trembling, stepping toward Nerezza's outstretched hand.Better I sacrifice myself than lose Sariah to this horror.A flicker of betrayal ignites in me, but I cling to the desperate notion that maybe Nerezza will truly spare Sariah if I obey.

Suddenly, the illusions shift, and I'm back in the present, gasping for air. Nerezza's eyes blaze with triumph. I realize I've physically moved closer to her, stumbling out of Sariah's reach. Sariah's voice crackles in my ear, frantic: "Kaelith! Don't—please—listen to me!" I catch the anguish in her cry, but my mind reels with the memory of that horrifying vision.I must protect her.

Nerezza smirks, her illusions still swirling around us. She lifts a hand, conjuring a barrier of shadow that divides me from Sariah. My wings snap open, but I can't muster the strength to resist. My head throbs. Nerezza's mental assault left me disoriented, heart pounding with panic for Sariah's future.

I turn to Sariah, hating what I'm about to say, but believing it might be the only way to keep her safe. "Sariah... I have to go. If I leave with her, she'll spare you." My voice breaks, shame coursing through me.

Her eyes widen in horror, tears brimming. "No! That's exactly what she wants. Don't do this!" She slams her staff against the shadowy barrier, arcs of silver magic sparking. But Nerezza's illusions are potent, and Sariah's exhausted from healing me. The barrier holds.

Nerezza laughs, stepping close to me, brushing her ephemeral fingers along my runes. Her touch makes my skin crawl, yet the illusions tangle my mind, reminding me of simpler times. A lie. Still, I can't shake the dread that if I resist, Sariah will suffer a monstrous fate. My chest aches.

"Sariah," I murmur, voice ragged. "I—I can't watch you turn into... her. If siding with Nerezza spares you from that path, it's a price I'll pay." My heart wails at the betrayal in her eyes.

She slams the barrier again, voice cracking with desperation. "Kaelith! You're letting her illusions trick you. She wants you enthralled or dead. This won't protect me—please, don't leave me."

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Tears slip from my eyes, guilt crushing me. But Nerezza's illusions swirl once more, showing me scenes of Sariah's brand blackening with chaos. My wings droop, tail limp. I can't let that happen.

Nerezza's voice purrs in my ear, "Choose me, Kaelith. End this cycle of fear."

I force a strangled breath, turning my back on Sariah, swallowing the sob that threatens to burst free. I do this for you. That's the lie I cling to. My runes flicker with anguished conflict as I shuffle forward, letting Nerezza guide me away from the barrier.

"No!" Sariah screams behind me, heartbreak lacing every syllable. "Kaelith, no, I love you—don't do this!"

The tether thrums with violent protest, sending razor-edged jolts of pain into my core as I pull away from her. I nearly collapse from the agony of severing that closeness, but Nerezza's illusions cradle me, dulling the physical torment with false comfort. I hate this.

Her dark robes swirl around me, and she half-manifests a corridor of shadows. I see glimpses of twisted gargoyles waiting beyond, their eyes gleaming with demonic light. My stomach twists. This is madness. But I'm locked in a spiral of guilt. If I fight, Sariah might become the monster I fear.

A final, despairing shriek rips from Sariah's throat. The tether convulses inside me, flaring a last desperate wave of synergy that begs me to return. My knees nearly buckle. I almost pivot, almost run back to her arms. But Nerezza's illusions tear open

a vision of Sariah in Nyxari form, decimating entire armies.No.My heart cracks, finalizing my decision.

I surge forward, passing through the curtain of swirling shadows. Nerezza's laughter echoes around me, triumphant and cruel. The last thing I see is Sariah's face, contorted with betrayal and grief, brand blazing silver as she tries to break the barrier. My chest feels carved open, the tether screaming in silent agony at our forced separation.

Then darkness envelops me. Nerezza's illusions coil around my mind, ushering me into a realm of half-light and swirling magic. The real world recedes, leaving only the faint echo of Sariah's sobs. My last conscious thought is that I've betrayed the woman I love in a desperate bid to save her from a fate that might be all in my head.All is lost.

The shadows swirl,forming a corridor of half-solid illusions. My wings remain limp at my sides, runes flickering with confusion. Nerezza's presence drifts around me like a noxious perfume. She leads me deeper, humming a soft tune that resonates with ancient sorrow. My mind reels with each step, old memories tangling with the present.I'm succumbing.

"Kaelith," she purrs, voice echoing. "You've chosen well. Together, we'll ensure that foolish purna never becomes another Nyxari. I'll keep her safe—provided you remain at my side."

I want to retch at the hypocrisy of her words, but the illusions weigh me down. My heart throbs with the tether's pain.Sariah is still out there, alone, thinking I abandoned her.My lungs tighten.I did abandon her.

Nerezza's illusory corridor opens into a grand chamber that can't possibly exist in these mountains. Pillars of black obsidian rise from a marble floor, swirling with

smoky wisps of chaos. Figures scuttle at the edges of my vision—gargoyle thralls, contorted by her corruption. My stomach twists at the sight of my kin so twisted, but I can't muster the strength to fight. Guilt overwhelms me, burying my instincts under a weight of grief.

Nerezza steps before me, black robes trailing across the floor. She lifts a hand to my cheek, eyes gleaming with satisfaction. "No tears," she murmurs, her voice sweetly cruel. "You're doing what's best for the one you claim to love, after all."

A trembling hiss escapes my lips. "If you harm her, I'll?—"

She laughs, placing a finger on my runes to hush me. "Relax. Why would I destroy my leverage?" Her expression flickers with a twisted semblance of affection. "My goal is to see you by my side willingly, without these pesky illusions. But you do enjoy illusions, don't you?"

My wings quake, tail scraping the marble. "Stop toying with me," I snarl, though it lacks conviction. "Spare her, or kill me now."

Her lips quirk in a faint smile. "Kaelith, always so dramatic. I have bigger plans than petty murder. You're the key to stabilizing my brood fully, bridging gargoyle resilience with my chaos. We almost had that centuries ago, if not for your meddling. Now, we can rectify past mistakes."

I recall the tragedy that erupted when she first tried to fuse chaos with gargoyle lifeforce. My soul recoils. "You turned them into mindless monsters," I spit, voice trembling. "They were never free."

She sighs. "Freedom is relative. Their bodies endured. They soared higher than normal gargoyles, unstoppable in war. We could have saved them from extinction, but you sealed me. Now that I'm awake, I'll finish what I started—this time, with or

without your cooperation.” Her eyes gleam. “But I’m glad you chose me. It spares me from ripping you to pieces.”

Revulsion churns in my stomach. I didn’t choose you. I forced myself to yield for Sariah’s sake. A pang of longing hits me as I think of Sariah. She’s out there, probably devastated. All is lost, the phrase echoes. “What do you want from me?” I croak, voice hollow.

She smiles, brushing a tendril of magic across my runes. The sensation makes me shudder. “Your power. It resonates with that little purna, but I can redirect it to strengthen my brood, to refine my chaos spells. In time, you’ll forget about your mortal fling. Or maybe you won’t, but it won’t matter once you’re woven into my domain fully.”

A wave of despair threatens to crush me. I walked into this, hoping to spare Sariah from the illusions’ prophecy. Now, I see how Nerezza plans to bend my synergy to her twisted aims, fueling further atrocities. I have to resist. But each breath feels heavier, illusions pressing on my mind, making me question whether Sariah is truly safer if I remain here. And if I fight back, what monstrous illusions might Nerezza unleash on Sariah?

Nerezza’s hand drifts to my chest, touching the place where my runes center. I recoil, but she grabs me with surprising force. My claws twitch, unsure whether to lash out. Would I break the illusions if I strike her? Is she even physically here, or is this another mental realm? My head spins.

She leans in, voice sweetly poisonous. “Take my power once more. Let me strip away your tether to that girl. Then we can channel your synergy fully. You won’t risk your heart, and she’ll live, hidden away from my wrath. Everyone wins.”

The illusions swirl, giving me a flash of Sariah safe somewhere far away, living a

quiet life. My heart clenches. She'd hate that, being forced to hide. But the image of her brand blackening, becoming another Nyxari, also ravages my mind. My will cracks further, the illusions gnawing at every vulnerability.

I sink to my knees in the illusory chamber, head bowed, wings drooping. Nerezza stands over me, dark magic shimmering around her like an unholy halo. My runes flicker with distress, tether screaming for Sariah. I left her behind. The shame and heartbreak are suffocating.

Through the chaos, I recall Sariah's tears, her voice pleading for me to stay. The memory kindles a faint spark of resolve. She loves me. She trusts me not to yield. But the illusions conjure another echo of Sariah's face, twisted with chaotic madness. Stop, I beg my mind. I can't bear this.

Nerezza strokes my hair with mock tenderness. "Surrender," she whispers, voice resonant with enthralling magic. "You have no path left but me."

A hollow sob tears from my throat. For an instant, I want to let go, to numb the agony of this betrayal, to drift in illusions of the old days with Nerezza. What if it spares Sariah from any further danger? My tail slumps across the floor.

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Yet that spark remains, dim but insistent: Sariah would never want me to abandon hope. She'd fight illusions tooth and nail. My brand, half a world away, might still anchor me if I can muster the strength. But how?

Nerezza's illusions swirl anew, and I see a horrifying image of Sariah locked in stone, gargoyles devouring her. I cry out, tears trailing down my face. She must be safe. She must be. My entire being trembles with the desire to break free, to return to her. That flicker of defiance grows.

But the illusions remain relentless, feeding me fear after fear. I'm pinned in place, mind battered, the bond to Sariah muffled by Nerezza's overshadowing presence. All is lost, the refrain echoes.

In the real world—wherever my body stands—Nerezza must be guiding me away from that clearing. Sariah is left behind, presumably pounding at the barrier, sobbing my name. My chest tightens with heartbreak, but the illusions show me that's the only path to keep her safe. The illusions have cracked my will. I let them.

Nerezza's triumphant expression flickers with a moment of softness. She leans close, lips near my ear. "I never wanted to fight you, Kaelith. We were meant for greatness together, remember?"

My runes pulse with a conflicted ache. The memory of our shared dreams stirs. My mind whirls with guilt and longing. She was once so radiant. But I can't forget the atrocities. I stare at the illusions' shifting mosaic—Nerezza in her old gentle form, Nerezza unleashing chaos upon innocents, all interwoven with images of Sariah. My head hurts.

Tears burn my eyes. I can't see a way out. The illusions have me in their thrall. My entire body slumps, wings half-petrified in despair. Sariah, forgive me, I think, letting the illusions carry me deeper into Nerezza's realm.

In that final thought, I taste the metallic tang of heartbreak. The tether's resonance dims to a faint echo, overshadowed by the swirling darkness. My soul feels tethered no longer to Sariah, but to a swirling void of illusions, courtesy of the woman who once claimed to love me. All is lost.

Darkness encloses me, illusions pressing in from every side. My eyes close, tears sliding down my cheeks. Nerezza's illusions hold me captive, drawing me away from Sariah's side with a twisted promise that this betrayal might save her from the fate I most fear. But the cost is unimaginable. My heart twists in regret as I let the illusions lead me further. I have no more fight left.

Thus, I fall into Nerezza's hands, leaving Sariah behind to face whatever nightmares remain, convinced my sacrifice might spare her from damnation. All is lost. And in the echoing chambers of illusions, Nerezza's laughter reigns, triumphant over the last shred of hope I carried.

15

SARIAH

I jerk awake, heart hammering so fiercely it rattles my ribs. My breath rasps through my raw throat. For a moment, I think I'm in the cave where Kaelith and I huddled together last night—or was it days ago?—but the surroundings blur, shifting into stark reality. I'm alone, sprawled on hard ground near the remnants of a cold fire. The sky overhead has just begun to lighten, gray streaks of dawn creeping across the bare cliffs.

Instantly, panic seizes me. My gaze flicks around the makeshift camp, searching for the hulking silhouette of the gargoyle who's become my partner, my anchor. Kaelith. But there's no sign of him: no broad-shouldered figure in chipped armor, no faint glow of runes. Only empty space and scattered footprints in the dust. My chest constricts. Where is he?

"Kaelith?" My voice echoes, ragged and small in the hush. A cold wind rustles over the rocks, offering no answer. I scramble to my feet, nearly tripping over a fallen branch. My staff lies within arm's reach, but that's the only comfort. The tether inside my chest—our connection that has guided me through so many perils—simmers with a dull throb, as if subdued by distance. He's gone. The realization slams into me, stealing my breath.

For a few heartbeats, I stand rooted in shock. My brand on my wrist itches painfully, reminding me of the synergy we shared, the battles we survived side by side. He wouldn't just leave me, would he? Not after everything. My heart stutters. Unless Nerezza forced him, or twisted illusions so potent he believed he had no choice. Anger, laced with heartbreak, flares. Or maybe he went willingly, convinced it would protect me. The possibilities churn in my mind.

My vision blurs with tears as I rake my gaze across the empty camp. My entire body throbs with leftover exhaustion from the frantic synergy that nearly broke us. Devastation seeps in, heavier than any physical wound. He's truly gone. I want to scream, but my throat seizes, no sound escaping except a choked whimper. The man I love has disappeared, leaving me with only the echo of the tether's weakened beat.

"Coward," I whisper, tears slipping down my cheeks. It's not fair to label him that, but fury coils in my belly, fueled by betrayal and fear. He might have abandoned me for Nerezza. He said he feared I'd become her, but he's the one who vanished without a word. A sob bubbles in my chest. How could he?

Before I can fully collapse into despair, the crunch of footsteps behind me jolts me from my misery. I spin, staff raised, adrenaline surging. My brand flares, half-expecting Nerezza's brood or Drayveth's purna to pounce. Instead, Drayveth himself emerges from behind a jagged boulder, his expression guarded. Two of his subordinates linger behind him, both sporting fresh bruises and wary stares.

I bristle, hatred and heartbreak mingling in my veins. My battered relationship with Drayveth teeters between truce and condemnation; he once threatened to brand me a Nyxari if I didn't kill Kaelith. My pulse spikes. What does he want now?

"Sariah," he says evenly, voice carrying across the rocky expanse. The wind buffets his dark cloak. "We heard shouting." His gaze sweeps around the camp, lingering on the empty bedroll Kaelith used. A flicker of understanding crosses his face. "Your gargoyle is gone, isn't he?"

The question drives salt into my fresh wound. My gargoyle. I want to lash out, but I clamp my jaws shut, tears still burning my eyes. "Yes," I manage, voice taut. "He left. Or was taken. I don't know." My anger surges again, twisting with grief. "Why do you care?"

He exhales, staff shifting in his hand. "You saved me from Nerezza's brood. I owe you at least civility." A faint note of regret weaves through his tone. Then he glances at his subordinates, who remain a few paces behind, scanning for threats. "We saw tracks leading away from here, fresh. Gargoyle footprints, accompanied by... something else. Possibly illusions. We suspect Nerezza drew him out."

My heart lurches. "She must have enthralled him again." I recall the illusions she conjured last time we saw her, how she nearly trapped Kaelith's mind. But is that the entire story? A darker voice hisses, What if he went willingly, believing Nerezza's promises? I squeeze my eyes shut, breath shaking. "I should have been awake," I murmur, heartbreak suffusing every word. "I could've stopped him."

Drayveth regards me with an unexpected gentleness, though behind it smolders old distrust. “Nerezza’s illusions are powerful. Perhaps he thought he was protecting you by leaving.” His gaze flicks to the brand on my wrist, the same brand that once marked me as part of his coven. “Or perhaps he embraced her calls. Either way, you’re alone now.”

Alone. The word echoes in my chest, gnawing with savage clarity. I’ve lost Kaelith. My brand throbs, as if mocking me that my synergy partner is out of reach. My tears threaten to spill anew, but I steel my spine, refusing to break in front of Drayveth. “Why are you here?” I snap, voice rough. “If you’re here to kill me or drag me back, do it quickly. I have no reason to fight you now.”

One of Drayveth’s subordinates bristles, eyes narrowing. But Drayveth silences them with a raised hand. His expression is grim, lines of worry etched into his face. “You misunderstood me before. I never wanted your death, only your compliance. But now that you’re alone, I come with one final offer: rejoin the coven. Help us seal these gargoyles—Kaelith included—and end Nerezza’s plague. You can salvage your life.”

My chest hollows. Help them seal Kaelith away? The mere thought sends fresh agony slicing through me. But Drayveth continues, misreading my stricken expression for consideration. “Think rationally, Sariah. Kaelith’s gone. If he’s joined Nerezza, you can’t save him. The gargoyles are unstoppable unless we harness old wards. If you help me, the coven might forgive your transgressions. You won’t be hunted as a Nyxari. You can return to our ranks.”

Return. The word tastes bitter, conjuring memories of training halls, of nights spent studying incantations under Drayveth’s tutelage. My brand stings, recalling how they turned on me the moment I refused to kill Kaelith. My emotions swirl: longing for a sense of belonging, hate for their cruelty, and heartbreak that they still demand I seal Kaelith to prove my loyalty. And if Kaelith truly left me for Nerezza... is Drayveth right?

A heavy silence weighs. Drayveth's subordinates shift impatiently. The man with a scar across his cheek fiddles with the runes on his staff, while the woman with shaved hair observes me with suspicion. My entire body trembles, tears threatening again. Kaelith is gone. Did he betray me, or was he forced?

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I recall the synergy we shared just a day ago, how fiercely we clung to each other. The echo of “I love you” resonates in my mind. A sob lodges in my throat. Could he truly betray that bond?

“Sariah,” Drayveth presses, voice firm. “Help me seal the gargoyles once more. We can end this threat—Nerezza’s brood, Kaelith, all of them. Return to the coven. Let us guide your power so it doesn’t consume you. Otherwise...” He leaves the threat unspoken. Otherwise, they brand me Nyxari for real.

I clench my staff, the polished wood slick in my sweaty grip. My brand itches fiercely, as though urging me not to turn away from the love I found, no matter how broken it seems now. But the despair inside me roars: Kaelith left. Maybe the love was a lie. My tears overflow, sliding down my cheeks. “I can’t,” I breathe, barely above a whisper. “Even if he’s gone... I won’t betray him.”

One of Drayveth’s subordinates curses under her breath. “Then you’re a fool,” she spits, stepping forward with menace. “He abandoned you, or worse, he’s joined Nerezza. You owe him nothing.”

Pain flares in my chest. I owe him everything. The tears intensify, but a fierce anger rises as well. “You don’t understand,” I snap, voice shaking. “He risked his life for me so many times. He was the only one who believed I wasn’t some toy or soldier to be manipulated. I won’t let your coven twist me into a gargoyle-killer.”

Drayveth’s eyes narrow, a flicker of frustration crossing his brow. “You’d condemn this world to Nerezza’s chaos for one gargoyle? Is that truly what you’re saying?”

I recoil, shame and fury mingling. I'm not condemning the world. Kaelith and I both wanted to stop Nerezza. But Drayveth's condemnation warps everything. I can't find the words to explain. My brand pulses in confusion, tears scalding my cheeks.

He exhales, shoulders slumping as if in pity. "We're out of time, Sariah. The coven is preparing wards to contain the gargoyles. If you help, we can reinforce the ancient seals. If not..." He lifts his staff, the runes etched into it glowing menacingly. "We mark you Nyxari in truth. No second chances. No illusions of mercy."

For a heartbeat, the temptation to yield washes over me. What if Kaelith truly joined Nerezza, enthralled by illusions or old guilt? Maybe there's no redemption. My tears blur the bleak mountain scenery. If that's the case, could I rejoin the coven, stop living under threat? I'd be safe. I'd belong again.

Images flood my mind: training with Drayveth as a young acolyte, laughing with fellow novices, the sense of security in belonging. Then I recall how they turned on me the instant I refused their orders, how they demanded I kill the man who fought at my side. They condemned me the moment I disobeyed. My heart beats painfully. And what if Kaelith is truly lost?

I sway, mind spinning. All is lost, the same phrase Kaelith used. But is it truly? A flicker of memory surfaces: the moment we last merged our magic to save his life, the love in his eyes. Could that be false?

Drayveth steps closer, staff pulsing with quiet authority. "Decide, Sariah. If you remain here, you'll be alone, easy prey for Nerezza or her brood. But if you rejoin us, we stand a chance to rebind them all—Nerezza, Kaelith, the entire gargoyle threat—back into stone. That was the original plan centuries ago, was it not? Seal them away for good."

My chest constricts with heartbreak. Seal them away? The memory of Kaelith's face

contorted in pain, pinned in stone for centuries, rakes my thoughts. Even if he's left me, I can't stomach the idea of him trapped in eternal slumber. No, I can't do it. But the thought of being alone, labeled Nyxari, hunted at every turn... I'm so tired, so battered. My brand sears, fueling my swirling emotions.

Tears drip onto the dusty ground. I squeeze my eyes shut, battling the voice urging me to accept Drayveth's offer and end my torment. Kaelith left you. He left you. It rings in my mind, a savage echo. My fists clench around the staff, nails digging into my palms.

"Sariah," Drayveth repeats, impatience edging his tone. "Time is short."

I nearly nod. My mind lurches at the prospect of safety, acceptance. But a voice—my own voice—whispers: No. You can't betray Kaelith, even if he betrayed you. You're better than that. My tears intensify, a sob ripping through me. I can't do it. Because deep down, I don't believe Kaelith willingly turned on me. And even if he did, my love for him can't vanish so easily.

Shuddering, I lift my gaze to meet Drayveth's. "No," I whisper, voice cracking. "I can't help you seal him. I can't rejoin a covenant that demands I murder or imprison someone who saved me repeatedly. Even if Kaelith did leave me... I can't cast him aside."

Drayveth's mouth hardens, and behind him, his subordinates shift with anger. "Then you're truly lost," one hisses. "You'd throw your life away for a monster."

My lips press tight, tears streaming. He's not a monster. But I can't form the words. Drayveth lifts his staff, runes flaring. "Then the covenant's edict stands. You're Nyxari in their eyes. We'll no longer attempt to spare you if we cross paths again."

I nod, the brand's sting intensifying as if it can sense the final break with my old life.

My entire body trembles, heart pounding so violently I fear it might burst. “Go, then,” I rasp, stepping back. “Do what you must. I’m done with your demands.”

Drayveth’s brow furrows, a flash of sorrow in his eyes. Maybe he regrets it. But he says nothing more. He turns, motioning for his subordinates to follow. They glare at me with contempt or pity—maybe both—before trudging away.

Within moments, they vanish into the boulders, leaving me truly alone. My tears redouble, hot and unrelenting. I grip my staff as though it’s the last anchor in a world crumbling around me. Kaelith is gone, Drayveth has forsaken me, the coven condemns me as Nyxari. Sobs wrack my body, stealing my breath.

For a time, I can’t move. I collapse onto a rock, burying my face in my palms, shoulders shaking with silent grief. The brand’s ache pulses in irregular surges, as if lamenting the absence of Kaelith’s synergy. My mind whirls with images: his molten gold eyes flicking to me with fierce devotion, the warmth of his stone-laced body pressed close, our synergy blazing with unstoppable power. All illusions, if he walked away so easily... or if Nerezza forced him. The not knowing tears me apart.

Darkness seeps into my thoughts, threatening to devour me. This is the end. I’ve lost everything. The air feels stifling, every breath laced with heartbreak. No coven, no gargoyle partner, no allies. I can’t do this alone. My tears drip onto the rocky ground, leaving tiny damp spots. The morning sun climbs overhead, mocking me with its golden light. A new day dawns, but my world feels black.

Seconds or hours pass—I can’t tell. At some point, I sense the cool breeze picking up, a faint reminder that I remain in a hostile mountain pass teeming with gargoyles. I must move. But despair weighs me down like lead. Where can I go? If I continue toward Snowfall Glen alone, do I stand a chance of surviving? If I remain, I’ll starve or be hunted by twisted creatures. Every path leads to ruin.

A faint scuff of rock signals footsteps. My head jerks up, puffy eyes scanning the ledge. For an instant, I think Kaelith has returned, but the figure that appears is too small, too robed in black. My heart sinks. Another purna from Drayveth's group? Have they returned to kill me?

But no—it's a single figure, limping slightly, face obscured by a hood. The brand on their wrist is partially visible, though battered. My panic flares. I lurch upright, staff raised, tears still wet on my cheeks. "Stay back," I snap, voice raw.

The figure lifts empty hands, palm outward. A weak voice emerges, female, trembling. "I'm not here to fight. I was left behind by Drayveth's retinue. I... I disagree with his verdict about you. I wanted to see if you needed help." Her tone is hesitant, as though she half-expects me to blast her with a lethal spell.

I blink, tears drying somewhat. My brand pulses uncomfortably. A purna from the coven who... pities me? My anger roils, but a faint hope stirs. "Why?" I demand, swallowing the lump in my throat. "Drayveth declared me Nyxari."

She winces, stepping closer. In the strengthening sunlight, I see a tired, worn face, a bruise across her cheek. "I know. I was with him when you parted ways. But... he left me behind to scout, or maybe to die. I never wanted this. I see how you love your gargoyle, how he fought by your side. I don't think you're on the path of Nerezza. Or if you are, perhaps it's not set in stone." Her mouth twists with uncertainty. "I'm not here to harm you, truly. I can't speak for the entire coven, but... I can offer you supplies, a bit of magic if you need healing."

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My chest wrenches. A shred of kindness from an unexpected source. But it's too late. The idea of rejoining them is impossible, and my heartbreak is too raw to accept pity. I shake my head, voice trembling. "You can't fix this," I whisper. "My partner—my gargoyle—left. Drayveth demands I seal him. I refuse." Tears threaten again. "Now I'm alone with no path."

The woman glances around, as if expecting an ambush. "You're never alone if you keep faith in your power," she murmurs, an echo of old coven teachings. Then she reaches into her satchel, pulling out a small parcel. "Dried food, a water canteen, and some bandages. Take them. I can't do more, or Drayveth will brand me a traitor too. But I won't let you starve."

A fresh sob wells in my throat. Why does this unexpected kindness cut deeper than Drayveth's condemnation? "Thank you," I manage. My hands shake as I accept the bundle, tears splashing onto the worn cloth. "I... I don't even know your name."

She smiles sadly. "Amille. We trained together once or twice, though you might not remember. You were always gifted with wards."

A faint memory stirs—Amille, a quiet novice in one of my classes. I never paid her much attention. My chest constricts with guilt. "Amille," I repeat, bowing my head. "Why are you doing this?"

She shrugs, eyes glistening. "Sometimes fear drives us to cruelty, but I can't watch my coven destroy another innocent. I hope you find your gargoyle, if that's truly what you want." She steps back, tears in her own eyes. "Drayveth is determined, though. If he sees you again, he'll carry out the High Circle's will."

I exhale shakily, cradling the parcel to my chest. “I understand.” My brand throbs, reminding me that each step I take away from the coven solidifies my outcast status. “Thank you for giving me a chance.”

She nods, tears shining, then hurries away before either of us can break down further. Her footsteps fade into the rocky distance, leaving me again alone, but this time with a small measure of hope. Not all purna want me dead.

I slump back onto the nearest rock, hugging the bundle of supplies. The dryness in my throat intensifies. My chest still tightens at the thought of Kaelith absent. He left me. Or Nerezza took him. Despair encroaches once more. What do I do now?

Memories swirl: Kaelith’s molten eyes, the synergy we invoked to save each other, the trembling confessions of love. Could that all vanish so swiftly? My brand stings with longing. He can’t truly have betrayed me. He must have believed he was protecting me.

Tears stream again, hot and unrelenting. Even if he thought it best, the ache of his absence won’t fade. Drayveth’s offer replays in my mind—help seal both gargoyles—and for a terrible instant, I nearly succumb to the easy path. Betray Kaelith. Return to the coven. Survive. But the thought makes me nauseous. I can’t. I love him, even if he left me behind.

The wind picks up, rustling dried shrubs in the ravine. Shudders of grief wrack my shoulders. I grip the staff, letting the brand’s persistent burn anchor me. This must be my darkest moment: alone, cut off from the man I love, no coven to rely on, hunted as a would-be Nyxari. My mind circles the hopelessness until a calm, small voice breaks through: He saved you so many times. You can’t abandon him now.

Yes. I sniff, wiping tears on my torn cloak. Even if Kaelith joined Nerezza or was dragged away, I owe it to him to try. We planned to reach Snowfall Glen, gather

allies. Maybe I can do that alone, or with new allies, then find a way to free Kaelith from her illusions. My heart clenches at the idea. It's insane, suicidal, but better than cowering or betraying him.

"I won't turn him to stone or kill him," I whisper, voice hoarse. "I refuse." The wind howls, as if in agreement. I drag a shaky breath. I might be at my lowest point, but I won't give up.

My brand pulses, a subdued rhythm matching my battered heartbeat. That synergy remains, a testament to the bond we forged. If Kaelith truly walked away to shield me from illusions, then perhaps I can repay that sacrifice by prying him free from Nerezza's manipulations. I owe him that.

Steeling myself, I force my trembling legs to stand. The world spins for a moment, tears still itching my eyes, but I remain upright, heart pounding with a fierce vow. "I'll keep going," I tell the empty ravine. "Even if he betrayed me, I'll find him. Even if the coven hunts me, I'll survive. I am no Nyxari."

The vow stirs a kernel of strength in my chest, quelling the swirling despair. Drayveth can label me as he pleases. My path is set: reach Snowfall Glen, gather resources, and if I must, march into Nerezza's stronghold to tear Kaelith from her illusions. The thought terrifies me, but it's better than surrendering to hopelessness. Better than letting heartbreak consume me.

Clutching Amille's bundle, I rummage for the water canteen. My lips are cracked from tears and dehydration. I gulp the stale water, each swallow a small lifeline. Then I nibble a piece of dried fruit, forcing my appetite to obey. My brand throbs less, as if the physical nourishment bolsters my resolve. I'll need strength for what's to come.

Once I've steadied my breath, I gather my battered cloak around me, staff in hand, and set off down the slope. The entire mountain range yawns before me, silent

witness to my solitary path. My feet ache, shoulders scream in protest, but I can't stop. Kaelith might be in grave danger, or Nerezza's illusions might have convinced him to remain by her side. The possibilities swirl, but none of them absolve me from trying to help.

Hours stretch into endless trudging. The sun arcs overhead, beating down on the exposed ridges. I scale rocky inclines, slip down scree slopes, all the while scanning for twisted gargoyle shapes overhead. None appear, though the sense of being watched lingers. My staff grows heavy, my brand scalding. I keep going. My heartbreak simmers just below the surface, fueling my determination to prove Drayveth wrong. He thinks me broken or lost. I'm not. Not yet.

As the day wanes, the sky overhead bleeds into gold and pink. My limbs drag, each step a monumental effort. My tears have dried, leaving a hollow ache behind my eyes. Kaelith's absence gnaws like an open wound. Yet I cling to the spark of defiance that flared when Drayveth demanded I seal both gargoyles. I can't. I won't.

Finally, I reach a broad plateau where the air is cooler, the wind biting. Pine trees stand scattered, clinging to the rocky soil. The faint scent of resin comforts me in a way I can't explain. Nature's calm. Searching for shelter, I spot a cluster of boulders forming a partial windbreak. My knees quake with exhaustion. I must rest.

I limp toward that nook, dropping onto the ground with a weary sigh. The brand throbs in the hush, a constant reminder that the synergy I once shared is incomplete. My mind conjures the memory of Kaelith's molten eyes. My chest twists with renewed longing and anger. He left me. Or he was forced. The ambiguity crushes me. But anger sparks again, fueling a vow not to yield to despair. I'll find him. One way or another.

Drayveth's final words echo: We brand you Nyxari. Let them come. If I'm strong enough to stand against Nerezza, perhaps I'm strong enough to face the coven's

condemnation. I'll be unstoppable if I harness my power responsibly, not letting it tip into chaos.

Night falls swiftly over the mountains, the temperature plunging. I wrap my cloak tight, teeth chattering. My body begs for warmth and food, but my meager rations from Amille are nearly spent. Perhaps I'll scavenge in the morning. Or perhaps I'll starve, alone on this path. The thought sends a pang of bitterness swirling with heartbreak. No. I'll survive. For Kaelith.

Tears threaten again, but I push them down, inhaling the crisp air. The brand's steady ache pulses in time with my heartbeat, a lonely echo. I wonder if Kaelith still senses it, wherever he is. My mind conjures a vision of him, trapped in illusions, thinking he's saving me. I bury my face in my knees, stifling another sob. I need to be strong.

"Sariah," I whisper to the empty night, mocking my own name. "You can't break now. Rest, gather strength, keep going." It feels pitiful to recite self-assurances, but the alternative is drowning in despair.

Eventually, I manage to doze off, curled in the hollow of rocks, staff clutched to my chest. Dreams assault me: nightmares of Kaelith kneeling before Nerezza, illusions swirling as he proclaims his loyalty to her. I see him turn to stone willingly, or watch him and Nerezza forging monstrous gargoyles that rampage across the land. I toss and turn, whimpering, brand throbbing like an infected wound.

At some point, I jolt awake, heart pounding. The moon is high, silver beams illuminating the rocky clearing. My tears glisten anew. A dream. But it could be real if I can't intervene. My body quakes with cold and sorrow. I bury my face against my folded arms. I'm not sure how much more heartbreak I can take.

Yet in the hush, the faintest shred of defiance remains. Kaelith saved me from giving up so many times. This time, it's my turn. Even if he no longer stands at my side, I

cling to the love we shared, trusting it wasn't a lie. That love can guide me, a shield against Nerezza's illusions. If Drayveth or the coven tries to brand me Nyxari, so am I. I'd rather stand alone for the right reasons than grovel for false acceptance.

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Steadying my breaths, I slide into a restless half-sleep, letting exhaustion claim me. My heart aches with the knowledge that I'm at my lowest point—abandoned, hunted, unsure if the man I love is enthralled or truly gone. This must be the darkest night of my soul, a place where despair and fury coil inside me, whispering that all is lost.

But I hold on, nails dug into the rocky ground, because in the swirling gloom, I sense a faint glimmer of hope. The brand pulses once, reminiscent of the synergy that once saved Kaelith from the brink. If there's even a chance of saving him, I'll do it. Betrayal or no, heartbreak or no, I won't replicate Nerezza's cruelty by abandoning him.

Dawn comes again, fragile and gray. I rise on unsteady legs, blinking away night terrors. My face feels puffy from tears, my limbs heavy from too little rest. The brand's dull throb matches the slow beat of my pulse. No illusions of comfort. But I can walk, can fight, can move. So I do.

Head high, staff in hand, I press forward along the mountainside, forging my own path. Each step feels precarious, but the memory of Kaelith's fierce eyes steadies me. Perhaps he thinks himself noble for leaving; perhaps he believed I'd be safer with him gone. I don't know. But I vow to unravel Nerezza's illusions and free him, even if it means confronting the darkest corners of my own magic.

Yes, Drayveth's ultimatum stings—help them seal Kaelith or remain an outcast. I choose outcast. Better than betraying the man who taught me the worth of my own choices. My tears threaten anew, but I swallow them down, forging a new sense of purpose from the shards of heartbreak.

My path is uncertain, overshadowed by the monstrous threat of Nerezza's brood, and

complicated by a coven that hunts me. But I cling to the single truth that hasn't shattered: love doesn't abandon, even if it's tested. If I fail, I fail fighting for him. If I succeed, perhaps we can defy every condemnation thrust upon us.

Gritting my teeth, I limp onward, ignoring the ache in my ankles and the dryness of my throat. Overhead, the sky grows brighter, but I find no comfort in its pale gold glow. The mountains loom, silent witnesses to my pain, offering no solace. Yet I walk anyway, determined that no matter how dark my night becomes, I won't let Nerezza or Drayveth define my fate.

Because even if Kaelith has vanished, my love and loyalty remain. The brand on my wrist stings in a perpetual reminder that my power can be a force for good—or a stepping stone to chaos. My heartbreak stands as a shield against despair. I might be alone, battered, perched on the precipice of destruction, but I'm still Sariah. I choose my path, not Drayveth's demands or Nerezza's illusions.

Step by step, I climb, tears drying on my cheeks, fury and devotion guiding me. The day stretches on, each moment a testament to my refusal to break. Darkness envelops my heart, yes, but it does not define me. I will not betray the gargoyle who risked everything for me. Even if he betrayed me, I can't do the same.

And so I press forward, forging my lonely journey, steeling myself for the battles yet to come. This is my dark night of the soul, but I cling to the faint hope that dawn will follow, and if I must stand alone against both coven and monstrous brood to reclaim Kaelith, then so be it. I grit my teeth, vow etched in my heart: I will not yield.

Because even in the blackest sorrow, love can become a weapon. And I'm prepared to wield it, no matter the cost.

KAELITH

I stand at the threshold of a chamber carved from black stone, every nerve in my body frayed with tension. This place can't possibly be real—it's too perfect, too reminiscent of the grand halls Nerezza and I once imagined together. Yet the polished obsidian floors gleam under torchlight, throwing back shifting reflections. Pillars rise toward a vaulted ceiling etched with twisting glyphs. I can feel the pulse of unnatural power in each carved symbol, taste the tang of chaos in the air.

The illusions cling to me, a half-formed haze that gnaws at my senses. My runes flicker over my arms and torso, caught between wanting to petrify me for defense and sensing that no amount of stone can shield me from her. Deep in my gut, I recognize I'm trapped in the heart of Nerezza's domain—whether it's a physical fortress or a labyrinth of illusions, I can't tell. My limbs remain too heavy to move freely. She has me pinned, body and mind.

At the far end of this hall, seated on a raised dais of obsidian, Nerezza reclines as though she's empress of the universe. Her dark hair drifts around her shoulders, shimmering with an eerie luster that defies natural light. A crown of black spires circles her head, crackling with faint arcs of magic. Those red eyes burn with an ancient hunger. My heart thuds painfully, recalling the warm spark that once lived in those same eyes centuries ago. She's changed so much—and yet I see whispers of the woman I used to know.

Two twisted gargoyles flank her throne, their monstrous bodies a grotesque parody of my own race. Their scaly skin is laced with throbbing veins of greenish energy, and their eyes glow with vacant malevolence. One hisses at my approach, baring fangs that drip with black saliva. I swallow, forcing myself not to recoil. This is what Nerezza calls her brood—broken creatures enthralled to her chaos.

"Kaelith," Nerezza greets, her voice reverberating across the chamber. The moment I

hear that familiar purr, my runes twinge with conflicting emotions—part revulsion, part sorrow. She used to speak my name so lovingly. Now, there's an undercurrent of triumph in her tone. A predator who's cornered her prey.

Slowly, I approach the dais, each step echoing on the polished floor. My wings remain partially furled, tail dragging. She's forced me here, illusions chipping away at my will. Or perhaps I allowed myself to be led, believing I might spare Sariah. The memory of Sariah's tear-streaked face slashes through my mind. A fresh wave of guilt floods me. I left her to Nerezza's cruelty, all because I thought it would keep her safe. Ridiculous. But at the time, illusions hammered me with visions of Sariah's downfall, and I caved beneath the weight of my old guilt.

I stop at the foot of the dais. The oppressive aura of chaos hangs like a suffocating miasma. My runes spark, as if trying to protect me from some unseen onslaught. I grit my teeth, forcing my voice not to shake. "You've brought me here. Now what?"

Nerezza's crimson lips curl in a slow smile, revealing just a hint of fang. She leans forward, resting her chin on her hand. "Now we talk, beloved gargoyle." Her robes rustle, shimmering with oily darkness. "I've waited centuries for you to stand willingly at my side. Our bond was never truly broken, only deferred."

I flinch. Our bond? We had a bond once, yes, but I shattered it by sealing us both away. My chest constricts with memory: the day I laid down my arms, forging a stone tomb to entrap her and myself, believing the world safer with us both gone. "That bond died the moment you twisted my kin into abominations," I manage, voice rough. "I stand before you only because you forced illusions upon me."

She arcs one delicate brow. "Forced illusions? Hardly. I merely showed you the truth—how your little purna might follow my path, how Drayveth condemns her as the next Nyxari. Weren't you desperate to protect her from such a fate? Didn't you come here willingly to ensure her safety?" Her eyes gleam with cunning triumph.

My wings tense, tail flicking in agitation. She's partially right. I recall how I stumbled from Sariah's side, illusions whispering that I could save her by yielding. Heat prickles my cheeks with shame. "I—" My runes flare, betraying my internal conflict. "She's safer if I stand between you and her. That's all."

Nerezza laughs, a musical yet hollow sound. "Stand between us? Such hubris. I can end your purna with a flick of my magic. Or I can let her live in peace, so long as you serve me." She drapes an arm across the throne's armrest, exuding a languid dominance. "You are the deciding factor, Kaelith. The pivot upon which her fate rests. So let's abandon false hostility. Join me. Let's reclaim the dream we once shared."

My mind reels. The dream. We envisioned a future where gargoyles and purna coexisted in harmony, forging alliances stronger than any dark elf tyranny. But she found chaos, used it, and turned it into a weapon of unimaginable devastation. My chest twists with sorrow. This is not the woman I loved. She's become a parody of that bright young purna, devoured by her own lust for power. But illusions swirl around me still, making me doubt. Could there be a shred of her old self in that voice?

I swallow hard, meeting her gaze. "You talk of forging alliances, but you're the one ordering your brood to slaughter entire covens. You annihilate any who oppose you. That's not the dream I remember." My voice trembles with a mix of anger and heartbreak.

Her eyes flash with cold fire. "Opposition must be crushed. Resistance invites anarchy. If Protheka kneels to me, then I can shape it into a haven for our kind—gargoyle and purna alike." She lets out a soft, mocking sigh. "But you sealed me, forced me to extremes. Look at the cost of your betrayal. We should have shaped Protheka together, Kaelith."

I rake a hand through my hair, runes prickling with frustration. “No,” I say, voice low. “We should have strived for peace without warping souls or turning gargoyles into thralls. I never betrayed you. You betrayed the dream by delving into chaos magic that slaughtered innocents.”

A flicker of old pain crosses her face—so quick I doubt it was real. “I sought power to protect your species, and they scorned me. They let fear turn me into a demon in their eyes. You scorned me as well, eventually.” She rises from the throne, descending the dais in a swirl of black robes. Her steps echo with quiet authority. “But I can forgive that if you join me now, help me bring unity under my rule. Even Drayveth’s petty coven will kneel or perish. As for your precious Sariah—” She waves a hand dismissively, “I won’t meddle with her if you remain loyal.”

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My heart stutters. She's dangling Sariah's life as a bargaining chip. The illusions swirl again, reminding me of Sariah's tearful face, the brand on her wrist glowing with heartbreak. I left her. Guilt collides with longing, forging a raw ache in my chest. My runes flare, a wave of warmth suffusing me—like a distant echo of the synergy Sariah and I once shared. Is it possible I can still tap into that?

Nerezza closes the distance, her eyes boring into mine. "Look at me, Kaelith. I can be everything we once were. Our synergy could surpass even what you shared with that child." Her voice dips, sensual and insidious. She raises a hand, trailing it across my jaw. The contact feels like a live wire, half revulsion, half memory of gentler times. My wings twitch in confusion.

A momentary longing surges—I remember how I adored her laughter, the promises we made. But a deeper truth slams into me: That woman is gone. The illusions in her presence flicker, revealing glints of monstrous cunning beneath her once-radiant features. My stomach churns. I see flashes of the brood, of scorched villages, of gargoyles twisted in her thrall. This is not the woman I once loved. She's a phantom wearing the face of a memory, a shadow that perverted our dream.

She senses my hesitation, illusions intensifying. The polished floor ripples with half-formed scenes from centuries past: us dancing on a stone balcony under a triple moonlit sky, me brandishing a sword while she conjured flames in a triumphant display after our first victory. My chest throbs with heartbreak, but I steel myself. These illusions can't replace reality.

Somewhere deep inside, a memory of Sariah rises—her fierce gray eyes, her trembling brand as she fought to keep me alive. She risked everything for me. She

shared her magic, her body, her soul. The memory resonates, a surging wave that crashes through the illusions swirling around me. My runes pulse brighter, recalling the synergy Sariah and I forged. That is real. That is my future, not this decayed echo of a false past.

A strangled cry escapes my throat as I jerk away from Nerezza's touch. "Enough," I snarl, runes blazing with sudden intensity. My tail lashes the obsidian floor, sending sparks across the polished surface.

She recoils, a glimmer of shock flickering in her crimson eyes. "What?—?"

I clench my claws, forcing the illusions to recoil. My mind sears with renewed clarity, each heartbeat stoking the memory of Sariah's unwavering devotion. I promised to protect her. Instead, I fled, letting illusions dictate my choices. No more.

"You are not the woman I loved," I growl, wings flaring wide. "That woman sought harmony, not conquest. She cherished gargoyle lives instead of enslaving them." The illusions fade around me, cracks forming in the illusory floor. The images of our past flicker like broken glass shards. My runes blaze a scorching gold, fueling my defiance. "And I realized something: Sariah is everything you once pretended to be—fierce, compassionate, loyal without tyranny. She is my future."

Nerezza's face twists, illusions warping around her. A hiss escapes her lips. "You're mistaken. She's a trifling novice, easily corrupted. I am your rightful queen."

My chest heaves with a powerful exhalation, refusing to yield. "No. You're a twisted shell, devoured by the chaos you once claimed to wield for good. I gave up centuries to keep you sealed, and now that you're free, I see I must stand against you again." A surge of adrenaline pours into my limbs, banishing the leaden weight from before. The tether hums distantly, as if it senses my renewed strength.

Her illusions intensify, black smoke coiling around my ankles, trying to drag me back into that dreamscape. My runes spark in response. Pain lances through me, but I summon the synergy I once shared with Sariah—or the memory of it. Even a fragment of that bond is enough to ignite a wave of raw power in my gargoyle core. Stone creeps up my legs, not as a petrification out of fear but as an anchor to keep me grounded.

“Is that your final decision?” Nerezza snarls, eyes blazing with fury. “You’ll reject me again—for that naive purna? You realize I can crush her and you in a single breath.”

Fear warps my chest, but I refuse to break. “Sariah overcame Drayveth, overcame your lesser brood. She’s stronger than you assume. And I won’t let you harm her.” My voice resonates in the chamber, an undercurrent of gargoyle might. I remember my original vow: to protect the world from this abomination.

Her grin turns feral, illusions coiling in renewed force. The twisted gargoyles by her throne hiss, stirring to lunge at me. My wings bristle. I might be outnumbered, but I have no illusions that I can stay here. My priority is to escape, regroup with Sariah if she’ll still have me, and fight Nerezza together.

Nerezza gestures, and the illusions slam into me with punishing force. Scenes of destruction swirl—Sariah chained, gargoyles butchered. My runes flare, resisting. My entire body trembles. I nearly fell for this once. But I see beyond the illusions now, fueled by the epiphany that my future doesn’t lie in this hall of black stone. It lies with Sariah.

I let out a thunderous roar, wings snapping open to their fullest span. The marble beneath me cracks from the force of my gravitational surge. My tail whips around, lashing illusions to ribbons. The runes along my arms and chest glow hot, channeling the leftover synergy I once shared with Sariah. Even if she’s not here, the memory of

her magic spurs me onward.

“No more illusions,” I bellow. “You don’t own me, Nerezza. I’m done cowering in guilt.”

The illusions waver, fracturing. For a heartbeat, her face flickers with genuine hurt, replaced by rage. “You dare?” she hisses, stepping back. “You sealed me once, and you think you can do it again? Alone?”

I grind my teeth, sweat beading on my brow from the exertion of throwing off her mental chains. “I won’t be alone,” I growl. “Sariah stands with me, whether physically or in spirit. And if we must, we’ll gather allies. You’ve made too many enemies this time.”

She snarls, a swirl of black chaos dancing around her outstretched hands. Her twisted gargoyles crouch, ready to spring. My heart thuds, adrenaline roaring in my veins. I can’t fight them all here. But I can break free. Freedom’s choice.

“I gave you a chance, Kaelith,” she says, voice trembling with fury. “You spurn it again. Don’t think I’ll be merciful when next we meet.”

“Mercy died in you long ago,” I snap, wings tensing. “But I won’t let you break me. Nor will I let you break Sariah.”

Her illusions crash against me once more, final attempts to chain me, but I muster every scrap of power left. My runes blaze, forging a barrier of stone-laced energy that repels the onslaught. The psychic pull slackens, and I seize that opening, pivoting toward the dais’s side where a shadowy corridor beckons—either a real exit or another illusion. I don’t care. Any path away from her is better than kneeling.

She screeches, commanding her gargoyle thralls to stop me. They leap from the

throne's sides, claws extended, eyes glowing with sickly radiance. I let out a bestial roar, slamming my tail in a wide arc. The first twisted gargoyle collides with me, nearly knocking me off balance, but I brace with petrified limbs, using my wings for leverage. We wrestle, claws scraping stone armor, sparks flying. My mind reels with the knowledge that these were once my kin, but I can't hold back. They serve Nerezza's corruption.

With a heave, I fling the twisted gargoyle aside. It crashes into a pillar, shards of black obsidian raining down. The second leaps onto my back, screeching. Pain lances as its claws dig into my shoulders, but I fling my body backward, crushing it against a stone column. A choked roar escapes it, then it slumps. I have no time for pity.

Nerezza shrieks in fury, sending a lance of void energy toward me. My runes pulse in response, forming a partial shield of stone that cracks under the force. Agony slices across my arms, but I stagger forward, refusing to yield. I must escape.

Reaching the corridor, I hurl myself into the swirling darkness. It might be an illusion-laced labyrinth or an actual passage. Either way, it's away from her throne room. My breath comes in ragged gasps, chest tight from the confrontation. I sense the illusions trying to reclaim me, but my renewed purpose—my vow to fight for Sariah—bolsters my resistance. I won't let Nerezza enthrall me again.

Behind me, her enraged cries echo. She calls out my name, hurling threats of what she'll do to me and Sariah. My wings shudder at each vow of vengeance, but I press on, forging blindly through the labyrinth. The floor lurches, reality distorting. She's still trying to contort my senses. But each time illusions surge, I recall Sariah's tearful courage, the unwavering love in her eyes. That memory is like a torch in the gloom, scattering illusions.

I crash through corridor after corridor, stumbling over illusions of swirling images. One moment, I see a meadow from my past with Nerezza laughing in the sunshine.

Another moment, I'm traversing a pitch-black hall with flickering torches. My wings keep me balanced despite the chaos. I'll find a real exit if I keep going.

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At last, the illusions fade enough for me to see a rough stone archway that leads outside. Wind blasts through with the scent of pine and ice. Fresh air. I lunge forward, ignoring the searing pain in my limbs. My runes flicker, half spent from the struggle.

Bursting into open air, I find myself perched on the edge of a mountain ledge under a darkening sky. The sun has slipped low, painting the horizon in purple and orange. How long was I trapped inside those illusions? My chest heaves, tears threatening again. I abandoned Sariah. I let illusions convince me it was the only way. Now I see the truth—Nerezza twisted my fears, using them to manipulate me. I must find Sariah.

I linger on the ledge, wind raking my hair, heart pounding. Will Sariah ever forgive me? My wings droop as I recall her anguished cry. I can't think of that now. I have to at least try. My runes glow with a weaker but still determined light.

Swallowing my fear, I vow softly, "I will fight for you, Sariah. Even if you despise me now, I won't let Nerezza's illusions decide our fate." My tail flicks, stirring pebbles over the edge. The brand of synergy we share still thrums faintly in my chest. She might not realize I've broken free. I cling to the faint hope that we can meet again.

The sky dims, a few stars twinkling. If Nerezza's illusions still linger, they no longer hold me in thrall. I can sense her presence behind me, raging in her fortress or labyrinth, but I no longer feel the psychic chains binding me. I'm free—physically and mentally. Exhaustion weighs on me, but my heart sings with renewed clarity. Freedom's choice has been made.

Raising my gaze to the distant peaks, I wonder where Sariah might be. She might be miles away by now. Or she might still be near the old camp, devastated. Guilt spears my chest. I'll search every crag if I have to.

My mind drifts to Drayveth's threat, the purna who once followed him, and the condemnation they cast upon Sariah. If I return to her side, we face them all—plus the brood. But I can't do otherwise. She risked everything to stand by me, to show me love beyond illusions. I won't let that be twisted into tragedy.

Clenching my claws, I summon what remains of my gargoyle strength, forcing my battered wings to spread. The wound on my thigh stings, half-healed from that synergy session, but I can manage short flights. I must be cautious. The cold mountain wind buffets me, reminding me how precarious flight can be. Yet a flicker of determination courses through me. I have to at least try, to cover ground faster.

Stepping to the edge of the ledge, I let out a measured breath, scanning for updrafts that might aid me. The glow of sunset outlines the ridges in deep purple. My runes flicker in synergy with my internal magic, granting me a measure of lift. I leap from the edge, wings catching the wind with a jolt of pain that radiates from my thigh. Gritting my teeth, I press onward, gliding in a shallow arc down the slope. Better than being stuck in illusions.

As I soar, albeit painfully, over the crags, my mind returns to Nerezza's final expression—shock that I defied her illusions a second time. Part of me wonders if she feels heartbreak, or if chaos consumed all traces of genuine emotion. No matter. She's the enemy. The illusions she conjured awakened me to the reality that I have someone far better waiting for me—Sariah, with her unwavering heart and raw power she's determined to use for good. That is the future I choose.

Wind tears at my hair, the cold biting through my battered leathers. My wings protest each shift, but I force them to comply, scanning the terrain below for any sign of a

campsite or footprints. The day's light wanes, casting the land in deep shadow. Flying at night is risky, especially wounded. But the tether tugs faintly in my chest, urging me to keep going. I can't rest until I find her.

Minutes or hours pass—I lose track, half-delirious with fatigue and guilt. At last, the ache in my muscles becomes too severe. My vision blurs. I spot a wide ledge near a rocky outcrop and angle my wings to land. The impact jars my injured leg, nearly toppling me. I suck in a hiss of pain, wings folding awkwardly as I slump against a boulder.

Panting, I press a clawed hand to my chest, feeling the faint echo of our bond. It's diminished, but not severed. She's alive. The relief surges through me, a lifeline in the gloom. My runes glimmer in the twilight, reminding me I still have some fight left. But I need to rest if I'm to be of any use.

Night unfurls across the mountains, stars winking into existence. My mind whirs with the last remnants of illusions, the memory of Nerezza's voice, the final vow I made. I will fight for Sariah. No matter how dire the path. I can't let my guilt overshadow that promise again.

I rummage for minimal provisions, discovering half of them were lost in the illusions or my frantic flight. My mouth twists with frustration, but I make do with a handful of dried meat. The slight nourishment steadies me, giving me enough energy to conjure a tiny flicker of gargoyle flame—a trick using magnetic friction in the stone. The meager heat soothes the chill in my bones.

As the night deepens, I stay awake, leaning against the boulder, letting my wings rest. The moon rises, casting pale silver over the rugged slopes. Despite my exhaustion, I can't fully relax. My mind replays Sariah's tearful face, the heartbreak that shadowed her eyes when I turned away. She likely thinks I betrayed her. A fresh wave of agony spears me. I must show her otherwise.

In the silence, I recall the tender moments we shared: her defiant grin in the face of Drayveth's demands, her warm body pressed against mine when we fused our magic to heal, the fierce declaration of love that spilled from her lips. A lump forms in my throat, tears pricking my eyes. She gave me everything, and I left.

But no more. My heart tightens, forging a vow stronger than stone. "I'm coming back to you, Sariah," I whisper to the night, voice trembling. "I won't let illusions or fear dictate my choices again. Nerezza cannot hold me."

The wind rustles, carrying the faint scent of pine. In that moment, the brand of synergy in my chest flutters, as if responding to my conviction. My runes flicker, brightening briefly. I sense a faint echo—Sariah is out there, forging on alone. I hope she feels a glimmer of my determination, hope she hasn't drowned in despair.

A part of me wishes I had the strength to fly all night, scouring the valleys until I find her. But I'm too battered, illusions drained me, and I risk crashing. Better to rest a few hours, regain my power, then resume the search at first light.

So I settle, wings curved protectively around me as I slip into a shallow, watchful doze. My mind stirs with half-formed nightmares—images of Nerezza's sneer, of Sariah lying in anguish. Yet each time I startle awake, I remind myself: I broke free. The illusions can't reclaim me unless I let them. I choose Sariah.

When dawn finally streaks the horizon with pale gold, I rise on unsteady legs, wincing at the dull ache in my thigh. My runes glimmer in the early light. The brand in my chest hums softly with longing, urging me onward. Yes, I'll push forward. Sariah, wait for me.

I spread my wings again, ignoring the pain. Each flap churns the crisp air, stinging my battered muscles. But the memory of Sariah's tearful goodbye, the heartbreak I sensed in her, drives me. I ascend into the skies, scanning the land below. I vow to

keep searching until I find some hint of her presence—footprints, a camp, anything. My tail lashes, resolving that if Nerezza tries illusions again, I'll fight them off with the knowledge that Sariah's fierce spirit matters more than any guilt from my past.

Yes, Nerezza is not my love anymore. She's a reflection twisted by chaos, and I won't let her illusions chain me any longer. My epiphany stands firm: the future I want is with Sariah. I can't change the centuries of mistakes behind me, but I can shape the battles ahead.

And so I fly, battered but unbroken, carrying the memory of Sariah's unwavering devotion like a flame in the darkness. I refuse to believe all is lost. The illusions are shattered, replaced by a single, burning mission: to reunite with Sariah, pledge my loyalty to her once again, and stand against Nerezza's tyranny with a heart unclouded by doubt.

No illusions can change that choice now. I gather my power, each wingbeat a testament to my renewed conviction. Sariah, I'm coming back for you. My vow echoes in my mind, lighting a path through the swirling storms that still loom over these mountains. If Nerezza dares to stand in our way again, she'll face a gargoyle who's no longer crippled by guilt, but fueled by a love that defies the darkest illusions.

The sun crests the ridge, washing the peaks in gold. My runes blaze in the light, carrying me onward. Freedom's choice has been made—I choose hope, I choose Sariah, and I choose to shatter Nerezza's hold once and for all.

17

SARIAH

I brace my hands against the shattered remains of a once-grand pillar, breath hitching in the freezing air. This place reeks of memories—raw, unyielding recollections of

the day Kaelith first awakened and saved my life. The old temple courtyard sprawls around me in crumbling stones and dislodged arches, its tumbled walls and mosaic fragments reminding me how fragile everything can be. The last time I stood on these pitted flagstones, Kaelith and I faced a legion of lesser gargoyles, illusions swirling around us like a dark promise. It's a bitter twist of fate that I return here alone, battered, with my heart in tatters.

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The wind whistles through hollow arcades, stirring dust and shards of chipped fresco. Twilight bleeds across the sky in streaks of navy and violet, painting the ruins with somber shadows. My cloak flutters around my legs, torn from countless battles, its edges stiff with dried blood. I ignore the chill, blood pounding in my ears. Drayveth was right about one thing: this place is cursed with significance. Possibly it's the perfect stage for another confrontation.

For days, I've roamed these mountains in a haze of heartbreak, refusing to believe Kaelith truly abandoned me. Each morning I forced myself onward, hoping to pick up a clue—footprints, a torn scrap of his leathers—anything to prove he might have come back. And each night, I bedded down under frigid skies, tears in my eyes, cursing the illusions that tore us apart. But now, as I stand in these old ruins, an inexplicable tension hums in my chest. My brand on my wrist aches with more intensity than it has since we parted, as if a tethered presence draws near.

I swallow, pressing trembling fingers against the throbbing brand. "Kaelith," I whisper into the restless wind, voice catching. Even the thought of him hits me like a knife. I see his molten eyes, that stoic half-smile, the protective curve of his wings. Then the memory of him walking away, illusions swirling, tears streaming from my eyes, rips into me. Where are you now?

A scuff on the broken flagstones snaps me out of my spiral. I tense, staff in hand, magic sparking along my brand. Footsteps echo from behind a crumbled arch, faint but approaching. My pulse kicks, hope battling fear. Could it be him? Or more gargoyles, or Drayveth's purna? My entire body coils, ready for anything.

The figure steps into view, wings half-furled, runes glowing faintly in the dim light.

My heart slams into my ribs. It's shim, battered and weary, but unmistakably Kaelith. His obsidian-hued skin and carved runes catch the dying sun's rays, each luminescent marking telling a story of scars, illusions, and battles. He halts a dozen strides away, tail flicking in agitation. My brand sears, an echo that resonates through me. He's truly here, not an illusion.

For a breathless second, we simply stare. My eyes burn with tears, relief warring with anger. He left me—But also, he's returned. The tether hums in my core, brightening like an ember stoked to life, though distrust gnaws at me. I can't help wanting to fling myself into his arms or lash out in fury. The intensity of the moment almost destroys me.

"Sariah," Kaelith murmurs, voice low enough to break my heart. He looks haunted, golden gaze shimmering with regret. "You're alive."

I bark a harsh laugh, blinking away tears. "You thought I wouldn't be?" My staff trembles in my grip. My entire body shakes. "After you left... I—" My voice cracks. Pain surges. "I was alone. I didn't know if you betrayed me or if illusions forced you. I—" I can't speak around the lump in my throat.

He lifts a clawed hand, half-reaching toward me. "I'm sorry," he breathes, wings trembling. "Nerezza twisted my mind. I thought I was protecting you by yielding. I see now how wrong I was." His runes flicker painfully, as if each word costs him. "Please... let me explain."

My tears spill down my cheeks, heart pounding. Relief floods me—he didn't betray me by choice. Yet the sting of heartbreak lingers, fueling a bitterness I can't fully repress. "Explain," I demand, knuckles whitening around the staff. "And it better be good."

He exhales, stepping closer, each movement cautious. "She showed me

visions—nightmares where you became the next Nyxari, with Drayveth condemning you. My old guilt made me believe I could spare you by surrendering.” He clenches his fists, tail lashing. “But illusions are illusions. I broke free eventually. All I want now is to stand by you, if you’ll have me.”

The raw anguish in his tone batters my defenses. My brand thrums with longing. He returned for me. My chest constricts with a swirl of fury, relief, and unstoppable love. “You left me in the worst moment,” I whisper, voice ragged. “I cried your name, but you walked away. Do you have any idea how much it hurt?”

His jaw tightens, runes flickering in agony. “I know,” he murmurs, taking another step. “I failed you. I let illusions overshadow our bond. I can’t undo that, but I’m here now, ready to fight for you, for us. If you’ll let me.”

My tears turn into a shaky laugh, bitterness echoing. “Let you? I spent days wandering these cursed mountains, believing I’d lost everything. Meanwhile, you wrestled illusions and decided to come back only after you realized your mistake?”

He flinches, wings drooping in shame. “I deserve your anger. But I would do anything to prove that I choose you, Sariah. Not illusions, not Nerezza’s false promises.”

Silence stretches, both of us breathing hard, hearts pounding in tandem. My chest aches, brand flaring. My fury simmers, but beneath it lies an overwhelming relief that he’s alive, that he wants to stand with me. I love him. I can’t deny that. But the betrayal still stings. “Let’s settle this after we deal with whatever fresh horror is about to happen,” I mutter, noticing how the dusk thickens with a strange hush.

He nods, tension thrumming in his posture. “Yes,” he murmurs. “I sense... something’s coming.”

As if on cue, an echoing roar shatters the quiet. The ancient temple ruins reverberate with an unholy clangor. I spin, staff raised, brand igniting in silver arcs. Kaelith steps up beside me, runes glowing fiercely, tail lashing. Across the courtyard, two monstrous shapes emerge from behind toppled pillars—twisted gargoyles, eyes glowing with malevolent light. My stomach twists. Nerezza's brood.

They shriek, bounding toward us with claws extended. My instincts flare. We must fight. But even as we ready spells, the thunder of approaching footsteps resonates behind the brood. In a swirl of cloaks, Drayveth and half a dozen purna appear, staves crackling with necromantic power. My heart clenches. Of course Drayveth is here too.

"Excellent," Drayveth snarls, stepping forward. "You're both in one place. Makes it easier to end this fiasco." His allies spread out in a loose semicircle, staff tips glowing with swirling greenish energy. Their eyes flick with malice between Kaelith and me, as if deciding who to strike first.

My jaw sets. We're caught in a vise—Nerezza's brood on one side, Drayveth's purna on the other. Tension spikes, the brand pulsing in alarm. Kaelith's wings bristle, runes flaring. "This is madness," he rumbles, voice echoing. "We have a common enemy. Why do you insist on labeling Sariah a Nyxari instead of helping us stop Nerezza?"

Drayveth lifts his chin, gaze cold. "Because the covenant demands it. Your illusions threaten to unleash more chaos than we can tolerate. Sariah refused to renounce you, so she's condemned. And you, gargoyle, are a threat from the moment you drew breath. The brood is merely a symptom of the disease that you represent."

Anger blazes in my chest. I open my mouth to retort, but the brood screeches, leaping forward. Their scaly bodies slam into Drayveth's front line, sending two purna sprawling. Chaos explodes. Bolts of necromantic power light the gloom, scorching columns and rubble. The twisted gargoyles swipe at the purna, rending staves in half. One purna screams, pinned under a clawed foot.

Sariah curses, raising her staff. She hurls a wave of shimmering silver magic that knocks one gargoyle off the pinned purna. The tension in her face breaks my heart; she tries to save Drayveth's people despite their condemnation. My runes hum in admiration. She's so damned good.

I lunge at the second gargoyle, wings snapping. My tail cracks across its flank, throwing it away from the cluster of purna. The creature snarls, eyes blazing. Pain rips through me as it rakes my shoulder with serrated claws, but I roar, stone creeping over the wound. I sense Sariah channeling her brand again, a faint swirl of synergy bridging us. My limbs surge with renewed force, enough to fling the gargoyle across the courtyard. It smashes into broken columns with a sickening crunch. One down.

A fresh wave of shrieking echoes. The brood's reinforcements appear from behind the temple's half-collapsed wall—five more monstrous gargoyles, each howling for blood. My stomach drops. We're badly outnumbered. Drayveth's purna recoil, forming a defensive ring. Sariah and I pivot, meeting each other's gaze in the flicker of chaotic light. We must unite or we all die.

She sucks in a breath, tears glimmering in her eyes, brand blazing. "I can't let them kill you," she whispers fiercely, "even if I hate that you left." Her vulnerability slashes my heart, but I nod, stepping shoulder to shoulder with her.

Drayveth snarls across the courtyard, staff raised. "Stand aside, Sariah! If you keep protecting that gargoyle, you're no better than Nerezza's brood."

"Stop!" Sariah snaps, silver arcs dancing around her staff. "We have bigger threats than your vendetta. Put aside your hatred, Drayveth, or we'll all be slaughtered."

Her words ring with authority, but Drayveth's expression twists. "Then so be it. If the brood kills you, at least the coven is rid of your potential Nyxari taint." He slams his staff down, unleashing a wave of necromantic fire that arcs around the courtyard,

aiming for both me and the brood.

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I snarl, wings flaring to block the brunt of the blast from Sariah, but the recoil knocks me back a step. My runes blaze, half-petrifying my arms for protection. Sariah skids on rubble, staff trembling in her grip. Drayveth is out of control.

A screech draws my attention. The brood leaps again, dividing into pairs to strike at Drayveth's purna. Torn between fighting them or defending Sariah from Drayveth's next strike, I hesitate. My brand flutters, reminding me Sariah stands with me. We can do this together.

"Sariah," I shout, voice rumbling with gargoyle power, "lend me your synergy. We must push them back—Drayveth and the brood both." My words tumble out, half an order, half a plea. She might still be furious at me. This is the moment to test our bond.

She meets my gaze, heartbreak mingled with fierce devotion. Without hesitation, she nods, raising her staff. "On my mark," she says hoarsely. "Remember the swirl technique—earth and purna entwined."

I clamp down on my regret, focusing on survival. "I'm ready." My runes spark as I channel my gargoyle essence—stones underfoot hum in resonance, dust swirling around my legs. Sariah's brand flares, weaving bright silver arcs that swirl across the battered courtyard. Together, we step forward, side by side, forging a ring of combined power that glitters with potential.

Drayveth sees the surge and curses, staff whirling with greenish necromantic flames. His subordinates scramble for cover as the brood lunges again. One twisted gargoyle leaps at Drayveth, forcing him to defend himself with a wave of blackish fire.

Another tries to corner two purna near a collapsed arch. The entire courtyard teems with chaotic battles.

Sariah and I ignore the rest, focusing on weaving our synergy. She chants an incantation under her breath, brand glowing with exquisite brightness. I draw on the earth, feeling the stones respond, a low vibration that rumbles up my legs. Our magics intermingle, swirling around us in a funnel of luminous dust.

“Now,” she whispers, tears glistening in her eyes. “Push them back.”

We release the synergy in a single burst. The courtyard shudders, flagstones cracking as a rippling wave of silver and earthen gold radiates outward from our joined stance. The twisted gargoyles screech, flung aside by the force. Drayveth’s necromantic flames flicker, his staff wobbling as he’s hammered by the shockwave. Debris showers the ruins, columns toppling.

The brood roars in pain, some leaping away into the shadows. One attempts to resist, claws scraping the ground, but Sariah angles her staff, intensifying the synergy’s wave. My runes glow hot, arms half-petrified, grit pressing into my palm. Together, we repel the monstrous creatures, driving them from the courtyard’s center. I sense them slinking around the perimeter, uncertain. Their howls continue, but they can’t breach our circle of combined might.

Drayveth staggers, cursing. Another wave of synergy pulses, rocking him again. His subordinates scatter, battered by the same flood of power. “Stop!” he yells, voice cracking with rage. “You’d dare strike me?”

Sariah trembles at my side, tears streaming. “You left me no choice,” she cries, voice echoing in the broken temple. “I told you to stand aside. I don’t want more bloodshed, but I will not let you kill Kaelith or me.”

Drayveth's eyes flick with hatred. He might lash out again. But the synergy swirling around us crackles, an unspoken warning. My tail sweeps the ground, stone-laced claws gripping my staff. One more wrong move, and we'll forcibly drive him out.

A strangled shriek rises from the brood as a new presence enters the courtyard—a tall, regal figure in swirling black. My heart leaps in recognition. Nerezza. Her robes glide over the broken stones, dark hair fanning out behind her. The entire battlefield hushes, illusions flickering at the edge of perception. The brood cowers, drawn to her presence. Drayveth's purna recoil, staves crackling in alarm. Sariah stiffens, brand flaring in immediate reaction.

Nerezza's crimson gaze sweeps over the carnage, landing on me and Sariah locked in synergy. A dark sneer forms on her lips. "How touching," she drawls, voice dripping with contempt. "The runaway gargoyle found his purna again. Shall I bury you both together this time?"

Sariah braces, tears drying into fierce resolve. "You twisted Kaelith's mind, but he broke free," she says, brand shining. "Your illusions don't hold him. Now we stand united against you."

Nerezza tilts her head, illusions swirling around her ankles like serpents. "Do you think your paltry synergy can match me?" She lifts a hand, conjuring a vortex of obsidian smoke that crackles with chaotic lightning. "I gave gargoyles their might, and I can reclaim it at will."

I snarl, runes flaring with defiance. "What you gave was corruption, not might. We don't need your chaos."

She smirks, illusions intensifying behind her. A half-formed squad of twisted gargoyles emerges from the shadows, eyes glowing with lethal purpose. Drayveth curses, forcibly re-forming his ranks, though several purna remain on the ground,

wounded or unconscious. The entire courtyard teeters on the edge of absolute destruction. We might be forced to fight Nerezza with Drayveth's grudging help or risk annihilation.

But Drayveth's face twists with undisguised hatred. He points his staff at us, ignoring Nerezza's brood. "If you two stand in my way, I'll remove you first. The coven forbids your union." His necromantic flames swirl, forcing the brood back momentarily, but also aimed at us.

Nerezza laughs, stepping aside as if amused by Drayveth's rashness. "Yes, kill them for me, puppet," she mocks. "I have bigger conquests awaiting."

My chest tightens. We must act quickly. Another wave of synergy tremors through Sariah and me, a whispered promise of power. We share a look—fear, heartbreak, and love in her gaze. We have no choice.

"Sariah," I murmur, voice raw. "We unite. Let's purge this madness."

She nods, exhaling. "Let's finish it."

Without further hesitation, we raise our joined magic once more. Earthy might surges up my limbs, meeting Sariah's purna brilliance. The brand on her wrist blazes silver-white, my runes golden-red, weaving a radiant vortex around us. Dust flies, shattered columns rattle. The brood hisses in alarm, illusions flickering in protest. Drayveth's staff crackles, but his eyes widen at the raw magnitude of our combined power.

Nerezza stands at the edge of the chaos, illusions swirling around her. She narrows her gaze. "Foolish," she hisses. "I taught you once, Kaelith, that raw synergy can burn your mind." Her chaos-laced lightning crackles in her palms, ready to strike.

A pang of fear lances me—we risk losing control. But I sense Sariah's calm presence,

her unwavering faith that our synergy can be harnessed for good. My heart steadies. “We’re not the same as we were centuries ago,” I say, wings lifting in defiance. “We choose each other, not illusions.”

Sariah’s staff pulses with shimmering arcs. “We drive you back, Nerezza—and anyone who stands with you.” Her eyes flick to Drayveth, brand flaring. “Including you, if you keep trying to kill us.”

Drayveth roars, hurling his necromantic flames at us. The wave of greenish fire collides with the synergy swirling around Sariah and me, sending sparks showering. My runes flash, intensifying our shield. The flames sputter, and Drayveth stumbles, cursing. We’ve grown too strong for his illusions of purna supremacy.

A savage shriek tears from Nerezza’s brood. They leap, claws extended, but we unleash our synergy in a rolling shockwave. The gargoyles slam into the force field, howling in pain as it sears them with combined earth and arcane energies. Several careen backward, crashing into broken walls. Another tries to scramble up a collapsed arch, only to be hammered by a second pulse from Sariah’s staff.

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Nerezza hisses, illusions roiling. She flings chaos-laden bolts at us, but our swirling synergy deflects them, though not easily. Sparks rain down, scorching rubble. Each impact jars my limbs, sweat beading on my brow. Sariah clenches her jaw, eyes blazing with unstoppable conviction.

Drayveth's subordinates retreat, dragging wounded comrades away. Drayveth himself, face twisted with hatred, attempts one last incantation—maybe a necromantic snare. But Sariah, tears streaming from the strain, whirls her staff and unleashes a concentrated arc that blasts him off his feet. He crashes into a toppled column, staff flying. Blood stains the broken stones where he lands. A rasping cough escapes him.

For a moment, our synergy flares bright enough to illuminate the entire courtyard like dawn. Nerezza shields her eyes, illusions faltering. "Impossible," she snarls, voice trembling with rage. "You can't surpass me. I am the first Nyxari."

"Wrong," Sariah grits out, trembling with the effort to maintain the synergy. "I'm not a Nyxari, and Kaelith is no thrall. We stand for each other, not for chaos."

The brood shrinks away, illusions flickering in panic. Sariah's arcs intensify, and I channel earthen might to reinforce them. The temple courtyard shakes, old columns toppling in a cacophony of stone. Dust plumes swirl like thunderheads. In the confusion, Nerezza curses, illusions swirling around her. She must realize she can't hold this ground. With one last venomous glare, she unleashes a wave of chaotic illusions that buffets us, then vanishes into the swirling shadows, leaving her brood to scatter. A shriek echoes as she retreats, fury burning in every note. She'll be back, but for now, we stand victorious.

The dust settles in the courtyard, revealing fallen gargoyles, moaning purna, and toppled columns. My chest heaves, synergy receding as the immediate threat vanishes. Sariah sags against me, brand still throbbing with residual arcs. I hold her, wings curving protectively, heart pounding with relief. We did it—we forced Nerezza to flee.

Drayveth coughs from where he lies crumpled. Blood trickles down his temple, staff lying out of reach. For a heartbeat, I wonder if we should help him or leave him. The brand on her wrist flickers with her kindness. She breaks away from my arms, stepping toward Drayveth.

“Don’t move,” she warns him, voice exhausted but firm. “We don’t want to kill you, but we won’t let you murder us either.”

His eyes burn with resentment. A cough wracks his frame. “So you’ve become the unstoppable duo,” he rasps bitterly. “What now? Will you end me here?”

Sariah shakes her head, tears clinging to her lashes. “No. Enough death. The brood is scattered, Nerezza fled. You can leave, Drayveth. Go warn your coven that we’re not their enemy unless they force us to be.”

He stares at her, fury and grudging respect mingling. “You refuse to yield to illusions, just as he refused me. You’d truly let me walk away?”

She bows her head, brand flickering. “Yes. We have more important battles than punishing you.” Her voice cracks with heartbreak for the mentor she once admired.

A long silence weighs. Drayveth grimaces, dragging himself upright, refusing the staff I nudge toward him. “Very well,” he mutters. “But the coven remains convinced you’re a threat, Sariah. This changes nothing.”

Sariah's lips press tight. "That's on them. I won't beg for mercy while they brand me Nyxari."

A snort escapes him. "Then we meet as enemies next time." He casts a final glare at Kaelith, then limps away, beckoning the few purna still conscious to follow. They retreat over the broken temple walls, leaving behind a handful of deceased or gravely injured. Sariah kneels by one wounded purna, guilt twisting her features. But the woman pushes her away with a sneer, refusing help. My heart aches for Sariah's sorrow, but we must let them go.

When Drayveth's group vanishes into the twilight, the courtyard falls silent, strewn with rubble, battered columns, and the stench of burnt necromancy. The tether between Sariah and me quiets to a soft hum, our synergy no longer surging in battle. I turn to her, chest aching with everything left unsaid.

She stands, staff trembling, tears on her cheeks. I step closer, wings lowered in submission, tail still. My throat tightens, the need to hold her overwhelming. But I hesitate—her eyes glisten with a swirl of heartbreak, anger, and undisguised love.

She exhales, dropping her staff with a clatter. "Kaelith," she whispers, voice quivering. "You... you came back."

I nod, wings twitching. "I'm sorry." My entire being pulses with regret. "I believed illusions, let my guilt rule me. I never wanted to betray you."

Tears slip down her cheeks again, but she doesn't pull away when I lift a cautious hand to brush them aside. My runes glow faintly, longing for the synergy that mended us before. "I was so hurt," she admits, voice breaking. "Part of me believed you left to join Nerezza willingly."

My heart twists. "Never," I whisper hoarsely. "She enthralled me with illusions,

convinced me it would spare you from a dark fate. I see now it was a lie. I broke free for you.”

She shudders, brand flaring with a subdued intensity. “We nearly died so many times in the past days. Drayveth all but condemned me, the brood hunted me. And the whole time, I clung to the hope you’d return.”

Emotion surges in my chest. She never stopped believing. Gently, I tilt her chin, letting our gazes lock. “I love you,” I murmur, voice raw. “I love you more than illusions or fear. I’ll spend the rest of my days proving it, if you’ll let me stand by you.”

A tremor passes through her. Then she steps forward, pressing her face against my chest. My arms encircle her, wings folding around us in a shield of comfort. Tears continue down her cheeks, but I sense relief in her trembling sigh. My own eyes sting with moisture as I hold her, the brand on her wrist warming in resonance with my runes. This closeness—no illusion can replicate it.

We stand in the battered ruins, embracing amid the broken pillars and charred stones. The lingering stench of necromancy and gargoyle blood remains, but our synergy hums, forging a cocoon of quiet intimacy. Sariah’s breath hitches. She lifts her head, searching my face for sincerity. I meet her gaze, letting every ounce of my devotion shine through.

A tearful laugh escapes her. “I hate you for leaving,” she whispers, voice thick. “But I love you too much to lose you again.” She curls her fingers into the armor near my collar, pulling me down. Our mouths meet in a trembling kiss, raw with heartbreak, relief, and unstoppable yearning. My chest tightens at the taste of her tears. She forgives me, or at least tries.

When we part, panting, I rest my forehead against hers, savoring the fierce pound of her heart. “I’m never leaving you again,” I vow. “Even if Drayveth hunts us, even if

Nerezza conjures illusions to tear my mind apart. I choose you, Sariah.”

She nods, tears still gleaming. “And I choose you. We’ll face them all—coven or brood—together.” A tremulous smile curves her lips. “Bonds tested, but not broken.”

I exhale, the tension in my chest loosening at last. We overcame illusions, heartbreak, condemnation. The brand throbs with a quiet assurance that our synergy stands firm, ready to face any threat. My wings envelop her, as if to block out the entire world. If only we could remain like this, locked in a tender moment. But footsteps in the distance remind me the threat isn’t entirely gone: Drayveth’s survivors may regroup, or the brood might reemerge.

Sariah senses it too. She steps back, eyes still shining with tears. “We should leave,” she murmurs, voice husky. “We can’t stay in these ruins—more gargoyles might return.”

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I nod, tail flicking in agreement. “Snowfall Glen might still be our best chance for allies,” I say, recalling our original plan. “Or we can pursue Nerezza before she regroups, but that’s risky without reinforcements.”

She chews her lip, brand glimmering. “Snowfall Glen,” she decides after a moment. “If we can find the purnas, they might help us cast wards strong enough to face Nerezza’s illusions. If Drayveth tries to label me Nyxari, maybe the purnas can prove him wrong.”

My wings flex. “Then that’s our path.” Another pang of guilt surfaces. “I know I’ve put us behind schedule. Will you lead the way?”

She offers a small smile. “We lead each other,” she corrects, stepping closer to entwine her fingers with mine. The brand’s warmth seeps into my runes, forging a quiet unity. “No more apologies tonight. Let’s survive first.”

I swallow a surge of emotion, nodding. “Agreed.” My chest swells with a renewed sense of hope. The temple courtyard still smolders with the aftermath of our confrontation, but in the midst of ruin, we stand side by side, hearts aligned. Nothing can tear us apart so easily again.

We exchange one last glance at the shattered pillars where we first met, the place that once awakened me from stone. In a sense, it’s awakened me again—this time from illusions that nearly stole my future. With a silent vow, we turn from the ruins, stepping into the twilight hand in hand. Our steps echo across broken stones, leaving behind the ghosts of illusions and condemnation.

The wind greets us as we climb the slope away from the courtyard, battered but united. Sariah keeps her staff at the ready, brand flickering. My runes glow with a calm assurance. We may face Drayveth's coven, Nerezza's monstrous brood, or illusions yet unseen, but we hold a bond tested by heartbreak and redemption. Romance threads between us, unspoken yet fierce, promising that no matter what trials come, we face them together.

Yes, our journey continues—Snowfall Glen awaits, and Nerezza's threat still looms. But here, beneath the starlit sky, hearts pounding with devotion, we make our stand. The memory of betrayal lingers, but forgiveness blossoms in its place. Love, tested in the crucible of illusions and regrets, emerges stronger than before.

As the night enfolds us, we press on, forging a path over craggy slopes, the mark on Sariah's wrist shimmering in harmony with my runes. Every so often, she steals a glance at me, eyes brimming with warmth that stirs a quiet joy in my chest. I squeeze her hand in acknowledgment, letting the hush of the mountains cradle us.

In the distance, lightning flickers along a distant ridge—perhaps a wild storm or a residual burst of Nerezza's chaos. We share a determined nod, silent resolution etched in our faces. Tomorrow might bring fresh battles, but for tonight, we cling to each other. No illusions or condemning coven can sever this bond again.

And as we vanish into the darkness, hearts beating in tandem, I know without question that we're unstoppable together.

18

KAELITH

Aragged wind tears over the broken battlements, carrying the acrid tang of spent magic and burning stone. I stand on a ruined parapet that overlooks the shadowed

valley where Nerezza's final stronghold rises—an ancient fortress or a piece of her chaotic illusions, I can't tell. Crumbling walls slope away into darkness, twisted gargoyles perched upon half-toppled spires. They watch with vacant, menacing eyes, like statues waiting for a signal to pounce. My body thrums with tension, each breath rasping through lungs scorched by battle.

At my side, Sariah grips her staff, brand on her wrist burning with a fierce glow that cuts through the gloom. She meets my gaze, stormy eyes reflecting worry and resolve. We're battered—torn cloaks, bruises, sweat, and dried blood marking every inch of us—but we haven't wavered. The synergy in my core hums each time our arms brush. Her lips quirk in a tight, fleeting smile, a silent reaffirmation that we'll face whatever horror awaits in the fortress depths.

We came here after scouring the mountains for any final clue to Nerezza's lair. With Drayveth's forces scattered and the brood prowling, it took cunning and luck to arrive intact. Now, with the sky bruised by the last vestiges of dusk, we confront the bleak citadel at the heart of Nerezza's domain. A swirl of black smoke wreathes its broken towers, illusions flickering across the collapsed gates. My runes prickle as if warning me that we stand at the threshold of a final confrontation.

Sariah's brand pulses, arcs of silver radiating around her staff. "She's here," she murmurs, voice tight. "I can feel her presence... it's suffocating." Her eyes dart over the cracked stones beneath our feet, tension rippling through her. "I hate that it has to end here, but we've no choice. If we don't stop her now, she'll unleash more atrocities on Protheke."

I nod, runes flaring in agreement. "This time, we seal her for good," I say, voice echoing in the hollow courtyard. My claws scrape the ground, remembering centuries I spent entombed with her illusions. I refused to repeat that trap, yet ironically, a new sealing might be the only solution. My chest aches at the memory of that ancient choice, but I feel Sariah's synergy stirring, reminding me we're not alone.

We pass through the fractured gate, stepping into a courtyard strewn with debris and scorched remnants of older wards. The stench of rot mingles with the faint tang of Nerezza's chaos magic. Above, twisted gargoyles lurk on broken parapets, hissing softly as we pass. Sariah's brand glows brighter, the synergy between us crackling with each footstep. My runes respond, fueling a shield of energy that keeps the lesser creatures at bay. They hiss, uncertain whether to attack. I sense Nerezza's invisible command holding them in thrall, not yet unleashing them.

Crumpled columns line a grand entry hall, walls shifting like illusions in my eyes. A pulse of nausea hits me. She's warping reality again. But Sariah's presence grounds me. I grip her hand, letting her brand's warmth flow into my runes. The illusions blur, revealing a corridor that likely leads to a central chamber.

We move forward, hearts pounding. Our synergy leaves a faint trail of shimmering dust in our wake. Each time illusions scrape at the edge of my mind, I recall the vow I made: I won't yield to guilt or illusions. Sariah stands unwavering by my side, brand shimmering in rhythmic pulses that match my runes. We face this together.

A faint laugh drifts through the corridor. My blood runs cold at the haunting familiarity of that sound. Nerezza. It echoes with a teasing malice, reverberating off the cracked walls. I sense Sariah's grip tighten on her staff, her brand flaring. We round a corner, emerging into a cavernous hall whose vaulted ceiling is partly collapsed, letting in a shaft of pale moonlight. Pillars lean precariously. Broken flagstones litter the floor, forming a rough mosaic of devastation.

At the far end stands Nerezza, regal in black robes shot through with swirling illusions of starlight. Her hair floats around her shoulders, a voidlike aura shimmering with each breath she takes. Her eyes shine red with triumph, lips curving in a cruel smile. Behind her, gargoyle thralls crouch in the shadows, eyes vacant and hungry. My runes blaze, recalling how she twisted my kin into these abominations. It ends now.

“Sariah. Kaelith,” Nerezza calls, voice laced with mocking warmth. “You come unannounced. No matter—I prepared a welcome.” She snaps her fingers. The thralls stir, hissing. Sariah tenses, but the brood doesn’t leap. They wait, as if Nerezza wants to savor this.

I step forward, runes spitting sparks. “We’ve come to end your reign,” I say, forcing my voice to resonate. “No illusions, no half-measures. You’ve bled this world enough.”

She laughs, illusions rippling around her. “Bled this world? I offer it salvation. If they kneel, I spare them. Didn’t you once want that same unity for gargoyles?” She glances at me with feigned tenderness. “We can still rule, you and I, if you cast aside this purna’s illusions. She’s no match for my true power.”

Sariah stiffens, brand glowing fiercely. “Your illusions can’t fool us anymore,” she declares, voice crisp. “We know the truth. You’re a shell of the woman you once were, feeding on chaos to mask your hollow core.”

Nerezza’s lips peel back in a snarl, illusions twisting into ephemeral serpents around her ankles. “You dare. I am the first Nyxari. I am power incarnate.” She flings a hand outward. A wave of black-laced lightning arcs across the hall, sizzling with chaotic force.

I roar, wings snapping open to shield Sariah as we form a synergy barrier. The bolt crashes against our joined power, sending shards of energy skittering over the flagstones. Dust showers us, but we remain steady. She’s strong, I realize with dread, perhaps stronger than she was centuries ago.

Sariah’s gaze meets mine, brand pulsing a question. We must seal her. I clench my fists, nodding. She chants under her breath, weaving a swirl of purna magic. My runes flicker, responding with earthen might. “Now,” I say through gritted teeth, “we

form the seal.”

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“Pathetic,” Nerezza hisses, illusions intensifying around her. She conjures orbs of swirling darkness, hurling them in rapid succession. Each orb splashes against our synergy field, forcing us to pour more power into defense. My arms ache, wings shaking from the strain. Sariah gasps, eyes narrowed in concentration. If we can’t counter soon, she’ll overwhelm us.

We shift tactics, letting one orb slip past to explode behind us while we launch a retaliatory bolt. Sariah’s staff glows white-hot, arcs of silver lightning coiling with the stone force I provide. The combined pulse tears a chunk from the floor near Nerezza’s feet, sending her illusions reeling. She snarls, momentarily stumbling. An opening.

Sariah and I surge forward, synergy blazing. My wings thrash, tail lashing to clear a path through thrall gargoyles that leap to defend their mistress. Sariah blasts them aside with arcs of luminous magic, each strike rippling with fury. My runes feed her raw power, forging a swirling vortex that cracks pillars and shatters illusions. Nerezza howls, illusions faltering.

But then she unleashes a new wave—voidlike power so dense it warps the air. My runes recoil, a primal terror stirring in my gut. She’s tapping into a deeper reservoir. A maelstrom of swirling blackness envelops the chamber, the walls shuddering as illusions bleed into reality. I see ghostly shapes—fallen gargoyles from centuries past, battered purna illusions, all swirling in a nightmare tapestry.

Sariah lets out a choked cry, brand flickering erratically. She staggers, illusions clawing at her mind. I wrap an arm around her waist, runes blazing with defiance. “Hold on,” I whisper, pushing synergy into her. She steels her jaw, tears glistening,

and our combined power flares anew, slicing through illusions.

Nerezza stands at the center of the swirling void, eyes blazing with triumphant malice. “You cannot stand against the raw void,” she roars, voice echoing with ancient wrath. “Protheka will be reborn in darkness!”

My heart pounds. We have only one choice: a new seal, stronger than before. But forging that seal might cost everything. I recall the centuries I spent entombed in stone, sacrificing my life to keep her contained. Could I do it again? My runes flicker, glancing at Sariah. She can’t be trapped with us. But maybe we can create a seal that binds Nerezza alone.

Sariah senses my turmoil. She raises her staff, voice shaking with determination. “I can channel a pure surge of purna magic,” she says, breath ragged. “But it’s not enough alone. I need you, Kaelith—your gargoyle essence, your willingness to cede that old power.” Her eyes meet mine, heartbreak shining. “If we combine them, we might contain her. But you’ll lose what remains of your gargoyle might.”

A flash of grief strikes me. My gargoyle powers are my identity—stone sleep, flight, the runes etched across my skin. But if that’s the price to save Protheka and keep Sariah safe, so be it. Tears prick my eyes. “I’ll do it,” I murmur. “I relinquish it all if it means freeing us from her shadow.”

Sariah’s tears sparkle. “Then let’s end this.” She kisses me swiftly, brand scorching with final resolve. I taste salt on her lips. The illusions swirl around us, but we stand unyielding, synergy swirling into something new—a seal forged from purna’s purity and gargoyle’s earthen might.

My runes glow in a crescendo of light, each carving across my arms and chest resonating with the brand’s silver arcs. Pain lances through me as I push everything into Sariah’s staff, wings stiffening to hold the illusions at bay. She chants a purna

incantation, voice resonating with a primal power that makes the air tremble. Her brand flares white-hot, turning the staff into a beacon.

Nerezza shrieks, illusions contorting in panic. “No,” she hisses, sending a final torrent of voidlike energy. It crashes against our forming seal, forcing us to brace in agony. I roar, runes flaring bright as I channel the last vestiges of my gargoyle magic. My body feels like it’s unraveling, stone plates crumbling from my limbs. But I press on, tears streaming. This is the sacrifice.

Sariah screams, brand blazing, funneling the combined power into a vortex that spirals around Nerezza. The vortex shimmers with swirling gold and silver, forming tendrils of luminous chains. Nerezza’s illusions flail, monstrous faces emerging from the chaos, but one by one they’re snuffed out by the seal’s light. The thrall gargoyles wail, collapsing under severed illusions. The ground rattles so violently that cracks race through the floor, releasing bursts of stale air from subterranean depths.

“Kaelith!” Sariah yells over the maelstrom, tears glistening, staff trembling in her hands. “Push your power fully. Don’t hold back.”

I grit my teeth, tail snapping. No more illusions, no more guilt. I let go of the last grip on my gargoyle abilities—my partial stone form, my old sense of flight, the runes that once defined me. A wave of anguish sweeps my body, but I channel it into the seal. My runes blaze in one final burst, each line of power streaming into Sariah’s incantation.

Nerezza howls, illusions fracturing. “No,” she roars, voice echoing with despair and fury. Her swirling voidlike aura collapses inward, battered by the radiant chains. The entire fortress quakes, pillars toppling in avalanches of stone.

In a final, savage flash of brilliance, the seal clamps shut around her. The vortex condenses, spiraling into a point of searing light. Nerezza’s form flickers, mouth

twisted in a silent scream. Then, in one explosive eruption, the illusions detonate, leaving behind a crater in the center of the hall. Dust and debris swirl, stinging my eyes.

I stumble, wings limp, no longer stone-strong. Pain courses through every fiber of me, the leftover synergy draining. Sariah staggers to my side, brand sputtering. I sense the entire fortress groaning, illusions fading into stale rubble. Twisted gargoyles collapse, inert or lifeless. The sky overhead cracks with thunder, a final echo of the chaos we banished.

“Sariah,” I rasp, voice raw, tail limp on the debris-strewn floor. “Did we?—?”

She presses a trembling hand to my chest, tears flooding her eyes. “We sealed her,” she breathes, exhaustion and relief tangled in her voice. “Nerezza’s... gone. Banished. Not forever, maybe, but for now. The seal is formed.”

My head swims, runes dimming until they’re barely visible lines on my skin. I gave it all. My vision blurs, tears hot against my cheeks. “I can’t... I can’t feel the stone in me anymore,” I whisper, heartbreak mingling with relief. A vast emptiness takes the place of my gargoyle might. But Sariah’s here, synergy still warm in my chest, albeit quieter.

She wraps her arms around me, staff clattering away. “Thank you,” she breathes, resting her forehead against mine. “You sacrificed so much for this world, for me.”

I close my eyes, tears slipping. “Worth every breath,” I murmur. My arms sag around her shoulders, muscles drained. Despite the battered fortress, an overwhelming calm settles in. The hush after the storm. Nerezza’s illusions no longer claw at the edge of my mind.

Around us, the fortress crumbles, gargoyle thralls inert or reduced to dust. Drayveth

is nowhere to be seen—maybe he fled or was lost in the chaos. My heart pangs for the gargoyle lineage twisted by Nerezza. At least now they can rest.

Sariah helps me walk to a stable patch of ground near a splintered column. We sink to our knees, leaning against each other. My chest feels so...human. No runes blazing, no stone strength. Just a man with a battered body and a tether to the woman I love. The brand on her wrist still pulses, though, faint arcs of synergy bridging us. That's enough.

She cups my face, eyes shimmering. "We did it," she whispers, voice thick. "You'll never be fully gargoyle again, but we're free from her illusions."

My tears return, a bittersweet ache. "I accept this," I say, voice wavering. "All that mattered was stopping her... and staying with you."

She kisses me, gentle and lingering, the brand throbbing with tenderness. Her lips taste of salt and hope. My wings, though limp, curve around her shoulders. The synergy hum resonates quietly, reminding me that, though I've lost my gargoyle powers, the bond we forged remains. That's the only strength I need.

For a long stretch, we just breathe, listening to the fortress settling. Stones shift, rubble clatters. The air no longer crackles with chaos or illusions. Sariah's brand glows softly in the gathering moonlight, my runes faint lines on my arms. We found peace in the aftermath of cataclysm.

Eventually, she breaks the silence, voice trembling with exhaustion. "I feel... empty and full at the same time," she admits. "Like the greatest magic I've ever channeled has left me hollow, yet at peace."

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I nod, heart pounding. “I feel it too. A hush after the storm.” My tail flicks, a mere vestige of its old might. “Nerezza won’t trouble Protheke for a long while, if ever again. That seal was forged from pura purity and gargoyle essence... stronger than the old wards.”

She exhales softly, tears glinting in the corners of her eyes. “Kaelith, I—thank you for trusting me enough to fuse your last powers. I know what that cost you.”

My chest tightens, emotion threatening to overwhelm me. “I trust you with my life. That cost is nothing compared to losing you or letting her illusions devour the world.” My voice cracks. “You gave me something better than stone sleep. You gave me a reason to live.”

Fresh tears slip down her cheeks, and she leans in, pressing her lips to mine once more, a slow, tender affirmation. My heart warms, synergy fluttering in a gentler rhythm than any frantic battle trance. Yes, we’re not unstoppable warriors anymore, but we share a bond deeper than illusions.

Gradually, the tension in my muscles eases. The fortress stands quiet—no shrieks, no illusions, no swirling shadows. If we strain our ears, we might hear the faint wind or distant debris falling. The entire domain, once bristling with Nerezza’s malevolence, feels drained, as if purged by our seal. Drayveth might reappear or remain hidden, but for now, he’s irrelevant. We’ve accomplished what was deemed impossible: banishing Nerezza’s darkness without dooming ourselves to centuries of isolation.

We help each other to our feet, leaning on our staffs—hers literal, mine figurative, as my wings no longer bear me in flight. My body aches, yet an undercurrent of relief

cushions the pain. Sariah threads her arm through mine, brand pulsing lightly as if content. Together, we pick our way across the courtyard, mindful of loose stones and the occasional inert gargoyle thrall that disintegrates into dust upon contact.

At the fortress threshold, we pause, turning back for one final glance at the half-collapsed citadel. Our last battleground. A swirl of emotions churns in my chest: sorrow for the gargoyles warped by Nerezza, relief for this victory, and a quiet sense of finality. I once sealed her at the cost of my own freedom. This time, Sariah and I sealed her together, forging a better future.

Sariah's fingers tighten around my arm. "We did it," she whispers, her voice laced with awe. "She's gone." Her brand flares with a warm glow, a testament to her unstoppable heart.

I recall how illusions once enslaved me. No more. "She's gone," I echo, voice unsteady. "And I remain with you." My runes are shadows of themselves, but that doesn't matter anymore. I have her. My heart yearns for rest, for the chance to rebuild a life unchained from illusions.

Her gaze searches mine, a tentative smile appearing. "So... what happens now? The coven branded me Nyxari, Drayveth wants our heads, and the world might remain suspicious of gargoyles, even if you're half-human now."

A rueful chuckle escapes me. "Perhaps we travel away from these mountains, see if Snowfall Glen offers refuge. Or we wander, forging alliances. Whatever we do, we do it together." My wings twitch in muscle memory. "I might not fly anymore, but that's a small price for freedom."

Tears shine in her eyes again, though a tender light brightens her smile. "Together," she agrees, kissing my cheek softly. The synergy hum resonates in the afterglow of victory. My chest feels lighter than it has in centuries, a sense of peace blooming

where guilt once festered.

We exit the ruin, stepping onto the rocky slope beyond the fortress gates. The night sky spreads overhead, a tapestry of brilliant stars and a bright moon. The air remains cold, but my runes no longer bristle from illusions. Sariah and I help each other over broken stones, the hush of the wilderness embracing us. Occasionally, she sways from exhaustion, and I prop her up; sometimes my leg gives out, and she steadies me with a gentle hand. We share quiet, exhausted laughter at our mutual bruises and scrapes.

When the moon climbs high, we find a small ledge overlooking a dark valley. A few scraggly pines grow near a rocky overhang, offering minimal shelter. Sariah and I collapse onto the stony ground, leaning against each other. I gather enough wood scraps to spark a faint fire, using the last flicker of my gargoyle friction ability, though it feels foreign now. The meager flames cast dancing shadows on our faces, reflecting the exhaustion etched into every line.

Sariah rests her head on my shoulder, brand calming to a steady glow. “I can’t believe it’s over,” she murmurs. “I was so sure we’d—one of us—would die in that fortress.”

My arm drapes around her waist, pulling her closer. “We nearly did. But your will never faltered, even when illusions hammered us.” My voice softens with reverence. “You saved me from myself more than once.”

She snorts softly, a tired grin ghosting her lips. “Only because you also refused to let me drown in chaos. It was synergy, Kaelith, always synergy.”

A wave of affection floods me. Yes, synergy. The brand and my dim runes are living proof of that union. Slowly, my hand shifts to brush a strand of hair from her face, thumb lingering at the corner of her mouth. She leans into my touch, eyes gleaming

with unguarded emotion. My breath hitches, remembering the frantic lovemaking we shared to save me from mortal wounds, remembering the heartbreak of illusions that parted us. Now we're here, raw and exhausted, yet unbroken.

"Sariah," I say softly, a trembling note in my voice. "We faced so much—betrayals, illusions, condemnation. And still, we stand. I... love you." The last words come out quieter than a whisper, but the brand sparks all the same.

She shifts, turning fully into my arms. Her fingers curl around the ragged collar of my clothing, drawing me close. "I love you," she echoes, tears streaking her cheeks. "Even if the coven never pardons me, even if Drayveth or others call me Nyxari, I choose you." She tilts her chin, lips brushing mine in a tender kiss that sears away the lingering ache.

Heat coils through me, not the frantic pulse of a life-or-death synergy but a gentle warmth that resonates in my chest. The brand pulses gently, and though my runes no longer blaze with gargoyle might, a faint shimmer lingers, a testament to the connection we forged. Sariah deepens the kiss, arms slipping around my shoulders. I let out a sigh, returning it with equal fervor, relief and passion melding in a sweet, unhurried moment under the moonlit sky.

When we part, foreheads touching, breath mingling, she murmurs, "Wherever we go, we'll likely face suspicion or fear, but as long as we're together, we can handle it."

I nod, a tiny surge of confidence filling the void left by my relinquished gargoyle powers. "Yes, we handle it. That's enough." My heart flutters at the possibility of traveling with her, maybe seeing corners of Protheka where no illusions threaten. Perhaps forging new alliances or proving to distant enclaves that we're not the monsters Drayveth claims. The future brims with uncertainty, but in what feels like centuries, I greet it with hope.

She nestles against my chest, the fire crackling softly. My wings curve around her in a loose embrace—no longer stone-strong, but still capable of holding her gently. She hums in contentment, brand flickering in a steady rhythm. How far we've come, I reflect, tears pricking my eyes. She was once an exiled purna, I was a sealed gargoyle. Now we stand on the threshold of a new dawn, having banished the greatest threat we both feared.

“Tell me we'll find peace,” she whispers in a shaky voice.

I lower my head, pressing a soft kiss to her temple. “We'll find it,” I vow, “or we'll make it if we must. We banished Nerezza, and Drayveth might never trust us, but we walk our own path. Together.”

Her arms tighten around my waist, tears of exhaustion shining on her lashes. She nods, letting a quiet sigh escape. “I'm so tired,” she confesses, a watery laugh in her tone. “I could sleep for a year.”

A gentle chuckle rumbles in my chest. “We have a lifetime of rest ahead, hopefully. Let's rest now, and tomorrow, we'll plan. Maybe Snowfall Glen or beyond.”

She smiles, eyes fluttering shut, brand's glow dimming to a soft pulse. I gather her closer, heart thrumming with a calm sense of triumph. Nerezza's final defeat, the forging of a new seal, the synergy that overcame illusions—it all led us here. A battered, half-collapsed fortress behind us, a flickering campfire to chase away the night. Even if the world remains uncertain, I hold Sariah in my arms, free from illusions, free from guilt. I've never felt such relief.

Night deepens, stars overhead glimmering in an expansive canopy. The air carries a faint chill, but Sariah's body warmth and the dying embers of the fire keep us comfortable. I cradle her as her breathing steadies, a soft serenity settling over her features. My heart clenches with love so profound it stuns me. She risked

everything—her coven, her future—to stand by me.

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I stroke her hair, recalling how mere days ago, illusions shattered our unity. Now, we share a deeper bond, tested by heartbreak and sealed with the defeat of a power that once devoured entire legions. My chest constricts with gratitude. I will never let illusions separate us again.

Dawn eventually creeps over the horizon, shedding pale gold across the stony hills. Sariah stirs in my arms, blinking. I brush a gentle kiss across her brow, wings shifting to let her stretch. We share a quiet smile, exchanging no words because none are needed. We survived.

When she sits up, smoothing her cloak, I notice her brand remains faintly luminous—a symbol of the synergy we'll always hold. I sense no illusions tugging at my mind, no lingering chaos from Nerezza's realm. Relief soothes my battered spirit.

Sariah stands, offering me a hand. I accept, hauling myself upright, feeling the residual ache in my limbs. We douse the last coals of our fire, then gaze out at the rocky path below. A fresh day beckons, the crisp air brimming with new possibilities. No illusions weigh us down.

She turns to me, eyes bright with quiet excitement. "Shall we head east?" she asks, voice still husky from sleep. "I recall hearing rumors of a merchant route that leads to Snowfall Glen. We might glean supplies, maybe find allies along the way."

I nod, tail curling in agreement. "Yes, that sounds right. If the burnas in Snowfall Glen see we banished Nerezza, they might accept us. And if Drayveth tries to twist the story, we'll present the truth ourselves."

A grin tugs at her lips, brand sparking in gentle mirth. “We’ll handle it together, then.”

I mirror her smile, heart lighter than it’s been in centuries. Arm in arm, we set off from our makeshift camp, forging a trail across the boulders. Each step resonates with confidence. My wings no longer hold stony might, but I walk with a new sense of belonging—Sariah’s synergy fueling my spirit, the brand linking our hearts.

As we descend a rocky slope, she laughs softly at some private thought. I tilt my head in curiosity. “What’s so amusing?”

She wipes a stray tear, half-laughing. “I was just remembering how not so long ago, I thought you were a monstrous gargoyle cursed to kill me, and now... now I can’t imagine facing anything without you.”

Heat blooms in my chest, affection radiating through my once-terrifying runes. “I thought you were a reckless purna dabbling in forbidden magic,” I admit. “Yet here we are, forging the greatest seal Protheka’s ever known, saving each other from illusions. Strange how fate unfolds.”

Her laughter is soft, tinged with relief. “Yes, fate, or maybe defiance. Either way, I’m glad it led us here.” Her cheeks flush, brand flaring gently.

My chest expands with raw joy. “Me too,” I whisper, leaning in to brush a tender kiss over her temple. She sighs contentedly, pressing close for an instant. Then we resume walking, forging our path through the winding mountain ridges, each step resonating with the unbreakable bond that overcame illusions and heartbreak.

Time passes in a blur of pine-scented breezes and dusty paths, the ruins of Nerezza’s fortress shrinking behind us. We speak occasionally about trivial things—where to find fresh water, how to handle the next suspicious traveler. Yet the deeper

conversation remains unspoken: We faced our darkest fears and emerged hand in hand. There's no need to rehash every heartbreak. Our synergy hums, affirming we're forging ahead, no illusions interfering.

At midday, we pause by a trickling stream, washing dust from our faces. Sariah's brand glistens with droplets of water, reminding me how that light once tore illusions apart. I watch her, heart filling with admiration. She's so strong, so compassionate. She notices my stare, a gentle smile curving her lips, brand pulsing in tandem with my quiet runic lines. That moment of shared peace feels like a gift after the storms we braved.

Eventually, we climb a ridge that overlooks a rolling landscape. Distant plains and glimmers of forest stretch far below, hinting at roads that might lead to new friendships—or fresh challenges. But I sense no illusions, no looming chaos. The day's sun bathes us in warmth, the brand and my faint runes matching that golden hue. We are free.

Sariah slips her fingers through mine, brand pulsing. "We'll find a place to rest soon, maybe an outpost that offers basic supplies. Then head east to see if Snowfall Glen remains willing to hear our story." Her voice brims with confidence.

I give her hand a gentle squeeze. "Whatever the outcome, I stand by you. No illusions, no regrets." My tail flicks behind me, no longer the unbreakable gargoyle appendage, but still part of me. A sign that I've chosen love and a life beyond stone imprisonment.

She nods, eyes glistening with affection. "Thank you."

Our journey continues down the rocky trail, hearts entwined. I glance over my shoulder once, at the distant peaks where Nerezza once held dominion. A faint pang stabs my chest—I sacrificed my gargoyle legacy. But the brand and synergy

overshadow any grief, reminding me I gained something infinitely more precious: Sariah's trust and a future unburdened by illusions.

In the hush of late afternoon, as we approach an ancient trade route, I reflect on how far we've come. I recall the sealed temple where Sariah's magic awakened me, the illusions Nerezza used to torment me, Drayveth's condemnation, and finally, forging the new seal that banished Nerezza to oblivion. Each memory underscores that we overcame obstacles once deemed impossible. We stand victorious, tethered by love and unwavering devotion.

Sariah tugs my arm, pointing at a thin column of smoke in the distance—likely a small settlement. My runes flicker in mild curiosity, the brand warming at the prospect of meeting new people who might accept us as we are. No illusions to unravel now, only honest conversations.

Together, we pick up our pace, letting the synergy guide our weary limbs. My wings remain folded, a shadow of their old might, but I feel no bitterness. We cross a bend, the horizon stretching wide and open. Sariah leans her head briefly on my shoulder, brand glowing in contentment.

When dusk falls again, we make camp by a shallow ravine. The air hums with the nighttime chorus of distant insects. Firelight dances across Sariah's brand and the faint lines left of my runes. She nestles beside me, murmuring how she looks forward to reaching a warm bed in some outpost, or maybe forging an alliance with the purnas. I smile, stroking her hair, heart overflowing with tenderness. Yes, we have a future to shape.

At last, as stars shimmer overhead, we huddle in a cozy embrace, synergy humming in the background. The shadows of illusions no longer claw at my mind, and Nerezza's presence remains banished to the nether. Drayveth might still brand us enemies, but that's a concern for another day. For tonight, a gentle peace envelops us,

the hush of the wild matching the quiet union of our hearts.

I hold Sariah, pressing a soft kiss to her temple. She dozes with a faint smile, brand flickering in tandem with my slow, even breaths. My chest brims with an indescribable calm, deeper than any stone sleep I ever experienced. The memory of illusions lingers only as a cautionary tale—love and trust shattered them, not guilt or self-sacrifice alone. We overcame them by forging a bond that outshone every lie.

In the flicker of firelight, I close my eyes, letting the night cradle me. The future brims with unknown paths: perhaps we'll help others banish illusions or sign treaties with outlying enclaves. Yet none of that daunts me, because I no longer stand alone, nor do I stand enslaved by illusions or guilt. The brand on Sariah's wrist and our synergy confirm we face everything side by side, forging a destiny beyond the darkness that once consumed us.

Tomorrow, we continue east, forging alliances or simply building a life free from illusions. We carry the knowledge that we banished Nerezza with a seal crafted from gargoyle sacrifice and purna brilliance—a testament to the union that overcame centuries of fear. The memory of that final confrontation humbles me, even as it emboldens me to meet new challenges with unwavering love.

Holding Sariah's sleeping form close, I vow never to let illusions sever our bond again. If Drayveth or any misguided souls threaten us, we'll confront them with honesty and synergy. If some threat arises from Nerezza's remnants, we'll stand firm, hearts entwined. Because we discovered something intangible yet unbreakable in that battered fortress: the power of love to cast aside illusions and free us from the shackles of old guilt.

The embers glow, painting gentle patterns across the rocky ground. My runes are mere remnants, but they glimmer faintly, echoing the synergy we share. Sariah shifts in her sleep, exhaling a quiet sigh of comfort. I tighten my hold, feeling the brand's

soothing warmth. We're at peace. I rest with no illusions haunting me, no shadows whispering that I'm unworthy of happiness. Sariah's unwavering presence banishes those lies.

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Thus, under a moonlit sky, I drift into a light doze, content to let dawn find us close. Nerezza is banished, the brood scattered, Drayveth's condemnation meaningless compared to our synergy. Whatever tomorrow brings, we greet it together, forging a path of hope out of the wreckage illusions once made of our lives. And as I finally yield to slumber, I hear Sariah's brand humming softly in time with my heartbeat—two souls that overcame the darkest illusions Protheke could muster.

Yes, illusions are fleeting, but the bond we forged stands eternal.

19

SARIAH

I press my palm to the still-warm stone floor of the old fortress courtyard, the final echoes of magic fading from the cracked flagstones beneath my fingertips. The hush that follows Nerezza's banishment seems unreal, a silence so profound it nearly drowns the pounding of my own heart. I barely trust my eyes as they skim over the ruins: shattered pillars, scorched walls, and inert gargoyle husks dissolving into ash. All is still, save for the rasp of my unsteady breaths and Kaelith's ragged exhalations.

He stands at my side, wings drooping with exhaustion, the once-bright runes upon his obsidian skin muted to faint etchings. The brand on my wrist aches in tandem with the deep hollowness in my chest. We did it; we cast Nerezza into a new seal. But the cost—Gods, the cost—stares at us in every bruise, every battered muscle, every swirl of leftover power that hums then fizzles in the evening air.

My gaze drifts to Kaelith. Even partially bent from weariness, his presence looms tall,

the remnants of his gargoyle form still formidable despite the final sacrifice he made. A pang stabs beneath my ribs: I recall how he surrendered the last vestiges of his gargoyle essence, merging it with my purna magic to seal Nerezza for good. Beneath the smear of ash and blood on his jaw, I see the faint lines of what used to be bright runes, now pale as old scars.

He catches me studying him. Our eyes lock, his molten gold meeting my stormy gray. The corner of his mouth quirks up in something resembling relief. The brand flutters in my wrist, echoing with gratitude and heartbreak. We're both too spent to speak for a moment, letting the magnitude of our victory—and our losses—settle around us.

I swallow, my throat thick. "You're... are you all right?" The question emerges shaky, laced with concern I can't conceal.

A ghost of a chuckle rumbles from his chest. "I'm alive," he answers, voice raspy. "That's more than I hoped for a few hours ago."

Those words hit me hard, a reminder of how close we both came to death. My hand drifts to his runes, tracing the faint lines where his power once blazed. He shivers under my touch, eyes fluttering shut. I can't hold back the tears that slip from the corners of my eyes. He gave so much—nearly everything—for this victory.

"Kae..." My voice splinters on his name. I rub at my cheeks, smearing a bit of dust across my skin. "Let's... let's get out of here. We need to find somewhere safe to rest."

He glances around the broken courtyard. The evening sun casts the ruins in a honeyed glow, turning rubble into jagged silhouettes. "Yes," he murmurs, stepping closer so our bodies nearly touch. "I can't bear to remain where illusions once thrived." His tail flicks, the motion feeble compared to what I remember, but the brand on my wrist thrums in empathy. "Come. Let's go."

We support each other, limping across the battered walkway, weaving around chunks of fallen stone. The fortress gate stands half-collapsed, letting golden dusk spill through a wide gap. Each step rattles my bones, reminding me how my body verges on total depletion. I feel Kaelith's heartbeat in the tether that binds us. Even the slightest brush of our arms sparks a wave of shared comfort—and also a lingering ache for what we lost. He gave up flight, he gave up the runic might that made him unstoppable.

We exit the fortress into a canyon ringed by ancient pines. The air is brisk, carrying the scent of pine needles and chilled earth, a sharp contrast to the stench of battle inside. Neither of us speaks. Words feel too small for the storm of relief and sorrow that churns within. My brand pulses again, this time with gentle warmth, guiding me to a rocky overhang partially sheltered by pine branches—a decent place to camp, at least for tonight.

Kaelith tilts his head, noticing the same spot. We exchange a nod, staggering toward it. The pine-needle carpet muffles our footsteps, providing a modest cushion for our exhausted bodies. As we collapse onto the ground, an unspoken tension coils between us: relief that we're alive, heartbreak for everything we sacrificed, and a pulsing awareness of how our bond survived the ultimate test.

He sinks against a boulder, head leaning back, eyes closed. I settle beside him, hugging my staff to my chest. My entire being resonates with the urge to hold him, to confirm he's truly here. The brand on my wrist tingles with a low, throbbing note—an echo of synergy that begs for closeness.

I gently set my staff aside and shift closer, my hip brushing his. He lifts an arm, inviting me into the curve of his side. With a shuddering breath, I nestle into him, pressing my cheek against the leftover stony ridges of his chest. Even half-drained of gargoyle power, he's still so broad, so undeniably Kaelith. My tears come fresh and silent, relief mingling with gratitude. We're alive. We're free. But we're also so raw.

His arm encircles me, fingers sliding through the tangles of my hair. Our gazes meet, and I see the same swirl of need, sorrow, and hesitant joy in his golden irises. We both sigh, a fragile harmony that merges into a single breath.

He dips his head, voice husky. “I owe you more than an apology for everything. For illusions that tore us apart, for the times I pushed you away. You gave me everything, Sariah, and I—” His words break off, a subtle tremor in his throat.

My heart clenches. I shift, lifting a hand to cradle his cheek, feeling the warmth of his skin, the faint texture of runes beneath my fingertips. “No more apologies,” I whisper, tears threatening again. “We both nearly lost ourselves to illusions, guilt, or the demands of others. It’s enough that we’re here, that we chose each other in the end.”

He swallows, eyes brimming with unshed tears. A slow moment passes where we just look at each other, letting the final strands of tension unravel. Then, with a soft exhale, he dips his head, pressing his brow to mine. His wings, though weaker, still wrap around my back in a gentle cocoon. I allow my body to relax against him, heart pounding with both relief and an increasing awareness of how deeply I crave his closeness now that the battle is done.

“Sariah,” he breathes, voice low. “Can we...?” He doesn’t finish, but the brand tingles, reading the same longing in me that thrums in him. So many times we united in synergy out of desperation or dire need. But tonight, we might finally let ourselves have this moment of love, uncoerced by crisis.

A watery smile curves my lips. I lean in, searching his eyes. “We can,” I whisper, feeling my pulse hammer in my ears. My cheeks warm as the last threads of fear slip away, replaced by a slow-building tide of affection and desire. We deserve this—not frantic, not borne of life-or-death synergy, but a reaffirming union that acknowledges our equal choice.

He dips his head, brushing his mouth over mine. The kiss starts tentative, as if we're both testing the reality that we survived. Then the brand flares, synergy flickering. I release a breathy moan, parting my lips. He threads his fingers through my hair, pulling me closer. A flood of warmth rushes through my veins, tinged with the new softness that edges our bond. This isn't the explosive magic of a dire healing or synergy shield. It's something gentler—yet it sparks a profound intensity in my chest.

My hand trails down his arm, noticing how the stone ridges are smoother than before, less pronounced. A pang of sadness flickers—he gave up so much. I glance at him, tears stinging. He answers with a tender murmur, sliding his hand down to cup my waist. The tether hums in quiet reassurance: we might've lost powers, but we gained a deeper unity that illusions can't sever.

Emotions swirl in a heady blend. I press closer, letting my cloak fall away. His wings shift, drawing me into a circle of warmth, the pine-scented wind ruffling my hair. Our foreheads touch, and his breath puffs against my cheek with each ragged exhalation. The brand pulses, synergy dancing with a gentle glow. It's no longer a frantic life-saving maneuver but a gentle undercurrent fueling our closeness.

He moves his hands to my hips, guiding me onto his lap, mindful of the bruises that mark both our bodies. My heart thrums with anticipation, each beat reminding me we're finally safe enough to embrace this moment. No illusions loom, no condemnation from Drayveth. Just us, raw and real, choosing one another.

“Sariah,” he murmurs, voice husky with longing. Our gazes lock, a thousand unsaid confessions passing between us. I cup his jaw, running my thumb over the faint scars left where runes once glowed. He leans into my touch with a low growl that resonates in his chest, half-gargoyle yet wholly Kaelith.

The next kiss is deeper, more insistent. My pulse races. Heat gathers low in my belly, radiating outward. Our synergy flutters at the edges of my awareness, not the raging

inferno of battle but a comforting warmth that intensifies each time our lips meet. I part from him with a gasp, only to trail my mouth along his neck, tasting salt and the lingering dust of collapsed illusions. He exhales sharply, claws—less sharp than before—curling gently against my back.

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Words become unnecessary as I fumble with the fastenings of his battered leathers, needing to feel the steady thump of his heart. He helps me, though his fingers tremble with fatigue. We're both bruised, but we cradle each other with soft care. Each brush of skin sends a jolt of awareness through me, the brand glowing. I recall the first times we joined under duress—now, it's a voluntary act of healing, emotional and physical.

My own clothes slip away, replaced by the warmth of his body, the hush of the forest night, and the flickering synergy that pulses in our bond. I feel every scratch and bruise on his skin, each ridged scar where runes used to shine. The reality of his vulnerability makes me ache with both sorrow and fierce protectiveness. He meets my gaze, a glimmer of wonder in his eyes, as if he can't believe we reached this quiet space after so much heartbreak.

Gently, almost reverently, we align, hearts pounding. Our limbs entangle in a slow, tender dance. This time, there's no urgency of healing a mortal wound or fending off illusions. It's a mutual surrender, a soft exploration that reaffirms the love we declared in the midst of chaos. My tears fall again, but they're tears of relief and gratitude. Each press of skin to skin, each murmured endearment, lifts another layer of sorrow from my soul.

His touch is featherlight, trailing over my curves in a way that ignites every nerve ending. I arch against him, brand thrumming with a gentle pulse, synergy shimmering between us. The air seems to crackle, but it's not the wild chaos of battle—rather a glowing aura of closeness, forging a deeper bond that illusions can't fracture. Our breaths mingle in soft gasps, each stolen moment of pleasure reaffirming that we're equals, choosing this path freely.

We shift, finding a comfortable position on the bed of pine needles. My cloak cushions me, and his wings spread around us like a protective shield, the leathery spans trembling with restraint. His tail curls over my calf, the motion more tender than the feral thrash it once was, its tip brushing my skin in slow, possessive strokes. I cradle his face, pressing kisses to his cheeks, his jaw, tasting salt and the faint tang of old tears. He groans softly, arms tightening around my waist, claws retracted but the heat of his grip undeniable.

Then his hand slides down, calloused fingers tracing the curve of my hip before slipping between my thighs. I gasp as he finds me—wet, aching—my body already yielding to his touch. His cock presses against me, thick and heavy with need, and for a moment we simply savor the friction, the delicious drag of skin on skin. I rock into him, my pussy clenching around nothing, desperate to feel him fully.

“Now, Kaelith. Take me. Embrace me, my love,” I breathe, nails scraping his shoulders. He feels so warm and so good against me.

He doesn’t hesitate. “Sariah...”

With a growl that vibrates through my bones, he guides himself into me, filling me inch by exquisite inch. “Gods!” I scream as he hits me deep and hard, my pussy creams even more, gushing with juices to accommodate him.

“You’re so wet and fits me so well,” he groans, holding onto my hips and thrusts inside again in one fluid motion.

The stretch is perfect, blissful, and I arch against him, my brand pulsing in time with each slow thrust. Our synergy flares, not as a wildfire but as molten gold—liquid and radiant, pouring into every gasp escaping our lips. His rhythm is unhurried, each movement a vow: We have time. This is ours.

I wrap my legs around his hips, pulling him deeper, and he shudders, his wings flexing around us. His cock strokes that sweet, hidden place inside me, and pleasure coils tight in my belly, brighter with every roll of his hips. His tail lashes once, then curls tighter around my leg, as if he can't bear even that small separation.

"Look into my eyes, I want to see you," he rasps, and when I do, his eyes are burning, the pupils blown wide with desire. The raw devotion there undoes me.

"Kaelith..." I call out his name over and over, wanting him to hear the desperation and need in my voice. I want him. Everything about him.

I clench around him, my pussy fluttering as the pressure builds, and his groan is ragged against my lips. His thrusts grow uneven, his control fraying, but still he holds my gaze—anchoring me even as pleasure threatens to sweep us under.

"I'm coming, my Kaelith," I gasp, my mouth unable to close and keening noises spills from me.

"Come for me, my love," he murmurs as his hips pistons faster. "Let's come as one."

My climax crests like a wave, and I cry out, my brand blazing as the synergy arcs between us in a shower of silver sparks. He follows with a broken shout, his cock pulsing inside me as he comes deep, his body locking mine in place like sacred ground.

For a heartbeat, there's only the echo of our shared release, the aftershocks trembling through us both. Then we sag against each other, hearts still pounding, skin slick with sweat and the evidence of our union. The forest night wraps around us, the faint moonlight filtering through pine branches as if blessing this quiet aftermath. My entire body hums with lingering contentment, muscles weak from battle and this final, tender surrender.

He brushes damp hair from my forehead, his eyes shining with love deeper than illusions.

“Sariah,” he whispers, voice trembling with awe, “I never imagined... it could feel like this—pure, free from illusions or desperation.”

I smile through tears, kissing his forehead. “We’ve earned it,” I manage, voice tight with emotion. “No illusions, no curses, just us.”

A soft chuckle escapes him, almost disbelieving. He kisses my palm, then helps me settle against his chest. We lie in the pine woods, letting our breathing slow. My cheek rests where I can feel his heart, each beat a reassurance that we stand on the brink of a new future.

Time drifts. The brand’s glow dims to a faint pulse, synergy settling into a gentle background hum. I recall everything that led here: fleeing illusions in the old temple, forging synergy to survive Drayveth’s demands, uniting to banish Nerezza for good. Kaelith gave up his gargoyle might, and I nearly lost all purna innocence to the darkness. Yet we overcame. The brand radiates a quiet pride in my chest, as though saying: You are free, truly free.

Eventually, Kaelith shifts beneath me, wincing at a bruise. I gently stroke his chest, concerned. “Are you hurting? I might have a scrap of magic left to ease your pain.” My voice catches. Though I’m drained, I’d do anything to comfort him.

He brushes his lips to my temple. “I’m sore, but I’ll live. Rest your magic, love. We can nurse each other’s wounds in the days to come.” His tone is serene, touched by a peaceful acceptance I’ve seldom heard from him.

I nod, burying my face in the curve of his neck. The dryness of my throat reminds me we have mundane needs—water, supplies, a safe roof. But for tonight, the pine-

needle floor and his arms suffice. We have survived illusions, condemnation, and heartbreak. Together, we can face the more ordinary struggles of hunger and shelter.

He drapes his wings around us, tail twining with my calf in a gesture of tenderness. The half-lost gargoyle essence remains, yet he's more human now—softer skin, less stony ridges. I kiss the slight hollow of his throat, marveling at the change. He closes his eyes, a content sigh slipping out. We can rebuild from here.

Distantly, an owl hoots, or perhaps some nocturnal creature stirs. The forest hush enfolds us. I shift my head to gaze at Kaelith's profile in the thin moonlight—his jawline no longer as jagged, runes faint. He seems almost calm, as if letting go of centuries of guilt. My chest warms with fierce admiration. He was unstoppable as a gargoyle warrior, but now he's unstoppable as a man who chooses love over illusions.

“Sariah,” he murmurs, blinking drowsily. “I sense a new path ahead—one that's ours to shape. We could search out Snowfall Glen, or travel the world, or build a quiet life somewhere far from illusions.”

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I smile, sliding my hand up to cup his cheek. “All of those sound tempting. We’ll figure it out, day by day,” I reply softly. “No illusions or covens deciding for us.”

He nods, eyes fluttering shut. “Yes,” he breathes, a satisfied hum in his throat. “I never want to lose this. You. Us.”

Tears prick my eyes again—tears of joy this time. We’ve earned this joy. “You won’t,” I whisper, sealing the promise with a gentle kiss. The brand glows with a final flicker, as though blessing our vow.

We snuggle closer, letting the forest lull us into a tender stillness. My body aches, but in his arms, I feel safe, content, and unbelievably relieved. If I listen carefully, I detect no illusions or roars of monstrous gargoyles—only the rustle of pines and the faint hush of night creatures. Our synergy hum rests in a quiet lull, akin to the slow, steady beat of two hearts finally at peace.

In the hush, memories swirl: Drayveth’s condemnation, Nerezza’s final shriek, the synergy that sealed her away. Yet none of it disrupts this moment. I tuck my head under Kaelith’s chin, inhaling the mingled scents of pine needles, soot, and the underlying warmth that’s purely him. He’s truly mine now, unbound by illusions, unshadowed by centuries of guilt.

I think of the future. We might face suspicion, since the coven still considers me a Nyxari, and Kaelith is no longer fully gargoyle nor fully human. But we are alive and free to forge our path. The brand in my chest hums with quiet assurance—my magic stands with me, not as a threat, but a tool of creation.

Kaelith's breathing deepens, half-lidded eyes watching me with a soft reverence. I trace faint runic lines across his collarbone, pressing gentle kisses to each. He shivers, letting out a low, half-pleased groan. My cheeks warm, but the brand flickers, urging me to continue offering comfort.

We share another slow, tender kiss, neither frantic nor overshadowed by violence. This time, it's an expression of relief and belonging that extends beyond raw passion. I lose myself in the softness of his lips, the quiet hum of synergy that glistens in our blood. The pine needles rustle beneath us, but we barely register the discomfort. We're adrift in a cocoon of love that the world's cruelties cannot fracture.

When at last we part, we lie entwined, limbs draped over each other, heartbeats syncing. My eyelids droop, the day's exhaustion heavy on every muscle. Kaelith's chest rises and falls, each exhalation calming me. My brand dims to a gentle glow, the final proof that we've secured a future together.

I shift my head, gazing at the star-pocked sky above. "I feel... such peace," I manage, voice hardly above a whisper. "After everything, it's hard to believe."

He strokes my hair, wings rustling. "It's real," he says, voice husky with weariness. "We made it real."

Smiling, I tuck myself against him, letting the synergy's lull cradle me. No illusions beckon, no condemnation weighs my spirit. My brand rests in a steady beat that echoes Kaelith's heart, forging a serene hush around us. I close my eyes, letting the dreamless dark envelop me in the warmth of his arms.

When dawn breaks, it finds us still curled together in the modest shelter of pine and rock. I stir, blinking sleep from my eyes, greeted by the comforting weight of Kaelith's arm across my waist. The brand flickers at the sudden wash of contentment. Our bodies ache, but the knot of fear that once plagued me has dissolved. I gaze at his

face in the early light, a flicker of gratitude sparking in my chest: He's here, truly here.

He stirs as well, opening eyes that gleam with quiet contentment. A small, wry smile touches his lips. "Morning," he rasps, voice gravelly from sleep.

I lean in, pressing a featherlight kiss to his temple. "Morning," I reply, heart fluttering. "Ready to face a new day free from illusions?"

His arms tighten around me, pulling me into a languid, half-drowsy embrace. "Beyond ready," he murmurs, eyes drifting shut again. The brand hums, synergy bridging us in a gentle, waking connection.

We share a few moments of lazy warmth, letting our bodies reacquaint themselves with safety and peace. Eventually, I push upright, rubbing my arms against the chill. He follows suit, stretching stiff muscles. The sun crawls higher, filtering through pine branches, revealing the battered state of our clothing and the faint scarring left by runes on Kaelith's skin. Yet the sense of wholeness in our bond remains.

As we gather our scattered belongings—staff, cloak, scraps of dried food—I catch Kaelith watching me with a thoughtful expression. "You all right?" I ask softly, sensing a swirl of emotion behind his eyes.

He nods, stepping closer so our shoulders brush. "Yes," he answers, voice quiet, "just overwhelmed by the notion of living without illusions hanging over me... or guilt crushing me." His gaze sweeps across my face. "And how grateful I am that you're here."

A gentle flush warms my cheeks. "I'm grateful too," I confess. "We'll find our way—beyond illusions, beyond Drayveth. We have each other."

He inclines his head, a serene acceptance brightening his features. Yes, we have each other. We share one last embrace, hearts pulsing in unison, then begin the slow journey away from the fortress's shadow. Each step leads us farther into a future shaped by our own hands, not illusions or ancient curses.

No illusions can sever the bond we reaffirmed in tender closeness last night, and no condemnation from old covens can overshadow the synergy we forged. The brand in my wrist hums contentedly, while Kaelith's faint runic lines shimmer in the morning sun. Side by side, we vanish into the forested ridges, hearts brimming with the promise that, after all the heartbreak and battles, we've earned this new dawn of love, free from fear.

And as we walk, I sense a gentle current of joy radiating from both of us—an unspoken vow that, no matter what the world hurls our way, we'll face it with unwavering devotion. In the quiet solitude of the pines, I quietly whisper a final prayer of thanks. We survived illusions and condemnation. We reclaimed a love forged in synergy. At last, we can live for ourselves, choosing each other without fear, building a fate untainted by ancient curses or battered covens.

Yes, we're weary, bruised, and battered. But we're also unbreakable—together.

20

KAELITH

Sunlight glitters through the remains of a once-grand doorway, illuminating faded glyphs and chipped stones that have witnessed centuries of secrets. The early morning air smells fresh and crisp, like a promise carried on the breeze. I stand in the fractured threshold of the ancient temple—now no more than a skeleton of pillars and arches—and let the golden rays spill over my face. My runes have faded to faint lines, but I feel more alive than ever.

At my side, Sariah steadies me, her brand glowing softly in the dawn's light. We share a glance, hearts pounding in a synchronized beat. The world seems to hold its breath, waiting to see what we'll do next, now that we've sealed Nerezza and survived Drayveth's condemnation. I draw in a slow, bracing breath, exhaling tension that's weighed on me for centuries. All that stone, all that guilt, all those illusions—gone. I am free.

Sariah's cloak flutters around her ankles as a breeze stirs the courtyard. She tucks a stray lock of hair behind her ear, silver glimmering in the sunlight. My chest tightens with a surge of affection. Even after so many battles, so much heartbreak, she stands beside me—strong, resolute, her brand an emblem of the magic that saved us both.

I reach out, taking her hand in mine. My claws are duller than they once were, my gargoyle might diminished to a mere shadow, but she laces our fingers together without hesitation, as though that part of me was never what truly mattered. The brand pulses, a faint synergy stirring between us. In that moment, everything feels right.

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We step beyond the temple's shattered doorway, leaving behind the echoes of illusions and final battles. The early light bathes the forested slopes in soft gold, beckoning us to explore a world no longer haunted by Nerezza's corruption. Sariah's gaze sweeps across the horizon, her lips curving into a gentle smile that kindles warmth in my chest. It's as though she, too, finds solace in the rebirth of morning.

"How do you feel?" she asks quietly, glancing at my faint runes. "Now that..." Her voice drifts, hinting at all we sacrificed—my gargoyle powers, the illusions we severed.

I squeeze her hand, letting the morning air fill my lungs. "I feel lighter," I murmur. "Like the stones weighing me down have finally fallen away." A wry laugh hitches in my throat. "I still ache from the final seal we cast, but that ache reminds me I'm truly alive—and free."

Sariah's eyes glisten with empathy. "I remember how you told me once that you felt cursed to repeat the past, to watch another purna become a monster. But you broke that cycle, Kaelith." She steps closer, pressing our joined hands to my chest. "We both did."

My heart thuds against her knuckles, the brand's hum adding a quiet undertone. "Yes," I say, voice raw. "Now we have the future to shape, free from illusions or ancient curses. And I want to share that future with you."

A faint blush dusts her cheeks. We linger in the temple's threshold, the ruins casting long shadows over the grass. I see the question in her eyes—Where do we go now? We've bandied about heading to Snowfall Glen, forging alliances with purnas

who might accept us. Or maybe we'll just wander until we find acceptance in some distant land. The only certainty is that we do it together.

She speaks first, voice tentative. "We've rid Protheke of Nerezza's immediate threat. Drayveth might still hate us, but with the brood scattered, there's no reason to stay in these mountains." Her brand pulses faintly. "We can't go back to my old coven, not with them labeling me a Nyxari. And you... well, the gargoyles are either gone or corrupted beyond salvage."

I nod slowly, memories of my old gargoyle brethren stirring. Once, I believed our race unstoppable, but Nerezza's illusions decimated us. A pang of mourning flits through me. "There's nothing left here for me," I murmur. "My kin are dust or twisted thralls. Even if I found survivors, they wouldn't recognize what I've become. Better we seek new horizons."

Sariah's grip tightens. "Then let's journey beyond Prazh, like we planned. The world might fear purna and gargoyle, but we can carve out a place for ourselves. Maybe Snowfall Glen, maybe beyond. We'll find a community that sees us for who we are." A tremor of excitement lines her voice. "Or we'll build our own, if we have to."

A swell of gratitude surges in my chest. I kiss her knuckles, brand flickering at the contact. "Yes," I say, eyes shining. "We step forward together." The words taste of promise, the simplest vow that has guided us since illusions first tried to tear us apart.

She smiles, then sets her staff aside, turning fully to me. The morning light gilds the planes of her face, accentuating the determination in her storm-gray eyes. A hush falls between us, the only noise is the rustling pine branches overhead. My pulse thrums, sensing a shift—a deeper resolution forming.

"Kaelith," she says softly, swallowing. "There's something else." She glances at her brand. "We've saved each other over and over, forging synergy that no illusions

could sever. But I want more than just traveling together. I want to stand at your side, not just as a partner in battle, but as... something permanent.”

My heart stutters. I recall how gargoyles once recognized mates with ceremonial vows, sharing stone-bound hearts. But I lost that tradition with my old life—though the memory remains. “Are you... are you asking to...?” I trail off, uncertain how to phrase the question.

She exhales, a tiny smile tugging her lips. “I recall how your old gargoyle culture recognized mates. My coven had a parallel idea: a bonding ceremony, though mostly for purna with deep synergy. When we sealed Nerezza, I realized there’s no one else I want to walk with through this world.”

My runes, faint though they are, tingle with an unmistakable warmth. *Mate*. The word resonates with a primal part of me, stirring both joy and solemn respect. We rarely used that term lightly in gargoyle traditions. And yet, the synergy and love I share with Sariah surpass anything I experienced, even with Nerezza in the distant past. It feels right.

“Yes,” I whisper, voice catching. “I want that, Sariah. More than anything.” My tail flicks in excitement, the brand on her wrist flaring in response. “But... does your purna tradition allow for a gargoyle—half gargoyle now—to stand as your mate?”

She lifts a hand, cupping my jaw. “We forge our own path, remember? Even if Drayveth or the coven or the entire world scorns us, I choose you. Will you choose me?”

Tears prick my eyes, a raw tenderness coursing through me. “Always,” I say, letting the word echo under the ruined arches. I lower to one knee, ignoring the twinge of pain in my battered limbs, and bow my head to her. It’s a gargoyle gesture of devotion, one rarely granted. My wings spread partially behind me, a sign of respect.

“Sariah, purna of unwavering heart, will you be my mate?”

She chokes on a laugh-sob, eyes brimming with tears. “Of course,” she whispers, tugging me up so she can fling her arms around my shoulders. Our lips meet in a desperate kiss, tears slipping down both our cheeks. My heart soars, brand humming in quiet euphoria. We made it—beyond illusions or condemnation.

We linger in that embrace, exchanging whispers of love and relief. Then I pull back, breath unsteady, scanning the sunlit clearing. “A ceremony,” I say, voice husky. “Gargoyles once had a custom of exchanging vows under the open sky, with a gathering of kin. But we have no kin left—perhaps we can do it just us, or find a friendly outpost that welcomes our union. I only know I want the world to see we stand as mates by choice, not illusions.”

Sariah nods, eyes shining. “We can hold a small ceremony—just the two of us in nature’s presence for now. Later, if we find acceptance among the purnas or any allies, we can reaffirm it. But I want to vow myself to you, Kaelith.” She strokes a hand over my chest, runes faintly warming. “In my purna tradition, we bless the union with an exchange of magic, consenting to be each other’s vessels in times of need. Is that something you’d want?”

A surge of emotion nearly robs me of speech. I recall how purna can take a mate or a vessel to channel excess magic, a sign of trust and intimacy. Me, willingly becoming her vessel. The idea humbles me. I was once a gargoyle warrior beyond mortal, but now I’d do anything for her. “Yes,” I murmur. “I’d be honored, Sariah.”

Her eyes flood with tears again, brand glowing in the morning sun. She takes my hand, guiding me a few paces into the temple’s courtyard, where a slender ray of light pierces the gloom. We stand in that shaft of sunlight, dust motes drifting around us like tiny sparks of magic. My wings fold gently, tail coiling at my ankles. The brand pulses, synergy stirring in a gentle current.

She lifts her staff, tapping the butt against the cracked stone. “In the name of the synergy we forged, and the world we fought to save, I vow to stand beside you, Kaelith, in all trials. My power is yours, my love is yours, for as long as you choose me.” Her voice quivers on the last words, tears slipping unchecked.

I swallow, blinking back my own tears. Stepping closer, I place a clawed hand over hers, runes flickering. “I vow to walk with you, Sariah, wherever these roads lead. I surrender my old burdens and embrace the life we build together. My heart, my loyalty, everything I am—yours.”

The synergy between us flares softly, an aura of silver and faint gold enveloping our clasped hands. We hold each other’s gaze, letting the vow settle into our souls. The brand glows bright, and though my runes are diminished, they respond with a gentle shimmer, sealing the union. In that moment, I sense we’re truly mates—bound by choice and love, no illusions or curses interfering.

Sariah exhales shakily, shoulders trembling with relief. She leans in, pressing her forehead to mine. Our lips meet in a slow kiss charged with quiet reverence. I taste salt from her tears, my own heart pounding a steady drum. We stand there, letting the synergy swirl around us, finalizing the vow in front of the morning sun.

When at last we part, she laughs softly, voice thick. “It’s done,” she murmurs. “We are mates in both gargoyle and purna custom. Whether or not the world accepts it... I can’t find it in me to care.”

I brush my thumbs over her cheeks, clearing the tear tracks. “Nor do I,” I whisper. “We’ll face the rest together.”

Her brand pulses, synergy shifting into a warmer current that grazes my senses. A subtle tension builds in the hush, an echo of the closeness we tasted at the fortress but overshadowed by exhaustion. Now, as the sun bathes us in fresh light, we share a

look that kindles something deeper: not frantic or desperate, but a tender longing to reaffirm this vow in the most intimate way possible.

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Heat blooms in my chest. “Sariah,” I murmur, voice catching. “I... I’d like to mate with you now, in the fullness of our bond, if you want.”

Her cheeks flush, a slow smile curving her lips. “Yes,” she breathes, tugging me toward a patch of overgrown moss within the old courtyard. “Let’s make our vow complete.”

Anticipation courses through my veins, laced with a gentle thrill that reminds me we’re free to choose each other without illusions. She sets her staff aside, and I shrug off what remains of my battered clothing. The morning air kisses my skin, a faint chill raising goosebumps, but Sariah’s brand pulses with heat that banishes the cold. We kneel on the moss, the worn stones behind us bearing silent witness.

This time, our union is neither about synergy to heal mortal wounds nor frantic merging to repel illusions. It’s a slow, deliberate act of love. She slips her cloak from her shoulders, exposing bruises and fading scars, each one telling a story of battles fought. My heart aches with admiration. She’s so strong, so beautiful, so wholly my mate.

She reaches for me, hands skimming over the faint runic lines on my arms. I meet her gaze, seeing the same swirl of gratitude, longing, and quiet joy. Her brand glimmers, synergy humming in the background. We lean in simultaneously, lips meeting in a tender, languid kiss that speaks of newfound hope rather than fear.

She tastes like relief, tears, and something sweetly addictive. I cradle her waist, careful of bruises, guiding her closer until our chests brush. Her brand surges with gentle arcs of light that flutter against my dull runes. A sigh escapes my throat as she

parts from my mouth, trailing kisses down my jaw, neck, and collarbone. Each press of her lips ignites a soft hum, synergy weaving between us.

I let out a trembling breath, sliding my palms over her sides, mapping each contour. Our bodies still carry the remnants of exhaustion, but the deeper well of affection spurs us on. She arches into me, brand flickering as she murmurs my name in a voice laced with promise. The morning breeze rustles overhead, scattering leaves into the courtyard.

With unhurried reverence, we sink onto the moss, limbs tangling. The synergy coursing through our bond is a gentle crescendo, not the frantic wave we harnessed in battles. She threads her fingers through my hair, a soft moan escaping her lips as our bodies align in a slow, rhythmic dance. I marvel at how different this is from any synergy-fueled lovemaking before—we're no longer desperate to survive, but celebrating life.

She shifts, meeting my gaze, cheeks flushed. "You're truly mine," she whispers, a statement of fact rather than question.

I nod, breath ragged. "Always," I rasp, sliding a hand up her spine. My runes flicker in agreement, synergy intensifying. She lowers her mouth to mine once more, and the final barriers fall away. We lose ourselves in a lazy exploration that affirms every vow we just spoke, each sigh and gasp an echo of trust.

Time blurs, measured by the quickening pace of our bodies—her hips rolling against mine, the slick heat of her pussy gripping my cock with every slow, deliberate thrust. The soft hush of the pine-scented breeze mingles with her gasps, the glow of synergy sparking brighter wherever our skin meets.

"Kaelith," she moans, nails scraping down my chest. "Gods, you feel—ah—so good inside me."

I groan, burying my face in her neck, my voice rough with need. "You're perfect. So wet, so warm—fuck—I could spend eternity like this. I could combust in your arm, my love, and I'll smile as I take my last breath."

She arches beneath me, her thighs trembling around my hips. "No dying on me, just pleasure. Gaze into my eyes and see I'm only speaking the truth," she whispers, and when I do, her eyes are dark with love and want. "I need to see you break apart in my arms, Kaelith. I crave to feel how you explode in me."

"My life, my everything..." I moan, caressing her body with my eyes and my hand grabs her hair as I bury my face in between her generous breasts.

Our murmured confessions spill between kisses, raw and unfiltered. "I love you," I rasp, thrusting deeper, watching her lips part in a silent cry. "Every scar, every battle, every damn illusion—it was worth it to be here with you like this."

Her pussy clenches around me as she whimpers, "Say it again."

"I love you. Forever. I'll say it over and over again if need be." My hand slides between us, thumb circling her clit, and she sobs my name. "Come for me, Sariah. Let me feel you fall apart."

The brand's pulse matches the frantic rhythm of our hearts, magic coiling tighter with every shared breath. When her climax hits, it's a radiant burst—her back bowing, her pussy fluttering around my cock as she chants my name like a prayer.

"Kaelith!" she screams, her body shaking from the earth-shattering orgasm.

"Sariah, I'm coming!" The sensation drags me under with her; I come inside her with a guttural groan, my wings flaring wide as pleasure fractures through me. Colors explodes in my head, my mind fracturing at the sheer sensation of the uncontrollable

pleasure igniting my very core.

A tremor of ecstasy ripples between us, underlaid by that same gentle healing—her magic soothing my battered soul, my touch mending her bruised spirit. She shudders in my arms, breath catching, tears glittering on her lashes. I cradle her face, pressing our foreheads together as the synergy's wave peaks and recedes, leaving behind a serene hum in every cell of my body.

"Stay inside me," she murmurs, legs still hooked around my waist. "Just... for a little longer."

I kiss her, slow and sweet. "Always."

When she finally slumps against my chest, I hold her close, our hearts hammering in tandem. We lie tangled in the moss, sunbeams painting gold over our sweat-slicked skin. Her laugh is breathless, satisfied; my tail curls possessively around her calf as my wings sag in exhausted surrender.

"We are one," she whispers.

"Truly," I agree. There's no fear in the word—only peace.

Minutes pass in a haze of lazy affection, fingers stroking across each other's skin, exchanging quiet kisses. My chest feels lighter than air, a strange sense of renewed energy suffusing me despite my earlier weariness. She kisses my jaw, lips curving into a small grin when she notices how my tail curls around her ankle in a protective gesture.

She props herself up on an elbow, hair brushing my shoulders. The brand glows softly on her wrist, synergy flaring in gentle pulses. "That was..." she starts, then laughs at her own loss for words. "I can't describe how perfect this is."

I brush a stray lock from her forehead, marveling at the love shining in her eyes. “Nor can I,” I murmur. “We fought illusions, fear, condemnation. Now we stand—well, lie—here, free to love each other in the open sun.” I pause, tears pricking. “Thank you for trusting me enough to let me be your vessel, to share your magic freely.”

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She kisses the tip of my nose, brand pulsing. “And thank you for relinquishing your gargoyle might to seal Nerezza. No illusions overshadow us now. You chose me without fear or guilt. That... that means everything.”

We share a small laugh, tension melting under the brilliance of morning. The courtyard’s ruins remain silent witnesses to our final vow. Eventually, we muster the energy to sit up, leaning against a broken column for support. She draws her cloak around her shoulders, while I retrieve scraps of clothing. We exchange shy smiles, as though we’re new lovers unashamed to be seen. The brand flickers contently, synergy swirling in a lazy orbit around us.

She glances at me, a contemplative light in her eyes. “So... the next step is truly ours to decide. Where do we go from here? Snowfall Glen, an uncharted land, or simply roam Protheka until we find acceptance?”

I let out a thoughtful hum, wings twitching. I can’t fly as I once did, but a gargoyle’s spirit still stirs in me. “I’d like to see how others beyond Prazh live. Maybe we can share our story, help them avoid illusions or condemnation. Show them purna and gargoyle can stand together.” I extend a hand, palm up, letting the brand’s glow reflect on my faint runes. “Whatever we face, we face together. If we find a place that welcomes us, we settle. If not, we keep searching. That is... if you’re willing to roam with a half-gargoyle who might struggle to keep pace.”

Her expression softens with a tender smile. She sets her hand in mine, brand shimmering. “I’m willing, Kaelith, mate of my heart. I’d roam the world with you, forging alliances, or living quietly if that’s what we choose. As long as we’re side by side, illusions behind us, the future is ours.”

Emotion thickens my throat. I draw her hand to my lips, pressing a reverent kiss to her brand. She exhales, brand flaring. The synergy hum quivers, reminding me how precious this union is—no illusions or forced bonds, just love.

We rise, helping each other straighten our disheveled clothes. My tail flicks once, an unconscious sign of readiness. Sariah retrieves her staff, eyes scanning the horizon where golden sunlight washes the rolling hills. She points to a path leading away from the ruins, winding through towering pines. “Shall we go?”

A wave of warmth surges through me. I nod, a smile gracing my lips. “Yes, let’s step into that new dawn.”

Our footsteps echo in the hushed courtyard, passing toppled pillars and scattered vines. The place no longer reeks of illusions or chaos. The breeze smells of pine and dew, and beyond the gate, bright sun lights our path. We walk hand in hand, synergy forming a quiet aura around us. My runes remain faint lines, but each time Sariah’s fingers brush them, I feel a gentle pulse of reassurance. She doesn’t need me to be a fully empowered gargoyle. She needs me—the man who fought illusions to stand with her.

At the threshold, we pause, turning one last time to watch the sunlight spill over the temple’s rubble. It’s the final image of a place that witnessed our worst nightmares and greatest triumph. Sariah leans her head on my shoulder, brand flickering with subdued contentment. “We’ve come full circle,” she murmurs. “Once, you woke in a temple to save me. Now we leave a temple behind, free of illusions. The cycle breaks.”

A powerful hush envelops me. I slip my arm around her waist, breathing in her comforting scent. “Yes,” I say softly, “the cycle breaks. We are free to forge our own fate.”

She lifts her face to mine, eyes shining in the morning sun. A small smile forms, hope radiating from every line of her expression. “Then let’s do it,” she says, voice tinged with excitement. “We walk forward together, as mates, forging alliances or quiet roads—whatever suits us. Protheka is vast, and illusions no longer chain us.”

I press a lingering kiss to her lips, a silent vow that I stand with her. The synergy in my chest flutters, a gentle wave of contentment. “Together,” I echo, voice husky. Then, clasping her hand, I guide us across the threshold, stepping from the temple’s crumbled stones into the bright expanse of day.

The pine forest opens around us, dappled sunlight painting the ground in shifting patterns. Our boots rustle over soft needles and moss, the brand’s gentle pulses marking the steady pace of our hearts. No illusions lurk in our periphery, no condemnation hounds our steps. The wide world beckons with uncertain possibilities, but we greet it with unwavering devotion.

After a time, we reach a fork in the path. Sariah laughs lightly, brushing windblown hair from her eyes. “Which way, do you think? East or south?”

I tilt my head, considering the shape of the distant hills. My runes tingle faintly, not with illusions but the memory of an ancient gargoyle sense for direction. “East,” I decide, pointing. “That route might lead us closer to rumored witch enclaves. And if not, at least we’ll see new sights.”

She nods, brand glowing in agreement, and we set off. Each step feels lighter than the last. Though my wings can’t carry me in flight, I feel no bitterness. Instead, the synergy hum in my chest reminds me of the flight we share—a spiritual bond that soars beyond illusions. Sariah’s brand brightens with each minute, as though thrilled by the open road.

By midday, we find a peaceful clearing, sunlit grass rippling in a gentle breeze. We

pause to share a simple meal of dried fruit and bread. There's banter between us, warm and teasing, about who's more skilled at foraging or which outpost might be more welcoming. The brand pulses with each shared laugh, synergy dancing around our conversation.

When we finish, she leans against a mossy rock, eyes drifting to me with a mischievous gleam. "So," she says, voice dropping. "That ceremony was quite the vow. And the lovemaking after..." She flushes, but her grin is pure delight. "I wonder if we'll have time for another ceremony once we find a place that embraces purna and gargoyle unions?"

A chuckle escapes me, wings folding in a show of contentment. "I'd like that," I murmur, stepping closer. My tail coils around her ankles playfully. "We can display the world how illusions lost and love won."

She laughs, brand glowing in sync with my faint runic lines. Then her smile softens. "It's so strange," she whispers. "I never thought I'd find acceptance after leaving my coven, let alone find someone who loves me enough to risk illusions and condemnation. Yet here we are."

I brush a tender kiss across her brow, heart swelling with pride. "We're unstoppable when we trust each other."

She hums in agreement, cheeks still warm from the memory of our morning union. The synergy hum stirs between us, a quiet undercurrent that never fully sleeps. We're mates, wholly so. The knowledge fills me with a calm sense of purpose I never felt even in my gargoyle prime.

Eventually, we gather ourselves and continue east. The path snakes through ancient pines and rocky hillsides, each step forging a new chapter in our shared journey. We trade banter about the wonders we might discover: hidden valleys, bustling towns, or

enclaves of purnas who might greet us with curiosity instead of fear. The brand pulses whenever we talk of forging alliances, as if to cheer us on.

That evening, we make camp in a sheltered grove. Moonlight bathes the glen, silvering the leaves. We share a small fire, cooking a humble stew from foraged roots and dried meat. Our conversation flows easily, peppered with teasing barbs about Drayveth's sour expression and gentle recollections of the synergy that saved us from illusions. A comfortable hush descends after dinner, the brand quietly glimmering in contentment.

I watch Sariah poke the embers, a soft smile on her lips, and my heart twists with love so deep it threatens tears. Slowly, I move behind her, sliding my arms around her waist. She sighs, leaning back against me. The synergy hum pulses in a gentle wave, reminiscent of our vow.

Her brand glows, and she tilts her head to rest on my shoulder. "We're truly building a life," she whispers, voice trembling with awe. "It feels almost too good to be real."

I press my lips to her hair, inhaling the faint floral note that clings to her cloak. "It is real," I murmur. "No illusions. Just us."

She smiles, brand flickering, and we share a tender kiss beneath the moonlit pines. My once-mighty gargoyle wings drape around her, a protective canopy, though I know I can't fly. I have no regrets. The synergy swirling in my chest, the brand's warmth, her laughter—these are worth more than any flight.

In that quiet moment, I recall how illusions once nearly devoured our bond, how Drayveth tried to tear us apart, how Nerezza threatened to chain me again. But love prevailed. The brand pulses a final testament, synergy glowing in a hush of contentment. We need no illusions or stone prisons to prove our devotion. We stand free, forging a path under the open sky.

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Eventually, she eases from my arms and unrolls our bedding near the fire's dwindling embers. I join her, sharing another soft laugh at how normal this moment feels after battling illusions and forging seals. We slip beneath the blankets, limbs tangling as we settle. The brand glows faintly, synergy lulling us toward a restful sleep.

Before I drift off, I lean down to whisper in her ear, heart pounding with gratitude. "Sariah, mate of my heart, tomorrow we face a new dawn. Are you ready for the journey?"

A soft smile curves her lips, eyes half-lidded. "With you, Kaelith, always," she whispers, brushing a kiss to my jaw. "No illusions, no condemnation, only what we build together."

I close my eyes, a tear sliding free. Yes, only what we build. The synergy hum vibrates softly, ushering us into a peaceful slumber. The final image in my mind is the sunrise we'll greet hand in hand—no illusions weighing me down, no brand binding her in fear. Just the pure, unbreakable bond that merges purna and gargoyle, forging a love stronger than any old curse.

The following morning, I stir at dawn, awakened by pale sunlight dancing across my eyelids. My limbs ache pleasantly, a reminder of the vow we made and the union we shared. Sariah slumbers beside me, her hair strewn over the bedding, brand faintly glowing against her forearm. For a moment, I just watch her breathe, marveling that I—once sealed in stone—found such devotion in a world freed from illusions.

Careful not to disturb her, I slip from the blankets and step outside our makeshift camp. The cool dawn air refreshes me, chasing away lingering weariness. My runes

remain subdued lines across my arms and chest, but I no longer mourn the lost power. I have something better. A satisfied smile tugs at my mouth.

Behind me, I sense movement. Sariah emerges, cloak draped over her shoulders, hair tousled by sleep. The brand flickers in a gentle greeting. She comes up beside me, slipping an arm around my waist, her cheek against my shoulder. We stand together, watching the sunrise transform the sky into brilliant gold and rose, painting an ethereal glow over the rolling hills.

I lean my head against hers, inhaling the warm scent of her skin. "A new dawn," I whisper, voice husky. "Just as we promised."

She nods, resting a hand over her brand. "Yes," she breathes. "And we greet it as mates." A tremor of emotion colors her tone. "Do you feel it, Kaelith? The synergy between us, humming softly, no illusions meddling."

I exhale, heart swelling. "I do," I murmur, turning to face her fully. My arms encircle her waist, wings folding behind me. "I sense every beat of your heart, every flicker of your brand, reminding me we chose each other."

She smiles through tears, standing on tiptoe to press her lips to mine. The brand glows, synergy rippling in a quiet wave. We linger in that tender kiss, a final reflection of the vow we made and the life we'll build. My tail curls around her calf, a playful echo of the moment we first realized we were more than reluctant allies.

When we part, the sun fully breaks the horizon, illuminating us in radiant light. We gather our few belongings, staff, cloak, and the half-empty pack of supplies. With one last glance at the sunrise, we clasp hands, synergy pulsing in time with our hearts. The brand on her wrist, the faint lines of runes on my arms, both affirm that we walk forward as equals, bound by love rather than illusions.

We step onto the faint trail leading beyond Prazh, stepping into a world that might

fear gargoyle and purna. But we do it anyway, hearts entwined, forging a future shaped by our own choices. A breeze ruffles my hair, and it carries the scent of pine and the promise of a fresh start. I glance at Sariah, finding her smiling, eyes bright with anticipation, and I smile back—grateful that after all illusions and battles, we stand in a new dawn, mates by vow and by heart.

Our footsteps fade into the forest hush, brand and runes pulsing in gentle unity. We vanish beyond the temple's old threshold, leaving behind centuries of curses, illusions, and condemnation. In their place, we carry a vow that even the darkest illusions couldn't break: to love each other freely, to roam wherever the road leads, and to greet the rising sun with hope brimming in our chests.

We are free, at last, to live.