



Claimed By the Stone Beast

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: I was built to kill. Not to feel.
Then I found her—bloody, chained, and defiant—and everything changed.

Elyria should've been my enemy. A human marked by forbidden magic.

I should've ended her.

Instead, I claimed her.

I dragged her into the ruins, locked her under my protection, and warned the world: she's mine now.

She fights me. Curses me.

But I see the way she trembles when I'm near.

She thinks I'm the monster in her cage.

But I'm the only reason she's still breathing.

And I'll crush anyone who tries to take her from me.

Read on for beastly possessiveness, forced proximity, dark magic bonds, enemies-to-something-darker, and a human girl claimed by a monster who refuses to let go. She was supposed to be his enemy—now she's the only thing keeping him human. HEA guaranteed.

Total Pages (Source): 65

ELYRIA

The shriek of metal on metal tears through the still morning air, and I pause mid-swing, my hands shaking around the iron bucket I'm carrying. My heart jolts so violently it feels as if it might rip straight out of my ribs. The noise reverberates across the stone courtyard where I and the other slaves—toil under the unrelenting eyes of the dark elves. Towering, jagged spires rise around me—part fortress, part labyrinth—so tall they seem to slice through the sky itself. I swallow my fear and set the bucket down, trying to steady my trembling limbs. I haven't slept in what feels like days.

My life here is a ceaseless loop of harsh commands and physical exhaustion, but today feels worse. A heaviness presses down on me from the moment I open my eyes. There's a sense of impending change—or doom—clinging to the stale air. The courtyard itself feels on edge, as though the stones are bracing for something terrible.

I roll my aching shoulders, careful not to jostle the iron collar at my throat. A chain runs from that collar to the belt of my dark elf overseer, who's currently speaking to another guard near the courtyard's edge. Being ignored for a moment gives me the smallest illusion of privacy—enough to let my fear flicker across my face before I mask it again.

The collar weighs heavily, as it always does. It marks me as property, as something less than the dust under the elves' boots. I wear it because I'm "human," too insignificant to be given an actual name unless I'm being ordered around or punished.

Whenever I recall how easily they can yank that chain and choke off my air, my throat tightens with memory. I press a hand against the cold metal and exhale slowly, forcing the panic back down.

“Elyria,” a voice hisses from my right. “Hurry up.”

I jump at the sound of my own name. It’s Thyra, another slave—a frail woman with a perpetual twitch in her left eye. She’s stooped under the weight of a large sack, her face pale and streaked with dirt. “They won’t wait for us,” she mutters.

I pick up my bucket again. It’s filled with slop for the fortress’s monstrous guard-hounds, and some of it sloshes over my hand, soaking my threadbare sleeve. The stench that rises is so foul it makes me gag. “I’m moving,” I whisper back, my voice raw from disuse.

We walk across the courtyard in tandem, the fortress’s looming walls casting long shadows over us. Tall, dark elf carvings—twisted and menacing—frame the path. Unlit torches line the walkway like silent sentinels. Nobody is laughing or chatting. Even the guards remain quiet, each one tense, as though the whole fortress is holding its breath.

Last night, while lying on the cold stone floor where I sleep, I overheard the guards whispering. They spoke about the gargoyles—beings rumored to be half-stone, half-devil, who once waged a brutal war. They said the gargoyles aren’t just legends anymore. They’ve awakened from a century-long slumber. I can still hear every word that slipped under the heavy door in the hush of darkness:

They’re raiding towns. They’re culling the women—every human female is to be killed on sight. The Alpha’s decree...

I shudder at the memory. The chill of the night is nothing compared to the dread that

scalds my veins. Gargoyles. I remember stories of them from my childhood—beasts with monstrous wings and eyes like molten fire, possessing a savage thirst for violence that rivals even the dark elves. But why target human women specifically? I can't shake the fear that it has something to do with old legends about witches... about purna.

Though I've never shown a single spark of magic in my twenty-two years, I can't escape the rumors that cling to me like a curse. The silver streak in my near-black hair and the birthmark behind my ear have always drawn suspicion from my overseers. "Abnormal," they call me. Once, a dark elf pressed a blade to that spot, threatening to carve it away if I didn't confess to witchery. I insisted I'm just a normal human—just a slave—but that didn't stop them from branding my back or scarring the skin around my collar.

I have no magic,I remind myself.No power.

"Move faster," a new voice snaps, sharper and harsher than Thyra's. It belongs to Zhorath, an overseer who radiates a twisted sort of glee whenever he's tormenting us. His pointed ears quiver as though he delights in sneering at humans. The slender chain connecting my collar to his belt jingles against his leg guards. "Hound feed is late. The beasts grow restless."

He's tall, even for a dark elf, with silvery-white hair bound in an elaborate twist. His tunic is the color of dried blood, held together by a black metal pauldron shaped like a fanged demon. I've never seen him without that sinister pauldron, almost as if it's fused to his flesh. Dark elves allegedly dabble in all kinds of vile, twisted magic; I don't want to know the truth of it.

I mumble an apology I don't feel. "Yes, Overseer."

His eyes narrow. "Is your voice failing, slave? Do you need a reminder of your

place?”

My pulse stutters. “No. No, Overseer. I’ll hurry.”

“See that you do.” He flicks the chain once, a vicious little tug that nearly makes me spill the slop again.

Gritting my teeth, I pick up the pace with Thyra at my side. We turn into a narrower corridor lit by flickering lanterns. The smell of rot and wet fur intensifies, my stomach twisting with disgust. The kennel lies just ahead, behind a series of iron bars. Corridors branch off in multiple directions, each lined with black stone carved in swirling runes.

Zhorath watches us as we pour the foul stew into troughs for the snapping, snarling guard-hounds. Some of these beasts have glowing red eyes—another sign of dark magic. They gnash their teeth, lunging as though ravenous. The wet slurping and gnawing sets my nerves on fire, but at least the racket distracts me from the overseer’s gaze.

Beneath that guttural noise, I hear another sound: hushed voices echoing from deeper within the fortress. Rumors spread quickly among slaves. If I focus, I can catch fragments—terror about the gargoyles, horror over the new kill decree. The fortress has doubled its security lately, adding more archers on the walls, dishing out more beatings in the yard. No one wants the dark elves thinking we hide purna blood among us.

They’re going to kill us all if they decide we’re a threat, I think bitterly. The gargoyles might get to us first. A heavy knot of fear tightens in my gut. I try to tell myself I’m safer inside these walls than I’d be out there, but the truth is that I’m trapped either way.

Zhorath flicks the chain again. “Stay here, slave, until the hounds finish eating. See that they get every crumb. When you’re done, return to the courtyard and scrub the walkway. Understood?”

“Yes, Overseer,” I say as steadily as I can manage.

He lets his gaze linger on the brand across my throat where the collar digs into my flesh, then smirks. “I’ll be back. Don’t even think about running.”

I swallow. Where would I go?

With a contemptuous snort, he leaves. His footsteps echo until the only sounds remaining are the hounds’ wet snarls and Thyra’s ragged breathing.

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The chain clanks on the stone floor—Zhorath has unhooked it from his belt, probably certain I have no chance to escape. Or maybe he enjoys leaving me pinned in the kennel, tethered by a short lead. I let out a shaky breath and lean against the cold wall, my arms trembling under the slop bucket's weight.

Thyra edges closer, her eyes darting from the hounds to the corridor. "I heard them talking again last night," she whispers, voice trembling. "The gargoyles have been spotted in the outlying villages, destroying entire towns. They... they kill the women first, so no one can awaken purna magic."

My heart sinks at her words. "But I'm no witch," I hiss, almost pleading with fate. "I've never cast a spell in my life."

Thyra's voice quavers. "Rumors say any human woman could awaken it, given time. That's what the gargoyles believe. And the dark elves do, too. So we're all suspects."

I close my eyes. Purna. My mother was rumored to carry that magic in her blood before she died, leaving me nothing but speculation and fear. "They're paranoid," I mutter. "So we suffer."

She nods, then lowers her voice further. "They dragged a woman from the eastern tower two nights ago. She might not even have been purely human, but they said she had purna blood. They... they killed her."

My stomach churns with nausea. Another life cut short under suspicion. I tighten my fists around the ragged hem of my tunic, anger bubbling up. How long can I keep living like this?

“I don’t know,” Thyra admits, glancing at the hounds as they polish off the last scraps of slop. “But I fear we don’t have much time left.”

I listen to the sounds of teeth scraping metal. My eyes burn, but I force back tears. Crying in this place is dangerous; it shows weakness. Anger, at least, can keep me standing. I’ll survive, I vow. I always do.

Footsteps echo closer, and I hush Thyra. Another guard strides in—this one younger, with a half-crazed smirk. He surveys us without a word, spitting on the floor before turning sharply and leaving, as if confirming that we remain chained and helpless.

I feel the tension grinding through my shoulders. “We need to finish and get back to the courtyard,” I whisper. “Before Zhorath returns and decides to punish us.”

Thyra nods. “Help me with the trough.”

We work side by side, scrubbing the feeding trough, disposing of the last of the slop. The hounds snap at us through the bars, but they’re calmer now, stomachs full. Then we head down the corridor, pressing ourselves against the damp walls whenever guards pass by. The dark elves rarely meet our eyes unless they’re barking orders or dealing out lashings. Acknowledging us as people probably makes their cruelty all too real.

Despite the gloom, I force my chin up. I refuse to cower, even though my pulse hammers in my throat each time a guard passes with a blade on his hip or a crossbow over his shoulder. The corridor leads us back into the courtyard, where more slaves bend double, scrubbing away dried blood. My stomach knots at the iron tang of gore. How many times have I seen that stain?

Before I can grab a brush, a commotion erupts by the far gate. Two guards drag in a young woman with nearly white hair, her face bruised and bloody. She kicks and

thrashes, screaming words I can't make out. My chest tightens. Is she the next suspected purna?

Zhorath looms nearby, barking for the guards to haul her to the dungeons. The woman's ragged sobs tear at me. Our eyes lock for a heartbeat, and in that instant, I see all her terror laid bare.

I have to bite back a flinch. I recognize that fear. It's the same I see in my own reflection. Then she's gone, dragged through a doorway. The fortress gate slams shut with a jarring clang.

"Slave," Zhorath calls, his voice echoing above the hiss of rain. I realize he's looking right at me. "Come here."

My heart leaps into my throat. I hurry over, keeping my eyes on his boots. "Overseer?"

He dangles the chain in front of me, then fastens it to his belt. "You're going to the kitchens for extra duties. The fortress is on high alert, and we need more provisions. Understand?"

"Yes, Overseer."

He starts walking at once, forcing me to stumble after him as he tugs the chain. We pass kneeling slaves scrubbing fresh stains from the stone. The mingled odor of cleaning solvent and blood stings my nostrils. Who died this time?

"Pick up your feet," Zhorath snarls. "You're lagging."

I ignore my aching limbs as best I can. We descend through twisting corridors lit by torchlight, the air growing hotter as we approach one of the main kitchens. The place

is large and smoky, vats of soup bubbling, ovens glowing. Human slaves hurry around with sacks of flour or stir massive pots. The tension here feels as tangible as a living thing, thickening with every new rumor about the gargoyles.

When I step inside, the smell of roasting meat almost overwhelms me. My stomach clenches from both hunger and revulsion. Slaves like me get watered-down broth and stale crusts at best. The dark elves feast while we waste away.

Zhorath thrusts my chain at a guard who stands near the door, then fixes me with a cold stare. "Help them prepare supplies. If you slack off, you'll regret it. When you're done, handle the water barrels for the evening watch."

"Yes, Overseer." My voice sounds hollow to my own ears.

He stalks away. The guard, a man with a pockmarked face and a bored sneer, gestures for me to move to a corner where a heap of vegetables awaits washing. Better than dog slop or scrubbing blood. I give a relieved sigh and push my tattered sleeves up. The cool water in the basin soothes my bruises as I start washing potatoes and carrots, losing myself in the repetitive motion.

My thoughts, however, refuse to quiet. Gargoyles are coming. They kill human women. They sense purna magic. A swirl of dread churns in my belly. Two other female slaves wordlessly join me at the basin, both with haunted eyes. None of us speak under the guard's watch.

Time bleeds away while I scrub. The guard paces nearby, his eyes never leaving us. My arms ache, wrists raw from the collar's weight, but I keep my head down. Just survive until the next moment, I tell myself.

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Clanging pots and the hiss of flames fill the kitchen. I overhear hushed voices near the far counter—dark elf servants gossiping.

“A small settlement to the north was wiped out last night,” one hisses. “Gargoyles swooped in and butchered every woman.”

My heart pounds so hard I fear it’ll burst. Another settlement... gone.

“We must be vigilant,” the second elf replies, voice low. “If any of these humans shows a trace of purna magic, the Alpha will hold us responsible for not reporting it.”

The first elf mutters something about an uprising, about how they can’t risk letting a purna slip through. Then they both fall silent as an officer passes by to check on them. I keep scrubbing, fingers whitening around the vegetables. My panic simmers just below the surface. Purna... gargoyles... a fortress that’s already suffocating me. Every time I’ve tried to escape, the dark elves have hauled me back, punishing me so severely I still carry the scars.

I’m caged by my own powerlessness and by this collar.

Eventually, the basin of vegetables is almost empty. The guard jerks on the chain. “You,” he snaps. “Carry those potatoes to the storeroom, then report back to the courtyard for cleaning duty.”

“Understood.” My throat aches, but I manage to keep my tone steady.

He leads me out of the kitchen, chain clinking. We pass through another corridor that

reeks of mildew, water dripping down mossy walls. I clutch the basket of potatoes, muscles protesting each step. High above, barred windows admit weak, grayish light.

I hear a distant rumble, like thunder—or maybe something else. Sometimes the fortress trembles from hidden magic or passing storms. Could gargoyles make the earth shake? I remember stories of them descending from the sky in huge wingspans, so heavy they caused the ground to quake on impact.

The guard halts and points to a heavy wooden door. “Storeroom. In and out. Quickly.”

I shoulder it open. The door creaks, revealing a cramped space stacked with crates and sacks. A single torch flickers on the wall. I set the basket of potatoes on a shelf and pause, allowing myself one heartbeat alone. My eyes sweep the dim interior, but there’s nowhere to hide. Just a broken crate filled with glass vials, probably potions or salves. Even if I wanted to do something with them, the guard stands right outside.

“Hurry up! Stop dawdling,” he barks.

“I’m coming,” I mutter under my breath. I slip back into the corridor, bracing myself as he refastens my chain to his belt. He drags me along, the fortress corridors buzzing like an angry hive. Tension coils in every corner, fear spiking as word of gargoyle raids spreads.

We emerge into the courtyard, the sky choked with dark clouds. Soldiers scurry along the ramparts, spears in hand; slaves hustle with buckets of murky water, scrubbing away fresh red stains. I taste blood in the air.

The guard presses a wet cloth and a stiff brush into my hands. “Clean,” he orders.

I kneel, letting the cold water in the bucket soak into my threadbare pants as I start

scrubbing the stones. Each stroke is mechanical: dip, scrub, rinse, repeat. My mind spins with everything I've heard. How long can this go on? The fortress is a cage. The gargoyles are killers.

A thunderclap booms overhead, and I glance up to see a dark shape flicker against swirling clouds. My breath catches, half-convinced it's a gargoyle—wings spread wide—but there's nothing. Just storm light. Still, rumors ring in my ears: They come at night, descending without warning, leaving ruin in their wake. If they really are culling all human women, am I doomed either way?

The brush slips from my fingers, and I swallow my rising panic. I grip it again, scrubbing harder, as though I can scour away my fear. If there's even a faint chance at surviving, I'll cling to it.

Someone above shouts for the guards to man the gates. My head snaps up. The tension feels like a wire pulled too tight. Figures hurry to vantage points, crossbows at the ready. I hold my breath, waiting for the screams of an aerial assault.

But then the gates open, and a grim-faced dark elf battalion marches inside—mud splattered over their once-shiny armor, streaks of what looks like blood across their pauldrons. They ignore us slaves entirely before sealing the gates again with a heavy groan.

My shoulders slump with relief. Another false alarm, perhaps. But maybe tomorrow, or the next day, the gargoyles will attack for real. And if that happens, would it be any better than living under dark elf rule? Fear wrestles with my bone-deep exhaustion. If the gargoyles intend to kill me, at least it might be over quickly. But I won't let hopelessness win. A tiny spark of defiance inside me refuses to die.

I keep scrubbing, ignoring my aching muscles and the slick stones. Rain starts falling in earnest, a steady, icy downpour that makes the courtyard dangerously slippery. The

guard occasionally yells at me to “scrub harder,” but mostly he just stands there, bored and dripping.

A single drop of rain runs down my cheek. I tip my head up to the sky, letting more drops strike my brow. The chain rattles whenever I shift, a constant reminder that I’m pinned here, subjugated.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see that battered woman from before, limp in the grasp of Zhorath’s men. She offers no resistance now. Her eyes stare at nothing, body slack. My stomach twists. Did they torture her into submission? Maybe something even worse. The casual cruelty with which the guards shove her makes my nails dig into my palms.

Don’t draw attention, I remind myself, forcing my gaze back to the filthy stones. My heart pounds at the truth echoing in my head: This is the daily horror. This is my life.

Lightning flares across the sky, thunder rolling a moment later. Some slaves flinch. The guard overseeing me spits in disgust and snaps at me to keep working. Rain pelts me from all sides, and the courtyard’s surface becomes slick with muddy water. Still, I scrub.

And in that moment, water streaming down my face—I swear I hear something else, a subtle rumble like distant wings slicing through clouds. I freeze, brush clenched mid-scrub, straining to hear more. The wind and thunder drown it out. The fortress walls tower, indifferent to my dread. Over the years, I’ve learned to read the hush before chaos, and this hush feels razor-sharp, like a blade pressed to my throat. Maybe it’s just a storm, or maybe it’s gargoyles overhead.

I force myself to resume scrubbing as Zhorath’s footsteps approach. He yanks me upright by the chain with that same sadistic twist to his lips. “Enough,” he snaps. “Get back to the slave quarters. Rain or not, you’ll be needed at dawn. Don’t entertain

thoughts of escape.”

My legs shake as I stand. The rain drenches me; rivulets trickle down my arms. Where would I go, anyway? There’s no safety from the horrors inside or outside these walls.

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Even as I acknowledge that, a fierce spark ignites in my chest. I won't let them break me. If gargoyles appear tonight, if the dark elves decide they've had enough of me, I'll fight to my last breath—magic or no magic. That promise is all that keeps me walking as Zhorath drags me back to the cramped slave quarters. Night falls soon. I can only guess at what new terrors it might bring.

Thunder rumbles again behind me, and I lift my gaze for an instant. Lightning zigzags across the sky. For one heartbeat, I imagine a vast silhouette passing behind those clouds—a beast of stone and fury, wings outstretched. A chill slides through me, uncertain if it's from fear or something more.

So the gargoyles really are awake, I think, as the heavy door slams behind me and darkness envelopes me once more.

What if... they're coming for me?

2

KORRIN

Lightning forks across the night sky, illuminating the jagged spires of our stronghold's battlements and the pale stone statues perched along its walls. Those statues look ancient—wings folded, eyes hollow—yet they bear a disquieting resemblance to the living gargoyles who are rousing all across Protheke. Every time lightning flashes, I catch glimpses of them: silent sentinels that remind me how close we came to eternal sleep.

I stand on the highest rampart, the storm's cold wind whipping across my face. The air smells of ozone and distant pine, undercut by the stale tang of blood from earlier hunts. I let my gaze sweep the dark landscape below, noting every flicker of movement—mortals scurrying near their watchfires, shadows shifting along the fortress walls. They all look so small to me. Fragile. I can't help the curl of my lip, a reaction born of the arrogance ingrained in my race. Still, there's no satisfaction in killing weaker beings; only a hollow sense of duty that's been drilled into me since the moment I cracked free from stone a fortnight ago.

We gargoyles have awakened. At first, my memories came in fragments, the cold hush of stone sleep, the war centuries past that nearly destroyed us, the witches who wielded terrifying purna magic, the dark elves who conspired in that conflict. They're all pieces of a broken tapestry in my mind—battle cries echoing over canyons, the flash of magic bright as a small sun, winged figures clashing high above burning towns. Now I'm confronted with a new command from the Alpha: Kill every human woman on sight. It's a culling meant to prevent the reemergence of purna magic.

I clench my jaw. I am an executioner, I remind myself. I have no illusions about my role. I'm the Alpha's foremost hunter, a living weapon he wields without hesitation. When he says to kill, I kill. I should feel no doubt.

I sense a presence behind me, and the short spines along my shoulders prick. I pivot, narrowing my eyes as I spot Tarmik, one of my gargoyle brethren. He has slate-gray skin and a jagged scar across his snout, souvenirs from battles he likely only half-remembers.

"Korin," Tarmik says, his voice like a low rumble of thunder, "the Alpha demands your presence."

I grunt in acknowledgment. I've been expecting this summons since the scouts brought word of a dark elf fortress harboring human slaves. There must be females

among those humans—potential carriers of purna blood. I spare one final glance at the storm-lashed horizon, then spread my wings in a single powerful motion. The wind catches beneath them, and I leap from the rampart. My stone-like muscles bunch, manipulating magnetic fields that grant me flight. Even after centuries sealed in stone, flight still comes naturally to me—like breathing, but fiercer.

Below, in our courtyard, newly awakened gargoyles test their strength and sharpen weapons. Torchlight casts twistingshadows that make them appear even more monstrous—horns, claws, fanged faces. I circle once overhead, then drop to the courtyard with a dull thud. My landing cracks the stone tile beneath my feet, sending shards of rubble skittering in every direction. Tarmik lands beside me, wings folding.

“Don’t keep him waiting,” Tarmik warns before stepping aside.

I enter the Alpha’s council chamber through massive double doors, each carved from dark stone and etched with runes. A cold blue glow emanates from arcane sconces on the walls, sending pale light rippling across black marble columns. At the far end of the hall stands the Alpha himself.

He’s enormous, even by gargoyle standards, eight feet of obsidian skin streaked with pulsing crimson veins. His wings arch behind him, curved horns framing a face etched with swirling patterns that mark him as our patriarch. The strongest among us. I cross the chamber and dip my head, my claws scraping against the marble as I stop.

“You summoned me,” I say, my voice echoing off the vaulted ceiling.

The Alpha inclines his head. “Yes. Our scouts have uncovered new intelligence about a fortress occupied by dark elves. They hold human slaves—among them, several females who may carry the seeds of purna magic. You know what must be done.”

My heart pounds, though my face betrays no emotion. “The humans must be culled.”

“Precisely.” He steps closer, and I feel the weight of his gaze. “We cannot risk another war like the one that nearly ended our race. The purna lineage was never fully snuffed out. Rumors suggest one of them—maybe more—hides among these captives. If they awaken, we could face the same horror that forced us into stone sleep.”

I recall half-formed nightmares that haunted my slumber: witches shrouded in blazing magic, entire gargoyle clans reduced to rubble. I have no desire to see our kind decimated again. Even so, a part of me resists the notion of slaughtering so many. It’s fleeting, but I feel it all the same.

“Understood,” I say, steadying my voice. “Do we have any names or descriptions?”

At the Alpha’s gesture, a lesser gargoyle steps forward. He carries a rolled parchment and unspools it, revealing sketches and marks that I assume come from interrogation or captured intelligence. “Many are inconsequential,” the gargoyle explains, his tone even. “But one stands out. A young woman named Elyria.”

My gaze slides to a charcoal sketch on the parchment, a slender figure with black hair streaked silver, a brand at her neck. The rush of adrenaline in my veins surprises me. Something about those scrawled features unsettles me.

“She has certain markings,” the gargoyle continues. “A birthmark behind her ear, rumored to be purna in origin. The dark elves haven’t executed her, implying they see potential benefit—or danger—in her existence.”

The Alpha’s eyes burn with intensity. “You, Korrin, will lead the strike. Infiltrate the fortress, exterminate the human females, and bring me proof. If any show a hint of purna magic, kill them. We cannot allow the threat of another war.”

I force down the unease gnawing at the back of my mind. I am the executioner. This is

my purpose. “It will be done.”

The Alpha’s lips curl in a grim smile. “Go, then. Tonight, we reclaim blood in the name of our survival.”

I say nothing more, merely pivot and stride from the chamber. The weight of the Alpha’s decree hangs on my shoulders like an invisible chain, heavier than any stone I’ve ever carried.

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Outside, the storm intensifies. Rain lashes my skin, lightning rips across the sky. A few gargoyles pause in their tasks to watch me pass. I sense their respect, their fear. At the stronghold's edge, I halt, scanning the horizon. Beyond the black ridges of rock and stunted forests lies the dark elf fortress—a place of cruelty, if rumors are true. The dark elves don't worry me; they're cunning but fragile. My real interest lies in the slaves...particularly the woman who might carry the purna spark.

A flash of lightning brightens the ramparts, and I launch myself into the storm, wings snapping wide. Sheets of rain pummel me, but I slice through the deluge with practiced grace. Three gargoyles peel away behind me, subordinates under my command. We fly over jagged cliffs, their wet faces reflecting the occasional lightning strike, then across stretches of pine forest that sway in the gale. Despite the grim mission, I feel raw power coursing through me. At least I'm awake again, not condemned to perpetual stone sleep.

But I can't shake thoughts of Elyria. Over the howl of the wind, I picture the hasty charcoal lines: black hair, silver streak, a brand around her neck. Why is she singled out? What is so special about her?

Rain slashes at my wings like shards of ice. I force my mind back to the present, angling westward toward flickering torchlights that trace the dark elf fortress's outer wall. The fortress rises abruptly from a rocky plateau, towers thrusting upward in a jagged silhouette. I signal for my subordinates to circle and find weak points. At once, they scatter into the storm.

Lightning flashes again, revealing archers along the ramparts. I hover behind an outcropping of rock, assessing. There, on the east side—a smaller tower with fewer

guards, partially concealed by swirling storm clouds. Perfect.

I grip the magnetic fields tighter, ascending in near silence. My claws clamp onto the tower's slick apex, and I crouch, wingsfolded. Rain patters around me, the wind masking my presence. The stench of fear drifts from somewhere below—perhaps the fortress dwellers know we're out here. Maybe they sense it in the shifting air.

I scale the wall with claws and toes, inching toward a narrow arrow slit. Dim lantern glow flickers inside, revealing an empty stretch of hallway. I slip in through the slit, landing quietly on the damp floor. The corridor is cold, smelling of mold and decay. My senses stretch, searching.

Every step I take is careful, measuring the labyrinth I suspect has changed since gargoyles once prowled these halls. Still, I feel the echoes of our old architecture beneath the dark elves' alterations. Hiding in a recess, I wait until two guards approach. Their footsteps clatter on the stone. Black armor adorned with a serpent sigil. Swords on their hips.

I spring. My claws rake across the first guard's throat, and his strangled cry dies instantly. Blood spatters the wall. The second guard tries to shout, but my tail whips him off balance, and a single crushing blow to his head ends him. Silence returns, broken only by the drip of blood.

My breath comes fast. No pity. No remorse. I do what I must. I drag their bodies out of sight, continuing deeper into the fortress. I hear more voices nearby—probably a group of elves—but I avoid them, instead descending a narrower stairway that leads below.

An insistent tug in my gut tells me to search the lower levels. If the fortress has human slaves, they're likely caged in dungeons. The air grows warmer, thick with the reek of unwashed bodies. I catch sight of an iron gate, beyond which a row of cells

lines the corridor. A single guard leans against a column, half-asleep. He doesn't even have time to draw a breath before I snap his neck. The dull thud of his corpse hitting the floor makes some of the captives whimper.

As I move among the cells, lantern light flickers over battered faces, hollow eyes, pitiful figures huddled against each other. My lip curls. This is no better than death, I think, but I recall the Alpha's decree: kill the women. My gaze travels across them—older women, children, men—but I don't see silver-streaked hair or the brand the scouts mentioned. She's not here.

I leave them behind, ignoring their soft pleas for mercy. If the Alpha decides, they'll die soon enough. I have a more pressing target.

A side corridor opens up. The walls here are less grimy, the stench less overwhelming. Perhaps these are the living quarters for slaves the dark elves consider "useful." Then I hear faint footsteps, a rustle of fabric, and a soft moan. Pressing against the wall, I peer around the corner. A dark elf oversees two female slaves—neither is the one I seek. Neither has that streak of silver in her hair.

Anger flares in me at the sight of the elf's smug posture. Dark elves once tried to enslave my kind; they sided with witches who cursed us with stone sleep. They deserve no mercy. But the slaves? They're just frail humans, never the architects of our downfall. Still, I remember the old war: witches with pale faces and eyes blazing with unimaginable power. We can't let that happen again.

I slip forward. The elf doesn't even see me. I tear his throat out with one swift slice. His gurgling cry echoes momentarily, then fades. The two slaves stand paralyzed in terror.

"Go," I growl, my gold eyes flaring. They look at each other, then bolt away. I don't chase them; they're not my targets.

A door to my right bangs open, lamplight flaring. I freeze, tensed, as a tall dark elf in ornate armor steps into the corridor. He spots the corpse, roars, and lunges at me with a curved blade.

Steel clashes against my claws. He's skilled, deflecting my initial slash, but I smash my forehead into his helm, dazing him. My tail swings around to offset his footing, and I deliver a brutal series of strikes. His blade scrapes uselessly against my hide before I plunge my claws into his gut. His eyes go wide, and he collapses in a wet gasp.

Panting, I glance into the room he came from. It's a small guard chamber lined with weapons, a battered table at its center. Maps and rosters are scattered across its surface.

I step in, scanning the pages. One depicts the fortress layout—"Barracks," "Kitchen," "Holding Pens," "Courtyard" scribbled in a rough hand. Then my eyes snag on a single name in the margin: Elyria. A note next to it reads: Collar remains; brand visible. Possibly purna. Watch closely. My pulse quickens.

She's real. The scouts were correct. I skim more details about her frequent assignments: kennel, kitchens, general courtyard tasks. The dark elves likely suspect something in her blood; otherwise they'd have killed her. They must believe they can control her. Fools. If she truly holds purna magic, a collar won't shackle her forever. Then again, maybe she's dormant and harmless. It doesn't matter—the Alpha's orders stand. All human females must die.

A peculiar tension coils at the base of my neck, but I push it aside. I listen at the door. No footsteps near, but it won't stay quiet for long. I tear the relevant page free, stuffing it beneath my chest plate. The fortress stirs; distant shouts tell me the alarm is raised.

Korrin, a voice whispers in my mind—one of my subordinates, using the psionic link gargoyles sometimes share. We must retreat or face the full garrison.

Acknowledged, I reply, frustration twisting my gut. I sprint down the corridor, wings folded tight. More dark elves dart into my path, but none are quick enough to stop me. I tear through them in a flurry of slashes and impacts, leaving a slick trail of blood behind.

At last, I reach a tall, narrow window overlooking the courtyard. The rain's coming in sideways now, lightning painting every surface silver-white. Below, I see slaves forced to kneel, guards barking orders. Searching for me, I realize. My gaze lands on one particular figure—a woman with drenched black hair, possibly streaked with silver. Even in the storm's chaos, she kneels with a stubborn tilt to her shoulders. My pulse stutters. Is that Elyria?

I only have a heartbeat to consider before a squad of elves charges up the stairs behind me. No more time. I snarl and hurl myself through the window, shattering glass. Rain and wind buffet me the moment I'm airborne. Arrows hiss by, one bouncing off my stony hide, another grazing the membrane of my wing. The pain fuels my anger.

My subordinates appear on my right, crashing into the archers, scattering them. I use the opening to surge higher, scanning the courtyard one last time through the downpour. I can't tell if that was Elyria or not, I think bitterly. But I'll return for her.

We regroup beyond the fortress's walls, panting in the hammering rain. Crossbow bolts slash through the air behind us, but the storm conceals our retreat. Tarmik's voice slides into my mind again: We've confirmed the fortress layout. We succeeded in infiltration.

Partially, I correct. We'll come back in force to finish this. None of them will survive

once we strike.

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I try to smother the pang of uncertainty in my chest. I've killed countless times before without blinking. But the image of that dark-haired slave kneeling in the rain, her collar glinting, posture proud despite her chains—it rattles me in a way I can't name.

Why this one?

The storm's roar offers no answers. Gritting my teeth, I lead my brethren into the night sky, away from the dark elf fortress. Soon, the real slaughter will begin. My only task is to exterminate every female who might harbor purna magic.

As the wind howls and lightning crackles, I feel something shift inside me—a hairline fracture in the certainty that's always defined me as the Alpha's unquestioning executioner.

A seed of doubt takes root, and it refuses to let go.

3

ELYRIA

I can't stop replaying last night's chaos in my mind. By the time Zhorath drags me back to the cramped slave quarters, the storm has torn itself out across the skies, leaving the fortress battered and tense. Everyone feels the reverberations of the attempted infiltration: dark elves stomping through corridors, demanding to know how a gargoyle managed to slip inside. Hushed talk of scattered bodies, of half a dozen guards found dead and drained of blood in the halls.

Gargoyles, the rumors whisper. They can slip through cracks in the night, a terror from above. The fortress's masters are furious and afraid, and that crack in their confidence is the only reason I dare hope for a successful escape now.

Because I see how frantically they roam the corridors, demanding accountability. I see how the usual discipline over the slaves lapses as the overseers scramble to answer their superiors. The entire place is one raw nerve, and fear is thicker than the stench of rot. If ever there was a chance to flee, it's when your captors are preoccupied with a bigger threat.

Even so, my heart hammers in my chest as I crouch in a cramped corner of the slave quarters, chain coiled around my ankles. The small rectangular room is dimly lit by a single guttering lamp. A half-dozen other slaves huddle around me, their eyes hollow. Everyone is trembling, exhausted from a day and night of brutality and panic. Zhorath keeps us here with the chain locked to a metal ring in the wall. Usually, we're too broken to consider pulling free.

But I'm not broken yet.

I'm bruised, half-starved, and my arms and legs still ache from scrubbing floors in a thunderstorm, yet I can't let go of the idea that it might be now or never. While the dark elves are reeling from the gargoyle incursion, maybe I can slip away. And yes, there is a part of me that clenches with terror at the thought of gargoyles out in the wild, waiting to snuff out human women. But what's the alternative? Life here is a slow death.

I dig my fingers under the iron collar around my neck. It's battered and rusted but still sturdy as sin. Tearing it off with brute strength is impossible, but I might not need to remove it entirely if I can just free the chain that tethers me. I test the ring bolt in the wall. It's old, crumbling around the edges. My breath rattles with excitement. I bite my lip, risking a whisper to the nearest slave, a woman named

Selin.

“Help me loosen the bolt,” I say. “If we can pry it free, I can?—”

She just stares at me, eyes wide with dread. “They’ll kill us if they find out.”

“They’ll kill us anyway,” I mutter, my voice trembling with pent-up frustration. “Look at what they did last night. Guards are on edge. They’re not watching us as closely as usual. We might never get a chance like this again.”

She winces, glancing around at the others. No one else moves. They’re too terrified of the repercussions. Slowly, I realize it’s just me—the only one with a shred of defiance left.

My hands are shaky as I grip the bolt with my fingertips. The mortar around it feels crumbly. I twist, push, pull. Inch by inch, I manage to loosen the bracket anchoring the ring to the wall. Each squeak of metal against stone makes my pulse skyrocket, but the steady hum of tense activity beyond the door conceals any small noises I make.

Seconds turn to minutes. I grit my teeth, ignoring how raw and numb my fingers become. Finally, with a muffled pop, the bracket gives. The ring slides out, leaving behind a jagged hole. I freeze, expecting some guard or overseer to burst in—but no one does. Outside, I hear only the echo of angry voices and frantic footsteps.

“I’m leaving,” I whisper to the others. My adrenaline is so high I feel almost detached from my body. “I—I can’t stay.”

Selin’s eyes fill with tears. She doesn’t say a word, just gives a tiny, sorrowful shake of her head. The others remain silent, unwilling or unable to risk what I’m about to do. My heart aches, but I can’t carry them all with me. I can barely hope to save

myself.

I rise to my feet, chain in hand. The collar is still fastened tight around my neck, but at least no one is holding the other end. I coil the slack so it doesn't clink and slip to the narrow door, pressing my ear against the wood. Beyond, the corridor is alive with tension. I hear footsteps racing by and distant shouts.

Steeling myself, I ease the door open a fraction. The hallway is dimly lit by a single sconce. Two dark elf guards hurry past, each wearing heavy boots that clatter on the stone. My breath catches when I see them, fear spiking. If they spot me, it's the lash... or worse.

They vanish around the corner, leaving the corridor momentarily empty. Now I slide out, pressing my back to the cold stone. The air here smells of sweat, sour with fear. I clutch the coil of chain with trembling fingers. My plan is half-formed: get out of the slave quarters, find a route to the fortress's perimeter, slip out while the guards are in chaos.

My stomach twists as I recall that the outside world offers no real safety. The gargoyles are out there, hunting. But I have to take that chance. Better to gamble on outrunning them than to remain certain I'll die in chains.

I hurry down the hall, mindful of the scuffing of my bare feet. Every so often, I flatten myself into an alcove when I hear footsteps. Twice, dark elves jog by me, cursing under their breath about incompetent watchers and how in the abyss gargoyles got inside the fortress.

A swirl of memory hits me: in the courtyard last night, through the sheets of rain, I could've sworn I saw a gargoyle overhead—a massive shape with broad wings. For an instant, I'd felt something like...recognition. As if his eyes were on me, specifically. Then the thunder boomed, and he was gone.

The memory sets my heart thudding again, but I push it aside. I don't have time for that. Right now, I need to focus on each precarious step.

At the next fork, I recall from my forced labor routes that one corridor leads toward the kitchens and outer courtyards; the other descends deeper into the fortress, toward the dungeons and storerooms. I want out, so I pick the corridor leading up. If I can reach the courtyard, maybe I can slip under the portcullis or find a crumbling section of wall.

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Blood pounds in my ears as I creep forward. The chain around my neck drags on the floor with the faintest scrape; I bunch the links in one hand, desperate to keep them quiet. Every breath feels like a risk.

I pass a doorway I recognize as the main kitchen. The door stands ajar, revealing a chaotic scene: two dark elves bark orders at exhausted human slaves who kneel, scrubbing the floor. A large pot boils, filling the room with steam. No one notices me in the shadows. My pulse leaps. Stay quiet, Elyria.

Slipping past, I round another corner and find myself in a small corridor that ends at a heavy wooden gate. Beyond that gate lies the main courtyard. So close.

I rest my hand against the wood, feeling it vibrate with movement outside. My muscles clench as I press my ear to it. Muffled voices, scraping boots on stone. A tremor of doubt wracks me: how many guards are out there? Would it be safer to look for a less obvious exit?

But I'm running low on time. The fortress is frantic, but the dark elves won't remain so distracted forever. If anyone checks the slave quarters, they'll notice I'm gone. I have to move quickly.

I ease the gate open a crack and peer into the courtyard. The pale daylight is a welcome change from the fortress's gloom, but it also means fewer places to hide. Several dark elf soldiers cluster around the far side of the courtyard, deep in animated conversation. One paces back and forth, gesticulating wildly, while the others keep glancing upward, as if expecting gargoyles to descend at any moment.

To my right, a coil of rope sits abandoned near some crates, probably left there in the wake of last night's confusion. Beyond it, I spot an old well with a dilapidated roof. The courtyard's walls loom tall and menacing, broken only by a massive gate of iron bars at the far end. That gate usually leads to a drawbridge over a rocky ravine. If I can cross it, I'll be out of the fortress. But how to get there without being spotted?

I inch through the door, crouching low behind the crates. My chain rattles softly, and I clench my teeth. My entire body feels wired, ready to bolt or fight. The courtyard is damp from last night's rainfall, puddles reflecting gray clouds overhead. The wind smells like an oncoming storm, or maybe that's just my imagination.

Something clangs behind me, and I whip my head around in horror. I can't see what made the noise—maybe a fallen weapon or a scurrying rodent. But the sound draws the attention of one of the soldiers, who barks, "Who's there?"

I freeze, heart in my throat. Breathe. Don't panic.

Seconds drag. The soldier stalks across the courtyard, glancing around, hand on his sword hilt. I curl tighter behind the crate, pressing myself as flat as possible. My chain is pinned beneath my knee to keep it from shifting. My lungs burn from holding my breath.

He's mere steps away. I see the glint of his black armor, the tension in his posture. If he comes any closer, he'll spot me for sure. My mind spirals: I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm...

A sharp cry echoes from the other side of the courtyard: "Captain! Over here!"

The soldier wheels around. "What is it?"

I remain perfectly still, listening as another soldier calls him away. Something about

fresh gargoyle tracks found on the ramparts. The soldier mutters a curse, then jogs back toward the group. Thank the gods. My entire body trembles with relief.

I wait another few heartbeats before I dare move. The soldiers are once again engrossed in discussing how best to repel future gargoyle attacks. They're not even looking at me. I risk a quick glance left and right. The path to the main gate is too exposed—I'd be seen instantly. However, there's a smaller side gate along the southeast corner, typically used for supply wagons. Sometimes the watch is minimal there.

I crawl on hands and knees toward the rope coil, snatching it up. Maybe I can use it to lower myself from an outer wall if I can't get through the main gates. The chain around my collar clinks softly with each movement. My knees ache against the wet stone, but I swallow the pain.

When I near the southeast corner, I see a single guard posted near that supply gate. He leans against the wall, crossbow in hand but gaze distant. He's younger than most, his expression betraying nerves. He's probably rattled by the gargoyle infiltration.

Hope surges in my chest. If I can slip behind him...But how? The courtyard is too open.

I tuck the rope under one arm. Then I spot a narrow passage—an alcove that might lead around the perimeter. If I can follow it, maybe I can slip up the steps to the outer wall, then find a vantage to see if any section is climbable.

I dart across a short gap of open ground, every sense screaming that I'll be spotted. My chain rattles, but the soldier remains oblivious, apparently lost in his own fear. I press myself to the fortress wall and inch into the alcove, finding a steep, twisting stair. Yes.

I climb, careful to stay low, the rope slung over one shoulder. The steps are slippery with rainwater. Once or twice, I nearly lose my footing. My heart is in my mouth each time I wobble.No. Focus.

At the top, I discover a small walkway running along the inside of the fortress wall. The vantage here reveals the courtyard below—and, beyond it, the wide ravine. If I peer carefully, I see the drawbridge is raised. Figures in black armor move along the battlements on the opposite side.No luck crossing there.

A crack of thunder rumbles overhead, or maybe it's just the fortress settling under its own weight. My thoughts spin: If I can't use the main gate or the drawbridge, is there a portion of the wall low enough to climb with the rope? The ramparts appear uniform and steep, but maybe there's a collapsed section...

I hurry along the walkway, searching. My pulse quickens when I spot crumbling masonry near a corner tower. Loose stones jut out, and part of the parapet has fallen away. Rain from last night's storm must have loosened it further.This might be my best shot.

I approach cautiously, scanning for guards. The walkway is suspiciously empty, likely because the fortress's forces are gathered elsewhere, investigating the gargoyle infiltration. My muscles tense at the memory: a towering figure of stone and sinew smashing through windows, leaving dead elves in his wake. A flicker of something, not exactly fear, rakes my mind. For a moment, I picture golden eyes meeting mine through the haze of rain—an image so vivid it makes my heart spasm.Why does it feel like I've been seen already by those eyes?

I swallow.Focus, Elyria.

I kneel by the broken parapet, checking the drop. The ravine is too far to jump, but the wall itself is about thirty feet high from this point. If my rope is long enough, I

might be able to rappel down the outer face, then scramble the rest of the way. The ground outside is rough and rocky, a slope leading into a dense forest. That forest could be my salvation—or a hunting ground for gargoyles.

I tie one end of the rope to a sturdy piece of stone with my shaky hands. The rope looks old but thick enough. I tug on it. Seems it might hold my weight if I descend carefully.

A shuffle of footsteps behind me makes my blood run cold. I spin, chain rattling. A dark elf guard stands only a few strides away, crossbow aimed at my chest.

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“Trying to leave so soon?” he sneers. His voice trembles with anger or maybe fear.

My mouth goes dry. “I—I just?—”

He doesn’t let me finish. He fires. Instinct kicks in; I fling myself sideways. The bolt slams into the stone, narrowly missing my shoulder. Splinters of rock spray my face. Pain stings my cheek, but I ignore it, launching myself forward before he can reload.

With a desperation-born strength, I crash into him, grappling for the crossbow. He’s stronger than I am—muscles honed by training, while I’ve been half-starved—but I have nothing to lose. I ram my knee into his groin, and he gasps. His grip loosens just enough for me to yank the weapon away and fling it over the parapet. It clatters down the outer wall, lost in the ravine.

He snarls, baring pointed teeth as he draws a short sword. The blade glints in the overcast light. My entire body shakes. I have no weapon beyond the chain coiled around my neck, but desperation makes me swing that coil like a whip. The links strike his wrist, knocking the sword aside.

“Filthy slave,” he hisses, lunging. I dodge as best I can, yet he manages to slam me against the parapet. My back hits hard stone, and the breath rushes out of me. Stars dance in my vision. The next thing I know, his hand grips my collar, yanking me up to glare into my eyes.

I see pure malice there. “You think you can run?” he spits. “I’ll carve your?—”

He never finishes. I twist the slack of my chain around his forearm and jerk with all

my might, forcing him off balance. He stumbles, foot catching on a loose chunk of masonry. For a breathless moment, we both teeter at the edge. Then, with a guttural scream, he topples backward over the broken parapet. He claws at me, trying to drag me with him, but I wrench free at the last second.

The world slows as he plummets. I watch, horrified, as his body hits the stone ledge below with a sickening crunch. Blood smears across the collapsed wall. My stomach churns. I've never killed anyone before.

For a heartbeat, I stand there, chest heaving. Move, Elyria. You have no time.

I rush to the rope. Shouts rise from below—someone must've heard the struggle or seen the guard's fall. My head throbs, my heart pounding loud enough to drown out everything else. I clutch the rope, praying it'll hold. If I stay, I'm dead. If I go... I might still die.

But I've made my choice. I hoist myself over the edge, wrapping the rope around one forearm to control my descent. The chain around my neck scrapes painfully, and the collar digs into my skin, but I bear it, gritting my teeth. My feet scramble against the wet stone. My hands burn as the rope slides. Thunder—or something like it—rumbles overhead, and the wind buffets me, making me sway.

I'm about fifteen feet down when the rope suddenly creaks, threads snapping. I gasp, clinging tighter. Not now, not now. Another snap. A jolt as the rope gives an inch. My nails bite into my palms. If it snaps entirely, I'll fall the rest of the way.

Above, a dark elf shouts, "There she is!" I dare a glance upward. Two silhouettes lean over the broken parapet. One raises a crossbow. Gods.

Desperation fuels me. I let go, dropping the remaining distance. The impact slams into my legs, sending me sprawling on jagged rocks. Pain flares through my left ankle

and my shoulder. Gravel tears my palms. I roll onto my side, fighting nausea. Keep moving.

Bolts whistle past, clattering against the stones. Some ricochet, sparking in the drizzle. I scramble to my feet, ignoring the fiery pain in my ankle. The forest lies maybe a hundred paces downhill, separated from me by a tumble of rocky slope.

Bent nearly double to keep my head down, I half-run, half-limp across the loose rocks. My chain rattles with each jarring step, but the adrenaline drowns out the discomfort. More shoutsecho behind me, but I don't look back. Don't slow down, don't let them see you.

At last, I reach a cluster of scraggly trees near the bottom of the slope. I duck behind one, panting. My vision blurs with pain, but I can't let that stop me. I press a hand to my throbbing ankle, wincing. Probably a bad sprain, but I can still stand on it, more or less.

Better to face a battered foot than face the dark elves again.

Through the branches, I see movement along the fortress wall. A group of elves points in my direction. The clang of metal suggests they're gathering a party to follow. I have minutes—if that.

I push deeper into the wild growth. Twisted roots snag my feet. The stench of damp earth fills my nostrils, mixing with pine needles and rotting leaves. The forest is thick enough to hamper direct pursuit, but it also slows me down. My ankle screams with every step, sending jolts of agony up my leg. I can't stop.

Tangled bushes claw at my clothes, scraping my arms. My collar snags on low-hanging branches, and I have to yank myself free. Rain, or maybe just leftover drizzle, patters on the canopy overhead. My breathing grows ragged.

Branches snap behind me. I freeze, heart lurching. Are the dark elves already on my trail? Or is it something else? Gargoyles. A wave of dread washes over me as I recall the stories: they can track human women across impossible distances, especially if they suspect pure blood.

I slip behind a massive tree trunk, pressing my back to the bark. My chain rattles softly. I grit my teeth, straining my ears. More snapping twigs, the hush of parted foliage. I risk a peek around the trunk, expecting dark elf scouts with crossbows. Instead, I see a pair of large boars, snuffling among the brambles. My entire body sags with relief.

But that relief is short-lived. A rumble overhead makes me jerk my gaze skyward. The clouds are still heavy and gray, promising more storms, but...I sense something. A shift in the air, a ripple of power. Am I imagining it?

I brush off the feeling and limp onward. Thorns slash at my ankles, drawing thin lines of blood. I can't help noticing how loud I seem compared to the hush of the forest—breathing heavily, chain clanking, stepping on dead leaves. A child could follow my trail. But I have to keep going.

Eventually, the ground evens out, and I come across a rough path—likely a game trail used by forest creatures. It weaves through towering pines, each trunk shrouded in moss. I pause, leaning on a tree for support as I catch my breath. My ankle throbs like it's on fire, my lungs burning from the frantic run.

I did it. I'm free of the fortress, for now. But the question churns in my gut: Am I actually safer here?

The dark elves might still hunt me. Worse yet, the gargoyles are scouring the countryside, killing any human woman they find. The forest might hide me from one threat, only to deliver me into the jaws of another.

But at least I have a chance.

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Rain starts again, a gentle patter that seeps into my ragged clothes. My collar is cold against my neck. If I had any illusions about my situation, they fade with the next flash of lightning overhead. I'm alone. Injured. No supplies, no real plan. The wilderness doesn't care if I live or die.

I half-limp, half-walk along the narrow trail, letting my instincts guide me. At least the fortress is behind me. Maybe if I stay hidden in the depths of the forest, the dark elves won't bother chasing me all that far, especially with gargoyles looming overhead.

A vivid memory from the courtyard floods my mind: a silhouette in the sky, wings spread wide, eyes possibly meeting mine. A shiver crawls down my spine. Something about that instant felt electric, like a thread of awareness connecting me to... whoever that gargoyle was.

My cheeks burn. It's absurd to imagine any sense of connection with a murderous gargoyle. My entire life, I've heard how savage they are, how they hate humans, especially women—potential purna. Yet the memory won't leave. Am I drawn to him because I sense that my fate and his are intertwined? Or am I simply imagining things?

The path twists downhill, leading to a shallow stream. I'm careful on the slick rocks, wincing as I test each step with my injured ankle. The chain around my collar drags in the mud, but at least there's enough slack for me to move freely. I wish I could break it off.

I kneel by the water, cupping my hands to drink. The cold liquid soothes my parched

throat. I wash the blood off my palms and arms, hissing when the water hits scrapes and cuts. Then I try to rinse the dirt off the iron collar as best I can—pointless, but it makes me feel fractionally less like a slave.

A crash in the underbrush makes me freeze mid-motion. I spin, water sloshing between my fingers. The boars again? Or... something else?

I hold my breath, listening to the hush of the trees. A large shape looms between the trunks. My pulse rockets. For a split second, I expect to see a gargoyle. But the silhouette is too squat, too graceless. Then it moves into a patch of weak daylight, and I see it's a dark elf, one of the fortress scouts, accompanied by a mangy hound straining at a leash.

My stomach drops. They tracked me.

Before I can react, the hound lets out a baying bark and lunges toward me. The dark elf points a short spear, his face twisted with triumph. "There you are," he snarls, eyes sweeping over me like I'm a prize.

I scramble to my feet, adrenaline spiking. My ankle threatens to buckle. The hound advances, snarling, eyes red with that same dark magic I've seen in the fortress kennels. Fear shrieks through me. I glance around—no weapon in sight.

The elf steps closer, spear raised. His voice drips with malice. "You murdered one of our own, slave. Now you'll die like the dog you are."

I try to back away, but the hound rushes forward, forcing me to dodge. My foot slips in the mud, sending a spike of agony through my injured ankle. I cry out, barely keeping my balance. The collar's chain clinks around me, tangling my arms. The elf laughs.

He lunges with the spear. I sidestep, heart pounding. The hound snaps at my legs. I can't keep this up. My eyes dart around, searching desperately for an escape route. The stream behind me. A cluster of boulders to my right. Dense undergrowth to my left.

"Trying to run again?" the elf taunts, cutting off my path. "I'll take pleasure in dragging you back by your hair."

The hound snarls, saliva dripping from its jaws. Despair wells in my chest. I escaped only to be recaptured. Why did I think I stood a chance?

Suddenly, a deafening roar splits the air overhead—like thunder, but more immediate. The dark elf's gloating expression falters. We both look up. A vast shape plummets through the canopy, scattering branches and leaves. For a heartbeat, I don't believe my eyes. A gargoyle.

He lands with enough force to rattle the ground, wings half-furled around a muscular body of stone-like flesh. My breath lodges in my throat. This gargoyle is massive—taller than any creature I've seen. His molten gold eyes slash across the clearing, taking in the scene.

The dark elf curses, stumbling back, spear aimed warily at the newcomer. The hound growls, but its hackles rise with uncertain fear. Why is a gargoyle here?

The gargoyle's gaze flicks to me, our eyes lock. My pulse pounds in my temples, dizzying. For an instant, I forget to breathe. There's a flash of recognition that sends a jolt through my entire body. I swear I've seen him before.

He snarls, turning on the elf with lethal intent. The elf thrusts the spear, but the gargoyle swats it aside like a twig, then sends the hound flying with one swipe of his powerful tail. The dog yelps, crashing into a tree trunk. The dark elf tries to retreat,

panic contorting his features.

A blur of movement and the gargoyle's claws close around the elf's throat. A wet gasp, a sickening crunch, and it's over. The elf slumps to the ground, limp. All I can do is stand there, trembling, as the gargoyle's chest heaves with battle fury.

For a long moment, neither of us moves. The forest seems to hold its breath. My ankle throbs, my chain rattles, and the gargoyle's molten stare is locked on me. I sense raw power rolling off him in waves, a predatory aura that should terrify me. And it does, but something else flickers inside me—an undeniable pull, a strange ache.

Am I next? The stories say gargoyles cull human women. Yet he doesn't lunge, doesn't snap my neck. He just stands there, muscles tense, as if fighting some inner struggle.

My heart is pounding so hard I can scarcely think. I can almost feel his breath, see the faint shift of his wings. A thousand questions swirl in my head, but I can't shape a single word.

With a low, guttural sound, more a growl than a voice—he jerks his head, as if telling me to run. Or maybe it's a challenge. I can't tell. My knees threaten to give out. My fear wars with an inexplicable surge of gratitude. He saved me, but why?

Behind us, the hound lets out a pitiful whimper, still alive but injured. The gargoyle flicks a glance at it, then back to me. I half-expect him to finish off the beast, but instead, he steps away, giving me space.

Am I free to go?

Every instinct screams that I should dash into the forest—away from this monstrous

creature. And yet, something in his eyes holds me transfixed. They aren't mindless or purely predatory. They're... haunted. Conflicted.

Thunder growls overhead again, making me flinch. My ankle aches, fresh blood trickling down my calf. I'm not in any shape to outrun a gargoyle, if that's even possible.

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He takes a slow step toward me, hands loose at his sides, claws glinting. My chain rattles as I instinctively shift back, fear raw in my throat. The gargoyle's nostrils flare, as though he can scent my terror.

Then his gaze drops to my collar and the looped chain. His jaw tightens, a flicker of rage crossing his face. He looks from the collar to my eyes, and I'm too stunned to speak. Does he... pity me? Or is he angry that the dark elves beat him to enslaving me first?

I realize my breathing has become shallow. Adrenaline, pain, and confusion swirl in my veins. He could kill me with a single swipe. He might do so any second. But he doesn't. Instead, he slowly backs away, giving a low rumble deep in his chest—like he's wrestling with impulses he can't fully control.

My lips part, but no words come out. My mind screams a thousand questions. The gargoyle glances once at the dead elf, then at me. It's almost like he's making sure I see that I'm no longer in danger from that threat. A wave of dizziness washes over me.

In that instant of hesitation, he crouches, wings unfolding. They're enormous, spanning at least fourteen feet. He leaps upward, muscles bunching, and surges above the canopy with a rush of wind. Leaves and branches shake from the force of his takeoff. Then he's gone, vanishing into the stormy sky.

I stagger, rubbing my fingers on my temple. The forest is silent except for the whimpering hound and my own ragged breath. The gargoyle... spared me. Why?

My shoulder throbs, my ankle pulses with pain. Blood trickles down my leg, and the

adrenaline crash leaves me trembling violently. I kneel by the stream, mind spinning.

What just happened?

I've dreamed of a chance at freedom, but never did I expect a gargoyle to appear out of nowhere and save me from a dark elf's blade. Maybe "save" is the wrong word. He might have only killed the elf for reasons of his own, not caring about me at all. But then, why didn't he kill me afterward?

My eyes sting with sudden tears. Exhaustion and pain drive me to the edge of despair. I don't know how I'll survive out here, with slavers on my trail and gargoyles patrolling the skies. Yet I'm alive. That's a victory in itself.

Above, the clouds churn, thunder rumbling like a distant heartbeat. I carefully lower myself to the ground, pressing my forehead against a damp log to steady my breathing. One step at a time. I'm out of the fortress, free if only for a moment.

But as I rest my head, I can't stop picturing those golden eyes meeting mine. Something about that brief connection burns in my mind, fueling me with a desperate spark of... hope? Curiosity? I hate myself for it. He's a monster, Elyria. A monster who kills women like me without hesitation.

Yet he didn't.

Through the haze of pain and uncertainty, I wonder if outrunning the gargoyles is truly possible—or if I've already drawn the attention of one gargoyle in particular. Am I simply stumbling from one danger into another?

I bite my lip, letting the cold rain pelt my shoulders. My thoughts swirl, frantic and breathless. There's no going back now. I won't return to that fortress. I'd rather face the wilderness, the darkness, even gargoyles themselves.

I will survive, I vow silently, ignoring the tears on my cheeks. Even if I have to face him again.

A gust of wind rattles the branches overhead, showering me with droplets. I steel myself. I'm on the run, battered but still breathing. Whether the gargoyle truly spared me or merely postponed my fate, I can't say.

But I'm free.

For now.

4

KORRIN

Night presses against my wings, the air too cold for comfort, but I fly on. My mind churns with the memory of the human woman—Elyria—I left trembling by that stream hours ago. Even with the wind and distance between us, I can't banish her from my thoughts.

I can still see the fear in her eyes when I landed, the shock etched across her face as I ripped that dark elf guard apart. There was a moment, hardly more than a breath—when her gaze locked with mine, and something inside my chest squeezed. I should have ended her there; that's what I've been trained to do. Yet I flew away, leaving her with nothing but the stench of blood and my pounding heartbeat roaring in my ears. No explanation. No final blow.

Now, high above the looming trees, I regret my own hesitation. The Alpha's order is clear, no human female should be left alive, certainly not one carrying purna blood. But I keep telling myself I will follow through—that next time, I won't falter. A lie. The remnants of that moment keep clawing at me, turning over in my head.

The wind whips across my face, a biting chill that stings my eyes. The storm from earlier has mostly passed, but the air is damp with leftover drizzle, and stray tendrils of fog writhe across the treetops. I spot a handful of gargoyles from my patrol circling the fortress we raided last night. They're scouring the area for stragglers, presumably to hunt down any human who slipped through the cracks. If I join them, I can be the first to discover any sign of her. Then I can finish what I started.

Finish. The word resonates like a hollow gong inside me. I'm not convinced that killing her is truly what I want. My every instinct shouts that I should want it—she's a threat, or at least she might be. Letting her roam free, especially if she indeed holds purna lineage, is risking the safety of my race. A hazard we can't ignore.

But as I glide through the cold air, I recall the shape of her face, the raw terror that gave way to confusion when I didn't strike. I remember the chain dangling from her collar, the fresh lash marks on her ankles. Fragile, I tell myself. She's nothing but prey. Yet the image won't align with what I saw in her eyes—flickers of defiance, of something fierce. Something that parted the storm inside me for that single, breathless moment.

I land on a high outcropping of rock, hooking my claws into the stone. Peering down into the forest canopy, I let out a low growl of frustration. This entire region is heavily wooded, making it difficult to spot her from above. The terrain slopes into a series of ridges and hidden ravines. If she's smart, she'll keep moving. If she's injured, she might try to find shelter. Regardless, I can't ignore her. Something in me refuses to let her slip away, no matter how dangerous it is for me to keep her alive.

I can't quite name the impulse that drives me to track her down. Obedience to the Alpha? Possibly. The temptation to see her face again? More likely. My wings twitch, unsettled by the truth I'm dancing around. It's a mistake to let personal curiosity drive my next action. Still, the next moment I push off the rock, diving into the labyrinth of trees below.

The canopy swallows me as I drop. I land in the soft undergrowth, leaves rustling beneath my feet. The scent of damp earth clings to the air. My breath rumbles low in my throat. If she's close, I might catch her scent—fear has a particular tang to it. Carefully, I pick my way forward, using the dense shadows to conceal my approach.

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Twigs snap under my weight. I move slowly, mindful that she could be cowering behind any trunk, or perhaps limping further away. My thoughts drift to the agony etched on her face when I saw her ankle buckle. She's wounded. That might help me track her faster, I tell myself in a harsh attempt at practicality. Even so, an unfamiliar pang of concern flits across my chest.

No. Stop. I focus instead on scanning the ground. Broken branches, footprints in the soggy earth—anything that can guide me. I'm about to give up and expand my search perimeter when I notice faint scuff marks near a fallen log, along with a scattering of footprints pressed into the soft mud. They're small, too small for a dark elf. They lead deeper into a cluster of gnarled pines.

My heart, or whatever the gargoyle equivalent is, thumps wildly. She's near. My body goes tense with the thrill of the hunt. It's a sensation that usually ends in bloodshed, in rending limbs and triumphant roars. But this time, the tension feels... complicated. Heavy.

I follow her trail through the dense brush until I spot a shape huddled against a tree trunk: black hair matted with dirt and leaves, slight shoulders trembling. She doesn't see me at first. The chain around her collar glints in the scattered moonlight. My claws flex, a wave of conflicting emotions crashing through me. I want to roar in triumph for having found her, but something like pity—or is it protectiveness?—lodges in my throat.

Elyria lifts her head, probably sensing a presence. Her eyes lock on mine. For an instant, neither of us moves. A swirl of panic crosses her face. She clutches at her chain, as if she can use it to defend herself. Then, with a harsh gasp, she scrambles

upright. I see pain spasm across her features when she tries to put weight on her injured ankle.

Rage sparks in my chest, sudden and vicious—rage at the dark elves for hurting her. This is insane. I'm the last creature she should trust. The last creature who should care. Yet I can't ignore the fury roiling in my gut.

"You—" She's breathing in shallow bursts, eyes blazing with defiance and terror all at once.

I step forward, uncoiling to my full height. She's so small compared to me, so fragile. My own reflection in her eyes is monstrous, wings half-spread, horns catching the faint light. The part of me that's always thrived on fear wants to relish this moment. But a deeper part, the one newly awakened, urges me to speak or show some sign of restraint.

She drags in a rasping breath. "If you're going to kill me, do it." The words quiver, but her voice is laced with a raw kind of boldness. She's unafraid to face death? Or maybe she's just exhausted.

I swallow. Something hot surges in my chest—admiration, pity, confusion, all mingled. The command of the Alpha echoes in my skull: No mercy. My claws curl, sinking into the earth. "I don't..." My throat is rough. Gargoyles rarely speak to humans. "I don't intend to kill you." The confession leaves my lips before I can think better of it.

She blinks, and her stance wavers in confusion. "But you— you're?—"

"A gargoyle," I say, voice low and vibrating. "Yes. I am. And my order is to kill you." Even as I speak the words, they taste bitter on my tongue.

Elyria flinches. She tries to take a step back, but her wounded foot folds, and she staggers against the tree trunk. A pained hiss escapes her. My instincts jolt me forward—my arms tense, ready to catch her, but she recoils from my approach.

“Stay—stay away from me,” she stammers.

I should. I should spin around, leave her there. Or end her life quickly, as the Alpha demands. But an unexplainable thrumming in my body propels me closer. My voice emerges as a growl: “If I wanted you dead, you’d already be bleeding out.”

She glares, tears gathering in the corners of her eyes. “Then what do you want?” Her question crackles with desperation.

I don’t know. My entire existence until now has been about obedience and bloodshed. But when I see her battered form, the collar biting into her skin, I only feel a driving urge to protect her from everything that wants to harm her—dark elves, other gargoyles, perhaps even myself. The realization scalds me with its strangeness.

“I can’t leave you for them,” I murmur, surprising myself with the quiet intensity in my tone. “They’ll recapture you. Or kill you.”

Her lips part, trembling. “Why do you care?”

Why indeed? The question sets every nerve ablaze. My mind screams that I don’t care, that I’m simply following some twisted sense of opportunity. Or that maybe I’m preventing her from awakening potential pure magic among my enemies. But none of those lies can hide the truth: something about her arrests me, enthralls me. And I refuse to let her die out here.

A thousand conflicting thoughts swirl in my skull. The primal gargoyle in me wants to roar at her defiance—yet a new, sharper voice urges me to shield her from the

shadows, to claim her safety for reasons I barely grasp. “I’m taking you with me,” I finally say. The words come out more like an edict than a request.

She exhales a harsh laugh, disbelief flickering across her face. “You think I’ll just go? Where?—?”

I close the distance in a single stride. I know I must look terrifying, but there’s no gentle way to do this. I catch her elbow with one clawed hand. She gasps, trying to yank free, but she’s not strong enough, especially injured. I hold on carefully, mindful not to pierce her flesh. “I don’t recall giving you a choice,” I rumble.

Her eyes blaze with fury. “You can’t just—” She tries to slap me, or maybe push me away, but her palm smacks uselessly against my chest. My hide is too hard to feel much of it. The force of her motion causes her ankle to twist again, and she cries out. In reflex, I wrap an arm around her waist to keep her from falling.

A jolting sensation shoots through me as her body comes into contact with mine. Even through the threadbare fabric of her clothes, I can sense her warmth, her frantic heartbeat. She’s so slight, quivering. Her breath hitches, and for a heartbeat, we’re locked in a strange tableau of tension and closeness.

Then she tries to shove me again, snarling in frustration, and I decide enough is enough. My tail flicks, coiling around her waist while I shift her weight into my arms. Elyria yells, pounding a fist against my shoulder, but I can feel her panic rising. If I let her continue, she’ll only aggravate her injuries. I have to subdue her—for both our sakes.

“Stop,” I hiss, tightening my hold in a way that pins her arms. “You’ll hurt yourself further.”

She thrashes, a ragged sob escaping her. “Is that supposed to comfort me? You’re

kidnapping me— a gargoyle?—”

“You prefer I leave you to the dark elves?” I snap, my irritation flaring. The memory of that guard nearly killing her surges back. “You wouldn’t last a day.”

Her retort is lost in a muffled cry as I pull her closer to my chest. Adrenaline courses through me. I’ve never handled a human like this, not with the intent to keep them alive. It’s disconcerting, to say the least. My wings flare, feathers... no, not feathers—my leathery membranes rustle with tension. “If you keep fighting, I might drop you,” I growl.

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She sucks in a breath, glaring up at me. “Where are you taking me?” Her voice trembles with exhaustion and fear.

“A place where they won’t find you.” And that’s all I say, because I can’t name my intentions beyond that. I don’t know precisely where. I only know there’s an ancient ruin deeper in the forest, half-forgotten. It was once a gargoyle outpost, long before our forced stone sleep. I recall fragments of it from old memories that surface in my dreams. In that deserted place, I can hide her from the Alpha’s eyes, from the dark elves. And from my own kind, who’d demand I kill her or brand me a traitor.

A swirl of confusion roils in my gut. Is that what I’m becoming? A traitor? The question stings, but I block it out. First, I need to get her out of sight.

I bend my knees, holding her tight, then launch skyward. A strangled scream tears from her throat as we shoot above the treeline. She clings to me, nails digging into my shoulders. The surge of wind is strong, but I maintain a careful grip. She’s so frail; a single miscalculation might send her plummeting.

Our ascent is swift. She buries her face against my chest, trembling. My instincts sharpen—any misstep and I’ll lose her to the yawning darkness below. A fierce protectiveness grips me. No matter how reckless, I have to keep her safe.

We burst through the canopy, emerging into open sky. The moon, still half-blanketed by lingering clouds, casts an otherworldly glow on the forest below. Elyria breathes in ragged gasps. I angle my wings, fighting the gusts. The collar at her throat reflects pale light, a stark reminder of her imprisonment. My chest twists at the sight, but I fly on, heading toward the faint memory of that ruined outpost.

It's not a short flight. The forest stretches for miles, thick with ancient pines and rugged slopes. Now and then, I hear Elyria swallow back a sob or a curse, but she stays still, possibly out of sheer survival instinct. My hold remains firm. I've carried prey before, though never with the intention of keeping it alive.

The lights of the dark elf fortress fade behind us. The night's hush settles in, punctuated by wind and the faint cry of nocturnal creatures. My thoughts churn with confusion, my entire being thrumming with an awareness of the woman in my arms. She's trembling uncontrollably—from cold? terror? exhaustion? Possibly all three. I bank left, scanning the horizon, searching for the half-buried structure that lingers in the far corners of my fractured memories.

I spot what might be broken spires protruding from the forest canopy. The shape is subtle, crumbling stone lost to centuries of weather. A sense of recognition tugs at me—this is the place. With a deep inhalation, I descend.

The wind buffets us, swirling leaves and debris. Elyria cries out as I land in a small clearing next to the ruin. My feet slam into the ground, jarring us both. She clings tighter, breath hot against my chest. Carefully, I loosen my hold and let her find her balance. Her injured ankle can't hold her weight, so she collapses onto the damp grass with a muffled gasp.

I kneel beside her. The structure behind us is indeed a ruin—an old watchtower mostly collapsed into a single, roofless chamber. The walls stand about half their original height, broken at the top. Vines and moss drape the stones, giving the place a ghostly feel. A good enough hideout, though. The forest is thick, the tower nearly invisible from above.

“Where...?” Elyria swallows, wincing as she tries to shift into a less agonizing position. “Where have you brought me?”

“An old gargoyle outpost,” I answer, glancing around. “Abandoned long ago. No one will look for you here.”

She snorts, a sound born of fear-laced sarcasm. “That’s because no sane creature wants to come near it.”

I grunt. “Exactly.” My gaze flicks to her ankle, swollen and bruised. I don’t bother asking permission before I wrap my hand around her calf, ignoring her startled hiss, and lift her foot to inspect the injury. She tries to yank away, but I hold firm—gentler than I might with an enemy, but not exactly gentle either. “Stay still.”

“I’m fine,” she snaps, voice raw.

“You’re not.” A muscle in my jaw clenches. The sight of her injuries, combined with the dirty, tattered clothes, the raw skin under that collar—it ignites a coiling rage in me. She’s been tortured. Used. I exhale sharply, reminding myself to stay calm. “It’s sprained, maybe worse. You won’t be able to walk on it.”

She stares daggers at me. “So what do you care? I’m just a prisoner, right?”

My grip tightens involuntarily, and I catch a spark of fear in her eyes. I curse under my breath, easing my hold. “I’m... keeping you alive,” I say. “That’s more than you’d get anywhere else.”

She averts her gaze, pressing trembling fingers to her temples. “Why?” Her voice cracks. “Why didn’t you kill me?”

My entire body stiffens. The question I’ve been dreading. I clench my teeth. “Because I chose not to.”

“That’s not an answer.” She glares up at me, tears brimming but not falling.

I let out a harsh breath, standing abruptly. My wings flare, a sign of agitation I can't fully control. How can I explain the swirl of impulses raging inside me? I hardly understand them myself. I turn away, scanning the shadows in the crumbling tower. At some point, I'll need to gather wood, find or create a fire, because the night is cold, and she's only human. Why do I keep thinking of her comfort?

Stone rubble litters the interior of the tower, forming a half-wall that might keep out the worst of the wind. I notice a wide slab of rock that could serve as a makeshift seat—or a bed if I find enough moss or grass to cushion it. “We'll be safe here,” I finally say, ignoring her question. “I'll get us wood for a fire.”

“Us?” she echoes, voice hushed. “Since when is this anus?”

I bristle, turning back to her. She's glaring, defiant despite her injury. “You want to freeze?”

She doesn't respond, just wraps her arms around herself. I take that as acceptance. With a low huff, I step out of the tower's remains and into the surrounding woods. Darkness envelops me, but my eyes adjust quickly. I gather a few thick branches and logs I can carry without trouble, though the entire time, I'm acutely aware that this is madness. I've abducted a human. I'm building her a fire.

She could be purna. If she awakens that magic, she might be capable of turning me to stone—or worse. Then kill her now, Korrin, a voice in my head demands. But every time I imagine that possibility, I recall the look on her face and feel an unexplainable wrench in my gut. I won't. I can't bring myself to do it.

Growling under my breath, I return with an armful of wood. She's no longer by the tower wall. Panic stabs through me for a second, but then I see her hunched form: she's managed to drag herself behind a fallen column, presumably to shield against the wind. At my approach, she tenses.

I drop the wood in a pile near the center of the tower's floor. "Here." My voice emerges harsher than intended. I see her flinch and exhale a shaky breath.

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She tries to straighten but winces, clearly struggling to move her ankle. I rummage through the rubble, finding a few pieces of flint from what might've once been the tower's supply chest. With a grunt of effort, I spark them until the tinder catches a glow. The small flame licks hungrily at the bark.

Warmth spreads slowly, flickering across the stone walls. Elyria watches me, eyes wide and wary. The glow illuminates her features, painting them in gold and shadow. My chest constricts at the sight of dried blood on her temple and bruises forming down her arms. She's so breakable.

Silence stretches between us, heavy as the night. Eventually, she speaks, voice barely above a whisper. "I owe you no gratitude for this, gargoyle."

"I'm not asking for your gratitude."

"Then why keep me alive at all?" She clenches her jaw. "You said your orders are to kill my kind."

I stare into the fire. The heat of the flames licks my skin, but I barely feel it. "Because I want to." Even to my ears, it sounds insufficient. But how can I explain the logic behind my choice? I hardly know it myself.

She makes a sound of disbelief. "Do you get off on... toying with me?"

I snarl. "I'm not a sadist. I don't torment for pleasure." Kill, yes, but not torment. "You've known real torment from the elves, not from me."

Her expression cracks with a flicker of haunted memory. “You’re all monsters,” she says, but I notice there’s less force behind the words. She lowers her head, pressing her fingertips to the collar at her throat. “At least with them, I knew what to expect. With you... I don’t.”

Something twists inside me. I shift, wings rustling. I don’t either. “We’ll rest here,” I say, ignoring the tremor in my voice. “I’ll find you food once dawn breaks.”

She startles, clearly not expecting that. “You’re— you’re going to feed me?”

I scowl. “I’m not an idiot. You’re weak. You need food or you’ll collapse.” My words come out gruff, but there’s a kernel of concern laced within them that I can’t hide.

“I’ve... never heard of a gargoyle feeding a human,” she mutters, eyes flicking to the fire. Her arms tighten around her middle. “What’s your name, anyway?”

That question jolts me. Name? Humans rarely ask me that, and if they do, they don’t live long enough to use it. “Korrin,” I say at last.

She breathes out. “Elyria.”

I nod stiffly. “I know.” Our gazes meet again. A silent current crackles between us—tension, curiosity, perhaps fear. The moment pulses with unspoken words, ones I’m not ready to voice. So I look away, focusing on the dancing flames.

Minutes drag, punctuated by the crackle of wood. When I finally glance back at Elyria, her face is turned away, but I can see the strain in her posture. The exhaustion. The lingering terror that thrums in her every breath. My claws flex, a desire to set her at ease coursing through me. But how? We’re predator and prey, after all. She has every reason to fear me.

I tear a strip of cloth from the half-rotted tapestry hanging off the collapsed tower wall. Wrapping it around my hand, I gingerly reach for her injured ankle. She stiffens, but I tug the torn cloth meaningfully. “Let me bind it.”

Her throat bobs in a nervous swallow. “You want to treat my wounds?”

I grit my teeth. “Would you rather limp around in agony?”

She hesitates, then exhales. “Fine.”

Carefully, I lift her foot onto my thigh. Her entire body quivers with pain, but she doesn’t protest. The flickering firelight gives me just enough illumination to see the swelling. My own hands are steady as I wind the cloth, tying it snug but not too tight. I can’t do much about the bruises or the deeper sprain, but at least it’s a start.

Elyria stares, expression unreadable. Her breathing grows softer, the fight draining out of her, replaced by bone-deep fatigue. When I finish, she murmurs, “Thank you,” so quietly I almost miss it.

I don’t respond. My emotions churn, raw and unfamiliar. I set her leg down gently. The chain at her collar clinks, a stark reminder of her captivity. I swallow a curse that rises in my throat. I want to tear that collar off her, but how would that help? She has nowhere else to go—outside these walls, the rest of my kin would kill her without hesitation.

She looks at the chain, then at me. I can almost sense the question forming on her lips: Will you free me? I have no answer that will satisfy her.

I stand. “Sleep,” I say. “The night is almost done. At dawn, I’ll hunt.”

Her mouth twists. “I can’t exactly run away with a busted ankle, can I?”

It's not quite an admission of trust, but it's close enough. I grunt and move to the other side of the ruin, where I settle against a slab of fallen masonry. My wings fold tight around my shoulders, forming a partial shield against the night air. I keep an ear tuned to her breathing, half-expecting her to try crawling away. But the minutes tick on, and she doesn't stir.

At some point, her breathing grows shallow and rhythmic. She's fallen into an uneasy sleep. I let my head tip back, staring at the star-flecked sliver of sky above the broken tower walls. A hundred questions rattle in my mind. Tomorrow, the next day...How do I keep her hidden?My kind won't let her live if they find out I've spared her. The Alpha will kill her and punish me in ways I can barely imagine.

But the thought of handing her over, or seeing her terror-laced eyes as I put a claw through her heart, makes every muscle in my body reject the possibility. Something about her draws me in like a magnet, even if it defies all I've known.

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I brood in silence, letting the fire die down to embers. The forest hushes, lulled by the late hour. Somewhere in the distance, an owl hoots. I watch Elyria's curled form by the weak glow of moonlight. She's shivering despite the fire's warmth, clinging to the ragged edges of her tunic. I should fetch a cloak or blanket. But from where? The ruin is empty except for rubble.

Reluctantly, I push off my makeshift seat, crossing the short distance between us. She doesn't awaken. Carefully, I slide one wing around her. It's not exactly soft, but it's better than nothing. My hide retains some warmth, at least enough to keep her from trembling so violently. She stirs a little, lips parted, a faint whimper escaping. But then her body goes limp again, and her breathing deepens.

For a long while, I stay like that, perched in half-silence, half-shadow. Her face relaxes in sleep, though the tension never fully leaves her brow. I wonder what nightmares haunt her. The fortress? The lash of dark elf whips? Or the face of a gargoyle who should've killed her yet chose not to?

My own eyes begin to feel heavy. I rarely sleep deeply these days, not since awakening from the stone curse. It's like my body still remembers centuries of enforced slumber. Now, I prefer to remain alert, to guard what I must. But with Elyria huddled under my wing, exhaustion tugs at my senses.

I let my eyes drift shut, the dull glow of embers dancing behind my lids. Her heartbeat is faint but steady, a fragile rhythm I can't stop listening to. Before I slip into a light doze, one final thought whispers through my mind:

I can't kill her. I'll protect her from my own kind if I have to.

And though I know it makes me a traitor to everything I've been taught, the thought sets a strange warmth coiling in my chest, an undeniable pull toward the girl who should be my mortal enemy.

5

ELYRIA

I jerk awake to the distant call of a bird echoing through crumbling stone walls. My eyelids feel weighed down, and a dim, reddish light seeps into my vision, as if the sun has barely risen. For a heartbeat, I forget where I am. My legs shift across cold, uneven ground, and the jolt of pain in my ankle snaps me back to reality with brutal clarity.

A battered ruin. A half-collapsed tower. A gargoyle named Korrin standing over me in the night, kidnapping me from that forest clearing... The memories surge back, flooding my mind with a mixture of fear, fury, and confusion.

I push myself upright, wincing at a stabbing throb in my ankle. Carefully, I flex the bruised joint, hissing in pain. The makeshift bandage is still there—the strip of cloth Korrin used to bind my injury. The recollection of his hands on me, cradling my foot, sends an unwanted ripple of embarrassment through my chest. Why do I feel gratitude mixed with my anger? He's my captor. He has no right to claim he's saving me.

Gritting my teeth, I glance around. It's early morning, the sun a faint glow through the jagged opening in the ruined tower roof. A few battered columns lean precariously near the edges, vines draping over them in ragged loops. Debris litters the uneven floor: broken stones, a collapsed arch. A cold hearth smolders near the center, just a handful of ashes left behind from the small fire he made last night. The air is chilly, but not as harsh as it was before dawn. My body aches, and not just from my ankle—my shoulders are stiff, my wrists rubbed raw from the chain that still dangles

off the rusted collar around my neck.

My gaze flicks around, searching for the gargoyle. He must be here somewhere. My stomach clenches. If I see him, will I try to claw his face off? Or will I cower? A mix of both? I swallow down a surge of bitterness. After years under dark elf rule, I'm painfully familiar with how it feels to have no real power. And yet something about him is different from those sadistic overseers. The memory of his amber-gold eyes meeting mine as he bound my ankle—almost gentle in the firelight—makes my heart twist in confusion. He's a gargoyle, a killer who culls human women. So why spare me?

I stand up, testing how much I can stand on my bad ankle. My entire leg trembles, and I have to lean on a half-fallen column for support. Where is he? If he's off hunting or scouting, maybe this is my chance to escape. Then again, one glance at my ankle tells me I'd barely get a few steps outside the ruin before collapsing. My breath hitches at the thought of stumbling through the forest, gargoyles circling overhead, dark elves trailing behind. Is it any safer than here?

No, a traitorous whisper in me answers. At least here I'm not alone, though that's hardly a comfort when my companion is a seven-foot-tall winged predator.

A scrape of stone against stone jolts me. My pulse jumps, and I whirl to see Korrin slipping back through one of the ruined archways, carrying what looks like a small cluster of roots in his clawed hand. He must have left a short while ago. His massive frame moves with startling quiet for someone so large, and I clench my jaw, bracing myself.

His skin is a dark slate hue, faint veins of gold shimmering along his powerful arms. A jagged brand marks one forearm—a reminder of his station as an executioner, I recall from overheard rumors. His molten eyes catch sight of me immediately. My stomach flips, a violent swirl of dread and unwanted fascination. He's no less

terrifying in daylight. In fact, I can see the details better: the ridges along his cheeks, the shadow of horns emerging from his temples, the broad wings folded behind him.

He approaches slowly. I notice the tension in his posture, like he's preparing for me to lash out. Maybe I will. "You're awake," he rumbles, voice low. "How's the ankle?"

"Why do you care?" I snap, hugging my arms across my chest. My voice shakes more than I intend, betraying the swirl of emotions inside me. "You kidnap me—drag me to the middle of nowhere—and now you ask about my ankle?"

Korrin's face remains impassive, though a muscle twitches in his jaw. "Yes."

I blink. "Well, it hurts," I admit, spitting the words. "Happy?"

He glances at my injured foot but doesn't reach for it. "Sit," he says, gesturing to a chunk of fallen stone near the unlit fire. "You shouldn't stand on that too long."

"Don't tell me what to do." My retort is automatic. My pride flares. For too long I've been forced to obey. Now I'm desperate to claim any shred of autonomy, even if the attempt is pathetically small. "I'm not your prisoner," I add, though we both know how untrue that is. The chain rattling at my collar begs to differ.

His gaze flicks to that chain, and something like annoyance—or guilt—flickers in his eyes. "If you try to run on that ankle, you'll make it worse." He steps closer, dropping the cluster of roots near the remains of the fire pit. "I found these by the creek. Might help the swelling."

He produces a small flat stone and sets it on the ground. Then, using his claw, he starts grinding the roots. I watch, half in disbelief. Is he making some kind of poultice? An absurd laugh bubbles up in my throat, but I swallow it back. A gargoyle

who plays healer?

I hear the crunch of the roots, smell their bitter tang. He works in silence, refusing to meet my eyes. Fine. If he doesn't want to talk, I'm more than capable of letting my anger speak for me. "What are you planning to do with me?" I ask.

He doesn't pause in his grinding. "Keep you alive."

I scoff. "What for? A trophy? A slave? Maybe the dark elves will pay you a bounty if you hand me over." I can't help the scorn that seeps into my words.

At that, he looks up sharply, eyes glinting. "I'd never trade you to those vermin. Ever."

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The vehemence in his tone makes me falter. “Oh? So you’re saying it’s more merciful to keep me captive for yourself?” My pulse hammers, braced for him to lash out at my provocation. But he simply grinds the roots harder, knuckles tight.

“Merciful,” he echoes in a low voice, like he’s testing the shape of the word. “You’ve known real cruelty. I’m offering you something else.”

My body floods with heat, part rage, part confusion. “Imprisonment is still cruelty, no matter how nicely you dress it up.” I take a limping step closer. I want to push him, to see how far I can go before he snaps. “Go ahead. Just say it. I’m your prisoner. You have me caged like an animal.”

His golden gaze snaps to the collar around my neck again, then slides away, as though the sight of it unsettles him. “I’ll take it off,” he mutters. “Eventually.”

The laugh that bursts from me is brittle, humorless. “Do you expect me to believe that? You need this collar to keep me under control, right? In case your precious Alpha demands my head at any moment?”

At the mention of the Alpha, his expression darkens. He sets aside the stone and root mash, stands to his full height. My breath catches—he’s massive, wings partially unfurling behind him in agitation. “Don’t speak of him,” he growls.

A tremor runs through me, but I steel my voice. “Why not? Isn’t he the one who decreed all human women must die? And isn’t that your job?” I point at the brand on his forearm. “Executioner.”

He looks at the mark, and I see his jaw tense. “It was my job,” he admits, something dark flashing in his eyes. “Now, it’s more complicated.”

“Complicated,” I repeat, heart pounding. “You tore through the fortress like a monster—killing dark elves without blinking—then decided I’m worth sparing?” I force a bitter smirk. “Makes perfect sense.”

“I didn’t say it made sense,” he snaps. His wings give a restless twitch, scraping the air behind him. “I’m only saying... I made a choice. I won’t hurt you, all right? That should be enough.”

A hot wave of defiance burns in my veins. “It’s not,” I manage. “Because I don’t want your twisted version of ‘protection.’ I want freedom.” My voice breaks on that last word, a reminder of everything I’ve lost, every time I tried to run from the fortress. My chest tightens painfully, tears threatening to sting my eyes. I won’t cry in front of him.

Korrin’s features harden. For a heartbeat, I think he’ll bare his fangs at me in anger. Instead, he exhales a jagged breath, looking away. “I can’t set you free. Not yet.” He picks up the mashed roots, turning away from me toward the crumbled arch. “Sit, or stand, or do whatever you want, but let me bind your ankle so you can heal. Starving or injuring you isn’t my goal.”

The quiet intensity of his voice disarms me more than shouting would. “And if I refuse?”

He pauses, shoulders tensing. “Then limp around in pain. It won’t kill you, but it’ll slow you down. Either way, I’m not letting you leave this place.”

Anger thrums in my chest, but I also sense the futility of resisting him physically. He’s gargoyle-strong and built for war. I’m battered, half-crippled by my own

injuries, and unarmed. Better to play along and watch for an opportunity. Perhaps I can gather enough strength to slip away eventually.

With a snarl of frustration, I hobble over to the chunk of fallen stone near the cold fire. I ease down, wincing as my ankle protests. “Fine,” I mutter. “Be my savior, if that makes you feel less monstrous.”

He shoots me a glare, but he kneels at my feet. My heart hammers at the sight of his enormous body crouching so close. He sets the poultice on the ground, carefully unwrapping the cloth he’d bound me with before. A faint, unpleasant odor drifts up as he presses the mashed roots to my swollen skin. I grimace, bracing for pain. Instead, there’s a cool, tingling sensation that slightly eases the throbbing. I suck in a shaky breath, forcing myself to ignore how gentle his claws feel brushing my calf.

“Where did you learn to do this?” I ask, my tone biting. “Secret gargoyle healing school?”

Korrin grunts. “We know some natural remedies. Life magic used to be part of our lineage—” He cuts himself off abruptly, as if he’s said more than he intended.

I glance at him in surprise. “Life magic?”

He gives a tight shrug, rewrapping the bandage to secure the poultice. “It doesn’t matter. We’re not known for that anymore.” There’s a heaviness in his voice that I can’t decipher. Then he ties the knot, sitting back on his haunches. “Better?”

I test the ankle gingerly. The pain is still there, but dulled by the cooling numbness. “Yeah,” I admit grudgingly. “Thanks.”

He stays there for a moment, eyes flicking to my face. The way he watches me—like he’s trying to solve a riddle he never expected—makes my stomach twist. I clench

my jaw, refusing to look away first. Eventually, he breaks the eye contact, rising to his feet with a controlled sigh.

“Stay here,” he says, moving toward the tower’s exit. “I’ll bring more firewood so we can warm the water from the stream. You need rest. I don’t want you wandering around.”

I bristle, crossing my arms over my chest. “And if I do wander?”

He pauses, half-turned toward me. His wings flare slightly, a flicker of that predatory presence I first encountered. “Don’t,” he growls. “I’ll always find you.”

His words echo with a quiet certainty that sends a ripple of uneasy awareness through me. He means it. My mind flashes to the fortress courtyard, that single glimpse of him overhead—a hunter in the storm. My defiance surges again, but my limbs still ache, and I know I wouldn’t get far on an injured ankle. So I glare at him, letting him see the hatred I feel for this captivity. He meets my gaze for a taut moment, then turns and strides out, leaving me alone.

He’s gone for a while, long enough for me to wonder if I can attempt exploring the ruin without him. My ankle doesn’t throb quite as fiercely now. Despite his warning, my rebellious streak flares. I’m painfully aware that this might be my only chance to gather intel or find a potential escape route.

I drag myself to my feet, leaning heavily on a fallen timber for balance. My entire body trembles under the effort, but I force myself onward, limping deeper into the ruined structure. Most of it is just rubble: collapsed walls, broken stairs leading nowhere, piles of old stones strewn in corners. A blanket of moss covers everything, giving the place a damp, earthy smell.

At one point, I discover a small alcove that might’ve once been a storage closet. It’s

caved in now, filled with rocks and spiderwebs. Useless. I poke around a different corner, hoping for a hidden exit, but only find a jagged hole in the floor that drops into some cellar. The cellar is mostly flooded with stagnant water. A rat skitters across a ledge, making me recoil in disgust. No thanks. I can't navigate that in my condition anyway.

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Frustration boils in my chest. This place is a tomb. No vantage point looks like an easy way to slip out unnoticed—assuming I could outrun or outfly a gargoyle, which is laughable. My ankle throbs more with each step. My forced independence costs me an extra wave of pain. Gasping, I slump against a chunk of fallen masonry, pressing a finger to my forehead. The collar around my neck weighs on me, physically and emotionally. Traded one prison for another.

Anger pulses through me, but it's laced with despair. Why is my life just an endless chain? If it's not dark elves, it's gargoyles. If not whips, then claws. My eyes flicks on a particularly sharp fragment of stone. A savage thought occurs: Could I pry this collar off with a shard? But the metal is thick, locked behind my head. I'd likely slice my own throat trying.

I close my eyes, gripping the rubble. Focus. Breathe. A swirl of images flickers through my mind: the dark elf fortress, the humiliating chains, the lash of whips. And then Korrin, sweeping down from the sky like an avenging storm, eyes molten with rage as he slew my tormentors. Despite myself, I can't deny a flicker of gratitude that he saved me from that guard. But what does that matter if I'm still imprisoned? Yet he's not the same as they were...

A footstep behind me sends my heart into my throat. I whirl awkwardly, wincing as my bad ankle nearly gives out. Korrin stands there, arms braced with a small pile of firewood. He frowns. "You're supposed to be resting by the fire pit," he says.

I bristle. "I can move where I want."

He growls under his breath, stalking closer. I brace myself, half expecting him to lash

out. Instead, he just sets the wood down, wings twitching in frustration. “You’re stubborn. Don’t make your injuries worse.”

“Maybe I like ignoring your commands,” I snap, hobbling back toward the main area of the tower. He hovers at my side, as if torn between letting me limp and sweeping me into his arms. I clench my jaw, ignoring the temptation to lean on him for support. I refuse to seem weak.

When I reach the center, I sink onto that same chunk of stone, leaning back against a crumbling wall. My breath is ragged from pain, but I force myself to keep my chin lifted. Korrin piles the fresh wood next to the burnt embers.

Without a word, he gathers the leftover ash, removing charred bits and clearing space for a new fire. Then he arranges the wood, pulling a flint from a pouch at his waist. A few sparks later, the tinder glows, crackling to life. Warmth begins to radiate, and my body welcomes it, though I refuse to thank him again.

“I’m going to the stream,” he says at last, settling back on his heels. “We need fresh water. I’ll take your ankle for a soak so it doesn’t swell more.”

My eyebrows shoot up. “You can’t be serious.”

He meets my gaze, unwavering. “It’ll help you heal faster. You said you wanted freedom? That requires being able to walk, doesn’t it?”

His logic stings, mostly because he’s right. But I’m not about to let him carry me around like some helpless damsel. “I can get there myself,” I mutter, trying to stand. He’s faster than me, gently catching my forearm before I can topple over.

“Hardheaded,” he murmurs, shaking his head. “Fine. Hobble to the stream, if you insist. But I’m not leaving you alone. If you fall, I’ll carry you.”

His words are oddly gentle for someone so deadly. Something inside me softens, but I push that feeling away. He's still my captor. "Lead the way, gargoyle."

"Name," he corrects quietly. "Korrin."

I snort, refusing to use it. A flicker of exasperation crosses his features, but he doesn't argue. Instead, he steps to my side, letting me lean a hand on his arm for balance. I struggle against the urge, but the pain in my ankle is enough to override my pride. We move slowly, leaving the ruin through a broken arch, following a narrow path that winds between toppled columns. The sky overhead is pale with morning light, clouds drifting in thick clusters.

Trees loom around us, their branches reaching like skeletal arms. The forest floor is damp with dew. Korrin glances around warily, as though expecting an ambush. Are there other gargoyles nearby? Dark elves? The thought makes me tense.

After a few minutes of hobbling, we reach a small clearing where a shallow stream trickles over smooth stones. The water is clearer than I expect, tinted gold by the early sun. Korrin helps me to a rock at the stream's edge, the movement surprisingly careful for someone so large and clawed. My ankle throbs painfully, but I chose to bear the pain without complain. Then he eases down too, folding his wings behind him. It's surreal, sitting beside a gargoyle like we're mere acquaintances taking a morning stroll.

"Put your foot in," he instructs, gesturing at the gently swirling water.

I'm reluctant, but the memory of the cooling poultice earlier urges me forward. I slide my foot out of the bandage enough to expose my swollen skin, then gingerly dip it into the stream. A hiss of relief escapes my lips as the cold water numbs the ache.

"You see?" he says softly, not looking at me. "Better."

I stare at his profile. The ridges of his horns catch the light, and for a moment, I see tension in his jaw. The reflection of the water flickers over his stone-like skin, shimmering across those faint gold veins. He's not looking at me, but I sense the coiled energy in his body—like he's on alert.

Silence stretches. My anger simmers, but it's tangled with something else. Curiosity. "Why are you doing all this?" I blurt finally. "You don't owe me anything, and your Alpha will probably slaughter you if he finds out you're keeping me alive."

His eyes flick my way, burning with quiet frustration. "Because I refuse to be a mindless weapon anymore. You deserve... a chance." The words are clipped, like he's forcing them out. "It's not your fault the purna lineage flows in your veins, if it even does." He exhales heavily. "I can't kill you for what you might be."

Those final words ring with conviction, stirring a strange mix of gratitude and despair in me. "But you admit you'd kill me if I— if that power awakened," I say, testing him.

He grimaces. "I don't know." The admission seems to pain him. "Killing is all I was trained for. But now, everything's... different."

A small stone twists in my chest. His sincerity unsettles me. I shift my foot in the stream, water swirling around my bruised flesh. "You're still holding me prisoner," I remind him softly. "I'm not free."

He inhales, the corners of his mouth tightening. "I can't let you walk away, not yet." He gestures at the chain and collar. "Because then the others would find you. And they'd finish what I refuse to."

Resentment flares, but I notice a flicker of regret in his expression. "So I'm stuck," I

mutter, “trapped with you in a ruin, waiting for my ankle to heal. And then what? You keep me here forever?”

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The water gurgles between us. For a long moment, he doesn't answer. Then he says, "I'm... buying time. I have to think of a plan. A way to keep you hidden until it's safe."

"Safe from who?"

A dark laugh rumbles in his throat. "From gargoyles. From the Alpha. From the dark elves. Take your pick. The entire world seems set on killing you."

My heart sinks. I can't argue. A wave of weariness washes over me, and I slump a little, letting the stream cool my foot. "I didn't ask for any of this," I whisper. "I just wanted to be free."

His gaze softens, startling me. "I know."

I swallow hard, turning my face away so he can't see the helpless tears gathering in my eyes. Curse him for making me feel anything but hatred. The hush of the forest is broken only by the burbling water and the occasional rustle of leaves overhead. My ankle pulses in time with my racing pulse.

After a few minutes, I bite my lip, deciding to push him further. "What if I left anyway?" I rasp. "What if I took my chances out there?"

His hand drifts to my forearm, gently but firmly. The touch of his claws sends a shiver through me, too close to a caress. "You'd die," he murmurs. "Either from your injury, the dark elves, or my own kind."

I want to rage at him, but I can't deny the truth. I twist my arm out of his grip, ignoring the odd pang of loss. "At least I'd be choosing for myself," I say bitterly.

He nods, lips pressed tight. "You might be right. But for now... let me help you." He stands, towering over me. The sun glints off his horns, and I'm reminded of just how inhuman he is. "Come on. Let's get you back before your foot goes numb."

Sighing, I tug my foot from the cold water. Pain lances my ankle as soon as it's exposed to the air. I hide a wince. Korrin extends a hand, and though it galls me, I place my trembling fingers in his. He lifts me effortlessly, one arm around my waist for balance. Our bodies nearly touch, and I suppress a shiver.

We make the slow trek back to the ruin. My mind whirls with conflicting emotions—resentment at being manhandled, relief that he's not forcing me to walk alone, and confusion about how gentle his hold is. The chain at my collar jingles softly, a reminder that kindness or not, I'm still under his control.

Inside the tower, he settles me by the rekindled fire. The flames crackle with renewed warmth. My muscles ache, and I realize I haven't eaten anything substantial since... the day before yesterday? The fortress rations were pitiful at best. My stomach growls, echoing in the quiet space. Heat crawls up my neck at the thought of him hearing.

He arches a brow ridge, rummaging through a battered satchel near the wall. He pulls out a small hunk of dried meat—maybe from some forest game. My nose wrinkles, but my stomach betrays me, growling louder. "Eat," he says simply, tossing the bundle to me.

I catch it reflexively. Glare at him. But I'm too hungry to resist. I tear off a piece with my teeth, chewing the tough meat. It's surprisingly flavorful, salty and earthy. Better than I expected from a gargoyle's stash. He watches me, expression carefully blank.

Something about his scrutiny makes me snap, “Do you mind?”

He looks away, wings rustling. “I’m... going to check the perimeter,” he mutters. “Stay put.” That last phrase is laced with a warning. Then he strides off, leaving me alone again in the flickering glow.

The dried meat does little to quell the whirlwind of my thoughts. My chest feels tight. I wrap my arms around myself, leaning closer to the fire. My ankle throbs less, thanks to his root poultice and the stream soak, but my mind roils with uncertainty. He’s not like any gargoyle or dark elf I’ve ever heard of. He kills easily, but with no apparent joy. He kidnaps me, yet tries to keep me comfortable. He speaks of me deserving a chance, yet chains me here.

I close my eyes, remembering the fortress, the gloom of the kennel, the brutality of the overseers. I escaped that nightmare, only to be caught in the orbit of a gargoyle who insists he won’t kill me. But for how long? One slip, and maybe his instincts take over.

My free hand drifts to my collar, fingertips brushing the cold metal. My chest constricts with mingled despair and the faintest flicker of hope. Because, deep down, I suspect he’s telling the truth—he doesn’t want to kill me. Maybe he truly means to protect me. But can I trust that motive, knowing how monstrous gargoyles can be?

And then there’s the rumor that I might have pure blood. The dark elves always suspected it, but I never felt any magic in my veins. If, by some cruel twist, it awakens... I shudder. I’ve heard the old stories: witches who burned entire armies alive, who twisted dark elves into monstrous gargoyles. Or so the legends say. The possibility that I could wield such destructive power terrifies me almost as much as my captivity.

But for now, I’m just a battered slave, held by a gargoyle who’s defied his own kin to

spare me. The strangeness of the situation is overwhelming. If I'd been told a week ago that I'd be sharing a ruin with a gargoyle while he tended my wounds, I'd have laughed. Or spat. Yet here I am.

The silence stretches. Eventually, the fatigue of the day's events weighs me down. The fire's warmth lulls me, tempting me to rest. My eyelids droop. I fight the urge, not wanting to be vulnerable in the presence of a potential killer. But my body has endured too much—escape attempts, injuries, fear, adrenaline. Slowly, my head sags, my thoughts drifting like the smoke curling above the flames.

A scraping sound makes me jump. My eyes fly open. Korrin's returned, carrying a small pail of stream water. He sets it near the fire to warm, then glances at me. I blink, pulse speeding up. How long have I dozed? He studies me for a beat, then clears his throat.

"You can rest if you want," he says, his voice oddly gruff. "There's nowhere else to go. And I'm not... I won't hurt you." The admission seems to cost him something, as though it goes against centuries of conditioning.

I swallow hard, conflicting emotions swirling. I want to hurl every insult at him for daring to keep me here. Another part wants to collapse, letting the exhaustion claim me. "I'm not going to nap at your command," I mumble, forcing my spine straighter.

His lips twitch, almost a wry smile. "Suit yourself." He turns away, adding a few logs to the fire. Sparks fly upward, dancing in the dim space. The flickering light catches his wings, making them glow faintly—like molten stone.

I rub my collar absently, ignoring the stinging salt of tears behind my eyes. This is my reality now, for better or worse. If I truly want to escape, I'll need to bide my time, regain my strength, and figure out how to slip away from a gargoyle who can track me effortlessly. I can't rely on that same gargoyle's good graces forever. So I remain

silent, hugging my knees to my chest.

Minutes pass. Neither of us speaks. He sits on the opposite side of the fire, stoking the flames occasionally, glancing my way as if to ensure I'm not about to do anything reckless. My ankle pulses, and I recall the relief of the stream's chill. As reluctant as I am to admit it, his healing measures helped. A tiny traitorous voice wonders if, when dawn comes again, he'll bring me more roots for the swelling or maybe find me some real food.

Despite my fury, I'm forced to acknowledge the seeds of an odd, tentative trust. He's not hurting me. He's not letting me starve. That's more than I've known in so long. The thought digs under my skin, warring with my determination to remain angry.

I chew on the inside of my cheek, eyes fixed on the collar's chain. I hate you, I think, directing it toward him, or fate, or both. Yet the words ring hollow when I recall how gently he cradled my foot or how he carefully avoided jarring my injury on the way back. Why does he care so much? He claims it's to keep me alive for reasons unknown. Maybe he's just toying with me, or maybe he's sincere in wanting to protect me. The uncertainty gnaws at me, stoking a slow burn of frustration.

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Eventually, my eyelids grow heavy again. My body aches for real rest, but I refuse to appear weak in front of him. I press my lips together, forcing myself to stay awake, to watch him. He's perched in a half-crouch, scanning the ruin's open arches as though on guard duty. The picture of a gargoyle protector. My mind reels at the contradiction. A moment of fracture, he called it—some shift in his priorities that made him spare me.

The tension in the air is thick, tangy like ozone after a storm. I sense that any day, any hour, this precarious arrangement could shatter. He might come to his senses, remember his duty, and decide I'm not worth the risk. Or maybe the Alpha will track him down, and there'll be a bloodbath. Where will that leave me?

I cradle my ankle, feeling the faint numbness from the root poultice. The fire crackles, casting dancing shadows across Korrin's stony features. In that flickering half-light, he almost looks... lonely. Or haunted.

My stomach lurches, and I realize with a start that I'm pitying him. Why? He's my captor, a gargoyle executioner. And yet, when I see the tension in his posture, the subtle flick of his tail that betrays his inner turmoil, I find myself wondering what burdens he carries. What conflicts roil in that powerful body. No, Elyria. Don't do that. I can't let pity or curiosity snuff out my anger.

For now, I resolve to watch him, to push his buttons, to see just how far he'll go to keep me alive. If I'm forced into captivity, I'll turn it to my advantage. Maybe I'll find a weakness or a way to manipulate him. The thought feels manipulative and borderline cruel, but this entire situation is cruel. I have to ensure my survival somehow.

A wave of exhaustion cresting again, I shift to find a more comfortable position. My limbs ache. The stone beneath me is unyielding, the collar an ever-present reminder of my lost freedom. But it's warmer here than the forest, and my ankle is less painful than before. The hypocrisy of feeling grateful for these small mercies while cursing my captor twists my insides.

"Get some rest," Korrin murmurs, his tone gentler now. "I'll keep watch."

I meet his gaze, which gleams in the dim light. My throat tightens with the words I want to fling at him: You can't order me around. I hate you. Let me go. But they tangle, refusing to pass my lips. Instead, I turn my head away. "I'm not tired," I mutter, even though we both know it's a lie. My lashes flutter, my body drifting. I'm balanced on the cusp of sleep.

He sighs, a low rumble, but says nothing more. In the hush that follows, I let my eyes slip shut, my mind swirling with resentment, confusion, and a traitorous flicker of relief that I'm not alone in the dark. The fire's warmth lulls me, the gentle flicker dancing across the inside of my eyelids. Perhaps in sleep, I can escape these conflicting emotions, if only for a short while.

I'll find a way out eventually, I promise myself. But for now, I'll submit to this false sense of safety. And maybe I'll learn what truly drives this stone beast who claims to spare me.

6

KORRIN

It's been more than a fortnight since I carried Elyria to this ruined outpost. In the grand scheme of my gargoyle years, two weeks is a flicker—but these days feel like entire lifetimes piled on top of each other. Time unfurls in uncertain hours of slow,

tense cohabitation: I gather supplies, keep an eye on distant threats, and struggle to decipher the girl I've taken under my reluctant wing.

If anyone had told me months ago that I'd willingly share a roof—or what's left of one—with a human, I would have laughed in their face. Or slit their throat. That was before the day I broke my executioner's oath in a single reckless moment of fracture. Now my entire existence stands on a razor's edge, split between lethal instinct and an alien protectiveness that flares whenever I look at her.

I still wake each morning expecting some part of me to remember who I was. To crave her death as I once craved the thrill of the hunt. Instead, I find myself hunting only to bring back fresh kill so she can eat, or trudging through the forest in search of medicinal roots to ease her lingering pain. And everytime I realize how far I've strayed from the Alpha's orders, guilt and panic twist in my gut like a coiled serpent.

Elyria's ankle has improved since that first day. I've forced her—against her will, of course—to soak it in the cold stream at dawn, apply my homemade poultices, and rest more than she's accustomed to. The result is that her limp is now barely noticeable, though she keeps the bandage for a bit of extra support. She still glares daggers at me whenever I remind her to go easy on it.

The ruin we inhabit has become a sort of uneasy truce zone. I've gathered enough moss and old cloth scraps to fashion a crude sleeping pallet for her near the east wall, where some stones still stand tall enough to block the wind. I sleep across the tower, propped against the rubble with one wing half-unfurled, always half-alert for intruders. The remnants of an ancient staircase lead to a precarious vantage point on the broken second level, which I occasionally climb to scan the forest. So far, no sign of other gargoyles or dark elf patrols, though paranoia gnaws at me daily.

Elyria stokes the fire in the mornings, an unspoken habit. I provide the wood; she arranges it with nimble, stubborn hands. We've settled into a cautious routine, but it's

riddled with tension that sparks whenever our gazes lock. She despises being captive, no matter how gently I try to frame it. I'm too harsh, too large, too threatening for her to see me as anything but a beast holding her prisoner. She's not wrong.

There's something else beneath her anger, a crackle that crackles in the air whenever we stand too close. I sense it when I help her walk, or when our hands brush accidentally by the creek. She pretends to hate my every breath, but her heartbeat spikes if I step behind her unexpectedly. My own blood roars whenever I catch the faint scent of her hair—like rain on stone and a hint of something warmer. That mixture of fear and desire is potent enough to drive me mad.

I perch on what's left of the second-level staircase, scanning the horizon for movement. The forest canopy spreads out below like a blanket of green and gold. Dawn's light breaks through the trees. A hush lingers, broken only by the far-off call of a bird and the trickle of the stream.

Down below, Elyria kneels by the fire pit. I can see the tension in her shoulders from here, the set of her jaw as she prods the embers awake. Her near-black hair is pulled back loosely, revealing that silver streak that stands out even in dim light. The chain and collar are still there—I haven't dared remove them yet, and the knowledge burns a hole in my chest. If I do free her, will she vanish into the forest, only to be slaughtered by gargoyles or dark elves? Or will she vanish by choice because she despises what I am?

I grunt, forcing the thoughts away. Below me, Elyria stands, stretching her arms overhead. The hem of her shirt lifts a fraction, exposing a strip of skin above her waistband. My breath snags, an unexpected jolt of heat pulsing through my veins. Why does she captivate me like this? I clench the stair's edge, claws scraping stone.

For a moment, I consider dropping down, offering her breakfast, maybe searching for

more game. But I hesitate. Lately, the tension has grown almost unbearable. We're like two predators circling, each uncertain if we want to fight or—my mind flinches from the wordmate. That's absurd. A gargoyle and a human? She's not even truly purna—at least, not awakened—yet my body doesn't seem to grasp the impossibility.

Shaking off the confusion, I leap down from the broken stair, landing with a light thud near her. She spins with a start, eyes narrowing.

“You move too quietly,” she accuses, holding her chest as though to steady her heart.

“You hear me now,” I reply, stepping over a slab of rock. “I have fresh fish from the creek. If you're hungry.”

Her expression cools. “You think I'm going to starve myself out of spite?”

I don't miss the flicker of dryness in her tone. “Wouldn't put it past you,” I tease, but my voice is too low and rough to sound kind. “You've threatened worse.”

She huffs. “Maybe I'll starve you.”

A flicker of amusement tugs at my lips, though I keep my face neutral. “I'm not so easily killed.”

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There's a beat of silence, the air charged. Then she drops her gaze to the fish in my hand, a small trout still gleaming with water. Her stomach rumbles softly—my keen hearing picks it up. A flush colors her cheeks, and she folds her arms over her torso, as if to hide the sound.

“Here,” I say, offering the fish. She frowns, so I sigh. “Look, I’ll clean it. Then you can cook it.”

Her mouth twitches, and she gives a curt nod. Without another word, she stalks back to the fire. I watch her limping less than before—her ankle’s nearly healed, a testament to my meddling care. Part of me feels relief. Another part fears it means she’ll run the first chance she gets.

The day stretches out in slow hours. I scout the perimeter of the forest again, while Elyria tests her ankle with short walks near the tower. Sometimes I sense her behind me, observing me when she thinks I’m not aware. She’s still bitter about the collar, and every time she tries to wedge a sharp rock against the latch, I warn her about injuring herself. She scowls like a wounded animal.

Late afternoon finds us both by the stream. Elyria crouches on a rock, soaking the collar in cool water to wash the grime off the metal. I stand nearby, arms crossed, scanning the shadows. We speak little, but tension crackles between us like a live wire. Her eyes flick to me occasionally, and I catch the swirl of wariness and something else she tries to bury.

“Are you going to hover forever?” she finally snaps, turning to face me. A rivulet of water runs down her forearm, trailing to her fingertips. My gaze follows it, enthralled.

I force my eyes upward, meeting her glare. “Yes,” I answer simply. “I told you, I’m not letting you out of sight.”

She stands, water dripping from her collar, which glints in the dappled sunlight. “You’re stifling.”

A flash of anger edges my voice. “And you’re reckless. Do you think I enjoy babysitting you?”

Her chin lifts. “Then stop. Let me go. We’ll see who’s reckless.”

My pulse leaps, but I refuse to let her see my uncertainty. “I can’t. It isn’t safe.”

She releases a harsh laugh. “Strange how you use that word. ‘Safe’ means freedom for me. Instead, I’m trapped in with a gargoyle who might snap my neck at any moment.”

The condemnation in her tone stings more than I want to admit. “If you truly believed that, you wouldn’t challenge me so often,” I say quietly, stepping closer.

She tenses, neck craning to look up at me—my height dwarfs her. “That’s not... I...” Her breath hitches, cheeks coloring. She tries to step back, but her heel skids on the wet stone. I lunge, steadying her with a hand on her elbow. The chain tugs between us, jingling ominously. Her eyes widen, lips parted in a silent gasp as she clutches my forearm.

Our faces are inches apart. I can feel her trembling, sense the rapid flutter of her heart. My instincts slam into me like a tempest: take her, devour her fear, claim her submission. But another voice whispers that I want her defiance, her fierce spirit. My claws flex against her arm, but I don’t hurt her. Heat coils in my gut as I taste the tension on the air.

“Careful,” I murmur, voice gritty.

She exhales shakily, trapped in my hold. “Let me go,” she demands, though her voice falters.

I loosen my grip, stepping away. Her eyes linger on me, a mix of panic and something that sparks deep in my chest. It’s the same turbulent swirl that’s been growing for days, each glare and taunt feeding it. What is this attraction?

She drags a hand across her mouth, as if wiping away the moment. “I’m going back,” she says, turning to limp toward the tower. “Don’t hover.”

I stand there, watching her. My breath remains ragged. “Fine,” I mutter under my breath. But I don’t follow immediately—my body is too keyed up, and if I remain near her, I can’t guarantee I’ll keep a leash on these wild impulses.

By the time dusk settles over the ruin, the air is thick with humidity. Storm clouds gather above the treetops, though no lightning splits the sky yet. Elyria is huddled by the fire, scraping the scales off another fish I caught earlier. She’s grown more adept at these survival tasks. Meanwhile, I’ve been pacing the outer perimeter of the tower, half-checking for intruders, half-arguing with myself to keep distance.

She looks up as I approach. The flames cast dancing shadows across her features, emphasizing the bruises that have mostly faded from her time in the fortress. Her hair clings to her temples in the muggy air, the silver streak catching the firelight like a slender blade. My pulse thrums. We’ve barely spoken since our confrontation at the stream. The tension is a coil ready to snap.

I crouch across the fire, adding more wood. Sparks fly upward, illuminating the archway overhead. The hush between us is suffocating.

She sets the fish aside, wiping her hands on a rag. Her eyes flick to me. “Why do you keep pacing like a caged beast?”

A scoff leaves my throat. “I am caged, in a sense. I can’t leave you alone.”

She bristles. “Then unchain me.”

I rake a hand through my hair. “You know why I haven’t.”

Her lips tighten, but she doesn’t argue further. Instead, she stands abruptly. “I’m tired,” she mutters, turning away. I watch her head to the makeshift sleeping area we fashioned with moss and cloth. She sinks onto it, wincing slightly.

A flash of lightning glimmers in the distant sky, though thunder doesn’t follow. My entire body is wired, every muscle coiled. My gaze keeps drifting to Elyria’s hunched shoulders, to the way her collar glints as she draws a ragged breath. I sense her frustration, her confusion, an echo of my own.

I can’t stand it anymore. I move, crossing the short distance to her makeshift bed. She lifts her head in alarm. “What do you want now?” she demands, voice taut.

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I inhale, hands curling at my sides. “To talk,” I lie, though I’m not sure if talking is what I truly want.

Her eyes narrow. “At this hour?”

I lower myself beside her, the stone floor rough beneath my knees. My wing accidentally brushes her shoulder, and she flinches as though burned. My heart twists. “I... sense your anger,” I say quietly. “Your fear. It’s choking both of us.”

Her jaw clenches. “Well, maybe you should have thought of that before kidnapping me.”

I let the accusation hang in the air, guilt prickling my conscience. “I won’t apologize for saving your life. But I will admit I’ve... complicated matters.”

She exhales a shaky breath. “Complicated? That’s the word you use for trapping me with a gargoyle?”

I grit my teeth. “Yes. Because I can’t let you die, and you can’t walk freely without a death sentence from my kin. So we’re stuck. Both of us.” I glance down, noticing how her chain rests across her lap. The sight tightens a knot in my chest.

“Then do something about it!” she snaps, color rising to her cheeks. “You’re the unstoppable beast, right? You can kill me, or free me, or?—”

Her words catch, tears shimmering in her eyes. She looks away, furious at her own vulnerability. Something snaps in me, a wave of protectiveness that blots out reason. I

reach for her hand on impulse. She tries to jerk away, but I catch her wrist gently, just enough to stop her from fleeing.

“Don’t,” she warns, voice quivering. But she doesn’t pull harder.

I lift her hand, turning it over in mine. My claws are retracted, as if I’m trying to appear less monstrous. Her fingers are calloused from labor, still trembling. Slowly, I shift closer, heart hammering. “I’m... not like them,” I manage.

She scoffs. “You don’t know that. Your own brand marks you as an executioner.”

I swallow, the brand on my forearm burning with phantom shame. “I can’t change my past,” I say, voice rough. “But I can choose not to kill you.”

Her eyes reflect the flicker of fire, confusion warring with bitterness. “You say that, yet you keep me chained. You control every breath I take.”

My chest tightens. “I—” I cut myself off, struggling to articulate the avalanche of conflicting desires that have plagued me since I saw her in that courtyard. “I want to protect you.”

She stares at me, her breath hitching. “That’s... twisted.”

She’s not wrong. But I can’t pretend otherwise. The pulse in my throat pounds, the coil of tension swirling between us. A storm brews inside me, urging me to close the distance. I shouldn’t. She’s fragile. Terrified. Everything about her screams that I’m the last creature she should want near. But part of me can’t resist the magnetic pull, the raw charge crackling whenever we’re close enough to feel each other’s warmth.

“Elyria,” I murmur, barely aware that I’m saying her name. She stiffens, lips parted. “Tell me to leave if you truly want me gone.”

Her mouth works soundlessly for a second, cheeks flushed. Then she shakes her head, a tiny motion. “I don’t trust you,” she whispers. “But I... I can’t do this alone.”

My heart lurches. It’s a confession, half-anguished, that slices through my final shred of restraint. I lean in, halting a hair’s breadth from her face, giving her every chance to push me away. She exhales unsteadily, eyes flicking from my mouth to my eyes. Fear and desire war in her gaze.

I should pull back. This is insane. But she closes the tiny distance, rising on her knees so our lips brush in a tentative collision—fragile, trembling. A jolt of heat surges through my body, electrifying every nerve. It’s a kiss fueled by desperation and confusion, a half-protest that transforms into something else.

She whimpers against my mouth, and I tighten an arm around her waist, drawing her closer. Our movements are clumsy at first—she’s still unsure, I’m all rigid muscle. Then the tension cracks, and we’re devouring each other in a frenzy of pent-up frustration. Her nails dig into my shoulders, and my claws slip over her waist, careful not to cut.

The taste of her is dizzying, smoke and salt, the faint tang of the fear she’s carried for so long. My wings stir behind me, threatening to unfurl and encircle her, but I hold them in check. The chain at her collar presses against my chest. I hate that damned collar, but I can’t tear it off. Not yet.

She breaks the kiss with a gasp, eyes wild. “What are we doing?” she chokes out.

I bow my head, pressing my brow to hers. “I don’t know,” I admit hoarsely. “But I can’t stop.”

Her lashes flutter. Then she captures my mouth again, fierce and hungry. My heart roars in my ears. My lethal instincts scream at me to take, to claim, but I fight to keep

my touch controlled. She's small, delicate. One misstep, and I could leave bruises that mark her forever. I sense her body trembling with a mixture of fear and undeniable need.

We tumble onto the makeshift bedding, the fire casting dancing patterns across the ruined walls. Thunder growls outside, the storm drawing closer. My mouth travels down her neck, the collar an icy ring beneath my lips. She arches against me, a soft moan escaping. The sound ignites something primal in my blood.

I want her.

I pause, lifting my head to search her face. "Are you sure?" My voice scrapes the air, thick with longing.

She stares at me, lips swollen, breathing ragged. Her eyes shine with a desperate light. "Nothing about this is sure," she breathes. "But yes."

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A trembling exhale leaves my lungs. No clarity—only fear, desire, and something far more dangerous: hope. My claws trace her thighs, careful not to prick her skin. She shivers, a stifled cry escaping as I drag my fingers higher.

“Korrin—” Her voice fractures when my thumb brushes the damp fabric between her legs.

“Tell me to stop,” I growl, though my body screams to take.

Her hips jerk. “I don't think I will.”

Clothes vanish in frantic tugs, her tunic ripped at the seam, mine falling to the stone floor. The firelight paints her bare skin in gold, highlighting every bruise, every scar. She's so small beneath me, all soft curves and trembling breaths. My cock aches, already hard, straining against her thigh.

Elyria's fingers skim the ridges of my scars, hesitating over the brand on my forearm. “Does it hurt?”

“Not as much as wanting you does.” She makes me ache, it's a sweet torture that has no end.

A gasp as I pin her wrists, my mouth sealing over hers. She arches, her pussy grinding against me in a silent plea. I groan, dragging my teeth down her neck. “You feel that?” I thrust against her, letting her feel the length of me. “This is what you do to me.”

Her nails rake my back. “Then stop teasing.”

Lightning splits the sky, casting her face in sharp relief—eyes wide, lips parted. I hook a hand under her knee, spreading her wider. My cock nudges her entrance, and her breath hitches.

“Look at me,” I demand. “Look at where your cunt meets my pussy.”

She does, her eyes widening a fraction, just as I push inside. Her back bows, a sharp cry tearing from her throat. “Fuck—you’re big.” My cock enters her, fortunately, it’s not all stone. It leaks pre-cum, making it soft and hard at the same time.

I freeze, sweat dripping down my temples. “Hurts?”

She shakes her head, but her walls flutter tight around me. “Just... I’m very wet for you. You’re just big but it feels so good. Move. Slow and hard.”

I obey, withdrawing almost completely before sinking back in. Her moan is a broken thing, her hips lifting to meet me. “Again,” she whimpers.

I do, again and again, each thrust deeper, harder. Her legs lock around my waist, heels digging into the scars on my back. “Gods, Elyria—” My control splinters as her pussy clenches around me, wet and scorching.

“More,” she demands, nails biting into my shoulders.

I snarl, flipping her onto her knees. Her gasp is swallowed by the thunder as I yank her hips back, plunging into her from behind. She chokes my name, fingers scrambling against the bedding.

“You receive me so well,” I grind out, one hand fisting her hair. “As if you were

created for me.”

“Korrin—ah!” Her cry pitches higher when my thumb finds her clit, circling roughly.

“Come for me,” I order, slamming into her. “Let me feel it.”

Her body obeys, shuddering as she falls apart. The way her pussy milks my cock wrings a guttural groan from me. I chase my own release, fucking her through her climax until my spine locks, pleasure detonating like a blade to the gut.

“Elyria—” I say her name repeatedly like a promise of heaven as I come inside her.

For a heartbeat, the world stills. Only our ragged breaths and the crackling fire exist. Then she collapses beneath me, and I barely catch myself before crushing her.

I pull out gently, but she winces. “Sore?” I murmur.

She huffs a weak laugh. “You’re... a lot.”

A chuckle rumbles in my chest, but it dies when I see the tears streaking her cheeks. I brush one away with my thumb. “Regrets?”

She turns her face into my palm. “Ask me tomorrow.”

The chain of her collar gleams between us, cold against my skin. I should leave. Should let her rest. But when I shift to rise, her hand fists in my hair.

“Stay,” she whispers.

And like a fool, I do.

With trembling care, I ease beside her, pulling the remnants of cloth to shield her from the chill. The fire cracks, sending sparks dancing. She exhales a shaky breath, curling her body slightly. I lie next to her, uncertain if I should wrap an arm around her or leave her be. The chain from her collar glints between us, a harsh reminder that this closeness is built on something precarious.

A silence falls, broken only by our ragged breathing. Eventually, she shifts, turning her head to look at me. Her gaze is guarded, yet there's a flicker of softness. "That..." she begins, then trails off.

I swallow. "I know." Words fail me. I want to apologize, to vow I'll free her, to claim I have answers. But I have none. All I can say is, "Are you hurt?" My voice is soft, laced with concern.

She shakes her head, brushing a strand of damp hair behind her ear. "No," she whispers. Then she grimaces, wincing a bit. "I mean—my ankle's a bit sore, but... no."

A weight I didn't realize I was carrying lifts from my chest. I nod, uncertain how to move forward from this moment. The tension is both relieved and transformed into something deeper, more terrifying. We've crossed a line. We're no longer just captor and captive, nor even reluctant allies. There's a bond now, forged in the rush of physical need and half-buried emotions.

She averts her gaze. "This doesn't change the fact that I still want to be free," she

says, voice brittle.

I nod slowly. “I know. It doesn’t change that I want to protect you, either.”

She laughs, a quiet, humorless sound. “So we’re stuck.”

I consider the collar, recalling how I once threatened to remove it. My mind flinches, picturing her fleeing into the forest, unable to outrun the dangers that lurk there. But how can I keep her chained after this? The conflict tears at me. “For now, yes,” I manage. “But we’ll figure something out.”

Silence stretches between us again, heavy with unspoken questions. She sighs, turning to face the fire. I sense her exhaustion, the emotional toll of the last weeks. My body aches too, but I can’t find it in myself to drift off. Instead, I sit up slightly, leaning against a chunk of rubble.

She hesitates, then shifts closer, resting her head against my arm in a gesture that’s half-reluctant, half-grateful for warmth. My wings fold around her, creating a cocoon that shields us both from the chill. The chain rattles softly as she nestles against my side, eyes sliding shut.

A wave of something akin to contentment and dread washes over me. I shouldn’t want this, but I do. My instincts, lethal and possessive, have found a new outlet—cradling her in the aftermath of what we just shared. Gently, I brush my claws through her hair, mindful of the silver streak. She doesn’t pull away, though I sense her uncertainty humming beneath the surface.

The storm outside finally breaks, a steady rain pattering on the broken stone overhead. Warm candlelight from the fire casts dancing shadows on the ruined walls. We’re exposed here, vulnerable if an enemy stumbles upon us. Yet for a brief moment, the looming threats fade, overshadowed by the quiet sound of Elyria’s

breathing.

I tighten my arm around her, heart pounding with an emotion far too big to name. She's not truly safe, not truly free, and I have no idea how to fix that. But in this hush, with her resting against my chest, I allow myself to imagine a future that doesn't end in bloodshed. Foolish, maybe, but the thought glows inside me like a faint star in a dark sky.

I glance down, meeting her half-lidded stare. Her eyes reflect the dying fire, vulnerable and wary. I lean forward, pressing my forehead gently to hers. A peace settles over us, fragile as the burned logs. In the coming days, we'll still clash, still wrestle with the chain that binds her. But for tonight, in this stolen moment, we're bound by something else too—a collision of fear and desire that we can't deny.

I feel her breathing slow, drifting toward sleep. I vow silently to stand guard through the night, though my own mind churns with questions. What am I now? A traitor to my race? A protector to a woman I once would have slain without question?

Whatever the answer, I know we've crossed a threshold. There's no returning to our old roles. She's in my arms, her heartbeat echoing in my ears, and I'm unwilling to let her go—even if it means defying the Alpha's decree.

Lightning flashes in the distant sky one more time. Then darkness settles fully, and I shut my eyes, holding her close. Let the world storm outside—tonight, we stand together, no matter how impossible it may seem.

7

ELYRIA

It's been a handful of days since I crossed that fraught line with Korrin—days that

feel longer than entire months of my previous life. Time in this dilapidated outpost seems to warp, measured only by the crackle of the morning fire, the fleeting hush of midday, and the encroaching darkness that drives us behind half-collapsed walls each evening.

I move through these days with an undercurrent of tension thrumming in my veins. My ankle has healed almost completely by now; the bruises on my body have faded to faint shadows. I should feel stronger, but I've never been more unsteady. The ruin is still a cage—albeit one with mossy floors and open skies. And Korrin, the gargoyle who once should have been my executioner, has become my uneasy companion, my lover in a moment of heated desperation, and my self-appointed protector.

The aftermath of that night lingers like an ember beneath the ashes of our every interaction. Neither of us mentions it directly, but it colors every glance, every brush of hands, every pause in conversation. Sometimes I catch him watching me from the corner of his eye—studying me as if I'm a puzzle he has no idea how to solve. And I do the same, stealing glimpses of his powerful form in the half-light, half-afraid he'll sense my curiosity.

But the fragile bubble we share can't shield us from the larger world. The signs have started appearing: a faint smell of brimstone on the wind that speaks of lurking gargoyles, or the sudden hush of forest creatures that hints at passing dark elf scouts. My instincts scream that something's closing in. Perhaps the fortress has finally sent a hunting party. Perhaps other gargoyles have grown suspicious of Korrin's prolonged absence. In any case, the sense of threat tightens around my chest like an invisible collar to match the real one at my throat.

I resent him for the chain that still binds me—yet each time I rage about it, I see a flicker of guilt in his golden eyes. At night, when we lie near the dying fire, it's become our nightly ritual to fall asleep with at least a hand's breadth of distance between us, as though we're both trying to pretend that closeness never happened. I

wake sometimes to find him watchful, wings half-unfurled, scanning the shadows beyond the broken arches of this ruin. If I'm honest, a twisted part of me feels safer with him awake. It's a confession I'm not ready to make out loud.

I can't deny that, without him, I'd be lost out here—perhaps dead already. My ankle might have crippled me weeks ago. Dark elves or wild beasts might have tracked me down. And I know what it means to be truly helpless. Still, I loathe the dependence. I loathe that, even now, the chain remains locked at my throat, no matter how gently he tries to excuse it. But the outside world seems more dangerous by the day, and my grudging acceptance of his protection grows with every new sign of encroaching peril.

Dawn spills a pale light through the gaps in the ruined tower's walls. I rise from my bed of ragged blankets, rolling my shoulders to chase away the stiffness. My gaze flicks toward Korrin, who's crouched near the fire pit, feeding the embers with dry moss. His massive wings fold close to his back, but tension radiates off him.

He glances over. Our eyes lock. No words pass, but a crackle of awareness sparks in the space between us—an echo of that night we haven't fully addressed. My cheeks warm, and I force myself to look away, busying my hands with smoothing the blanket.

Outside, the sky is a tapestry of shifting grays, threatening rain but never quite committing. The forest stirs with restless energy. Birds call anxiously, and the hush that follows pricks at my nerves.

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“Korrin,” I say finally, voice low. “Do you sense it?”

He looks up, brow ridge knitting. “Yes.”

One word, but it resonates with apprehension. “What do you think it is?” I press, unable to keep the tremor from my tone.

His gaze drifts to the jagged tower window. “Scouts, perhaps. Could be your old masters. Or mine.”

A chill slides down my spine. Dark elves, or gargoyles. Both are nightmares in their own right. I swallow, crossing the short distance between us. He smells of smoke and damp stone. I remember the warmth of his body against mine, but I shove that memory down, focusing on the fear that churns my gut. “We can’t stay here if they’re closing in, can we?”

His jaw tightens. “For now, we wait. If the threat grows, we move.”

I hate the idea of running, yet an ominous tension thrums in the air. “What if we leave now? Find somewhere safer.”

He exhales, setting aside the moss. “Where would we go that’s safer? Farther into the forest, we might run into my kin. Closer to the roads, we risk the dark elves.”

A spark of frustration flares in my chest. Trapped. “So we do nothing?”

His eyes flash. “We stay vigilant.”

I clench my fists, forced to concede. There are no good options. Is this how it will always be—caught between two unstoppable forces, pinned in place by fear?

The next few days pass with an undercurrent of restless dread. Korrin and I keep watch in shifts, scouring the forest perimeter for any hint of invaders. I sense him scanning the skies as if expecting his gargoyle brethren to descend. Meanwhile, I check for signs of dark elf presence—broken twigs, footprints, or the acrid smell they leave behind.

Each time I step beyond the ruin, my heart pounds with a conflicting cocktail of anxiety and relief. There's no chain tethering me physically to the tower—Korrin gave me enough slack so I can move around without hobbling—but the collar remains a constant weight on my throat. A reminder that my so-called freedom is conditional. Sometimes I seethe about it, directing my anger at him. Other times, I see his guarded expression when I mention it, sense the conflict within him. Then my rage softens into something complicated—pity or empathy, I can't be sure.

He hunts for us, bringing back a small deer one afternoon. We dress it by the creek, shoulders bumping awkwardly as we try to avoid each other's eyes. Our conversation is stilted. Whenever our hands brush or our gazes meet, heat licks at my chest. A swirl of memory from that night—his mouth on mine, the rumble of thunder outside, the moment I clung to him as if he were my lifeline. I hate how it haunts me. I hate how the possibility of it happening again both terrifies and intrigues me.

At night, the tension grows heavier. We curl on opposite sides of the dying fire, feigning sleep. I lie awake, ears pricked for any sign of encroaching danger. Sometimes I wonder if he does the same, if he wrestles with the memory of our closeness.

We've grown adept at dancing around each other, acknowledging the simmering tension without daring to reignite it. There's an unspoken truce: I won't bring up that

night, and he won't push me to talk about it. But the storm that led us to that moment seems poised to break again. I can feel it in the charged air, the way we keep finding ourselves within arm's reach before pulling back.

One morning, a low mist drapes the forest. I'm outside gathering kindling near the shattered tower wall when I catch a whisper of voices drifting through the trees. My entire body goes rigid. Dark elves have a hissing cadence, gargoyles an undertone of guttural clicks. This voice is low, muffled. I can't quite make out the words, but the hair on my neck rises.

I crouch behind a fallen column, dropping the half-broken twigs in my arms. A prickle of dread slides through my veins. Please let it be a passing traveler, not a scout.

The voice fades, replaced by a rustling that might be footsteps. My heart pounds so loudly I fear they'll hear it. Slowly, I edge back toward the tower entrance. Korrin—I have to warn him. My ankle twinges, but it's strong enough now that I can move swiftly with minimal pain.

Inside, I find Korrin perched on the second-level rubble, scanning the treetops. His gaze snaps to mine the instant I step through. "What is it?" he demands quietly, reading the alarm in my eyes.

"Someone's out there," I whisper, glancing over my shoulder. "Low voices. Couldn't make out if it's elves or... something else."

His wings tighten. "Could be a dark elf patrol." He leaps down in a single fluid motion, landing beside me without a sound. "Stay here."

I bristle, but fear knots my stomach. "You said we'd handle threats together."

He hesitates, clearly torn. “Fine. But don’t get reckless.”

We move in tandem, him leading the way with swift, silent strides, me trailing behind with as much stealth as I can muster. My collar chain rattles softly if I’m not careful, so I clutch it to my chest to still the noise. Outside, the mist swirls around us, chilly against my cheeks.

We crouch by a ridge of collapsed stone at the ruin’s perimeter. Korrin lifts a clawed hand, motioning for me to stay low. Carefully, he peers over. I hold my breath. A moment later, he ducks down, brow furrowing.

“Dark elves,” he says under his breath. “Three or four. They’re searching the area.”

A jolt of terror spikes through me. I recall the faces of my old overseers, the sneering cruelty. My brand across my back itches with remembered pain. Have they finally come for me?

“Could we fight them?” I ask, heart thudding. “Or should we run?”

Korrin’s expression is grim. “If it’s just four, I can take them. But it risks alerting more. They might have a campsite nearby. If they vanish, the fortress will send more. We need to avoid a direct clash if possible.”

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I swallow a bitter taste. The idea of him killing to protect me sits uneasily in my chest, but the alternative—being dragged back to the fortress or handed over to the Alpha’s decrees—is unthinkable. “What if they find us anyway?”

His gaze flicks to my collar. “Then we fight. Or we flee deeper into the woods. But running blindly invites other threats.”

Dread and frustration tangle in my gut. My hands shake. “I don’t want to be captured again,” I rasp.

“I won’t let that happen,” he says, voice low and fierce. Something in his tone steadies me despite my fear.

We wait in tense silence for what feels like hours. The voices drift closer, then fade. Twigs snap, leaves rustle. My muscles ache from crouching. After an agonizing wait, the forest grows quiet once more, the hush returning to an uneasy normal.

Korrin peers over the ridge again, then exhales. “They’re gone.”

My knees nearly give out from relief. But the tension in the air remains, a promise that they might come back with reinforcements. I rise carefully, arms trembling. “They know someone’s here.”

He nods, wings flaring slightly. “They suspect. We can’t be certain they won’t return.”

We exchange a long look, neither of us voicing the fear that tomorrow or the next day

might bring an entire squad. I clench my fists, wishing desperately for the freedom to run from this place. But Korrin is right. Running blindly isn't a solution.

Later that evening, the weight of this looming threat presses heavily on me. I stand near the broken arch at the tower's edge, gazing out into the dusk-lit forest. The air smells of pine and damp earth. Somewhere, an owl hoots, making me jump. My nerves are frayed.

Korrin appears behind me, silent as always. My chest twists with relief at his presence, though I refuse to show it. It sickens me that I rely on him so much. I cross my arms over my chest, keeping my gaze forward.

He remains a pace behind, a hulking shadow in the gathering dark. "You all right?" he asks quietly.

Am I? The memory of dark elf voices in the mist replays in my mind. I force a bitter laugh. "No. But it seems I have no choice."

His claws scrape gently across the stone floor. "Choice in what?"

I whirl, glaring. "In trusting you." The admission comes out more raw than I intend. "I never wanted this. But if they're out there, I can't survive alone."

His eyes gleam with that molten light. "You resent needing me."

I grit my teeth. "Wouldn't you?"

A flicker of sympathy crosses his face. "Yes," he admits. "But I'm glad you haven't tried to run off in your anger. It would end badly for you."

My temper flares, but it's tempered by harsh reality. "I know. That doesn't make it

easier.”

He takes a half-step closer, tension coiled in his body. “I’ll keep watch every night until we’re sure they’ve moved on. But if they return in force, we have to be ready to leave.”

I nod, biting my lip. “And where will we go?”

His shoulders slump. “I’m... not certain. Farther north, maybe. There are places in the mountains where neither dark elves nor gargoyles roam freely. But it’s a hard journey.”

The thought of a trek through unknown terrain twists my stomach, but the alternative is captivity or death. “I’ll do it if we must,” I whisper. “I won’t be a slave again.”

He exhales, wings rustling. The faint torchlight from our campfire flickers over his face, highlighting the ridges of his horns. “Then we agree.”

A fragile moment settles between us. My anger and fear swirl beneath the surface, but for once, I let myself feel the solace of having someone standing by me. I hate that it’s a gargoyle who once was sworn to kill my kind. But here he is, arms folded, gaze scanning the perimeter like a sentinel.

I shake my head, turning back to the archway. A ragged sigh escapes me. “I still loathe this collar,” I say, voice ragged. “But I’m beginning to see... you’re the only one who’ll keep me safe.”

He hesitates. “I never wanted you to wear it. But I can’t remove it yet. Not without risking everything if we cross paths with my kin.”

Bitterness churns, but I clamp it down. “Promise me that if we make it to those

mountains—if we find somewhere hidden—you'll remove it.”

He steps closer, the warmth of his body brushing my shoulder. My heart jolts at his nearness, the memory of our tangled limbs. “I promise,” he murmurs. “I hate it as much as you do.”

I glance up, startled by the sincerity in his tone. Our eyes meet, and the embers of that night stir in my chest. My breath catches. For a beat, I think he might touch me, might close the small distance between us. But he only stands there, tension crackling.

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“Thank you,” I manage, voice low. The admission tastes foreign on my tongue, but I can’t deny I’m relieved to have his vow.

That same night, a hush descends as we settle near the fire. Korrin takes the first watch, perched on a hunk of masonry, while I curl on my bedding. The collar digs into my neck if I turn the wrong way. My frustration flares, but fear weighs heavier, a reminder of how close the dark elves might be.

Hours pass in a strange half-sleep. When Korrin finally wakes me for my turn, I blink groggily at the embers. “My watch?” I ask.

He nods, exhaustion lining his features. “Just for a bit. I’ll sleep lightly.”

I stand up, ignoring the twinge in my ankle. The chain drags as I step away from the bedding. “Go on,” I mutter, waving him off. My tone is harsher than intended, but we’re both worn thin.

He lies down, wings folded around him like a leathery blanket, but I sense he’s still half-alert. I pace the ruin, scanning the shadows, every gust of wind making my heart lurch. The forest feels too quiet. My thoughts wander to the inevitability of fleeing, imagining the perilous journey beyond. Could I truly handle a trek through mountains with a gargoyle as my escort?

Then my mind drifts to that one night—how his touch chased away my terror for a few hours, replaced it with something more potent. A tremor laces my stomach. I shouldn’t crave that closeness again. But in my darker moments, I can’t help longing for that fleeting sense of safety in his arms. I curse myself for it. I curse him for

awakening desires that war with my pride.

The watch drags on until dawn's first pale light. Neither of us sees or hears any new sign of the dark elves. By the time the sun clears the horizon, my entire body is drained, my nerves raw. Korrin stirs, pushing off from his sleeping spot. We exchange wordless glances—exhaustion and wariness mirrored in each other's eyes.

Days slip by in this pattern: we stand guard by night, scavenge for supplies by day, always prepared to run at the first sign of real danger. My sense of impending threat never fades, but the dark elves don't return. Maybe they've moved on to a different territory. Or maybe they're gathering a larger force.

At midday on the fifth day since we first heard those voices in the mist, I gather a handful of wild mushrooms in a small clearing near the tower. Korrin stands on the edge, scanning the treetops. The hush is so profound my own breathing sounds thunderous.

Then I hear it: a distant roar of wings. My heart skitters. Gargoyles. I cast a panicked look at Korrin. He stiffens, eyes narrowing as he tilts his head to listen.

"It's far off," he murmurs after a moment. "But yes, my kind."

Fear clenches my gut. If they find us, if they see me—will Korrin truly stand against his own race?

We hurry back to the ruin. Neither of us voices the dread coiling in the silence. Gargoyle scouts or patrols could be even deadlier than dark elves. Their sense of smell, their ability to spot even the faintest clue, could unearth our hiding spot easily.

I hunch by the tower's battered wall, refusing to let my panic show. "Do you think they're searching for you?" I ask, voice barely above a whisper.

He nods, grim. “Possibly. My absence hasn’t gone unnoticed, I’m sure. Word might have reached the Alpha that I haven’t delivered any kills in weeks.”

My stomach churns. This is the reality: Korrin’s betrayal of the gargoyles is as dangerous as my escape from the elves. We’re fugitives on both sides.

“You said you’d protect me,” I remind him, hating how desperate I sound.

His face sets into firm lines. “I will. Even from my own kin.”

A surge of conflicting emotion washes over me—relief, but also guilt that he’s risking everything. “Why?” I rasp, not for the first time. “Why would you turn on your own kind for me?”

He hesitates, wings shifting. “Because... it’s wrong. We can’t just kill every human woman for a power they might never awaken.” His gaze flicks away, as if he can’t bear to meet my eyes. “Maybe a part of me remembers what it’s like to be powerless.”

My chest tightens. We rarely talk about his past or the stone sleep that imprisoned his race for a century. The conversation always tangles in unspoken regrets. I sense that same hush falling now, and I don’t push. Fear still roils in my stomach, but I place a trembling hand on his forearm, a silent show of appreciation. He flinches at the contact, then relaxes, exhaling slowly.

That evening, the tension in the ruin is almost unbearable. We sense threats from every direction—a tightening vise. The storm clouds overhead mirror the storm within me, swirling and restless. I pace near the hearth, arms wrapped around myself. The firelight casts my shadow across the broken stones, making it look like I have wings of my own.

Korrin stands by the archway, scanning the gathering dark. Finally, he turns, jaw set. “We can’t wait for them to find us,” he says. “Better we move before dawn tomorrow.”

My heart skips. “We’re leaving, then?”

He nods. “Yes. We’ll head north, try to reach the foothills. There are caves, hidden valleys. My pack never patrolled that region much. The dark elves seldom stray there either.”

A frisson of both dread and excitement runs through me. “So this is it. We run.”

He steps closer. “It’s the only choice. Unless you want to wait for them to corner us.”

I swallow. “No. I don’t.”

We fall silent, the finality of our decision pressing down on us. Tomorrow, we’ll venture into unknown territory, with no guarantee we won’t be discovered by gargoyle patrols or roving elf scouts along the way. But we have to try. The alternative—waiting for a siege or ambush—feels worse.

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Night descends, bringing with it the anxious hush of our last hours in this makeshift sanctuary. I gather my meager belongings—a satchel of dried food, a waterskin. Korrin readies his own gear, which is little more than a small bag containing flint, extra bandages, and a few stolen jars of herbs. He's as lightly burdened as I am. Survival out here demands minimalism.

By the time the moon rises, we're sitting across from each other at the dying fire, the collar chain coiled between us like a serpent. My entire body feels wound tight, as if anticipating a final confrontation. Or a final goodbye. But Korrin and I are set to travel together; we're not parting ways. The realization stirs a trembling feeling in my chest, part dread, part something else.

He breaks the silence first. "We leave at first light. We'll keep off the main paths. Follow the ravines north until the foothills. It'll be dangerous."

A shiver runs down my spine. "I'm ready."

His gaze flicks to the chain around my throat, then back to my eyes. An echo of that old guilt haunts his expression. "I can't remove it yet," he murmurs. "If we run into gargoyles, they'd know I freed you willingly."

I press my lips into a thin line. "I understand," I force out, though it hurts. "Just remember your promise."

He inclines his head. "I do."

Moments tick by, the fire crackling softly. The tension is thick as pitch. My heart

thuds at the memory of how we once sought solace in each other, if only for a night. The knowledge that we might not see tomorrow's sunset in one piece churns a reckless impulse inside me. Fear of the journey, fear of the dark elves, fear of Korrin's kin—some chaotic swirl of all that fear draws me toward him, the same way it did that first time.

I catch him staring at me, gold eyes gleaming. It's the same look he wore in that heated moment, the one that said I can't kill you, but I don't know what to do with you either. My pulse kicks.

"Korrin..." I whisper, uncertain what I'm about to say.

He shifts closer, wings rustling. "Yes?"

A hundred emotions tangle on my tongue—gratitude, longing, resentment, terror. I can't voice them. Instead, I slide my hand over the chain, grasping it like a lifeline. My gaze flicks to his face, seeking an unspoken answer. Should I push him away or draw him in?

He exhales shakily, as if reading my confusion. Then, moving with a predator's grace, he leans forward, bracing a clawed hand on the stone floor beside me. Our faces hover inches apart. My throat constricts. My mind screams that this is dangerous, that trusting him again might break me. But an even deeper hunger roars back, fueled by the knowledge that tomorrow we plunge into the unknown.

Without conscious thought, I close the distance, pressing my lips to his in a kiss both desperate and defiant. It crackles with the same tension that's been building all week—a friction that neither of us can resist. My collar chain clinks against his chest as I rise onto my knees, ignoring the twinge in my ankle. He groans softly, arms sliding around my waist to pull me closer. The heat of his body seeps through my clothes, and I shudder at the memory of how intimately we fit before.

We break apart briefly, breath mingling in ragged gasps. The look in his eyes is equal parts caution and need. “Elyria,” he murmurs, voice low, “you want to do this?”

I nod, though tears prick the corners of my vision. “Yes,” I whisper. “I’m tired of being afraid of everything. Just... let me feel alive tonight.”

A flicker of anguished longing crosses his features. Then he kisses me again—this time slower, as if he’s trying to taste every second. My heart pounds, fear and desire tangling. The world outside fades, overshadowed by the press of his mouth, the careful sweep of his claws up my arms. I recall the violence he’s capable of, but here, his touch is deliberate, coaxing. I arch into him, an electric current skating over my skin.

He lifts me gently, carrying me to the bedding we’ve shared only in uneasy distance. The chain drags across the stone, an unwelcome reminder that I’m still bound, but I cling to him anyway, swallowing my resentment in the face of raw longing. We settle among the blankets, my palm pressed to the hard plane of his chest, feeling the thunder of his heartbeat.

In the flickering firelight, I catch glimpses of his inhuman features—the horns curving along his brow, the ridges of his powerful shoulders. Once, these details would have chilled my blood. Now, they spark a deep, breathless fascination. Perhaps it’s madness, or survival, or some new bond forged by shared danger, but I can’t deny the pull.

We undress cautiously, hands tangling. My chain tangles too, but he shifts it aside, brushing apologies across my skin each time it catches. My breath turns ragged as I let myself be vulnerable, letting him see me fully. The hush of the ruin envelops us, brightened only by the guttering fire. Our bodies align, and I release a trembling sigh when he leans in, pressing a hot kiss to my throat where the collar rests.

A swirl of conflicting emotion hits me: I hate this metal ring, but for now, I can't escape it. I hate needing him, but right now, I crave the sense of security he offers, even if it's fleeting. My fingers knot in his hair as I draw him closer, surrendering to the flicker of heat that consumes us both.

We come together with a shiver of both fear and longing. It's different this time—less frantic, more laden with the knowledge of all that stands against us. My heart hammers as he rocks into me, his cock stretching me with a slow, deliberate pressure that borders on unbearable. I gasp, my nails biting into the scars along his back, my body arching to take him deeper. The fullness is overwhelming, a molten ache that blurs the line between pleasure and pain.

He stills for a breath, his forehead pressed to mine, his claws flexing against my hips. "Tell me," he rasps, voice rough with restraint. "Tell me if it's too much."

I can't answer, only drag him closer, my legs locking around his waist. The chain at my collar jingles as I shift, the sound a cruel counterpoint to the slick heat between us. He growls, low and approving, before rolling his hips in a long, torturous stroke. My pussy clenches around him instinctively, drawing a ragged groan from his throat.

"Korrin... fuck me," I urge him to move faster, wanting him deep inside me. I want him so bad, it's driving me to insanity.

Then he moves, and the world narrows to the friction of his cock inside me, the way my body yields and tightens with every thrust. He fucks me with a controlled hunger, each motion measured, as if he's memorizing the way I pulse around him. The drag is exquisite, a building fire that coils tighter with every snap of his hips. I'm panting, my fingers tangled in his hair, my cries muffled against his shoulder.

"Korrin!!!" I scream his name repeatedly, egging him on, and needing more.

“Elyria... you feel so good around me. I can’t stop...” he moans as he pulls out and slams into me. I feel the world narrow around me, keeping noise escaping my lips.

“Gods!” I gasp, my eyes rolling back as the sensations overload my brain.

The pleasure crests in waves, each one sharper than the last. His wings shudder behind him, half-spread in the firelight, casting jagged shadows across the ruins. I’ve never seen him like this—unraveled, his usually rigid control fraying at the edges. His claws prick at my thighs, not enough to break skin but enough to remind me of what he is: dangerous, other, mine in this fractured moment.

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“Don’t look away,” he demands, voice guttural.

I force my eyes open, meeting his burning gaze. His pupils are blown wide, his fangs bared in a snarl of pleasure. The sight sends a fresh bolt of heat through me. He shifts his angle slightly, and suddenly the head of his cock grinds against a spot inside me that makes my vision whiten. I cry out, my back bowing off the bedding, but he pins me down with a forearm braced beside my head.

“That’s it,” he murmurs, his breath hot against my lips. “Come, splinter for me. Let it go.”

“I’m coming!” I scream.

I’m helpless to resist. The tension snaps, my orgasm tearing through me with a violence that borders on pain. My pussy flutters around him, milking his cock as I sob into his chest and my pussy gushes out liquid as if it’s a waterfall. I squirt on his chest, making me slightly embarrassed but very satisfied.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he groans as he follows me over the edge with a roar, his hips stuttering as he spills deep inside me, his wings flaring wide before collapsing around us like a shield.

For a long moment, there’s only the sound of our ragged breathing and the distant roll of thunder. He stays buried in me, his forehead pressed to my collarbone, his body trembling with the aftershocks. I trace the ridges along his spine, my fingertips skirting the base of his wings, and he shivers.

When he finally lifts his head, his expression is raw, unguarded. His thumb brushes my lower lip, smearing the bite marks I left there. “You’re shaking,” he says hoarsely.

I am. My whole body feels wrung out, oversensitive, alive. The chain at my throat is cold against my flushed skin, a stark reminder of reality waiting beyond this ruin. But for now, I let him gather me against his chest, his heartbeat a steady drum beneath my ear. The firelight flickers, gilding the sweat-slick planes of his body, and I close my eyes, memorizing the weight of him, the scent of us tangled together.

Neither of us speaks. There’s nothing to say—only this fragile truce, this temporary shelter from the storm.

When it subsides, we lie entangled, foreheads touching. My chest heaves, tears slipping unheeded down my cheeks. He cups my face, concern etching his features. “Did I hurt you?” he asks, voice husky.

I shake my head, swallowing. “No,” I manage, barely above a whisper. “I’m just... everything feels so uncertain.”

His gaze flickers with regret. “I know.”

We remain pressed together, letting the aftershocks of closeness settle. The chain rests between us, a cold, unyielding barrier that contrasts sharply with the heat of our bodies. My emotions swirl, too tangled to name. This union is as much a desperate refuge from fear as it is physical desire. I cling to him, and for a fleeting moment, the world doesn’t seem quite so bleak.

Finally, we separate, rolling onto our backs. He shifts to drape a corner of the threadbare blanket over my shoulders, mindful of the chain. Our breaths mingle in the hush. The fire has burned low, embers glowing faintly. Outside, the wind stirs, a

harbinger of uncertain journeys to come.

We say nothing for a while. My body aches, both from desire spent and from the tension of our predicament. But I feel calmer, anchored by the steady rise and fall of his chest beneath my palm. My eyes drift closed, lulled by the rhythmic beat of his heart.

I wake at the first gray light of dawn, stiff and disoriented. Korrin sits near the embers, fully dressed, wings half-furled as he sharpens a blade. Our decision to flee leaps to the forefront of my mind. My pulse quickens. Today we leave the ruin. Today we risk everything.

He senses my movement, glancing over. Our gazes hold, a silent exchange of lingering intimacy. My cheeks warm as I recall the night's closeness. Then reality snaps back: We're still in danger. My collar remains locked around my throat. My future is tied to him, for better or worse.

I rise, gathering my clothes and the minimal gear I set aside. He watches, tension in his posture, but doesn't speak. We both know conversation is unnecessary—our path is set. Within minutes, we've quenched the last coals of our fire, secured our meager belongings, and prepared to leave the only refuge we've known these past weeks.

As we step out from the tower archway, I turn back for a final look at the broken walls, the collapsed stairs, the battered stone that once sheltered us. I can't decide if I'll miss it or be glad to see it behind me. Either way, time moves forward.

Korrin stands at my side, scanning the forest. His tail flicks once, betraying a flicker of nerves. I grip the chain at my collar, forcing my feet to move. The morning air is crisp, the sky streaked with gold. A new day. Perhaps a chance at something beyond this half-life of hiding.

I glance at him, eyes lingering on the brand marking him as an executioner. The man who should have killed me is now my only companion in a world that hunts us both. The chain rattles as I take the first step away from the ruins, away from the fragile security we built. I don't trust him fully. I don't trust myself fully. But I must try.

His hand finds the small of my back, guiding me forward. "Together," he murmurs, a promise wrapped in that single word.

I nod, clearing my throat. "Together."

And so we leave the place where our forced alliance became something more, stepping into a wilderness that might devour us. Yet despite the fear prickling under my skin, a spark of cautious hope flickers. Outside threats loom, dark elves and gargoyles alike, but Korrin and I face them side by side—bound by necessity, scarred by the past, and unwilling to relinquish this tenuous bond we've forged.

8

KORRIN

If someone had told me, just a season ago, that I'd be trudging through rugged forest terrain with a human woman at my side, I would've considered it a twisted joke. But here I am, following a faint deer path through mossy undergrowth, scanning every shifting shadow in case gargoyle scouts or dark elf patrols lurk nearby. I move on high alert, my senses attuned to threats in all directions. Elyria keeps pace behind me, quieter than she once was, yet I still hear the soft clink of her cursed collar whenever she steps wrong.

We left the ruin at dawn, just as we planned. The forest is thick, tree trunks knotted with vines, boulders slick with morning dew. Each footstep is a gamble—one misstep and we could be heard by predators or discovered by enemies. We've chosen to travel

mostly in the valleys, letting the slopes and dense foliage shield us from prying eyes above. It slows our progress, but it's safer than skirting open ridges.

I glance back at Elyria. She clutches the loop of chain near her neck to keep it from rattling. Her hair, with that defiant silver streak, is braided to prevent it from snagging on branches. I can't deny it feels wrong to see her still collared, but the risk of removing it is too great. If we meet any gargoyles, they must not suspect I've freed her willingly. That might buy us a few moments' reprieve—enough time for me to act. To kill them, my old instincts whisper. But my life is woven around her survival now, and I can't unravel that bond.

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She meets my gaze, a question in her eyes: Are we safe? I can only offer a curt nod. Safe is a relative term out here.

We continue forward, pushing through a tangle of brambles. A faint midday sun filters through the canopy, lighting swirling dust motes. Somewhere ahead, water murmurs—a stream or waterfall. Elyria's breathing is steady, though she's clearly uneasy. I share her apprehension. My wings twitch under the harness of my makeshift pack, itching for flight, but I don't dare risk exposing us from above.

Hours pass in near-silence. We pause to sip from the stream, fill waterskins, and nibble on dried venison. The forest hushes whenever we move, as if it senses the tension coiled between us. Despite the closeness we shared last night, there's a wary distance in Elyria's eyes. She still doesn't trust me completely, and I can't blame her.

Eventually, we find a sheltered hollow beneath a jutting cliff. Ivy drapes over the stone, forming a natural curtain. Elyria and I exchange a look. It's not a perfect hiding place, but it'll do for a brief rest. I slip behind the ivy first, scanning the hollow for threats—only damp leaves and old pine needles. I motion her inside.

She lowers herself onto a rock, letting out a controlled exhale. "We'll need to keep moving," she says, her voice hushed. "We can't stay in one place too long."

I nod, stepping forward. "Agreed." My gaze moves to the sky beyond the ivy. Storm clouds gather at the horizon, threatening an evening deluge. Another night forced to find shelter. Another night with no guarantee of peace.

For a moment, we just stand there, breathing in sync. The memory of last night's

closeness hums beneath my skin, but the present danger clamps down on any warmth that might surface between us. Survive first, keep the rest for later.

We press on for another hour, pushing north toward the foot of a mountain range that looms in the distance. The day's light starts to wane, painting the forest in dusky gold. That's when we stumble upon an ancient structure rising from the undergrowth: a weathered building of stone pillars and carved reliefs, half-buried by creeping vines.

Curiosity flares. Elyria halts beside me, eyes wide. "What is this place?" she whispers.

I scan the architecture. It's not gargoyle craft—our style is more jagged, more imposing. Nor does it bear the signature of dark elf spires. The columns are carved with swirling patterns, reminiscent of something older, more earthly. A rotting wooden door, partially ajar, creaks in the wind.

"We should check it," I say. "Could be a monastery. Humans or older tribes might have built it. Maybe it'll provide better shelter than sleeping under a tree."

Elyria tenses. "What if something else lives here? An orc band, or a... ghost?"

I almost smile at the fear in her voice, though I share her wariness. "We'll find out. Stay close."

Her chain rattles softly as we approach the entrance. My claws graze the worn threshold, brushing aside a clump of ferns. Inside, the space is dim and musty. Shafts of dust-laced light pierce through cracks in the walls. The ceiling is supported by tall columns etched with faded glyphs. An eerie hush blankets the room, broken only by the drip of water somewhere deeper within.

I move carefully, wings folded tight to avoid scraping the low beams. Elyria trails

behind, eyes roving across the walls. The place feels ancient, older than the fortress that once trapped her, older than my memory of gargoyle strongholds. I sense no immediate presence—no fresh footprints, no lingering smell of orcs or elves.

She gently touches one of the carved glyphs. “These symbols... I’ve never seen them. They look... arcane.”

I step closer, scanning the pattern. They do appear magical. The lines swirl like vines, circling a stylized crescent moon. “Maybe it was some old druidic shrine or purna temple,” I muse aloud, recalling half-forgotten stories about human witches who venerated the moon’s cycles.

Elyria stiffens at the word purna, but remains silent. The moment sours with tension—my kind hunts purna out of fear, after all. I sense her unease, but we keep exploring.

We find a main hall, strewn with rubble. A collapsed statue of a robed figure lies near the center, its face eroded. I test the floor, discovering a mosaic design under the dirt—more swirling patterns and a large moon emblem. Something about this place sets my body on edge, yet it feels oddly serene, as if the centuries have muffled whatever power once thrived here.

“There’s a side corridor,” Elyria says softly, pointing to a darkened archway. “We should see if it leads anywhere safer to sleep.”

My instincts bristle at the idea of diving deeper into unknown territory, but a glance outside shows the sky growing dark. A storm roars in the distance. This might be our best option for the night. Gritting my teeth, I gesture for her to stay behind me. “All right. Let’s go.”

The corridor is narrow and damp, the walls slick with moss. We edge along, footsteps

echoing. After a short turn, the passage opens into a smaller chamber. Shelves carved into the walls sag under rotted scrolls and tattered books. The musty stench of old parchment and mildew hits me. Elyria's eyes widen.

"This is... an archive?" she murmurs, brushing her fingers lightly over a bundle of parchment crumbling to dust.

My heart pulses with a flicker of awe. It's rare to find intact writings outside major strongholds or libraries. "Careful," I warn. "They could be fragile."

She nods, plucking a scroll that seems less deteriorated than the others. Carefully, she unravels it on a nearby slab. I stand guard, scanning the corners for any sign of lurking creatures. The chain at her throat clinks quietly as she bends over the text, frowning in concentration.

"These symbols..." She squints at them. "Similar to what we saw on the walls. Some... moon phases... references to purna?" She looks up at me, throat bobbing. "I think it's about purna lineages."

A knot forms in my chest. Purna lineages. My people's greatest fear. The reason I was once commanded to cull human women on sight. "Let me see."

I approach, leaning over her shoulder. The scroll is indeed inscribed with looping glyphs, interspersed with sketches of moon cycles. Snippets of text in archaic script mention 'bloodlines of the High Moonsong' and 'silver-streaked hair, marked by starlight.' My gaze snags on a small illustration: a stylized woman's face, framed by hair streaked with pale silver, a faint crescent birthmark behind her ear.

My stomach clenches. Silver-streaked hair. My eyes dart to Elyria's dark locks—highlighted by that single silver streak. "This... might be describing you," I say hoarsely.

She pales, fingers trembling on the parchment. “It’s just a coincidence, right?”

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I swallow, scanning more text. My old lessons about purna come flooding back. I recall how my gargoyle elders taught me to spot the signs of a High Purna: unique markings, dormant powers that could devastate armies if awakened. And here we see mention of ‘the last scion shall bear the mark of stolen magic, cursed to undo the old wars.’ The pit of my stomach grows cold.

“No,” I whisper. “This is describing your lineage. The High Purna.”

She staggers back, nearly dropping the scroll. “That’s impossible. I’m not even sure I have any magic, let alone being some... legendary bloodline.”

I close my eyes, grappling with swirling memories of gargoyle lore: the High Purna were the ones who nearly obliterated my race centuries ago, wielding catastrophic spells. The entire reason the Alpha decreed we cull potential purna. And I’m harboring the last of them. My breath quickens.

Elyria’s chain clinks as she paces, panic flashing in her eyes. “I was just a slave. The dark elves suspected I might be purna, but they never confirmed anything. I never showed any real power.”

My mind races. The fortress kept her alive, probably wanting to harness her potential. Now she’s free... with me. If the Alpha learns she’s the final scion of a High Purna line, the entire gargoyle host will descend on her. Letting her live is an act of open rebellion. “This is bigger than we knew,” I mutter.

Her gaze darts to me, fear and defiance swirling in equal measure. “So what? Are you going to—” She cuts off, tears threatening. “You said you wouldn’t kill me.”

The question stabs me like a blade. My duty as an executioner was absolute. Kill any purna. And she's not just a purna; she's from the most feared line in living memory. My entire body tenses. "Elyria, I..." My voice shakes. "I can't—I won't kill you."

She exhales in shaky relief, though tears brim in her eyes. "Then what do we do? The dark elves... if they find out. Yourkin... if they learn I'm this... High Purna." Her voice breaks. "We're doomed."

I gather her shoulders, drawing her close so she won't collapse under the weight of this revelation. The old me might have delivered a merciful strike, ended her life swiftly to spare my race potential destruction. But the new me, the me forged in the ruin, bound by an indescribable connection to her, can't even contemplate that. "We keep going," I say, forcing conviction into my voice. "We go deeper into the mountains, far from all who might harm you."

She trembles, tears slipping free. "But you're risking everything. This is..." She gulps, voice quiet. "This is treason, right?"

I swallow hard. High treason. The Alpha's edict is crystal clear: any gargoyle who defies the kill order is a traitor. "Yes," I murmur. "But I made my choice when I first spared you."

We stand in silence, our breath mingling in the dusty air. The scroll on the slab is a testament to the forces that shaped our world: purna magic that once nearly destroyed gargoyles, leaving a scar still raw after centuries. And now, that magic rests in her blood, dormant but lethal if awakened.

Elyria pulls away, wiping her cheeks. Her face is resolute. "We should get rid of this place. Or at least hide these scrolls. If the dark elves or gargoyles find them, it'll confirm who I am."

I nod, forcing my mind into action. “Agreed.”

We gather the more intact scrolls referencing the High Purna lineage. My heart hammers with each mention of a cataclysmic prophecy, each reference to a last scion. It feels like a noose tightening around our necks. In the end, we set them in a corner and pile rubble over them. A crude job, but it'll obscure them from a casual search.

Then we slip out of the archive chamber, returning to the main hall. The mosaic stares up at us with silent judgment. Moon phases, swirling vines, and at the center, that symbolic female figure. I almost feel it watching Elyria. She averts her gaze, hugging herself.

By the time we exit into the outside air, the storm has broken. Rain slashes through the trees, thunder rolling overhead. We find shelter in a small alcove near the monastery's entrance, at least enough to keep us from getting drenched. Water drips off the stone pillars, and lightning flashes beyond the forest canopy.

Elyria collapses onto a broad step, burying her face in her hands. I hover nearby, wings shifting in agitation. The chain rattles as she rocks slightly, struggling to process. My own thoughts reel, a storm within a storm. She's the last of a High Purna bloodline. If I were the gargoyle I was raised to be, I'd end her life right now. The idea makes me nauseated.

I sink down beside her, careful not to crowd her. Rain mists the air around us, turning the monastery courtyard into a hazy dreamscape. My heart thuds with a mixture of dread and fierce protectiveness.

Elyria lifts her head, eyes red. “So... all these nightmares about me having a dangerous lineage—they were all real,” she whispers. “I spent my life denying it, thinking I was just a worthless slave with no power.”

I swallow. “You still might not awaken anything. Some purna never do. And... even if you did, it’s not fated to destroy everything. You have control.” My voice trembles on the last word. I want to believe it, but I recall the stories of High Purna unstoppable storms of magic. Fear gnaws at me.

She lets out a bitter laugh. “Control? I can’t even keep my own freedom without being chained.” She tugs at the metal around her neck, a furious gesture. Then she sighs, deflated. “I’m sorry. I know you’re trying.”

Guilt courses through me. “I wish I could remove it now. But if we cross paths with gargoyles, they’ll suspect everything.” My eyes drift to the swirling rain. “They might suspect anyway. I’m gone too long from the stronghold.”

She wraps her arms around herself, shivering from cold or emotion. “You’re risking your life for me, Korrin. I’m... grateful, even if I don’t always show it.” Her voice softens, sending an ache through my chest.

I shift closer, the chain lying between us like a serpent. “I’m risking more than my life,” I admit, voice low. “I’m defying the Alpha, betraying the executioner’s oath. If the clan finds me, they won’t just kill me. They’ll make an example out of me.”

She flinches. “I never wanted that for you.”

A wry smile tugs at my lips. “I never wanted it for myself, either.” Then my gaze drops to her hands, clenched in her lap. I hesitate before covering them with my larger palm. Her fingers spasm beneath my touch, but she doesn’t pull away. “But I can’t be what I was anymore,” I say, voice raspy with emotion. “Not after everything.”

She nods, tears gleaming. Then, almost impulsively, she leans into my side, resting her head against my shoulder. The chain clinks. I freeze, wings tensing, but an

overwhelming tenderness surges beneath my fear. I lift an arm, curling it around her protectively. She exhales shakily, letting me hold her in the rain-drenched gloom.

We sit like that for a time, two fugitives from a war that might reignite the moment her magic stirs. The thunder overhead resonates with the conflict in my own heart. I recall the old, prideful lesson that gargoyles are unstoppable apex predators. We're unstoppable, except by purna magic, I realize grimly. That's the impetus for centuries of hatred. And ironically, I've bound my fate to the most feared purna line of all.

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When the storm lessens, we start making preparations. We'll use the partial shelter of the monastery for the night, then move on at first light. While Elyria checks for a dry corner to sleep in, I stand by a broken window, letting the dripping vines brush my arms. Dusk is settling fast. Another night in unknown territory. I try to keep watch, scanning the tree line for any sign of movement.

My mind churns with images of the scroll. The last scion. If that rumor spreads... No, I decide. I won't let it. I clench my fists, recalling how easily I can dispatch enemies with claws and winged strength. I'll kill any gargoyle or dark elf that threatens her. But what if dozens come? Hundreds?

Elyria returns, cheeks flushed from rummaging around. "There's a half-dry room near the library. The roof didn't collapse there." She hesitates, glancing at me. "It might be safer than the courtyard."

I nod curtly. "Lead the way."

She does, and soon we settle into a small nook lined by crumbled shelves. Water drips through cracks, forming shallow puddles on the flagstones. We gather old planks to lay on the ground, draping them with our traveling cloak for insulation. There's no place to safely build a fire, so we'll have to endure the damp chill. My gargoyle blood shrugs off most cold, but Elyria is only human. I'll keep her warm if she lets me, I tell myself.

Night descends fully. My instincts scream to remain awake, but exhaustion weighs heavy after the day's turmoil. Elyria curls against the corner, hugging her knees. Her chain clinks whenever she shifts. My heart aches at the audible symbol of her

captivity. I vow to free her once it's safe. The vow resonates in me like a stubborn lifeline.

Tentative, I move to sit beside her. She glances up. Worry lines her face. "I should keep watch," she offers, but her eyes droop with fatigue.

"You're exhausted," I say. "Rest for a bit. I won't sleep deeply anyway."

She hesitates, then nods. I drape a corner of my worn cloak around her. She stiffens briefly at my touch, but then exhales, leaning into the warmth. Our shoulders press together, a small sign of fragile trust. Despite the swirling threat of discovery, the moment feels strangely peaceful—a lull in the storm of our reality.

Time drifts. We speak little. My thoughts circle back to the revelation in the archive. I watch her doze off, the tension in her features easing. I wonder what will become of us if we truly find the hidden valleys in the mountains. Is a peaceful life even possible? My soul churns with doubt.

At some point, I slip into a half-doze, waking with a start when my wing twitches. Elyria stirs beside me, blinking in confusion. My chest tightens with guilt. I should be fully on guard. But no threat has shown itself.

She rubs her eyes. "Anything out there?"

I shake my head. "No. Quiet."

She exhales in relief, and presses her hand to her chest. Her collar catches the dim light, reflecting back at me like an accusation. If they only knew you're a High Purna, I muse, they'd try to kill you... or worship you... or harness you. A swirl of protective anger roils in my gut.

Elyria clears her throat, noticing my stare. “What is it?”

I consider lying, brushing off her concern. But I’m too wound up. “I just... can’t shake the thought that once the clan learns I’ve spared you, especially after learning who you really are...” I trail off, uncertain how to phrase the next part without scaring her.

She understands anyway. Her shoulders slump. “It’d be a bloodbath, wouldn’t it? The Alpha and the others would hunt us down.”

My voice comes out rough. “Yes. They’ll see it as the gravest treason.”

A silence thickens, heavy with unspoken dread. Then she reaches out, fingers brushing my forearm. The chain rattles. I still, heart throbbing. She locks eyes with me, fear and gratitude warring in her gaze. “Thank you for not following that order,” she murmurs.

My throat constricts. “I—” The words catch. I want to say I’d do it again, no matter the cost, but that implies a finality I haven’t fully grappled with. “I can’t kill you, Elyria,” I manage, voice low. “I won’t. I’m not that creature anymore.”

She nods slowly, tears threatening to pool in her eyes. The vulnerability in her expression sears me. I lift a trembling hand, wanting to comfort her, but uncertain if it’s welcome. After a beat, I settle it lightly on her shoulder. She doesn’t recoil. Instead, she leans in, pressing her forehead to my neck. The contact jolts through me, a blend of solace and heartbreak.

We remain like that for a moment, two refugees from a war that might reignite at any second. My mind drifts to the vow I made: I’ll see her free, collar removed, far from the reach of gargoyle or dark elf. I can only hope we have the strength to survive until then.

Dawn breaks eventually, gilding the ruined monastery with pale light. Rain still drips from the rafters, echoing through the corridor. Elyria and I pack up quietly, neither of us speaking of the revelations that now shape our course. But the unspoken tension looms larger than ever.

When we emerge into the soggy courtyard, I notice a faint breeze carrying the scent of pine and damp earth from the north. The mountains beckon in the distance, their peaks lost in cloud. Danger and sanctuary, all at once.

Elyria stands beside me, arms wrapped around herself. Her eyes trace the horizon, as if seeking a path. The chain at her collar glints in the early sun, and a surge of protective urgency courses through my veins. We must keep moving. The HighPurna knowledge rests in my mind like a brand, fueling my determination.

She sighs, turning to me. “Ready?”

I adjust my pack, nodding. “Yes. Let’s go.”

We share one last glance at the ancient shrine behind us. In another time, we might have lingered to uncover its secrets, but we can’t afford that luxury now. Danger stalks us from all sides—my own gargoyle kin, the dark elves who suspect her existence, even the wild beasts that roam these lands.

Elyria sets off, chain in hand to keep it from rattling. I fall in step, scanning the trees, wings tense. Overhead, gulls or hawks circle in wide arcs, free to soar where they will. I can’t risk flight unless absolutely necessary, I remind myself. Keeping to the ground is safer for hiding tracks.

As we head deeper into the forest, the hush between us vibrates with new understanding. She is the last scion of a lineage that might rival the gods in raw power—if awakened. I’m the gargoyle sworn to exterminate such threats. Yet here

we are, bound by necessity and something more tender that neither of us can name.

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Each step northward feels like walking a knife's edge, but we press on. My heart beats with fierce resolve, ignoring the shadow of treason that hangs over me. Sparing her was my first true act of freedom, and I refuse to abandon that choice now.

And so we continue, two outcasts forging a path through uncertain wilderness—haunted by revelations that threaten everything we once believed, yet clinging to each other as we navigate a world that hunts us both.

9

ELYRIA

I feel the terrain shifting beneath my feet before I see any real change in the landscape. The air grows thinner, carrying a crisp bite that hints we're leaving the lower forests behind. Here in the foothills, the pines stand taller, their silhouettes sharp against an early dusk sky. My lungs tighten with each breath, not from the altitude—though that plays a part—but from the constant knot of worry that's been lodged inside me since we discovered my High Purna lineage.

Korrin walks ahead, tense and watchful. His broad back is rigid, the harness securing his pack snug around his powerful shoulders. He used to move with predatory grace, wings half-furled as if expecting a fight at any moment. Now, I notice another dimension to his posture—he's burdened, troubled. His wings drag a little, the edges sometimes skimming the forest floor when he thinks I'm not watching. Anxiety radiates off him in subtle ways.

We've been traveling for almost a week. Each morning, we press deeper into these

rugged slopes, seeking safe passage away from gargoyle and dark elf territory. Each night, we huddle around a small fire—if we dare risk the light—or burrow under rock ledges in cramped silence. It's a tenuous existence, haunted by the knowledge of who I might be and who he was trained to be.

I keep catching these moments, glimpses of Korrin's expression, unguarded in the flicker of moonlight or the dim glow of embers. I see guilt etched there, worry that twists his features as if he's at war with himself. I know part of his conflict revolves around the Thirteen and their edicts, around his betrayal of the Alpha, around me. But I suspect more lies beneath that stony facade, things he won't talk about. Secrets, perhaps too raw or painful for him to name.

I want to demand answers. Another part is afraid of what I'll hear. We share fleeting touches and guarded conversations, but the tension between us grows thicker day by day. It feels like a gulf I can't cross, as if we're perched on opposite ledges, each waiting for the other to reveal too much or step too far.

And then there's the chain on my throat, a constant reminder that my freedom is still conditional. He keeps insisting it's for my safety—if any gargoyle sees me unbound, it'd confirm his treason—but it's a bitter pill. Sometimes I ache to tear it off, even if that invites danger. But so far, I've yielded, trusting his judgment more than I ever thought I could. Am I a fool? Or am I simply following a path none of us can escape?

By midday, clouds gather overhead, promising an afternoon shower. We push ourselves hard, climbing a narrow ravine lined with slick stones. Korrin goes first, testing each foothold before signaling it's safe for me. My ankle, mostly healed, still twinges when I strain it. The chain occasionally snags on rough edges, forcing me to pause and free it with muttered curses.

Near the top, we reach a rocky outcrop that juts over the valley we left behind. The view opens up: rolling hills, dark forests, and distant peaks capped with patches of

lingering snow. It's majestic yet eerily silent. I can't help scanning the skies for winged shapes—other gargoyles who might see us from afar. But the horizon is empty.

Korrin halts, breathing heavily, a sheen of perspiration on his gray skin. He braces one hand on a boulder, wings quivering from the climb. For a moment, I see raw exhaustion in his eyes. He's been driving himself past normal limits, barely sleeping, always alert. Something in my chest tightens—a mix of concern and resentment. He's so damn stubborn.

As I step beside him, he straightens, forcing that unreadable mask onto his face. "We should keep going," he says, voice tight with strain. "Rain's coming soon. We need to find a dry alcove."

I want to argue that we should rest, but I bite my tongue. Instead, I nod, swallowing my frustration. The chain rattles quietly as I adjust my pack. "All right."

We press on, cutting through a narrow pass. The wind picks up, bringing the smell of ozone. Gray clouds churn above. The path eventually widens, revealing a cluster of jagged rocks forming a natural shelter. Korrin motions me there, and we slip inside just as the first drops of rain begin to patter against stone.

The alcove we find is shallow but high enough for Korrin to stand upright without folding his wings too tightly. The floor is uneven, scattered with loose gravel and dead leaves. Rain intensifies, creating a steady drumming on the rocky ledge outside. A wave of relief washes over me—at least for one more night, we can keep the storm at bay.

I drop my pack with a sigh, rolling my shoulders. Korrin scans the alcove's corners, checking for animals or hidden threats. It's empty. Satisfied, he tosses his pack down and stretches his wings carefully. I observe him, noticing how his tail flicks with

nerves—he hates enclosed spaces, I recall, a remnant of the stone sleep that once confined him.

I kneel by the entrance, sliding a few stones together to form a makeshift ring for a small fire. He joins me, gathering damp sticks from the edges of the alcove. Neither of us speaks. Thunder rumbles outside, echoing in my chest. My heartbeat thrums with tension that has nothing to do with the weather.

Once we manage to coax a weak flame from soggy tinder, Korrin and I settle on opposite sides of the tiny blaze, letting its feeble warmth chase off the chill. Water drips from my hair. I rub my arms, shivering a bit. He notices, rummaging through his pack to hand me a spare scrap of cloth. It's not much, but I appreciate the gesture.

After a pause, I press my lips together. Enough. I can't live in this half-light of secrets any longer. The day's weariness, combined with the relentless worry about who's hunting us, pushes me over the edge.

"Korrin," I say, voice cutting the silence.

He glances up, molten gold eyes flickering with the fire's reflection. "Yes?"

I inhale, steeling myself. "I need to know what's going on inside your head. You've been... distant." My fingers curl around the metal links near my throat, that hated chain. "Ever since we learned about my lineage, you've shut me out."

His jaw tightens. "I'm... trying to protect you. All that matters is getting you to safety."

"That's not an answer," I snap, frustration spiking. "What about you? You carry so much guilt— about defying your Alpha, about your past as an executioner. I can see it eating at you, and it's creating this wall between us. I'm sick of pretending

everything's fine when we're both barely holding ourselves together."

He looks away, eyes narrowed at the flames. "It's not that simple."

"It never is," I retort, voice trembling with emotion I'm struggling to contain. "But I deserve to know, especially if we're in this together. I can't keep accepting your decisions blindly while you lock your pain behind a fortress."

A muscle in his cheek twitches. He might lash out or stalk away. Instead, he exhales a harsh breath, wings dropping in a defeated slump. "Elyria... I carry more secrets than you realize."

A spark of anger flares. "Then share them. Or else how can I trust—" I choke on the words. Trust you? I've trusted you with my life already. The chain rattles as I shift, pressing closer to the fire's warmth. "Tell me," I whisper.

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He winces, as if my plea strikes a nerve. Silence stretches for an agonizing beat. Rain hammers outside, and the wind keens. Then he speaks, voice raw and low.

“I was... created,” he begins, each syllable forced. “Not born the way normal gargoyles are. My clan used dark magic to craft a line of specialized executioners—beings made to obey unconditionally, to kill on command without hesitation. They carved out our instincts, honed them to a single purpose. That’s why it was so easy for me to slaughter. I never questioned it, not until I saw you.”

My breath catches. I recall how merciless he seemed at first, a blade honed to perfection. The thought that he was made that way, stripped of choice, churns my stomach. “So you had no say?”

He shakes his head, bitterness etched in his face. “We believed it was our highest calling— that the Thirteen anointed us to keep the gargoyle race pure from threats like the purna. But deep down, I always felt... empty. As if something was missing. And when the Alpha commanded I kill you, something in me fractured. I couldn’t do it.”

I stare at him, heart pounding. “That’s when you kidnapped me instead,” I say softly. “You’d never disobeyed before.”

He nods, throat working. “It was the first time I acted on my own will. And now I’m branded a traitor, an abomination among my kin. But I can’t regret it. Even if it dooms me.”

Emotion swells in my chest. I set aside the chain, leaning forward. “You carry that

alone?” My voice quivers with sympathy and lingering anger. “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“Because...” His gaze flickers with shame. “I was afraid you’d see me as a monster—another puppet of the Alpha. Or worse, that you’d pity me.”

A trembling laugh escapes my lips, half bitter, half relieved. “I already saw you as a monster. Then you saved me, more than once. As for pity... I know what it means to be robbed of choice. At least now I understand more about you.”

He exhales, wings drooping further. “I’m sorry I kept it from you.”

I study his face, the tightness around his eyes. Beneath the brutality and lethal grace, I see a man warring with old programming, with guilt so heavy it weighs every step he takes. “You’re not the only one with burdens,” I say gently. “I’m terrified of my own bloodline, of what I might become if that magic awakens. But pushing me away only makes it worse.”

He nods slowly, tension easing from his posture. “You’re right. I—I don’t know how to be anything but an executioner. Every day, I expect I’ll fail you, that I’ll slip back into that mindless killer.”

A pang of sorrow hits me. I reach out, curling my hand over his stone-like fingers. “You won’t,” I murmur. “You’ve come too far. And... I can’t do this alone, either. We face the same threat, from different angles.”

The confession settles between us, raw and honest. His large hand closes around mine, claws retracted. For once, the chain doesn’t feel like a barrier but a quiet testament to how far we’ve come. We’ve both been molded by forces we never chose—his gargoyle creation, my purna heritage. Perhaps that understanding binds us together more than any collar or oath.

We sit in reflective silence for a time, the fire crackling softly in the confines of the alcove. Rain intensifies, drumming a steady rhythm on the rocky overhang. My heart still flutters with leftover anger, but it mingles with compassion and relief that he's finally opened up. I sense a fragile bridge forming between us, the first real chance at understanding.

Korrin stirs, sliding closer to the fire. His gaze dips to our joined hands. I see emotion churning in those golden eyes—fear, longing, a flicker of hope. My own chest feels too tight, heavy with all the unspoken feelings between us.

“Elyria,” he murmurs. My name in his deep voice sends a ripple through my core. “Thank you for... for pushing me to speak. If we're to survive, I can't keep hiding from you.”

I swallow. “I want that—no more secrets.” My voice comes out husky. “And if we can help each other bear our... curses, maybe we'll both find a way through this.”

His lips press into a thin line, as though holding back a flood of words. Instead of talking, he shifts to face me fully, wings partially unfurled for balance. The air between us crackles with tension, different from the fights or the silent resentments. Something deeper. My pulse quickens as I recall our last encounter.

“Korrin...” I begin, not entirely sure what I'm asking for, but wanting more than just reassurance.

He tilts his head, a question in his eyes. Then, almost tentative, he lifts his free hand to graze my jawline. His claws remain curled inward, gentle. My breath stutters at the contact, at the tenderness in his gaze. I see anguish there, yes, but also a fierce devotion that makes me tremble.

I lean in on instinct, letting my cheek press against his palm. The warmth of his skin

steadies me. My eyes flutter shut. In the hush of rain, I can hear his breath catch, feel the subtle hitch in his chest. When he shifts closer, I part my lips in a silent invitation, heart pounding.

A moment later, our mouths brush in a tentative kiss. It's softer than before, laced with the swirling emotions we've kept locked away—an apology, a confession, a promise. I exhale shakily, sliding my hand up his arm to his shoulder. The collar chain clinks, reminding me of all that still binds us, but for once, I can bear it.

His lips linger on mine, moving slowly, as if savoring each second. I taste the salt of rain on his skin, smell the faint scent of smoke and damp stone. A quiver of longing pulses through me. He groans softly, pressing closer, and my body warms despite the chill. We pull apart briefly for air, our gazes colliding. His eyes burn with hunger and tenderness.

“You should go to sleep soon, rest. We still have a long way to go. I'm sure you're tired,” he says, gazing into my eyes and making my heart race. There's so much tenderness in them that it makes me want to cry. I turn away, composing my emotions.

“Yes, I think I'll go to sleep now,” I reply softly, and prepare my makeshift bed. I close my eyes, trying to sleep but I can't forget the kiss. Its sweetness lingers in my mind until sleep overtakes me. I just hope tomorrow is a better day.

I wake to a softer drizzle at the entrance of our refuge, the sky tinged a somber gray. My body aches in pleasant ways, though my ankle complains about the day's travel. Korrin still sleeps, wings tucked around me possessively, as if shielding me even in slumber. My cheeks warm at the memory of the night's intimacy, how it felt to finally share a piece of our burdens.

Careful not to disturb him too much, I shift, pressing a light kiss to his temple. He

stirs with a low rumble, eyes fluttering open. For a heartbeat, his expression is unguarded—soft, almost content. Then I see the flicker of reality returning, tensionedging back into his gaze. But there's also gratitude, perhaps even a gentle acceptance, for what we have.

He sits up, rolling his shoulders. "Morning," he murmurs.

"Morning," I answer, tugging the blanket around me to shield from the damp chill. Our eyes meet in a silent exchange, recalling the closeness we shared hours ago. The chain weighs at my collar, but the memory of his fingers trailing along the scarred metal is fresh enough that it doesn't sting as harshly.

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We gather our belongings in quiet coordination, a newfound softness in our movements around each other. He helps me stand, offering his arm for balance when my ankle twinges. I offer him a small, tired smile in return, my chest tight with a mixture of hope and looming dread for the future.

Outside, the rain lingers in a steady patter, turning the foothills into a patchwork of slick mud and glistening leaves. We both know we'll be trudging through miserable conditions today, but I can't find it in me to complain. Not when the tension between us has eased, replaced by a fragile bond that might see us through.

"Ready?" he asks quietly, adjusting the harness that secures his pack.

I nod, fingers brushing the chain around my neck. One day, I'll be free of this. "Let's keep going," I reply, voice resolute.

And so we emerge from our alcove, stepping into another day of uncertain travel. The storm-scented air ruffles Korrin's wings and tosses my hair into my eyes. Yet beneath the gray sky and the distant threat of enemies, I sense a flicker of cautious optimism. We've confronted each other's secrets—his creation as an executioner, my terror over purna magic—and we've chosen to stand side by side.

The path through the foothills remains dangerous, the future even more so. But I take Korrin's hand—he squeezes mine in return—and we forge ahead. The chain rattles, yes, but my heart thrums with an unexpected warmth that just might sustain us when the darkest moments come.

KORRIN

Achill wind scours my skin, leaving an electric tingle that sharpens every sense I have. The foothills we've been navigating have given way to a plateau of jagged rocks and twisted pines. Over the past days, Elyria and I have encountered half-collapsed shrines, lonely monoliths, and ancient markers that hint at a vanished civilization—possibly the same that built the monastery we sheltered in. In this wilderness, ruins sprout like old scars on the land, each one whispering of secrets best left buried.

Today, we discover a place that resonates with a particular eeriness: a ruined fortress perched on a rocky outcrop overlooking a narrow valley. Its walls are half-tumbled, the gatehouse collapsed into rubble. Broken statues line what used to be a courtyard, their stone faces worn away by centuries of rain and wind. Barely any roof remains, just shards of timber and gaping holes that let in the harsh sunlight.

We approach in cautious silence. Elyria's chain rattles softly with each step, and though we've grown adept at muffling it, the sound grates on my nerves. We're not sure if any danger lurks here—beasts or bandits, or worse, other gargoyles. Yet we can't ignore that the battered walls might offer temporary shelter from the wilds around us. The day has been long, and we need a secure spot to regroup before nightfall.

"This place looks older than the monastery," Elyria whispers, hugging her thin cloak tight against the wind. Her breath puffs white in the chilly air. "And more... savage somehow."

I nod, scanning the broken battlements. A rotting banner, unrecognizable from the ravages of time, drapes one corner of the ruin. "Likely a fort that changed hands many times," I murmur. "Its architecture is a clash of styles—some gargoyle-like buttresses, but also angles reminiscent of orcish fortifications. Hard to say who last

controlled it.”

She glances at me, eyes flicking to my wings. We haven’t yet fully spoken about my old clan, about whether this place might have once served gargoyles. But we both know the risk: if any gargoyles still roam these foothills, they might be drawn to such a vantage.

“We’ll be careful,” she says, quiet but firm.

I sense the undercurrent of trust there, hesitant, but real. Since our talk in the alcove, we’ve found a fragile understanding. Even so, tension coils in my gut like a serpent. Something feels off about this fortress, as though it still hums with leftover magic or memories of war. My executioner instincts prick, warning me that we’re exposed.

But Elyria’s footsore, and the sun is dipping low. We need somewhere to rest. With a curt nod, I lead us through a gap in the shattered wall, picking my way across broken stones. We remain poised for ambush, but the ruin seems deserted. No fresh footprints or scent. Just dust and a faint tang of old decay.

We locate a portion of the fortress that still has part of its ceiling intact—a cramped corner room with half a roof, enough to keep out the worst of the night chill. The space is littered with debris: splintered wood, scattered stones, a fallen archway carved with unreadable runes. Elyria kneels to brush away dirt, clearing a patch for us to settle. I keep watch at the threshold, scanning for any sign of movement beyond the crumbling corridors.

The wind keens through the broken halls, stirring shadows that flit across the tumbled stones. My wings twitch, uneasy. If any gargoyles approach, I’ll sense them first, I tell myself, trying to still the knot in my chest. But I can’t shake a faint sense of dread, as if we’re not alone.

When I finally step back inside, Elyria has laid out our meager supplies in the corner, near a collapsed window that admits thin, murky light. She meets my gaze, the chain at her throat glinting ominously. “All clear?” she murmurs.

“Seems so,” I reply, voice tight. “But I don’t like it here. Feels... haunted by old battles.”

She nods, lips thinning. “We won’t stay long.”

I exhale, relief flickering through me. “One night,” I agree, “then we move on.”

We set about making a small fire with the scraps of rotted timber, though there’s scant kindling that isn’t damp. Our attempts produce more smoke than heat, but it’s enough to stave off the worst chill. Elyria rubs her hands, hissing at the swirl of ash that drifts up. I shift closer, offering the meager warmth of my body. The chain rattles, an ugly sound in these dead halls.

Before we can drift into uneasy rest, a low rumble grips my gut. Not from hunger, but from my gargoyle senses picking up a vibration in the air. I still, every muscle tight. Elyria notices instantly, her eyes wide. “What is it?”

I hold up a hand, listening. My wings flare slightly, attuned to subtle changes in the wind. An unmistakable echo reverberates from somewhere beyond the fortress’s outer ramparts: the heavy footfalls of multiple creatures. Gargoyles. Possibly more than one. My heart lurches. But wait—there’s also a different cadence, lighter, clipped steps that might belong to elves or men. Fear twists in my belly.

“We have company,” I whisper.

Elyria’s face pales. “Dark elves?”

“And gargoyles,” I confirm, teeth gritted. “They’re heading this way. Probably caught sight of the ruin or our smoke.”

She curses under her breath, shooting a frantic glance around. “What do we do? Hide? Run?”

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A pulse of savage protectiveness flares in me. If they find us, it means confrontation—especially if they see me with Elyria, let alone the chain indicating she's not a typical captive. "Running might be an option if we can slip out unseen," I mutter. "But we can't outrun gargoyles in open terrain, and the dark elves might have archers. We'll have to be clever, or—" My voice falters. Or I fight. The old executioner within me stirs, half-terrified, half-thrilling at the idea.

Her eyes spark with determination. "I won't let them take me."

"Then we stand ready," I say, forcing a calm I don't feel. "We might find a vantage to observe them first. If it's only a few, we can slip away or pick them off. If more come, we retreat deeper into the fortress."

She nods, swallowing. "I trust you."

The quiet admission tugs at something deep inside me. I can't fail her now. "Stay close," I murmur, gripping her hand briefly. Then I hurry to douse our feeble fire, scattering the coals. The chain rattles as we creep into a corridor that might lead to higher ground—perhaps we can peer out from a broken tower or parapet. We move fast but silently, my wings pulled in tight to avoid brushing the walls.

The corridor spirals upward, leading to what might have been a second-floor walkway. Much of it is collapsed, open to the sky. Squeezing through a half-blocked arch, we emerge onto a partial rampart ringed by rubble. The vantage overlooks the fortress courtyard—cracked flagstones, broken columns, and a wide breach in the far wall. And there, stepping over the debris, are figures that seize my heart in dread.

Three dark elves in black leather, crossbows slung across their backs, pick their way cautiously. Their expressions are alert, scanning each shadow. Close behind them, to my horror, marches a gargoyle. A real gargoyle, wings folded, skin a dark slate color. He's big, though not quite as tall as me, and he moves with the lethal grace of a trained hunter. My mind reels, recognizing insignias on his bracers. He's from my clan. Possibly a scout or mid-level executioner, dispatched to find me or any sign of my defection.

Elyria stiffens behind me, nearly pressing herself into my back. Her breath shudders. I sense her fear—the dark elves alone are bad enough, but a gargoyle from my own clan is an even bigger threat. The fact that they're working together is worse. What unholy alliance is this? Possibly the dark elves have offered intelligence, or a temporary truce, if it means capturing the fugitive gargoyle and the rumored High Purna.

They speak in low voices, though I can't catch every word from our vantage. The gargoyle's tone is guttural, the dark elves hiss in their harsh tongue. Then they spread out, fanning across the courtyard. One elf tests a side passage that might lead to the interior. Another paces near the collapsed gatehouse. Meanwhile, the gargoyle stands in the center, scanning the half-fallen towers with keen eyes.

I pull Elyria down behind a portion of the parapet, heart hammering. "We can't let them corner us," I whisper. "That gargoyle might catch my scent if he gets too close. He'll sense you too."

She nods, hands shaking slightly around the chain. "We need a plan."

A swirl of old instincts floods me: Identify the biggest threat, neutralize swiftly. As an executioner, I know these tactics. I steel myself. "If they spread out, we might pick them off in smaller numbers. But if the gargoyle uses any psionic or elemental magic, we could be trapped."

She pales, nodding. “I’ll follow your lead.”

I press a clawed hand over hers, a silent vow. Then I peer over the parapet again. The group has split up. Two elves vanish into a corridor below, likely searching rooms. The third elf stands near the gargoyle, scanning. My breath catches as the gargoyle moves, turning slowly in a circle. His wings flicker. He’s definitely a scout—body language says he’s sniffing the air. He suspects we’re here.

We can’t let them pinpoint us. We need an ambush or a diversion. My mind whirs. “We’ll descend another staircase, try to isolate one or two. I can handle them if we catch them off guard.”

Elyria nods firmly, though her eyes betray swirling fear. I guide her along the rampart, ducking under broken arches, aiming for a far stairwell that likely leads down to the fortress’s eastern wing. Our steps echo softly in the old stone. The chain is a liability, but she keeps it pressed to her chest to minimize noise.

We descend quickly, emerging in a long hall with collapsed columns. Dust motes swirl in the faint light. My wings brush a precarious beam overhead, sending a trickle of rubble down. We freeze, hearts pounding. A voice drifts from the far end—a dark elf cursing in their guttural tongue.

I motion for Elyria to hide behind a chunk of fallen masonry. My pulse roars in my ears. The footsteps approach. One elf? Possibly. I let out a careful breath. If it’s just one, I can strike fast. Danger thrums in me, but also a savage clarity. No turning back.

A slender figure emerges around the corner: a dark elf male, crossbow gripped in one hand, steps cautious. He hasn’t seen us yet. I lock eyes with Elyria, silently telling her to stay put, then slip into the corridor’s shadows. Every muscle is taut, each sense honed. I am executioner no longer—but I’ll kill to protect her.

The elf steps closer. His face is etched with tension, scanning the gloom. Just as he passes my hiding spot, I lunge. My claws slice across his throat before he can yelp. Blood sprays, coating my hand. He collapses with a ragged gurgle. My heart hammers, teeth bared. Old instincts swirl with revulsion. He was the enemy. I had no choice.

Elyria emerges, eyes wide at the sight of the corpse. She swallows hard, but doesn't balk. "Are there more?"

I nod grimly. "Two elves and one gargoyle remain." We can't linger. Blood spreads across the floor, the stench thick. Another voice echoes from deeper in the ruin, cursing. They heard something.

I seize Elyria's hand, pulling her along. We hurry around a corner, seeking a vantage that might let us see the courtyard again. Each step is a calculated risk. Tension coils in my gut. If the gargoyle or the other elves discover the body, they'll know we're here for sure. No more stealth. My mind flicks to my vow: If forced, I'll fight them all.

At the next intersection, we skid to a halt behind a fractured wall that overlooks an open area—a portion of the courtyard with a collapsed roof. The gargoyle stands there, scanning, wings half-spread. A dark elf stands to his left. The other elf is nowhere in sight. Possibly searching the southwestern corner. My chest tightens. If we can isolate the gargoyle from the elf, I might stand a chance in single combat. But if I have to face them both at once, it's riskier.

As we watch, the gargoyle frowns, looking down at the ground, perhaps he's found footprints or a smear of blood from the first elf. He growls something. The elf nods, raising his crossbow. They move with coordinated caution, stepping into the corridor we just left. They're heading for the body. My heart leaps. We're pinned if they come this way.

Elyria tugs my arm, pointing silently toward a battered staircase that might lead back up or around. We nod at each other, adrenaline spiking. We slip that direction, trying to circle behind them. The chain rattles once, making me wince. If the gargoyle hears that, we're done for. My wings brush the air in an effort to keep silent. Another corridor leads around the courtyard's perimeter, a route that might let us flank them.

We move swiftly, the fortress's labyrinthine passages half-collapsed, forcing us to climb over debris. My heart pounds at the knowledge that we're actively hunting now—I'm hunting them. Elyria's breathing grows ragged, but she stays close, silent and determined. A fierce admiration sparks in me for her courage.

Rounding a final corner, we spot them, the gargoyle and the elf, bent over the corpse of their comrade. The elf curses in dismay, the gargoyle stands rigid, eyes blazing. I can almost smell the fury roiling off him. He barks an order at the elf, likely telling him to search the perimeter. The elf sets off, crossbow at the ready.

The gargoyle remains behind, crouched over the body. My chest tightens. Now or never. If we let them regroup or call the third elf, we'll be outnumbered. I turn to Elyria, pressing a finger to my lips. She nods, stepping back into a shadow. I swallow, summoning the lethal calm that once defined me.

One more kill. But this time, it's not for the clan or the Alpha. It's to protect the woman who upended my world.

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Stepping from the shadows, I let out a low hiss. The gargoyle whips around, eyes flaring gold. Recognition jolts across his features. “Korrin?” he snarls, voice echoing in the ruined hall. His wings flare wide, immediate suspicion in every line of his body. “You— what are you doing here?”

I see the clan mark on his bracer, confirm he’s one of ours. My heart twists with an old, almost-forgotten loyalty. But I swallow it down. “Lower your voice,” I growl, stepping closer. “Or I’ll finish what you came here for.”

He sneers. “Traitor,” he spits, eyes darting around. “You vanish, the Alpha sends us to find you, and now I see you killed an elf we were allied with. Are you insane?”

Cold dread surges. The clan allied with dark elves? They truly are working together to hunt me. “Those elves are scum,” I say, voice dripping with disgust. “You’d join them to kill innocents?”

He laughs, wings rustling. “There’s no innocent in a High Purna or a rogue gargoyle. The Alpha’s orders are clear: bring you back in chains, and kill the purna if you’ve found her.” His gaze roams the corridor, searching for a hint of Elyria. A snarl builds in my throat.

“I won’t let that happen,” I say flatly, shifting into a fighting stance. My wings spread for balance, tail lashing behind me. The old battle-lust thrums in my veins, but it’s tinted with righteous anger instead of blind obedience. “Leave now.”

He bares his fangs in a vicious grin. “Or what? You’ll kill me too?” A humorless laugh echoes. “You can’t hide your betrayal, Korrin. The Alpha will flay you alive

for this.”

My chest constricts with both fear and fury. “Then so be it,” I snap. With a single powerful leap, I strike. He’s ready, blocking me with a swipe of his claws that rakes my forearm. Pain flares, but I bare my teeth, ignoring the sting. We slam together in a tangle of wings and muscle, each trying to gain advantage.

He’s strong, comparable to me in raw might, maybe a shade less experienced as an executioner. The corridor walls ring with the impact of our blows. I grapple him, hooking my tail around his leg, forcing him off-balance. He tries to slice my side, but my hide deflects most of it. The old instincts flood me: Find an opening, strike fast.

Our wings clash, scraping stone. He roars, half-trying to subdue me alive. Perhaps he thinks he can drag me back to the Alpha. But I know the only outcome is lethal. I can’t risk him calling the others. I lash out with a brutal punch, my claws raking across his chest. He staggers, hissing in pain.

“Stop this,” he growls, eyes wild. “You’re throwing your life away for a worthless human.”

My anger ignites to a white-hot fury. “She’s not worthless,” I snarl. “She’s more than you’ll ever be.” Summoning all my strength, I slam him into a fractured column, hearing the crack of stone. He slumps, momentarily dazed. Before he can recover, I lunge, sinking my claws into his ribcage. Blood spurts, hot and sticky. My stomach twists, but I don’t hesitate. If he lives, he’ll betray us.

He gasps, eyes wide with shock. “Tra... i... tor...” The word sputters in a gargle of blood. Then he collapses, wings folding like a broken bird. A wave of nauseating guilt hits me. I just killed one of my own. But I had no choice. Elyria’s life demands it.

“Korrin!” Elyria’s voice echoes from behind me. She emerges from the shadows,

chain in hand, face etched with equal parts horror and relief. She sees the gargoyle's body, the gore around my claws. Her lips part, trembling. "You... you did it."

I stand there, chest heaving, blood dripping from my fingers. The clan mark on his bracer glints ominously, reminding me of the oath I've just shattered beyond repair. "He would have taken you," I say, voice raw, "or alerted the entire clan. I—I couldn't let that happen."

Her throat works, eyes glistening. "I know. You saved me." She steps closer, swallowing hard. The acrid smell of gargoyleblood hangs in the air, a savage testament to my final break from the Alpha's rule. My insides churn, but when Elyria reaches for me, I let out a shuddering breath and take her hand.

"We should find the others," I rasp, shaking off the fugue that tries to claim me. "There's still one elf—maybe two—lurking around."

She nods, knuckles white around the chain. "Let's... let's end this." Her voice shakes, but determination fuels her. We can't leave them free to hunt us down.

Before we can advance, footsteps echo from a hallway to our right. We spin, tension coiling. The final dark elf emerges, crossbow raised. He spots the gargoyle's corpse, the pool of blood, then me with my claws still stained. His eyes flare in shock. "You... you killed him?"

I snarl a warning. Elyria grips my arm. The elf recovers quickly, leveling his crossbow at me. Time seems to slow. If he shoots, I might dodge, but Elyria's at risk. My wings flare in a protective arc, shifting to shield her. The elf's finger tightens on the trigger.

A sudden rustle behind him: the third dark elf, the one we lost track of. He emerges from the corridor, sees the scene, curses. The tension spikes. We're outnumbered two

to one. But I sense their fear—they just saw me kill a gargoyle single-handedly. That might buy us an edge.

Elyria's nails dig into my arm. "Korrin..." She breathes my name, voice taut. She's no fighter, but she stands tall, refusing to cower. Fierce pride surges in me.

The elf with the crossbow snarls, "Surrender, gargoyle, or we put a bolt through your heart. Then we take the girl."

My blood roars. "Try," I say, voice rough. "I'll rip you apart like I did your friend."

His eyes flick to the corpse, lips tightening. The other elf readies a throwing knife, stepping wide. They mean to flank me. My heart hammers—two elves with ranged weapons could be lethal. I must strike first.

Elyria senses my intention. She tugs the chain to brace herself behind me. "Korrin?—"

"Stay back," I growl. One chance. I fake a lunge to the left, prompting the crossbow elf to shift aim. Then I pivot, wings snapping open, hurtling to the right. The second elf, armed with a knife, hurls it at me. It grazes my shoulder, stinging. I ignore the pain, barreling into him. He screams as my claws rake his abdomen. He tries to slash me with another blade, but I grab his wrist, twisting until the bones snap. He collapses, wailing.

I spin just in time to see the crossbow elf fire a bolt. It streaks toward me. No time to dodge. With a desperate move, I raise my arm, letting the bolt slam into my forearm's thick hide, wincing at the impact. Pain flares, but the bolt doesn't fully penetrate my stony flesh. The elf curses, fumbling to reload.

I let out a feral snarl, launching at him. He tries to backpedal, but the corridor's

cramped. I seize the crossbow, yanking it aside as he scrambles for a dagger. My tail whips around, knocking his legs from under him. He hits the floor with a gasp, dagger clattering away. Without hesitation, I stomp down, hearing bones crack. He howls in agony. Kill him, my old training insists. But I pause, chest heaving. Is it necessary?

The elf glares up at me, blood trickling from his mouth. He glances at Elyria, eyes alight with hate. "This is purna scum," he spits. "She'll doom us all."

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Rage flares white-hot. My claws descend, silencing him in a swift slash that ends his words. Blood spatters across the crumbling stones. I stand there, chest heaving, mind reeling. Two elves and a gargoyle lie dead at my feet. The fortress corridor stinks of gore and fear.

Elyria steps forward, breath ragged. “Korrin...”

I stagger, wings trembling. The clash of adrenaline and horror churns in me. “Are you—hurt?” I manage.

She shakes her head, voice trembling. “N-no. I’m fine.” Her eyes flick to the bodies, then back to me. Concern shadows her face. “You’re bleeding.”

I follow her gaze to the crossbow bolt embedded in my forearm. Blood trickles down my stony skin, mingling with that of my slain kin. My stomach roils. “It’s... not too deep,” I say, forcing composure. “I can remove it.”

She nods, reaching out. “Let me help. You did all this for me.”

I dip my head in a slight nod, not trusting my voice to remain steady. I ended the lives of my own clanmate and these elves. Guilt, sorrow, and determination swirl, but overshadowing all is relief that Elyria remains safe. It’s the choice I made—my final break from the Alpha’s tyranny.

We limp back to the small corner room we’d claimed as a campsite. The fortress remains eerily silent now, the threat presumably ended. Still, we keep our guard up, ears pricked for more footsteps. None come. The dead won’t bring reinforcements.

Yet I can't shake the sense that we must leave soon, before any other patrol arrives.

Inside, Elyria hastily lights a few coals leftover from our smoldering fire. I sink to my knees near the flickering glow, wincing as she gently examines the bolt. Her hands are sure, though trembling, as she grips it. "Ready?" she whispers.

I nod, jaw clenched. She yanks. Pain screams through my limb, but I grunt, refusing to cry out. Hot blood flows. Elyria quickly presses a strip of cloth over the wound, stanching the bleeding. I glimpse tears in her eyes as she works. "I'm so sorry," she chokes. "You've sacrificed so much."

I manage a tight smile, a shaky attempt to comfort her. "I'd do it again," I rasp. The truth resonates in my chest. I'd kill a hundred more if it keeps her alive.

She binds my arm, face taut with worry. Then she looks at me, expression raw. "We have to go, right? There might be more out there."

I nod, exhaling a quivering breath. "Yes. But first, I need a moment." My gaze drifts to the corridor where the bodies lie. They were my enemies. Yet one was a gargoyle from my own clan. I rub my forehead, guilt and bitterness twisting inside me. "He recognized me. He'll tell no one now, but eventually, the clan will know a scout is missing. Rumors will spread. The Alpha?—"

She leans close, putting a hand on my chest. The chain clinks softly. "We'll keep moving, find somewhere deeper, safer." Her voice gains a shaky resolve. "I can't let you face them alone if they come for you. We'll stand together."

Emotion swells, raw and fierce. My free hand wraps over hers, gripping with desperate gratitude. "Thank you." I whisper. "I... can't lose you, Elyria."

A tear slides down her cheek, but a faint smile trembles on her lips. "Nor I, you."

We pack up in haste, ignoring the pain that throbs in my arm. My wings feel heavy, but I can't show weakness. Elyria helps me shrug into my harness, her hands lingering on my shoulder. We speak little. The chain's presence is a bittersweet anchor—it kept up the ruse that she's a captive, but now I wonder how long it'll matter. I'm openly a traitor, beyond redemption in the clan's eyes.

Before leaving the fortress, we pause in the courtyard to assess the best route out. Pale light spills through the shattered gatehouse, illuminating the carnage. The gargoyle's body lies near the corridor's entrance, the elves not far away. A wave of nausea hits me. We stride past them with set jaws, refusing to linger on the gore.

Elyria's steps are unsteady, but she keeps pace. The chain rattles, echoing in the otherwise silent ruin. My heart twists. I vow again to remove that chain as soon as it's safe. Then we slip through the breach in the wall, into the rocky valley beyond. The sky overhead is streaked with oranges and purples, dusk creeping over the foothills. We plan to travel by nightfall, distance ourselves from the fortress so no reinforcements can corner us.

We cross a small ridge, descending into the next valley. Only then do I let out a shuddering breath. Elyria steadies me with a hand on my good arm. "You're trembling."

I nod, mindful of the sticky blood on my forearm bandage. "The adrenaline is wearing off," I admit. "And the guilt." My voice strains. "He was my clanmate."

She looks at me with profound sympathy, tears glistening. "I'm sorry," she murmurs. "He gave you no choice. He would have killed us."

I nod, trying to quell the roiling in my stomach. "I know. But it's final now. No turning back." My eyes burn with unshed tears. The clan will see me as a monster, an oath-breaker. But I can't regret choosing Elyria's life.

She steps closer, chain rustling between us. Gently, she lifts a hand to my cheek, wiping away the blood splatter there. “We have each other,” she says quietly. “We’ll survive.”

My chest tightens. I place my hand over hers, pulling it to my lips for a tender kiss. Her skin is warm, trembling. “Thank you,” I repeat, voice thick. “You’re all I have now.”

Her cheeks flush, and she nods. “And you, me.”

We continue onward, navigating the rugged ground. Dusk soon yields to night, stars pricking the sky with cold brilliance. Our progress is slow, my wound throbs, and Elyria’s ankles still ache from the climb. But we don’t stop until we’re far from the fortress, deeper into the wild foothills. Eventually, we find a small outcrop offering partial shelter from the wind. Elyria helps me lower myself onto a flat rock. She rummages for bandages, re-checking my arm with gentle hands.

The night air is frigid, the ache in my chest heavier than the physical pain. My clan brother’s death replays in my mind. The look on his face, the betrayal etched there. I am truly cut off from them now, I think. The last slender tether to my old life is severed. My only purpose is to keep Elyria safe, no matter the cost.

As if sensing my turmoil, she sits beside me, leaning her head on my shoulder. The chain rests between us, cold metal on my skin. I wrap my arm around her, ignoring the throbbing wound. We share our body heat, letting the hush of night settle around us. Overhead, a pale moon slides across the sky, ghostly and distant.

For a while, we speak no words. The bond between us, once fraught and uncertain, feels more real than ever. We’ve both spilled blood for each other now—my clan’s, the elves’, the old illusions about who we should be. The path forward remains perilous, but we’ll face it together. We must.

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Elyria's voice breaks the silence, soft as a whisper. "Korrin... Let's keep going tomorrow, as far as we can. Maybe we'll find a hidden valley or a cave system. Anything to stay off the main routes."

I nod, lips brushing her hair. "Yes. We'll put distance between us and any who might track that ruin." I swallow, recalling the possibility of other gargoyles investigating their missing scout. "We won't stop until we're beyond their reach."

She trembles slightly, nestling closer. "I'm with you," she says, quiet resolve in every syllable.

I close my eyes and let her warmth seep into me, letting the tension in my wings subside. The chain presses into my chest, but I let it be. For now. We're bound by more than that chain—a vow forged in blood, in defiance of the Alpha's cruelty, in the fragile hope that we can carve out a future free from the wars of old.

Thunder rumbles distantly on the horizon, but no rain falls here. The stars glitter overhead, oblivious to mortal struggles. I hold Elyria close, mindful of my bandaged arm. My heart still aches with guilt for the gargoyle I killed, but I cling to the conviction that my choice was necessary. I am not an executioner for the Alpha anymore. I am a guardian, a traitor, a shield for the woman who might be the last High Purna in existence.

And so we rest, the hush of the wild foothills our only companion. The hush is broken only by our quiet breathing and the faint clink of her collar. The dawn will bring new trials, but for this moment, I let my eyes drift shut, comforted by her presence. My final thought before sleep claims me: I will kill again if I must. I will burn the world if

it means keeping her alive.

11

ELYRIA

The dawn light comes late in these mountains, delayed by the massive peaks that loom to the east. By the time the first rays spill across the uneven ground, my bones already ache from another night of restless vigilance. We've been traveling for days since our bloody encounter in that ruined fortress—Korrin and I pressing deeper into the foothills, scavenging for shelter in whatever clefts or hidden alcoves we can find. Each day pulls us farther from the roving patrols, but the tension never ceases. Even in my sleep, I can't escape the coil of fear lodged in my chest.

This morning, the sky glows peach and lavender, a deceptive promise of calm that does nothing to soothe the dread beneath my skin. The chain at my throat feels heavier than ever, as if sensing the swirling anxieties in my head. I wake stiff and chilled, curled under a makeshift blanket that does little to ward off the mountain air. Across from me, Korrin stands watch, his broad back to the weak sunrise, wings half-furled. He's so still, I almost think he's turned to stone again—a silent sentinel haunted by old ghosts.

I rise slowly, testing my limbs for soreness. My ankle throbs from the climbs and descents, but I can still bear weight without too much pain. A pang of guilt flickers, he's been pushing me so hard, even though I know we have no choice. I swallow the bitterness: we're fugitives in a land that wants us dead. We can't afford comfort.

Korrin hears me stir and turns his head slightly, enough for me to catch his golden eyes. There's a weariness there that makes my heart twist. We share a subtle nod—no words needed. I gather our minimal belongings while he scans the horizon. In this mutual routine, we find a sliver of companionship, each mindful of the other's

burdens. Even so, an unspoken sense of threat lingers in the crisp morning air, as if the mountains themselves watch our every move.

We depart the small ledge we used for shelter, moving carefully through a maze of boulders. The terrain here is punishing: steep inclines, loose rocks, patches of stubborn snow that glisten beneath a thin sun. Korrin leads, ever watchful, occasionally pausing to sniff the wind or listen for distant footfalls. His vigilance is a comfort, though I hate how the chain rattles each time I scramble to keep up.

We speak little, saving our breath for the trek. My thoughts churn with a thousand worries: how far must we go before we're truly safe? How much more blood must Korrin spill in my name? Each time I recall the fortress, the memory of his final blow resonates with both relief and sorrow. He killed his own kind to save me, severing his last ties. I ignore the almost suffocating feeling and push onward, matching his pace.

At midday, we pause to rest by a shallow trickle of water that runs between two rocky slopes. I crouch, cupping my hands to drink, the icy liquid stinging my palms. Korrin sets his pack down, rolling his shoulders with a low grunt of discomfort. I look at the bandage beneath his harness. The crossbow wound he sustained is still healing, the scabs visible whenever he shifts. A wave of concern crests in me.

"How does it feel?" I ask, quietly. "Your arm?"

He shrugs, feigning indifference, but I see the tension in his jaw. "I'll manage," he says, voice gruff. Then his eyes soften, an unspoken apology for shutting me out.

I nod, letting it be. I won't push him further. Instead, I straighten, scanning the rugged hills. Rocks rise in irregular formations, and far above, jagged peaks pierce a sky that grows darker by the hour. Clouds gather, grey and heavy. Probably another storm. My stomach knots at the thought of trying to scale treacherous paths in the rain.

“All right,” Korrin says after a moment, hefting his pack. “We push on. Let’s see if there’s a valley or ravine we can slip into before the weather turns.”

I tuck my cloak tighter, adjusting the chain so it won’t snag. Each step forward is a small defiance against everything that hunts us. Just keep moving, I chant inwardly, just keep living.

By late afternoon, the clouds have swelled into a solid mass, the wind picking up in chill gusts that howl between the boulders. We make our way along a high ridge, the path so narrow that sometimes I have to press against the stone to let Korrin pass or shift my weight. My nerves are on edge—this vantage offers a sweeping view of the valleys below, but it also leaves us exposed if any watchers are out there.

We spot what appears to be an old trail leading down a steep decline into a hidden valley. Shrugging off our misgivings, we choose it in hopes of finding cover from the looming storm. A sense of foreboding clenches my gut. The path, though well-worn, seems too convenient. But we have no better option, so we descend carefully.

The valley below reveals itself as a long, narrow basin, ringed by jagged cliffs on three sides. At first glance, it seems deserted—just patches of dry grass, a few scraggly pines. The wind keens, rustling dead leaves. My ankle twinges with each step, the chain jangling softly in the oppressive silence.

Suddenly, Korrin halts, lifting a hand to signal me to stop. My pulse spikes. He senses something. I strain my ears, hearing only wind. But then, carried on the breeze, I catch a faint clatter of metal. My heart jumps. Armored footsteps?

“Korrin—” I begin, but he cuts me off with a gesture, eyes narrowed. He motions for me to step behind a large boulder. My heart hammers as I duck down, gripping the chain to silence its rattle. Korrin presses himself against the rock, wings tensed, scanning the valley’s rim.

The metal noise grows louder, accompanied by hushed voices in a language I recognize too well: dark elves. Fear surges. They found us again. My eyes flit to Korrin. He looks over his shoulder at me, concern blazing in those golden irises. “Get ready,” he mouths.

But before we can plan an ambush or route of escape, a new sound slices the air—rushing wings overhead. My stomach plummets. More gargoyles? I crane my neck, glimpsing a shadow skimming the cloud-wreathed sky. A silhouette passes across the sun. Korrin curses under his breath. We’re surrounded—dark elves below, gargoyle(s) above. Panic flares.

We try to double back along the ridge, but the moment we step out from behind the boulder, a flurry of movement explodes around us. Dark elf scouts emerge from camouflaged positions among the rocks, crossbows aimed. My chain clinks as I freeze in alarm, Korrin shifting protectively in front of me.

“Surrender!” a dark elf barks, eyes gleaming with malice. He’s tall, wearing battered leathers with a sigil I recall from the fortress that once enslaved me. My blood runs cold. “You can’t win this time, gargoyle. We have reinforcements above. Our archers stand ready.”

Korrin’s wings snap open, a lethal display. Despite the crossbows leveled at him, he roars in fury, hooking an arm across me to shield me from immediate fire. “Get behind me,” he rasps.

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My chest tightens. “We can’t—there are too many.”

He doesn’t respond, but I see the desperation in his face. Another half-dozen dark elves stride forward, crossbows and short swords in hand. They fan out, forming a semicircle. I glance upward; a gargoyle hovers overhead, circling with menacing slowness, ready to dive if we attempt flight or fight. Trapped.

“Hand over the girl,” the lead elf snarls. “We’ll let you live if you swear to stand down, gargoyle. Our alliance with your clan is... flexible. But the purna must die or be returned to her rightful owners.”

My stomach twists. Return me? They mean to drag me back to the fortress, to enslavement or execution. My entire body trembles. I cling to Korrin’s arm, fear pounding in my temples.

Korrin’s lips curl in a snarl. “Never,” he growls, voice low and dangerous.

The elves exchange glances, some shifting uncertainly. They sense how deadly Korrin is, how many of their kind he’s slain. Yet they close ranks, crossbow bolts trained on him. More footsteps echo behind us—a second squad approaching from the ridge. My heart clenches in despair. We’re truly surrounded.

Korrin glances at me, anguish flickering in his gaze. Then his eyes harden. He’s going to fight, I realize, terror surging. We can’t beat them all.

He lunges, roaring, wings snapping wide to strike the nearest elf. The elf yelps as Korrin’s claws rake across his chest, but crossbow bolts fire in a staccato volley.

Korrin tries to shield me, but one bolt grazes his side, another thunks into his thigh. He stumbles, hissing in pain. My scream lodges in my throat.

I scramble to help him, but the dark elves close in with chilling efficiency. Two seize me from behind, yanking me away from Korrin. The chain at my collar rattles violently as I struggle, arms pinned. I glimpse Korrin slashing at an elf who tries to stab him from behind. Blood spatters. Another bolt strikes his wing, and he staggers. My vision blurs with tears. No, no, no...

“Korrin!” I cry, voice raw. He roars in fury, trying to reach me, but more elves swarm him. I see swords flashing, hear pained snarls. It’s chaos, pure chaos. The gargoyle overhead swoops lower, snarling orders or threats—I can’t tell.

“Hold her!” the lead elf commands, wrenching my arms back. My entire body aches. Another elf clamps a metal cuff over my wrist, snapping it to the chain. They’re recapturing me. My mind reels with horror, old nightmares flooding back.

Desperately, I crane my neck, searching for Korrin. Through the swirl of bodies, I see him battered to one knee, blood streaking his chest and thigh. He’s still fighting, lashing out with savage power, but he’s outnumbered, bolts peppering his wings, swords scraping his stony hide. A strangled moan rips from my throat. I have to do something. But the elves restrain me, forcing me backward.

Suddenly, Korrin manages one final surge, hurling an elf aside. For a heartbeat, our eyes lock. In them, I see heartbreak, regret, and a desperate command. But I can’t—two elves hold me pinned. He tries to lunge in my direction, but the gargoyle overhead dives, slamming him down. The crack of impact echoes, and Korrin’s roar of pain sends ice through my veins.

“No!” I scream, tears streaming down my cheeks. He collapses under the gargoyle’s weight, pinned against the rocky ground. More elves rush in, swords raised. My

entire being shrivels in horror. I see blood soaking the dirt around him, his wings pinned awkwardly. Then an elf slams a crossbow butt into the back of his skull, and he goes still.

Terror and grief tear me apart. “Korrin!” I shriek, fighting the elves with every ounce of strength. But they yank the chain tight, the metal collar biting into my flesh. My vision spots with black, breath caught in ragged sobs. He’s not moving.

An elf clamps a gag over my mouth, silencing my cries. My limbs thrash, but their grip is unyielding. Helpless, I watch as the gargoyle above lifts off, barking orders, and a cluster of dark elves gather around Korrin’s still form. I see them prod him with a blade, then share terse words. My entire body screams in silent protest. Is he dead?

Without mercy, the elves drag me away, half-choking me with the chain. My tears blur the world. Korrin... no. Please, no. My mind howls in despair. My greatest fear realized: I’m recaptured, and he might be gone forever.

The dark elves march me down the valley at a brutal pace, ignoring my limp from the chain’s constant yanking. One of them, presumably the leader, keeps a crossbow trained on me, as if I might vanish into thin air. My wrists are bound behind my back with iron cuffs, the collar chain looped to a belt at the leader’s waist. Every step sends agony through my shoulders. The gag muffles my sobs.

Night descends, a grim reflection of my heart. They force me to camp in a small clearing surrounded by watchful sentries. No sign of Korrin. I twist against my bonds, desperate for any clue of what happened after the ambush. The elves say little, but from the odd snippet, I glean that they left him for dead. Left him—My stomach roils. He can’t truly be...

Sleep is impossible. I lie on cold ground, wrists throbbing, the collar digging into my neck. Memories of old enslavement crash over me—days of chains, nights of

whippings. The terror is so suffocating I struggle to breathe. I was free, if only briefly. We found each other. And now... it's all undone. My mind replays Korrin's final expression, the savage defiance overshadowed by heartbreak. My chest feels carved out.

When morning comes, they yank me to my feet, feed me scraps of stale bread, and keep me gagged. My entire body aches. I'm half-numb from heartbreak and dread. If Korrin is alive, how could he find me? If he's not... I can't bear the thought. My throat tightens with grief, tears threatening constantly.

The elves set a grueling pace, presumably headed back to their fortress. They keep me near the front, the leader's chain in his iron grip. Occasionally, I see him glance over his shoulder at me, eyes gleaming with twisted satisfaction. My mouth floods with bitter saliva. Back to slavery, or worse.

We traverse rocky passes and descend into lower altitudes. The air warms slightly, though the sun is lost behind swirling clouds. My ankles bruise from stumbling on loose gravel, the chain jerked tight whenever I lag. Each time, I recall Korrin's gentler hand, how he'd help me navigate. The memory stabs my heart anew.

One afternoon, we pass a vantage that overlooks a wide swath of forest. The leader halts, scanning the horizon. I glimpse the distant shape of the fortress I once served, a black silhouette marred by spires and cruelty. My stomach lurches. They're taking me there. My pulse roars in my ears. No. I can't go back. But I'm powerless, wrists bound, the collar choking any hope of escape.

That night, I attempt to slip the gag in my sleep, hoping to glean information from the elves. But a sentry catches my movement, delivering a harsh kick that leaves me gasping. Another memory of old humiliations. I curl on the ground, tears silent. The sense of finality crushes me: Korrin is gone, or dying, and I can't fight alone. The "All Is Lost" moment resonates with a brutality that steals my breath.

On the third day of forced marching, the gloom weighs so heavily on me I stop caring about bruises or thirst. I shuffle mechanically, battered feet scraping dust. The elves seem edgy, though. They talk among themselves in sharp whispers, glancing behind us as if expecting pursuit. My heart flickers—Could it be Korrin?

As we crest a ridge, the leader orders a halt. He scans the rear terrain, cursing. I squint, trying to see what unsettles him, but my vision is blurred by fatigue and tears. Then he barks an order to speed up, like they fear someone's on our trail. My heart leaps. What if Korrin survived? The thought is both thrilling and agonizing—our last memory of him was battered, pinned. How could he survive that onslaught? But maybe he did. My chest clenches with longing. I cling to that possibility, no matter how faint.

It's dusk when we finally approach the outskirts of the dreaded fortress I once served. My stomach convulses at the sight of those towering spires, the black iron gates that once caged me. The leader confers with the gate sentries, producing some sort of token. The gates groan open, and they drag me inside. Torchlight flickers on stone walls, revealing a courtyard that roars with memory: whippings, forced labor, caged nights. I'm back. My heart shrinks, despair surging.

The lead elf tugs the chain roughly, forcing me forward. A gag stifles my protests, but tears drip from my eyes. Dark silhouettes pass by—other elves, slaves scuttling in corners. Some glance at me with pity or dread. They see the collar, realize I'm a captive. My soul feels like it's cracking. I had a taste of freedom, of love, and now...

They haul me to a side tower, up winding steps that scrape my knees as I stumble. The corridor is lit by guttering torches. I recognize the stench of rotting straw, the damp chill of these walls. This is a prison tower. My mind reels with old terror. They fling open a door to a small chamber—stone walls, no window. A single ring hammered into the floor to secure a chain. My chain.

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They push me inside, unfastening my wrists from their metal cuffs only to clamp them together in front. The chain from my collar loops through the ring in the floor, limiting my range to a few steps. Then they slam the door, the clang echoing like a death knell.

I collapse onto the cold stones, the gag still in place. My entire body trembles. The chain rattles in the hush. Back where I started. Darkness seeps into my soul, suffocating. Korrin... I can't sense you. Are you alive?

I rock, hugging my cuffed arms to my chest. Memories swirl: Korrin's protective stance, his fierce kisses, how he soared above me in the forest. Now, he might be rotting under a pile of rubble in that ambush site. Grief and guilt crash like waves. If I'd fought harder, if I'd—Useless regrets. I bury my head against my knees, silent tears coursing. I am alone again.

Time loses meaning in the cell's darkness. My captors rarely come, aside from a guard who brings stale water or scraps of food, shoving them under the door. They remove my gag only to let me sip water, then force it back, presumably to keep me from shouting or using any potential purna power. I remain chained like a hound, forced to sleep on cold stone, every muscle aching.

I slip into a haze of painful memories, drifting between nightmares and half-waking illusions. Korrin's face, contorted in pain, the moment the crossbow bolt struck him. The fortress courtyard, where I once scrubbed bloodstains. My mind cycles, searching for hope but finding only gloom. He's gone, a voice taunts. And even if he lived, how could he infiltrate this place alone?

A stubborn flicker remains, a memory of his unstoppable resolve, how he once tore through elves to rescue me. Could he do it again? My chest tightens. The fortress is heavily guarded; the dark elves likely anticipate a rescue attempt. But I cling to that scrap of faith like a drowning soul clutches driftwood.

After what might be days or weeks, time blurs in the quiet cell—the guard who brings my food one morning hesitates. He’s a younger elf with uncertain eyes. Setting down the meager bowl, he lifts the gag from my mouth to let me eat. I manage a few painful swallows, then croak, “Please... Korrin. The gargoyle. Did he survive?”

He frowns, glancing warily at the door. “Shut up,” he hisses, but there’s a flicker of sympathy on his face. “No one speaks of a gargoyle. We left him for dead.”

My heart lurches. The guard lowers his gaze. “That’s all I know,” he mutters, then regags me, leaving before I can ask more. Left him for dead. The words hammer in my skull. That means they didn’t see a body, or confirm... A faint ember of hope flares. They didn’t confirm his death. He could still be out there.

In the solitude that follows, I wrap trembling arms around myself. If he’s alive, he’s out there alone, wounded. If he’s not... My chest aches so fiercely I fear I’ll break. But I won’t let go of the possibility that he survived. He’s unstoppable, I remind myself. He defied the Alpha for me. He can defy death too—he must.

That evening, a commotion echoes through the fortress corridors—a faint clamor of shouts, metal striking stone. My eyes snap open from a fitful doze. Could it be him? My heart gallops. The chain tugs as I scramble upright, listening. But after a flurry of noise, silence returns. My mind latches onto the idea that Korrin might be staging a rescue, though the hush that follows chills me. If so, he’s been thwarted... or never made it this far.

Tears sting my eyes. I sink to the floor, pressed against the cold wall, letting the chain

coil in my lap. The fortress's gloom seeps into my bones. All is lost, a voice inside me wails, echoing the finality of that ambush. Without Korrin, I am truly alone in this place.

Outside, thunder rolls ominously, as if the sky weeps with me. My entire world has shrunk to a cell, a chain, and the searing memory of what I've lost. I hug the collar's edge, remembering how he used to promise to remove it one day. He never got the chance. Sobs wrack my body until exhaustion claims me.

In the darkness, I slip into a haze of dreams. Flickering visions of Korrin's face, battered but alive, calling my name across a battlefield. My mother's voice, half-forgotten, urging me to fight. The swirl of purna magic that might awaken in my blood. I wake panting, tears drying on my cheeks. A trace of determination flickers in my chest. I can't surrender. If Korrin's out there, if he's alive, I owe it to both of us to keep fighting.

Chains or no, I start testing every link, every ring in the floor. Each tug sends vibrations up my arms, but the iron is set solidly. My wrists remain bound in front, giving me limited reach. No lock picks, no tools. Still, I can't give up. Grunting, I strain against the ring, ignoring the collar biting my neck. The metal creaks but doesn't budge.

My heart plunges again, but the flicker of resolve remains. If Korrin taught me anything, it's that adversity can be defied. Even if I'm alone now, I must keep searching for a means to escape. I refuse to die here, a chained prisoner.

In that moment, footsteps approach. I freeze, chain taut. The door scrapes open, torchlight flooding the cell. Two burly elves stride in, the younger guard trailing behind them. The older one, presumably an officer, sneers at my trembling form.

"Time to move you," he says. "The mistress wants to see her prized purna."

My gut twists. Mistress? Possibly some higher-ranked dark elf or a fortress official. They unfasten the chain from the flooring but keep the collar and wrist bindings in place. Then they haul me to my feet, ignoring my muffled protests through the gag.

The younger guard glances away, guilt flickering in his eyes. I cling to that small crack of empathy, but he offers no help. Instead, the officer yanks me forward. My ankles stumble, the chain tangling. They half-drag me from the cell, along a corridor that smells of rot and stale air. My heart rattles with renewed fear. Where are they taking me?

They lead me up winding stairs, into torchlit passages where the stone floors gleam with fresh moisture. I recall these corridors, or ones like them, from my time as a slave—dim, foreboding, patrolled by merciless overseers. My pulse pounds. If I can't find a chance to break free soon, I'll be at the mercy of whoever "the mistress" is.

At a final landing, the officer knocks on a reinforced door. A muffled voice grants entry. The door swings open, revealing a small antechamber draped in black fabric, reeking of incense. My stomach churns at the cloying scent. Another dark elf stands within, tall and robed in dark crimson. Her eyes flick over me with cold interest.

"So this is the infamous purna," she says, voice silken with danger. She gestures dismissively, and the officer shoves me forward. "Gag off," she commands, arching a brow. "I want to hear her voice."

The officer obeys. My gag is pulled away, leaving me coughing in the thick incense-laden air. Tears prickle. I glare at the robed elf, though the chain and wrist bindings betray my helplessness.

She smiles, predatory. "You gave us quite the chase, dear." Her gaze slides to my collar. "But fate brings you back. The fortress is thrilled by your return. The mistress has many questions."

Fear thrums, but I force my voice not to shake. “Where’s Korrin?” I demand, throat hoarse.

Her lips curve in a cruel smirk. “The gargoyle? Perhaps rotting somewhere. I hear he left quite a few of my comrades in pieces. If he’s alive, not for long.”

Anguish stabs my heart. My breath stutters. They’re lying, or... oh gods, what if he truly fell? A sob threatens to rise, but I quell it, refusing to show weakness. “You’ll regret this,” I manage through clenched teeth. “He’ll come for me if he’s alive.”

She laughs softly, as if savoring my despair. “I look forward to seeing that. For now, we’ll keep you safe in our custody.” She gestures to the guards. “Return her to a holding cell, but a more... specialized one. The mistress will see her soon enough.”

I recoil, but they seize me again, ignoring my frantic struggles. “Korrin!” I scream one last time, voice echoing in the corridor. The robed elf’s laughter follows me as they drag me away.

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They escort me down a different hallway, deeper into the fortress than ever. My hope sinks with every step. Tapestries hang on the walls, depicting dark elf victories over humans and monstrous forms. The heavy oppression of this place weighs on me like a physical force.

At last, we arrive at a cell block lit by eerie greenish lanterns. One guard slides open a reinforced metal gate, revealing a cramped cell lined with runic inscriptions. My chest constricts, these runes might be designed to suppress any latent magic. They're caging me not just physically, but magically.

They shove me inside. The collar chain is locked to a ring in the wall, giving me even less mobility than before. My arms still bound in front, I slump to my knees, trembling. A final clang echoes as they shut the iron gate, then I hear the snick of multiple locks. No chance of prying those open by brute force.

Alone in the flickering greenish gloom, tears flood my eyes. My entire body shakes with grief, exhaustion, and the raw terror of returning to captivity. This is it. I'm lost. The fortress has me again, more securely than before, and the only one who ever dared rescue me might lie broken in some lonely mountain pass. My soul hollows out.

I put my forehead to the cold stone floor, the chain biting my throat. "Korrin... please be alive," I whisper, voice shaking. But no answer comes, just the mocking silence of a fortress built on cruelty. My tears blot the dusty floor, heart fracturing under the weight of my loss.

In that final moment, everything seems truly undone. The fragile freedom we shared,

our tender bond, the hope of forging a life away from the clan and the elves—all shattered by a single ambush. My mind replays Korrin's last roar, the bolt striking him, the gargoyle slamming him to the ground. He can't survive that, can he?

My sobs echo in the chamber, a lonely lament that no one hears. Bound, collared, cut off from light or rescue, I surrender to despair. The fortress walls loom around me like a tomb. It's over, I think. All is lost.

12

KORRIN

I surface from a sea of pain, consciousness flickering around the edges of a dark void. At first, I'm not sure if I'm alive or if some cruel afterlife has claimed me. My lungs burn, chest tight. My wings ache as though they've been wrenched from their sockets, and a throbbing agony pulses through my skull. Every breath stings, echoing through battered ribs. Am I truly breathing?

Gradually, my senses return. Sound filters in, a murmur of voices, the scrape of boots on stone, the distant drip of water. My nostrils flare at the smell of incense, blood, and something more pungent—an unmistakable tang of gargoyle lair. I know it too well: the faint metallic tang that clings to the corridors, the acrid smoke of braziers that line the cavernous halls. I'm in my clan's stronghold. A cold dread curls in my gut. How did I get here?

Memory roars back, slamming into me with brutal force. The ambush. Dark elves. Another gargoyle swooping down. Elyria's scream, the chain rattling as she was torn from my side. My last sight was her tear-streaked face, my own wings pinned under a blow that shattered the ground. Then... nothing. Blackness. They must have found me, half-dead, and brought me here. But who? My mind spins with images of gargoyle scouts, the Alpha's enforcers. The clan wants me in chains for my betrayal. Or worse.

“Wake,” a cold voice commands, echoing in the darkness. A heavy blow strikes my shoulder, jolting agony through my battered muscles. I groan, forcing my eyelids open. Torchlight stabs my retinas, and I squint.

I’m lying on a slab of black stone, a narrow dais in what appears to be a dungeon chamber. Iron clamps bind my wrists and ankles, pinning me in place. My wings, too, are lashed with thick straps. The chamber is lit by flickering braziers that cast cruel shadows across the walls, revealing carved gargoyle totems—grim faces with fanged maws. The sight is painfully familiar from my training days. My clan’s stronghold, the keep’s lower dungeons. A place where traitors are punished, or purna captives are interrogated. My heart thuds with bleak terror.

Standing before me is Varzak, one of the Alpha’s favored enforcers, a gargoyle known for his sadistic streak. He’s tall, even by gargoyle standards, with obsidian skin that gleams in the torchlight. I see the clan insignia branded on his forearm, the same place I once bore the mark of an executioner’s rank. His lips curl in a sneer as he slams a closed fist against my ribcage again, forcing a tortured sound from my throat.

“Traitor,” he spits, eyes flaring with malicious glee. “You gave us quite the chase. The Alpha wants you alive—for now.”

Pain sears with every breath, but I refuse to cry out. “Varzak,” I rasp. “Where is she?” My voice cracks with desperation. Elyria... is she even alive?

He scoffs, delivering another cuff to my shoulder. “Shut your sniveling. The Alpha will decide if you get answers. Your concern for that purna filth is pathetic.”

Fury and horror swirl. She must be held somewhere in the fortress or, gods forbid, back with the dark elves. My blood runs cold at the memory of them dragging her off, her screams echoing. I muster a ragged snarl. “If you’ve harmed her?—”

He backhands me across the jaw, a savage blow that splits my lip. “Silence. You have no demands to make.”

My head reels, stars dancing at the edge of vision. Warm blood drips down my chin. I gasp, spitting out the coppery taste. The pain is excruciating, but fear for Elyria dwarfs it. At least I know I’m in the clan’s lair, not a dark elf fortress. That must mean they struck some arrangement or found me first. A faint flicker of bitter relief: if the Alpha wants me alive, I might have a chance to find her.

Varzak lets out a harsh laugh, turning away as two more gargoyles enter—both I recognize from the Alpha’s inner circle. They unfasten the straps around my wings, but keep my wrists and ankles shackled. I try to stand, but my battered body protests, forcing me to rely on their rough grips as they haul me upright. My vision swims with dizziness. The corridor beyond the cell is a corridor of polished obsidian, lit by braziers and lined with macabre gargoyle sculptures. They drag me along, ignoring the rattle of my chains.

At every step, agony flares in my wing joints, memories of the crossbow bolts and savage blows that pinned me on the battlefield. But I cling to one thought: I must learn Elyria’s fate. If the Alpha has her, I’ll endure anything to ensure her safety. If he doesn’t, I must escape to find her. But how, with every gargoyle here calling for my blood?

They haul me up a winding staircase carved into living rock. My stomach knots. I recall the path from my earliest training days: it leads to the Alpha’s personal throne hall, the seat of his dominion over the clan. My heart hammers in dread. This is it. I can’t muster illusions about mercy. The Alpha enforces loyalty with iron claws.

At the top, a massive ironbound door swings open, revealing a vast chamber lit by braziers of eerie green flame. The walls are lined with carved pillars depicting gargoyle conquests, each telling a story of subjugation—dark elves, humans, even

other gargoyles who defied the clan. I used to revere this place. Now, it feels like walking into my own funeral.

In the center stands the Alpha: nearly eight feet tall, wings extended in a display of dominance. His obsidian skin glimmers with veins of crimson, and curved horns frame his stern face. Around him, a half-circle of gargoyle elders watch with grim interest, arms folded. The hush is thick with menace.

Varzak prods me forward until I stand (barely) ten paces from the Alpha's dais. My wrists remain shackled, ankles weighted by iron. My wings hang limp, trembling from the pain. I force my chin up, refusing to cower. I've killed clanmates to protect Elyria. My betrayal is absolute. Let them see I regret nothing.

Silence stretches as the Alpha regards me with a withering stare. When he finally speaks, his voice resonates like distant thunder. "Korrin," he says, spitting my name. "I had hoped the rumors were false. That you had not become the traitor they claimed." His molten eyes flick to my battered body. "Yet here you stand, reeking of human stench."

I swallow, my throat parched. "I am no traitor," I lie, trying to keep my voice steady. "But I refuse to kill the innocent."

He snarls. "Innocent? A High Purna is anything but. Our clan nearly perished at the hands of purna witches once. Need I remind you of the old wars? And you, an executioner, have forsaken your vow for a creature who would see us burned to ash if she awakened fully."

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My chest tightens. “She is no monster. She has not awakened any destructive magic, nor does she?—”

The Alpha snarls, cutting me off. “Silence! I’ve heard enough. You defied my direct order to cull every human female suspect. Worse, you killed your own brother gargoyles in your flight. Their blood stains your claws.”

A wave of grief surges. I recall the fortress courtyard where I slew one of my kin. “They attacked me,” I say, voice cracking. “They would have taken her life.”

“Her life is forfeit by the clan’s decree!” the Alpha roars, eyes blazing. “You place a purna’s existence above ours? You shame us. In every generation, we have had an executioner, unwavering in his loyalty. But you—” His voice trembles with rage. “You taint our lineage with cowardice and lust for a human slave.”

My fists clench in the iron cuffs, fury and anguish coiling together. The elders shift, muttering among themselves. Some watch me with contempt, others with pity. Varzak stands behind me, a smug grin curling his lips. He’s enjoying my humiliation.

I grit my teeth. “If she’s a threat, we can confine her, or reason?—”

“Reason?” the Alpha hisses. “The only reason is to ensure no purna magic can rise to slaughter us again. You disgust me, Korrin.”

His wings flare in a display of dominance. Then, with a snap of his claws, he signals a pair of subordinate gargoyles to approach from the side. They drag something behind them. My breath catches—through the gloom, I see a figure, ragged and

trembling, but undeniably human. Elyria? My heart leaps, only to plummet. No, it's not her. This woman is older, her hair in disarray. She clutches a childlike figure behind her. Two purna captives, presumably. My stomach turns. They look terrified, eyes hollow from captivity.

The Alpha gestures coldly. "You see these? They are lesser purnas discovered in the outlying forest. We keep them as leverage, ensuring no budding witches threaten us. Some, we cull when the time is right." The woman trembles, tears on her face as a gargoyle yanks her chain. The child cowers.

"I show you this," the Alpha continues, voice echoing, "to remind you that we do not spare potential purna. We don't allow them to breed or awaken. Yet you not only spared one, but championed her." He steps closer, looming over me, the reek of brimstone swirling around him. "Unless you prove otherwise, I see no reason not to tear off your wings and let you rot in stone sleep."

A spike of dread stabs my chest. He demands proof of loyalty. My mouth goes dry. "What do you want?" I rasp.

A cruel smile flickers across his obsidian features. "The purna. The one you call Elyria. She is in the custody of the dark elves. They will deliver her to us soon, in exchange for certain... considerations. Her existence spares them from further gargoyle raids." He leans in, voice dropping to a rumble. "I will give you a chance to atone. You will kill her yourself, Korrin, in the presence of the entire clan. Show us your loyalty still burns, and we might forgive your transgressions. Fail, and you both die slowly."

My mind reels. They have her? They plan to exchange her with the clan? Or is she still with the elves? Either way, they intend to force me to kill her. A horrifying numbness seeps through me. "That's... monstrous," I whisper, shaking. "We can't— She's done nothing?—"

He snarls, a brutal backhand striking my jaw. The shock knocks me half off my feet, the shackles biting my wrists. I taste blood again. “You dare question me?” the Alpha bellows. “I have given you a path to redemption. A single kill. She means less than nothing. A trifling sacrifice to keep the clan safe.”

A flood of anguish roils. My stomach churns. Kill Elyria? The woman who awakened my heart, who I bled for? The very idea is so vile I can hardly breathe. Yet the alternative is unthinkable—my own slow torture, and she likely slaughtered anyway. No matter which path, it ends in her death if I follow the Alpha’s logic. Unless... My mind whirls, frantic for an out.

He sees my hesitation, a cold triumph flickering in his gaze. The entire hall waits, silent, for my response. Elders murmur, some snarling curses at me, others wearing guarded expressions. They want me to break.

I swallow, forcing myself to speak around the agony in my chest. “If I do this... you’ll spare me?” My words taste like ash.

A cruel grin spreads across the Alpha’s face. “We spare you, yes—if you complete your duty in front of all. Kill her, and your clan forgives. Refuse, and you both perish.” He steps back, wings flaring in finality. “The choice is yours.”

Despair crushes me. What can I do? Every fiber of my being screams to protect Elyria. The memory of her tears, her chain rattling, her gentle hand on my cheek... I can’t betray that. I can’t kill her. But the Alpha corners me. Even if I choose to let them kill me, they’d likely murder her as well. She’s powerless in the clan’s eyes, a purna to be culled. All is lost indeed. My soul feels like a gaping wound.

Varzak sneers, stepping forward. “The Alpha will announce the ceremony once the elves deliver her. Until then, you remain in the lower keep. Don’t think of escaping. We’ll watch your every breath.”

My head spins with horror. They plan to publicly execute her. The alpha wants me to carry it out as a twisted show of loyalty. My only hope is to find a way to sabotage that plan, to free her. But I'm chained, battered, and alone against the entire clan. Is there any path that ends with us both alive?

They drag me from the throne hall, returning me to a narrower passage that leads deeper underground. My wings ache with every jolt, the bandage on my side torn away, fresh blood trickling. A wave of dizziness nearly topples me. The gargoyles—Varzak chief among them—escort me to a cell much like the first, but larger, fitted with heavier chains that loop around my torso to pin my wings tight. The sense of imprisonment crushes me. I'm as helpless as Elyria now. A savage guilt tears at me: She must be terrified. Possibly tortured. My heart rages.

Varzak lingers as the lesser guards lock the irons. He smirks, delivering a final blow to my gut that drives the air from my lungs. "I never did like you, Korrin," he murmurs, leaning close. "The Alpha's golden pup, so perfect in your kills. But you're not so special now." He twirls a small blade in his claws, eyes gleaming. "When the time comes, if you hesitate, I'll finish her off myself. Perhaps I'll do it anyway, just to see your face."

I seethe, choking on fury. But my body is too battered to fight back. He laughs at my impotent rage, then stalks out, leaving me shackled in gloom. The heavy cell door slams, the clang echoing in my chest.

I sag against the wall, breath shuddering. My entire being throbs with pain. I can barely move my arms or wings. Every shift of the chain scrapes the raw flesh around my shoulders. Yet the physical agony is nothing compared to the roiling torment in my mind. Kill Elyria. Or watch her slaughtered while I die too. The Alpha offers no alternative.

"What do I do?" I whisper to the empty cell, voice cracking. My thoughts spiral. If

she's delivered to the clan, I'll be forced to stand before the entire host, weapons in hand, eyes on her terrified face. I cannot. My whole being aches at the very image. Better to die. But if I simply refuse, they'll kill her anyway, likely in a more brutal fashion. No matter the choice, the clan wins. We lose. My throat tightens with grief.

Memories flood me: her laughter in quiet moments, her unwavering gaze when we overcame each crisis together, the feel of her soft warmth in my arms during that final night we truly had each other. "I'm sorry," I mutter, though she can't hear. "I promised to protect you. And now I can do nothing."

Hours crawl by in that cell, torchlight flickering across the corridor outside. Occasionally, a guard passes, sneering or spitting in my direction. Once, Varzak returns to hurl insults, goading me to rage. I close my eyes, refusing to give him the satisfaction. My mind rummages for some desperate plan—escape? But how can I break these chains alone? Allies in the clan? I doubt any would defy the Alpha for my sake. I'm truly alone.

Still, a faint ember of defiance lingers. I recall Elyria's courage, how she never succumbed to despair even when shackled by dark elves. If there's any chance to free her, I must keep faith. I will not hurt or kill her. I'd rather die. The question is how to ensure she survives.

On the second day of my imprisonment, judging by the changing torches—someone unexpected visits. The cell door creaks open, and an older gargoyle steps in, his wings dusty with age. Rhyzgran, once a trainer of novices, stands with a troubled expression. He waves away the guard, who stands outside to give us a measure of privacy. Rhyzgran was never cruel, as some trainers were. He always believed in harnessing a gargoyle's mind as much as its body. My chest twists with memory.

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“Korrin,” he murmurs, voice tinged with sadness. “You truly strayed this far?” He glances at my shackles.

I glare, though a flicker of respect remains. “I strayed from mindless slaughter, if that’s what you mean.”

He sighs. “The clan is in uproar. The Alpha demands your execution if you fail to kill the purna, but some wonder if you might yet atone.”

“There’s no atonement in murder,” I snap, words biting. “She’s not the monster they claim. You know how we were taught to fear and hate purnas without question.” My breathcatches in a ragged sob. “I found truth outside this lair—some are not evil.”

Rhyzgran’s gaze shifts, torn. “The clan lost hundreds to purna curses. Old wounds shape our laws. But I always suspected we oversimplified. The Alpha’s decree is absolute, though. Disobeying is... suicide.”

“Then I choose that,” I hiss, though tears sting my eyes. “I won’t kill her.”

His shoulders slump, wings drooping. “Korrin... if you won’t do it, others will. And you’ll die, painfully.” He drags a hand down his face. “I can’t watch that happen, but what can I do? The Alpha’s word is law. If I intervene, I share your fate.”

A bitter laugh spills from my lips. “I ask for no help. Let me face it. Perhaps it’s the only path left.”

Silence stretches. He looks at me with genuine sorrow, a paternal softness I once

admired. “I wish it were different,” he whispers. “You were our brightest executioner, unstoppable. Now... you’ve undone it all for a human.”

I swallow. “She’s more than that. She’s everything.” The confession burns my throat. I love her.

He nods, eyes glassy. “I’ll pray to the old stones for your mercy, Korrin. That is all I can offer.” With that, he turns away, footsteps echoing in the corridor. The cell door slams, leaving me alone again.

I languish another day, wracked by pain and fear for Elyria. Each moment crawls, each breath a reminder that time runs short. Then, abruptly, on the third day (or fourth—hard to tell), Varzak reappears with a sinister gleam in his eyes.

“Rise, traitor,” he snarls, unlocking the chains at my ankles but keeping my wrists manacled. “The Alpha summons you. Your precious purna is on her way to the fortress. The dark elves deliver her soon.”

My stomach plummets, heart slamming. She’s alive. Relief and dread meld in a sickening wave. They truly plan to force me to kill her in a public spectacle. My limbs shake as I stand, wings cramped from disuse. Varzak smirks, jabbing me toward the corridor. I can’t let them see how terrified I am.

They march me through the labyrinthine passages, up and up, until we reach an antechamber outside the Alpha’s throne hall. Elders gather in hushed conversation, eyes flicking to me with contempt. Varzak announces my arrival, shoving me forward. A hush settles. Gargoyles on either side sneer or mutter curses. All want my blood.

The Alpha’s voice booms from within the hall. “Bring him,” he commands.

Varzak pushes me through the doorway. The hall is more crowded than before—many gargoyles stand on the periphery, possibly drawn by the scandal. The braziers glow with an almost celebratory malice, as if the clan awaits a savage show. My eyes flick to the dais. The Alpha stands, massive wings partially spread, staff in one clawed hand. His gaze pins me with cold fury.

“Korrin,” he says, voice reverberating. “Your time of judgment arrives. The dark elves will bring the purna soon. We shall test your loyalty at last.”

I manage a trembling breath, forcing myself not to collapse under the hateful stares. My injuries throb. “If she arrives... what do you intend?”

A sneer curves his lips. “You will execute her before the entire clan. Prove you remain our executioner, loyal to our survival above all else.” His eyes narrow. “Defy me, and the clan tears you both limb from limb. Slowly.”

An elder steps forward, a female gargoyle with silver-streaked horns. She regards me with grim disapproval. “The clan has no use for an executioner who loves a purna. Will you uphold our ancient vow, Korrin, or confirm your betrayal?”

I clench my chained fists. All the clan is here. If I refuse, they’ll kill her. My breath hitches. But if I do as they say, I become the monster she once feared. My heart writhes in agony. There must be a third path. But how?

The Alpha’s gaze intensifies, seeming to peer into my soul. “I smell your hesitation,” he hisses. “Do not hope for a miracle. The moment she arrives, you’ll have a blade in your hand. And the clan will watch. One clean strike, or we punish you both. Decide now, Korrin. Surrender to your sworn duty.”

The hall is deathly silent, every gargoyle’s eyes locked on me. My mind whirls, searching for any flicker of hope. I can’t kill her. But if I openly refuse, they’ll tear me

apart, then likely kill her anyway. Is there any chance to turn the clan's loyalty? Could I sabotage the moment of execution?

My voice trembles. "You will see my choice," I manage, struggling to keep defiance from betraying my plan. "When the time comes."

A low rumble of disapproval passes through the onlookers. The Alpha's mouth twists, displeased by my evasive answer. Yet he says only, "Take him below, keep him under watch. When the purna arrives, we hold the ceremony."

Varzak seizes my arm, marching me out again. Gargoyles hiss curses as we pass, spitting at my feet. My soul feels numb. Elyria is alive, at least. But I must kill her or face the clan's wrath. My breath shudders with silent grief.

Varzak leads me to a small antechamber, not the full dungeon. A cluster of younger gargoyles stand guard. I'm pinned to a thick chain bolted in the center of the floor, forced to kneel. A hush falls as Varzak leans in close, voice dripping with malice.

"Soon, the dark elves bring your precious human. We gather in the main arena, and you'll do your duty. Or I'll carve her heart out myself. Slowly." He runs a claw across my throat, eyes bright with sadistic glee. Then he departs, leaving the guards to watch me.

I slump, chest tightening with dread. The "arena" is an open cavern near the fortress's core, used for clan rites—birth celebrations, challenges, punishments. I recall witnessing traitors executed there, the crowd roaring. Now, I'm forced to stand in that circle, a blade in hand, Elyria at my mercy. I'd sooner slice my own throat. But that saves no one.

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Time blurs. My entire body shakes with exhaustion, old wounds throbbing. But the emotional agony dwarfs physical pain. I keep recalling Elyria's trembling form, how she looked the first time I spared her. What if I have to look into her eyes and see trust or betrayal?

A door slams outside. Footsteps pound the corridor. Gargoyles come and go, whispering about the dark elves' arrival. My breath comes in ragged gasps. It's happening. Soon they'll drag me to that arena. I must do something. My mind churns—maybe I can feign compliance, then turn on the Alpha. But the clan's enforcers will be everywhere. Suicide. Still, that might buy Elyria a chance to flee. She's collared, likely shackled. She can't outrun them alone. My heart sinks further. Is there truly no hope?

At last, a guard steps in. "It's time," he grunts, unchaining me from the floor but keeping my wrists bound in heavy manacles. "Don't struggle." I clench my jaw, letting him yank me upright. My ankles quake, wings pinned behind me. Two more guards flank me, each gripping an arm. The corridor is thick with tension. Every gargoyle we pass stares with contempt or curiosity. I see no friendly faces, no hidden allies. Trapped.

They march me down a flight of stairs, across a wide corridor lined with torches. The air thickens with excitement, as if the entire fortress hums with anticipation. My chest aches. I catch glimpses of gargoyles gathering in droves around the entrance to the central arena—a cavernous space where I once trained. My stomach flips. It's real. They're going to force me to do this in front of everyone.

We enter through a side gate, stepping into a vast circular chamber. Tiered stone

benches rise around the perimeter, jammed with gargoyles—warriors, elders, novices. Torches mounted high on pillars cast harsh light over the central ring, an open floor of polished stone. My wings fold in tight, an instinctive reaction to the throng of watchers. A hush ripples through the crowd as they see me. They came to watch a spectacle. My heart pounds, fear and hatred mingling in my veins.

At the far side stands the Alpha on a raised platform, staff in hand. Varzak stands near him, arms folded, expression triumphant. The crowd parts, letting me see a second set of metal gates across the ring. My breath catches. A group of dark elves stand there, elves I half-recognize as fortress overlords, with a single chained figure among them. My vision blurs with tears. Elyria.

She looks gaunt, bound at the wrists, collar still around her neck. A fresh bruise darkens her cheek, and her eyes dart frantically across the arena. When she sees me, her face twists with heartbreak. I swallow a broken cry. She's alive, but battered. They said they'd deliver her to the Alpha—and here she is, an offering of cruelty.

The crowd hushes as the Alpha raises a claw. "Clan," he booms, voice echoing off the vaulted ceiling. "We gather to witness an act of redemption—or final justice. Korrin, once our proud executioner, has strayed. But we give him a chance to reclaim honor. By slaying this purna, he atones for all."

A murmur ripples among the gargoyles, some cheering, others looking grim. My stomach roils. The dark elves push Elyria forward, into the ring. She staggers, chain rattling. The Alpha turns to me. "Korrin," he calls. "Step forth."

I close my eyes, the entire arena watching. My heart roars: I cannot kill her. But how can I save us both from the alpha's wrath?

ELYRIA

I've been dragged through these corridors so many times now, I can't recall how many days have passed since I last drew a free breath. Each tunnel is dimly lit by guttering torches, the walls sweating damp and mildew, the floor slick with old grime. Orcish slaves might have carved these passages long ago—now they're just another extension of the gloom that devours everything in the gargoyle stronghold.

Over the past handful of days, the dark elves have moved me from one makeshift cell to another, shuffling me under heavy guard. They claim to be acting on behalf of the gargoyle Alpha, ensuring I'm securely caged while my "trial" or my "execution" is arranged. I've lost track of how many times I've been gagged, bound, or forced to kneel while sneering elves deliver scraps of water or stale bread. Each time I see that gargoyle crest etched on the towering walls, my stomach lurches: Korrin's clan. The same place that once belonged to him as an executioner. Now it's my prison, and possibly his, too.

Every second I'm here is a fresh wave of terror. The chain around my throat is heavier than ever, the collar biting raw circles into my skin. My wrists are shackled in front of me, limiting my range to a brief span of movement. My ankles feel bruised from rough handling. And though the dark elves are my jailors—along with a smattering of gargoyle overseers—I can't stop imagining Korrin somewhere in these same halls. Is he captive, too? Has he succumbed to his clan's demands?

I recall the last time I saw him, bloodied, pinned by a gargoyle's brutal dive, dark elves swarming his fallen body. The memory is a twisted dagger in my chest. Surely no one could survive that. But a tiny ember of hope flickers, refusing to die. He's survived worse. He is unstoppable, right? My thoughts churn day and night: Will he come for me? Or will he betray me to save his own life?

My mind snarls in circles, memories tangling of the ambush, the wild blow that took

him down. My heart aches. If he's gone, I might as well be gone, too. Because I'm chained once more in this fortress, facing a death I cannot escape. A slow suffocation of the spirit. And yet part of me—some stubborn spark—wants to believe that he's still out there, battered but alive, fighting for a miracle.

On the day my life is set to be decided, though I can't quite pinpoint how I know it's the day—the dark elves shove me into a new cell, deeper in the fortress. This chamber, more imposing than the last, has carved gargoyle effigies leering from the walls. Torch brackets cast elongated shadows of fanged faces across the floor. Above me, the ceiling arches high, lined with hooks that might once have held captured or caged beasts. Now, I'm the caged one.

A gargoyle stands guard by the iron gate, arms folded. He doesn't speak to me, only watches with contempt. Behind him, two dark elves hover, crossbows slung over their shoulders. I sense the tension between gargoyle and elf, an uneasy truce. Maybe the clan allied with these elves just to keep me penned. The realization draws a ragged laugh from my throat. I must be important to them—dangerous enough to unite old enemies.

My ankles are shackled to a ring in the center of the floor, with just enough slack to let me sit or stand. The collar chain is looped around a second iron post, forming a humiliating tether that keeps me from moving more than a few strides. Hours creep by, each minute hammered by the knowledge that a final judgment is near. I try to quell the trembling in my limbs, but the chain rattles anyway, betraying my fear. I can't stop shaking.

Strangely, in the corners of my mind, something stirs. A faint hum, like a distant pulse. It's not the clang of metal or the hush of footsteps. It comes from within me, a thread of awareness that prickles in my veins. My magic? The purna inheritance I never fully believed in. Over the past days, it's flickered once or twice—like a candle in a windstorm—whenever I felt cornered. But it never built to anything real, never

manifested in a way that could break these chains.

Part of me wonders, could I truly unleash some force strong enough to free me? Fear clenches my heart at the thought. The rumors say a High Purna's awakened magic can reshape reality or burn entire armies. But I have no training, no idea how to channel such power. And if it flares uncontrolled, who might it harm—even Korrin, if he's alive?

I swallow, tears scalding my eyes. Focus on survival, on him. The day drags on. No food, minimal water. Guards change shifts, but they keep me under constant watch. The gargoyle who stands guard sneers each time I look up, as if my existence repulses him. A purna locked in gargoyle territory is an abomination. The threat is so thick I can taste it.

At some point, a group of elves enters the corridor, whispering among themselves. One—an officer with a jagged scar across his cheek—steps to the gate, eyes me with cruel amusement. “They’ll summon you soon,” he says in a voice meant to unsettle me. “The Alpha demands a public display. Your gargoyle friend will be forced to do his duty.”

My heart lurches, blood roaring in my ears. Korrin's alive? My entire body stiffens. “Where is he?” I demand, voice hoarse. “Is he—hurt?”

The elf's scarred lips twitch. “He's alive enough,” he taunts. “But that might change if he disobeys. The Alpha's going to make him prove loyalty by slitting your throat.”

My throat clenches. A wave of dizziness hits me. He's alive. He's in the fortress, forced to kill me. I can hardly breathe. The elf laughs at my horror, then leaves with his retinue, footsteps echoing ominously.

The guard gargoyle smirks, tail flicking. “It's what you deserve, purna,” he growls.

My gut churns with equal parts relief and terror:Korrin is here, but what if they coerce him to kill me?

I slump to the floor, chain tugging at my neck. Emotions swirl: joy that he survived, dread that I might face him in an execution arena. My tears slip down unbidden.He won't do it. Right?But the memory of how the clan breaks traitors sears my thoughts.They'll torture him until he obeys.My chest heaves, stifling sobs. I brace my shackled wrists against my forehead, ignoring the guard's jeers.Don't cry, don't break.But it's so hard.

Time bleeds again. Sometime later, a half hour, or half a day?—the gate creaks open, and a small party of gargoyles stands there, led by a lean female with cold eyes. She unlocks my ankle ring and collar chain from the floor. Another gargoyle seizes the chain, dragging me upright. Pain shoots through my shoulders. My battered ankles protest.It's happening.I see the finality in their expressions.

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They haul me along a corridor that broadens into a flight of steps. I fight not to stumble, but my legs are cramped, weak. Each time I falter, the chain yanks mercilessly. My lungs burn. The fortress hum feels louder now—an undercurrent of anticipation, like a crowd gathering. They're going to stage a spectacle. A public execution. Possibly Korrin is forced to do the deed. I swallow bile.

We traverse corridors flanked by gargoyles. Some glare with contempt, others smirk. A hush falls as I pass, the chain rattling my humiliating captivity. My mind whirls: No escape, no weapons, no illusions. My dormant magic flickers again, an electric buzz in my blood. Desperation surges—I want to free it, burn these chains, but I have no clue how. I never learned. My mother died before she could teach me. The purna lineage is a ghost in my veins.

My breath hitches at each step, tears threatening as I imagine Korrin on the other side of that door, a blade in his hands, forced to choose. Please, gods, let him find a way. But I recall how the dark elves hammered into me the futility of hope. They told me no matter where I ran, I'd be recaptured. Now the gargoyles prove them right. My nails dig into my palms. I can't let them break me before I see him one last time.

At last, the corridor opens onto a wide set of steps. The guard gargoyles flank me. I see a pair of massive doors ahead, slightly ajar, from which a dull roar emanates—like a crowd's collective breath. Torchlight flickers across the threshold. My heart pounds. The arena. If I wasn't already shaking, I'd collapse.

They push me forward, the chain snapping taut. Fear saturates my every pore. Korrin... I cling to his memory: his protective arms, his fierce scowl at any threat, the gentle way he'd hold me while I trembled. I can't lose that.

The doors swing open, and I'm thrust into a vast circular chamber thrumming with gargoyle voices. Stone tiers rise along the sides, filled with a sea of gargoyle faces. Torches ring the arena's perimeter, throwing flickering light over the polished floor. My eyes dart across the crowd—some gargoyles snarl at me, others watch with cold indifference. The stench of tension is suffocating. This is a public spectacle indeed.

In the center stands a dais, and on it is the Alpha, looming like a regal beast. His obsidian wings are partially unfurled, his horns framing a visage carved by cruelty. At his side is Varzak, if I recall the name from my glimpses—an enforcer with a twisted smirk. But my gaze zeroes in on the figure forced to kneel at the dais's edge, shackled but unbowed: Korrin. My heart almost leaps from my chest. He's alive. Fresh tears spring to my eyes.

He's battered, wings strapped with rough bandages. A slash mars his chest, though a fresh scab covers it. His expression is hollow, eyes flicking to me the instant I'm forced forward. Shock and anguish flare across his face. He struggles against his own restraints, as though wanting to reach me. My soul lurches. He's truly here. But so bound. So wounded.

Gargoyles part around me, forming a ring that leaves me no escape. My captors wrench the chain, forcing me into the center. I see the glint of a sword lying on a stone pedestal—dark metal, carved with runes. My mouth goes dry. The executioner's blade. A wave of nausea churns.

The Alpha lifts a clawed hand, and the audience hushes. A deep voice resonates, echoing across the arena. "Clan," he announces, eyes glowing. "Behold the purna who threatened our survival. She's here to face justice from our chosen executioner—Korrin." He gestures to where Korrin kneels. Murmurs ripple among the crowd.

My pulse hammers. I see how Korrin's face contorts, tears shining in his eyes as they

unchain him from the dais but keep shackles around his wrists. Another gargoyle shoves him toward the blade. They mean for him to do this. My throat goes tight. He won't... He can't... but they'll kill us both if he refuses. My mind screams.

Korrin staggers, catching himself against the stone pedestal. The clan roars in anticipation. My guards drag me across the floor, until I'm only a few feet from him, the chain still taut. Our eyes lock—he's trembling. "Elyria," he mouths. My tears flow freely.

The Alpha's voice booms. "Korrin, take the blade. Complete your vow. Slay her before us all." A hush thickens. I see Varzak grin, crossing his arms with smug expectation.

Korrin's claws scrape the dais. Blood seeps from reopened wounds on his side. With a trembling breath, he grips the black-hilted sword. He won't meet my eyes for a heartbeat, anguish twisting his features. When he does look up, I see pure torment—love and apology warring with fear.

My throat constricts. I can't speak, words fail me. All I can do is stare, hoping the bond we forged transcends this horror. Perhaps he sees it in my eyes: I trust you, no matter what.

He lifts the blade, stepping forward. My captors force me to my knees, pressing me to lower my head. My entire body shakes. This is it. The clan rumbles with savage excitement. They want my blood. My vision blurs. My chest feels caved in. Korrin...

He stands over me, sword raised. The hush is deafening. My breath comes shallow, heart pounding so loud it's all I hear. He won't, he won't... but if he doesn't, we die. My magic flickers in my blood, a faint spark that can't break these chains, can't shield me from the blade. The gloom closes in, time slowing to a single point of tension.

Korrin trembles, tears sliding down his face. He meets my gaze, lips parted. A single moment of absolute clarity: We love each other, even in this final breath. Then he roars, bringing the blade down.

I scream, bracing for agony. My eyes squeeze shut, every muscle bracing for steel biting my flesh. A wave of air rushes overhead. But... the blow doesn't land. Instead, I hear metal striking stone with a resounding crash, sparks skittering. The crowd gasps in dismay. I crack my eyes open, heart hammering, to see Korrin's blade embedded in the ground beside me.

He's panting, glaring at the Alpha, tears mixing with fury. "No," he snarls, voice echoing in the hush. "I will not execute her."

A collective roar erupts from the stands, outrage, shock, disbelief. My entire body floods with raw hope. He refused. But fear crashes just as quickly. They'll kill us both now. The Alpha's face contorts in wrath. Varzak leaps forward, claws unsheathed.

"You dare?" Varzak howls, charging. Korrin whips around, intercepting him with a savage blow. The crowd surges to its feet, pandemonium breaking loose. Gargoyles leap from the tiers, some aiming to subdue Korrin, others just eager for blood. My chain jerks as my guards try to drag me back, but confusion reigns.

"Korrin!" I shout, tears streaming. He spares me one desperate glance. I see regret, love, and absolute resolve. Then he roars, flinging Varzak aside with pure ferocity. He's unstoppable for a heartbeat, but more gargoyles swarm him, wings and claws. We're about to die. My chest seizes. Yet I see Korrin's defiance blazing. He'd rather perish fighting than live as a slave to cruelty.

I'm yanked back by the chain, an elf or gargoyle, I can't tell in the chaos—trying to haul me from the arena. My mind reels: We're lost. But that faint hum inside me surges, fed by terror and heartbreak. My veins tingle. Is this the magic? Could I do

something?

Another blow from Korrin sends gargoyles sprawling. The Alpha roars from the dais, unleashing an oppressive aura that crackles with arcane might. My head dizzies. Korrin staggers from a slash across his wing. He can't hold out much longer. Despair swells, tears blur my sight. I can't watch him die. A raw cry tears from my throat, agony fueling my entire being.

Suddenly, a spark flickers inside me, a warmth blossoming in my core. My limbs tingle, the chain around my neck vibrating as though responding to an unseen force. Confusion floods me—Is this me or some external surge? My breath catches. I recall old purna tales: A sudden awakening, triggered by mortal peril. Could that be happening?

“Stop,” I gasp, voice quaking with desperation. The guard hauling my chain pauses, confusion on his face. My terror blossoms into raw anger. A crackle of energy arcs along my skin. I see it—tiny sparks, silver-white, dancing on my arms. The guard's eyes widen. “Witchcraft,” he hisses, rearing back.

My heart seizes: I have magic. I sense it swirling at my fingertips, but it's a chaos I can't direct. Still, I must try. Korrin howls in pain as another gargoyle slams him against the pedestal. My soul wrenches free of caution. “No!” I scream.

A torrent of white-hot energy surges from my hands. The chain rattles violently, the collar heating with a furious hum. The guard is flung backward, colliding with an elf behind him. My wrists glow with an ethereal shimmer that cracks the metal cuffs. I gasp in shock, half-terrified at the raw power sizzling through me. The chain around my throat smokes, but it doesn't break. Not enough. My magic wavers, untrained. My head throbs, an overwhelming dizziness.

All around, gargoyles recoil in panic or rage. The crowd roars, some screeching

“Purna!” and others rearing back with fear. My vision swims. I see Korrin pinned by three gargoyles, Varzak raising a spear. The Alpha bellows commands. My entire being pulses with one thought: Save him, or we lose everything.

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I gather what remains of that shimmering force, pressing it into a single, desperate push. My arms tremble. The collar chain tightens, sizzling on my neck. Pain scorches me, but I channel the spark anyway, forcing it outward in a wave of pale fire. The ring beneath my feet cracks. The air thrums. A half-dozen gargoyles close to me reel back, hissing in shock. The chain near the collar warps, metal turning red-hot.

The force abruptly sputters, leaving me dizzy, half-blind with pain. My magic flickers out, a candle snuffed by the tempest. I can't maintain it. The collar remains, though partially melted, searing my skin. I collapse to my knees, panting, tears streaming from the exertion. My untested magic is not enough to free me from this entire clan.

As the haze clears, I find myself surrounded by more gargoyles. My brief wave of magic incited chaos, but the clan is too many. They regroup swiftly, wings spread, weapons drawn. The air is thick with fury. Varzak emerges from the scrum, face twisted in rage, blood dripping from a wound on his brow. He stands near Korrin's battered form. My heart seizes. Korrin...

He's pinned again, one gargoyle's foot on his back, another wrenching his arms behind him. His breath comes in shallow gasps, blood matting his hair. He meets my gaze across the ring, sorrow on his face. I tried, I mouth silently, tears scalding my cheeks.

"Enough!" the Alpha's voice booms, drowning out the crowd. He strides forward, staff crackling with arcane energy, eyes burning with wrath. "She dares use purna magic in our sacred arena? We end this now."

Varzak spits on the floor, stepping back. The Alpha raises his staff, pointing it at me.

I sense a build of oppressive magic. My weakened limbs quake. He's going to strike me down. My attempt at power was fleeting, leaving me drained. I can't muster that force again. Dread paralyzes me as the staff glows with crimson lightning.

Korrin lets out a guttural roar, struggling anew. "No—Alpha, spare her!" he shouts, voice cracking with raw anguish. My soul lurches, but the Alpha ignores him, staff swirling with lethal brilliance. I'm going to die. My final thought is of Korrin, battered, unable to save me.

But at the last instant, the Alpha falters, glancing at the stunned gargoyles around me. Perhaps he wants this to remain Korrin's responsibility, a twisted test of loyalty. He lowers the staff, features contorted in a sneer. "Bind her. She tried to awaken her magic. She's dangerous. Secure her properly."

A swarm of gargoyles lunges, wrestling me to the ground. My brief surge of magic is gone, leaving me dizzy and powerless. They clamp new metal shackles on my wrists, ignoring my whimper as the collar tears fresh burns into my neck. My face presses against cold stone, tears dripping. All is lost again.

Korrin is forced to watch, pinned, helpless. Our eyes meet. I see heartbreak there, and a flicker of hopeless rage. The Alpha addresses the clan. "We shall reconvene at day's end. Korrin must carry out the execution or face a traitor's demise. Let the purna reflect on her final hours."

My breath shudders. The crowd roars in approval or condemnation—I can't distinguish. My mind spins, everything a blur of fresh tears and throbbing pain. Gargoyles drag me toward a side exit, presumably another dungeon cell. I catch one last glimpse of Korrin, pinned on the dais, eyes raw with sorrow. I can't do this again.

They lock me in a cramped alcove off the arena corridor, heavier bars forming a claustrophobic cage. My arms remain shackled, the collar chain threaded through an

iron ring in the wall. I slump against the bars, body trembling. The faint heat of my attempted magic still hums in my veins, but it's ephemeral, impossible to grasp again. I can't replicate that wave, not without control or guidance.

Hours pass in a haze. Outside, I hear distant roars from the crowd, presumably other events or preparations. The pungentreek of gargoyle musk seeps in. My entire being aches with the knowledge that come nightfall, I face the final stage: a forced execution at Korrin's hands. My chest quakes with a silent sob. He won't kill me. But if he doesn't, the clan rips us both apart.

I realize with a sick twist: the Alpha might want to torture me further, forcing Korrin to watch. Maybe they'll chain us in the arena again. My breath hitches, nails biting my palms. The chain rattles whenever I shift. What can I do? Wait passively for death?

Despair weighs like lead. I recall Korrin's vow, the nights we spent forging a bond deeper than fear. He'd never willingly slay me. But the clan's brutality is unmatched. If he tries to defy them a second time, we both die. Is that the best outcome? Dying together? My throat burns at the thought.

I feel a gentle tug at the frayed edges of my mind. A swirl of memory: the half-buried monastery, the archive scroll describing High Purna lineage, the faint illusions of unstoppable power. If I truly am that scion, should I not be able to fight back? To break these chains? Yet the collar, these runes... they stifle me, or maybe my fear does.

I close my eyes, tears leaking down my cheeks. My lips shape a silent prayer to any spirit or star that might listen: Give me a miracle. But the cold, empty halls answer with nothing.

The fortress's cyclical routine intensifies as dusk falls. I hear gargoyles gathering

once more, stomping in unison. Firelight seeps through the barred window high on the corridor wall. My guard stands watch, occasionally muttering about the “grand finale.” They want a spectacle. My veins run cold. I cling to the bars, forcing my stiff body upright. The chain drags.

At last, a squad of gargoyles arrives, unlocking my cell. They yank me out, ignoring my pained whimper. My ankles drag on the stones, wrists shackled. The lead gargoyle sneers, taillashing. “Time to fulfill your role, purna. If the traitor fails, you both die. If he obeys, at least he is spared. You? Not so lucky.”

I can’t muster a reply, only trembling breath. My eyes burn. They drag me through a labyrinth of corridors, then down a narrow passage that leads to a side entrance of the arena—different from before. The roars of the assembled clan echo ominously, a savage chant. Adrenaline spikes, my heart in my throat. No escape, no second chances.

At the threshold, they pause. My hands shake uncontrollably. Another guard grips my chin, forcing me to meet his gaze. “You’ll kneel in the ring. Don’t try that magic trick again. We’ll see how far it gets you when the Alpha intervenes.”

I bare my teeth in a last flicker of defiance. “Let Korrin go,” I whisper, voice raw. He snorts, shoving me forward. The doors open, torchlit columns framing the ring. The crowd’s roar intensifies, hitting me like a physical wave.

I’m shoved into that same circular arena, the crowd overhead jeering and stomping. Torchlight illuminates every corner, gargoyles perched on the stone tiers, hungry for violence. My legs nearly give out, but the guards drag me to the center. My chain is fastened to a metal ring in the floor, ensuring I can’t run or hide. I see the dais again, the Alpha looming in regal menace, staff in hand. Varzak stands behind him, arms crossed, wearing a triumphant sneer.

And there... Korrin, flanked by two gargoyle enforcers, stands to the side of the dais, unshackled but battered. He clutches that same black-hilted blade, knuckles white. My eyes lock on his. His breath catches, heartbreak written on his face. He has to do it. My chest stabs with agony. He's forced to kill me or watch them tear us both apart. My lips quiver with unspoken pleas. Don't do it, but if you don't...

The Alpha raises his staff, commanding silence. The crowd hushes, an expectant hush that makes my skin crawl. He gestures to me, kneeling in chains. "Behold the purna, a threat to our clan's survival. She dared awaken her magic in our midst. Now she faces final judgment."

A cheer of bloodlust rises. My stomach lurches, tears welling. My gaze flicks to Korrin once more. He steps forward, sword trembling. The Alpha's gaze pins him. "Korrin, we grant you this last chance to redeem your betrayal. Take her life, prove your loyalty."

Thunderous silence. My heart hammers so violently it drowns my hearing. Korrin... please.

He exhales a shudder, stepping into the ring. The guards holding me release their grip, stepping back to watch. The chain still tethers me to the floor, enough slack to stand or kneel. I manage to push myself upright, though my wrists remain bound. I look into his eyes, searching for some sign, any sign. He lifts the blade, lips parted, tears glistening. He's crying.

His voice emerges, shaking. "Alpha, I beg you?—"

"Silence," the Alpha hisses. "Perform your duty."

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Korrin's chest heaves, wings twitching with nerves. Then his gaze falls on me, and I see that same heartbreak from our first near-execution. He lifts the sword over my head. The crowd leans in, breathless. I can't stop trembling. My lips shape his name in a silent plea.

He hesitates, tears rolling down his cheeks. Time stretches, tension thick as pitch. The Alpha snarls from the dais, lightning crackling around his staff. "End her!" he roars. "Now!"

Korrin's face contorts in agony. He raises the blade higher. My own tears blur everything. The entire clan leans forward, a monstrous hush. I brace myself, half expecting the blow to land. Either he kills me, or the clan kills us both. My mind reels with final acceptance: I love you, Korrin.

Suddenly, at the last second, he roars, twisting the blade away from me. "I can't!" he bellows, voice breaking. The clan explodes in fury. Gargoyles leap from their seats, roaring curses. My breath seizes. He refused again. Relief and terror crash over me.

The Alpha snarls, power flaring in a swirling red glow around him. Varzak lunges from the dais, wings beating. "Then die together," he snarls, brandishing a spear. The crowd surges, gargoyles dropping into the ring, claws bared. My chain rattles as I scramble to Korrin, tears soaking my face.

He grabs my shoulder, pulling me behind him. The sword trembles in his grip. "Elyria," he gasps, pressing his forehead to mine in that split second of chaos. "I'm sorry. I can't—I won't?—"

“We stand together,” I whisper, voice shaking with love and dread. “One last time.”

He nods, tears shining. We turn as the first wave of gargoyles converges. Swords glint, claws slash. The Alpha’s roar echoes in the cavern, promising slaughter. We brace, hopelessly outnumbered. My wrists are shackled, the chain fixed to the floor, limiting my range. He can fight, but we can’t outrun them all. We’re truly doomed. My heart clenches: At least we’re together.

Korrin brandishes the sword. He slashes at the nearest gargoyle, a savage blow that forces them back. Another tries to divebomb from above, but Korrin spins, wincing as his wounded side bleeds anew. My chain tugs me, forcing me to remain within a few steps. I huddle close to him, useless in these shackles. A gargoyle leaps in from behind, fangs bared. I shriek, stumbling aside. Korrin whirls, parrying with a grunt, the ring of steel on steel filling my ears.

We can’t last. More gargoyles close in, spurred by the Alpha’s wrath. My heart twists with raw despair. We’ll die here. Yet a numb calm settles. Better this, fighting together, than me executed by his blade. The tears on my cheeks burn. I love you, Korrin, even in death.

A gargoyle lunges at me, ignoring Korrin’s slash. My chain prevents me from dodging far. He rakes his claws across my arm, tearing cloth and skin. Pain flares, a ragged scream escaping my throat. In that instant, my magic flutters, responding to mortal terror. I feel a spark of white heat swirl inside me. But it flickers, no more stable than before. If only I could unleash it fully. My eyes clench shut, tears and blood mingling.

Korrin roars, cleaving the attacker’s wing. The gargoyle collapses, shrieking. Another pair move in, unstoppable. The crowd roars for blood, the Alpha’s laughter cold above us. My vision dims. All is lost. I sag, one hand pressed to the fresh wound. My magic flickers and fails. I can’t harness it. Korrin stands over me, shielded by savage

defiance, but he's battered, bleeding from multiple gashes. This is the end.

He tries one final surge, blade raised, but a gargoyle from behind slams a club into his knee. He buckles with a cry, losing his grip on the sword. Another cracks him across the back, and he collapses, chest heaving. I scream his name, tears blinding me. The chain yanks me down as well.

The Alpha steps forward, staff crackling with arcane energy. The ring around us hushes, gargoyles pulling back to let their leader deliver the final blow. My entire body trembles with heartbreak, eyes locked on Korrin's battered form. We're about to die. The alpha sneers, staff raised, red lightning dancing. Korrin tries to push upright, but Varzak's foot slams him back to the floor.

Hot tears streak my face. I lurch forward on my knees, ignoring my shackled wrists. "Korrin," I sob. He meets my gaze, lips mouthing an apology. Everything slows, a hush in my ears except for the rapid thunder of my heart. The alpha aims the staff at him, raw hate etched on obsidian features.

No. I won't watch him die. My chest constricts, rage and desperation surging. The leftover flicker of magic in my veins sparks wildly, responding to my raw emotion. I grit my teeth. I can't let them kill him. My limbs quake as I fight to channel that swirling power. Sparks crackle around my fingers, swirling silver light that reflects off my tears. The collar chain vibrates ominously, but I force the energy forward. I must try again.

The alpha's staff glows, ready to unleash a killing bolt. My mind screams: Now or never. I let out a raw shriek, pouring everything into that flicker. Pain explodes in my chest, the collar heating white-hot. A wave of silver flame bursts from my hands, colliding with the alpha's red lightning in a flash of blinding brilliance. The entire arena gasps.

Agony rips through me as the collar resists my power. My vision whites out. But I sense the alpha's staff sputtering under the collision, the recoil forcing him to stagger. The crowd roars in confusion. My magic surges beyond my control, ripping free in a blazing tide that scalds the ring's floor. A High Purna's spark. Gargoyles recoil from the searing wave. Varzak snarls, flinging Korrin aside to avoid the arcs of silver-white energy.

I collapse, screaming, as the collar sears into my flesh, choking the magic's release. Sparks dance across my body, but the runes on the collar hamper me from unleashing full devastation. My arms quake, shoulders burning as the wave dissipates, leaving only a haze of scorched stone and panicked gargoyles. I pant, tears streaming, vision dimming. I can't sustain it. The collar holds strong, leaving me half burned, half broken.

Elders rush to the alpha, who regains his balance. His eyes glow with fury, staff raised again. The crowd seethes. Korrin lies near the dais, struggling to move. My body is spent, magic drained. We've delayed doom by seconds. The alpha brandishes the staff, a killing blow aimed at me for sure. My chainhangs, partially melted but still intact, the collar fusing with my scorched neck. I can't even raise my arms.

Time slows as the alpha roars, summoning a final storm of red lightning. My mind shrieks: This is it. I glance at Korrin, our gazes locking one last time, love shining in the heartbreak. We can't save each other.

14

KORRIN

I'm on my knees, chest pounding, the ring of gargoyles looming around me like a wall of stone. The Alpha stands above, obsidian skin rippling with arcane fury, staff crackling with crimson lightning. The entire arena reeks of sweat and raw terror, and

I taste blood in the back of my throat. Elyria lies collapsed a dozen paces away, arms shackled, her chain half-melted but still pinning her to the floor. She's gasping, tears staining her ash-covered cheeks. It's as if every flicker of hope has been torn from us—yet we're both still breathing.

The clan roars for my blood, for her blood, for some savage display of final loyalty. My battered wings throb with each breath, a constant reminder of how close I am to complete ruin. I've refused the Alpha's command not just once but more, failing to execute her. The monstrous hush that fell after her last surge of magic has receded, replaced by a deafening clamor. Gargoyles circle the arena tiers, stamping and jeering. My heart flutters with raw panic. We can't fight them all.

I swallow, forcing myself to move. My side aches fiercely where a blade sliced through earlier. The wound drips a sluggish trickle of blood, spattering against the polished stone. I look at Elyria—my reason for defying everything I ever was. She's trembling, half-conscious, the collar scorched into her neck. My gut twists with rage. I can't let this be our end. She tries to lift her head, meeting my gaze through strands of tangled hair. In her eyes, I see heartbreak and an unspoken apology—she couldn't break free. And I see love, shining through agony. That flicker gives me the strength to stand.

I push up on shaking legs. My wings sag, half-spread. Gargoyles hiss at me from all sides, brandishing weapons. I can do nothing alone. The Alpha's staff cracks the air with a discharge of lightning, snapping me back to the present. He stands tall, horns curving, wings partially fanned to display his dominance.

"You think to defy me again?" he growls, voice echoing. A hush descends. Torches flare along the arena walls, illuminating the throng of onlookers. My mouth tastes of dust and despair, but I gather what remains of my spirit.

"Better defiance than a life spent murdering the innocent," I say, voice cracked but

resolute. My eyes flick to Elyria, still pinned by her half-melted chain.No more. I won't harm her to save myself.

The Alpha's obsidian lips peel back in a snarl, revealing fangs. "Then you choose death for both of you." His staff hums with lethal energy. "No more chances, Korrin. You were our prized executioner, and you spat on our laws. This purna threatens our clan's very survival."

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“She threatens nothing,” I retort, though my knees shake. “You threaten everything by chaining us to your fear.”

A ripple of shock runs through the crowd. I have never spoken to the Alpha so disrespectfully. But I can't hide my fury. If I die, let it be with truth on my tongue. Elyria stirs on the floor, struggling to push herself onto one elbow, her wide eyes locked on me. I wish I could gather her in my arms, but a ring of armed gargoyles stands between us.

The Alpha points his staff. “Your defiance ends here.” A swirl of red lightning arcs from the staff, aimed at me. I instinctively raise my wounded wing, bracing for agony. The bolt slams into me with a jolt of scorching pain. I choke on a cry, stumbling, wing membranes burning. He's powerful enough to kill me in one strike if he wishes.

My knees hit the ground again. Blood pulses in my ears. The taste of charred flesh floods my senses. Elyria screams my name, her voice hoarse and desperate. She tries to stand, chain rattling, but guards keep her pinned. The collar's runes glow, containing her purna spark. My chest heaves, mind spinning. This is the end. The Alpha readies another strike, staff raised high, the crowd bellowing for blood.

But then he halts, a gleam of vicious cunning flickering in his eyes. He lowers the staff slightly and gestures to the sword that remains embedded in the arena floor, not far from me. “You want to die a traitor's death? Or prove me wrong.” He sneers, glancing at the battered ring where Elyria kneels. “Pick up the blade again. End this purna. We might yet spare your miserable life.”

A savage hush. My breath rasps. I can barely stand, wings trembling from that lightning bolt. My entire body screams in pain. I close my eyes, recalling all that led me here: the day I first spared Elyria, the nights we shared in the wild, the tears in her eyes as we realized we could not exist without each other. I will not kill her. That oath is carved into my bones. The clan or the Alpha can do as they wish.

I force myself upright again, ignoring the waves of pain. My vision swims. The crowd shifts, anticipating my next move. Elyria sobs softly, tears cutting pale lines through the soot on her cheeks. She thinks we're doomed. A strangled noise escapes me. I must show them—I won't be controlled again.

The Alpha's voice booms, "Korrin, this is your last chance." His staff crackles, but he holds his strike, waiting to see if I'll pick up the sword. The entire arena hushes, a dreadful hush. I stagger toward the embedded blade, the gargoyles parting slightly to allow me. My hands tremble as I grip the hilt, yanking it from the stone. A hush of excitement or horror flutters among the watchers. They think I might do it.

Sword in hand, I pivot, ignoring the agony in my side. Elyria's chain rattles as she tries to crawl closer, tears rolling down her cheeks. The ring holds her fast. Her eyes meet mine, a silent question: Will you truly—? She can't finish the thought. My own heart clenches with love and anguish. I can't kill her, can't let them kill her either. The crowd presses in, wings rustling, waiting for me to strike.

A savage clarity grips me. The clan's pride is in my wings. They consider them a symbol of my lethal prowess, a gift from the Alpha to carry out his will. If I strip that away, I shatter the clan's hold on me. Yes, it's madness, but better than kill Elyria. My entire life, I soared above them as the perfect executioner. Now, I'll renounce that power in front of everyone.

Time slows. Elyria's eyes widen, sensing something. The Alpha snarls, sensing my intent. Gargoyles shift uncertainly, not sure what I'm doing. I tighten my grip on the

blade, inhaling a trembling breath. My gaze flicks from her tear-streaked face to the black, curved sword. I can't do it halfway—I must make a statement that no one can ignore. My wings burn with the memory of flight. Goodbye, old life.

With a roar that tears from the depths of my soul, I raise the sword overhead. But instead of driving it into Elyria, I swing it backward at my own wings. Pain explodes as steel meets flesh and membrane. The entire world becomes a shriek of agony. Gargoyles gasp in collective disbelief. The blade hacks into the arch of my left wing, snapping bone with a sickening crack. Fire surges through my nerves. My mouth opens in a silent scream, tears streaming. Blood spatters across the polished floor.

The crowd erupts in chaos. Some gargoyles recoil in horror, others snarl, trying to lunge forward. The Alpha bellows, staff blazing. But I'm not done—my mind roils with unstoppable momentum. Both wings. I pivot, swinging the blade again at my right wing, severing tendons, feeling the bone snap under the impact. Another roar tears from my lips, raw agony flooding every sense. My legs nearly buckle. I can't fly, I can't fight, but I choose her over flight or clan. The sword slips from my trembling hand, clanging on the stone.

Blood streams down my back, wings limp and shattered behind me. The ring echoes with stunned silence. Not even the Alpha's staff crackles. Elyria cries out my name, voice shaking with heartbreak. She sees me bleed, sees me sever the last piece of me that was the clan's property. I fall to my knees, tears scorching my cheeks, dizzy from pain. But I manage to rasp, "I do not need wings... to... protect her." My voice ragged. "I... choose her."

For a heartbeat, nobody moves. Gargoyles gape, stunned by my self-mutilation. Then pandemonium explodes. Half the clan roars in outrage, others recoil from the sheer brutality. The Alpha unleashes a howl of unbridled fury. "You lunatic!" he snarls, staff blazing anew. "You would rather maim yourself than obey me? Then I'll see

you both torn apart!”

Varzak leaps from the dais, brandishing a spear. Guards swarm the ring. My head spins with blood loss. Elyria screams my name, still chained, still powerless. The collar’s runes flicker, half-burned from her earlier surge of magic. If only she could break free. My heart lurches: We must survive this moment of chaos.

Summoning the last of my strength, I rise on unsteady legs, ignoring the agony. The remnants of my wings hang limp, excruciating with each step. I no longer have flight, but I can still fight. With a snarl, I stoop to grab the sword again. My arms shake, drenched in blood, but I grip the hilt with fierce resolve. I may die, but I’ll not let them murder her unopposed.

Varzak rushes me, spear aimed at my chest. Pain be damned, I swing the blade in a wide arc, forcing him back. He snarls, tail lashing. We circle each other, the crowd pressing in. My body is failing, but my will burns bright. I have no illusions: we’re hopelessly outnumbered. Still, I might buy her a chance. She tries to yank her chain from the floor ring, tears flooding her eyes, face a mask of dread. My heart twists.

Varzak lunges, feinting left, then thrusting the spear at my wounded flank. I manage a parry, wincing as the movement jars the broken stumps of my wings. Blood pools under me, making the floor slick. I slip, and Varzak seizes the opening, slamming the spear shaft into my ribcage. My vision darkens from pain. I gasp, knees nearly buckling. Varzak cackles, forcing me backward, aiming the spear at my throat. I can’t hold out.

Then a savage wave of silver-white light explodes behind Varzak, flinging him sideways with a startled yelp. I blink through tears to see Elyria, chain half-wrenched from the ring. Her arms glow with that same luminous energy as before, but stronger—like a storm condensed into human form. Her eyes blaze with an otherworldly radiance, shining silver tears. Her collar crackles, half-broken, runes

failing to suppress the surge. She's unleashing it fully, awakened by the horror of this moment.

The crowd screams in alarm. Gargoyles in the stands recoil from the raw magical force swirling around her, a vortex of shimmering power that crackles with ozone. The ring's floor cracks beneath her feet. The chain smokes where it touches her glowing wrists, metal warping under the heat. She's found the strength. My heart leaps with awe and fear—High Purna power truly awakened.

A wave of force radiates outward, hurling gargoyle guards off their feet. Even the Alpha staggers, staff flickering. The red lightning he conjures collides with her silver wave, scattering sparks across the ring. It's way stronger. Elyria lets out a wrenching cry, tears streaming down her glowing face as she pours everything into the release. The chain on her collar snaps with a tortured screech, links scattering. She stands free, arcs of silver energy dancing along her arms, hair whipping in an invisible wind.

The entire clan is thrown into chaos. Gargoyles scramble, some diving for cover, others trying to rally. Varzak tries to stand, but another pulse knocks him back down. My head spins. She's unstoppable in this moment. A fierce exultation courses through me: Yes, Elyria, destroy their tyranny. But fear grips me, too: can she control it? I must help her somehow.

Elyria advances across the ring, silver flame wreathing her. The floor cracks under each step, sending shockwaves that topple gargoyles left and right. The onlookers on the tiers cry out, half stampeding to flee. She gazes at me, heartbreak and determination mingling on her radiant features. "Korin," she chokes, tears in her voice. "I—I won't let them kill you."

I try to stand, but my legs tremble from blood loss and agony where my wings were severed. The sword clatters from my grip. "Elyria," I croak, eyes stinging with tears. "You're free—go!"

She shakes her head, silver aura crackling. “Not without you.” Her voice resonates with a power not entirely her own—like a storm’s fury laced with heartbreak. She clenches her fists, turning to face the Alpha, who gathers a final surge of red lightning, staff pointed at her. “No more!” she shouts.

He unleashes a bolt that rips toward her with violent speed. For an instant, my heart seizes. She might be overwhelmed. But Elyria raises her glowing arms, channeling the destructive wave of magic. The bolt collides with her silver barrier, sizzling in an explosion of sparks. She staggers under the impact, but doesn’t fall. Her aura flares, pushing the red lightning back, reversing it in a brilliant arc that engulfs the Alpha in a blaze of crackling energy.

He roars, knocked back, staff spinning from his grip. The dais trembles, pillars splintering. Stone fragments rain down. Gargoyles shriek as the entire structure cracks from the force. My jaw drops. She’s toppling the Alpha’s seat.

Sensing defeat, the clan’s lesser gargoyles scramble to retreat, flapping wings or diving through archways. Some turn to attack Elyria, but each time they close in, another burst of silver flame sends them sprawling. I muster a ragged breath. She’s terrifying in this power. But I see tears glistening on her cheeks, the toll it takes. Her body quakes, eyes glowing with a relentless brilliance. She can’t sustain this for long without burning herself out.

Varzak attempts one last lunge at me, spear raised, presumably to kill me in the confusion. I brace, though I’m nearly spent. But before he lands the blow, Elyria flings out a hand, silver arcs dancing. He’s hurled across the ring, slamming into a broken column with bone-snapping force. My stomach twists at the brutality, but relief floods me. She’s saved me again.

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The Alpha regains his feet on the collapsing dais, rage twisting his obsidian face. He stumbles, staff lost, red lightning flickering uselessly around his claws. Elyria levels her gaze on him, brow furrowing. I see the raw anguish in her expression: she doesn't want to kill him or any gargoyle, but he forces her hand. She releases another surge of power, a wave that cracks the dais. He's flung backward, roaring helplessly. A final crash echoes as stone pillars break, burying the Alpha in rubble. Dust plumes, swallowing him from view.

A hush of terrified awe grips the arena. The watchers scatter, fleeing through corridors or taking flight. Elyria breathes in ragged gasps, swaying on her feet. Her aura still glows, though it flickers dangerously. The entire ring is littered with debris, fallen gargoyles moaning or unconscious. I swallow hard, heart hammering with gratitude and alarm. She's ended the Alpha's rule in a single catastrophic display.

She turns, stumbling toward me, tears in her glowing eyes. I try to rise, but pain anchors me. My wings—shattered stumps—throb with every heartbeat. Blood pools around my feet. "Korrin," she breathes, collapsing to her knees beside me, aura crackling in arcs along her arms. Up close, I sense the violent chaos of that unleashed purna power swirling around her. She cups my cheek, expression twisting in sorrow. "You... you cut your own wings... oh gods."

I manage a broken smile, tears slipping down my face. "I couldn't kill you," I rasp. "I'd rather lose my wings, my life, anything."

She lets out a sob, pressing her forehead to mine. The silver flame dims slightly, as though her emotional release is draining the power. "I can't let you die now," she whispers fiercely. "We have to get out of here."

The ring stands largely abandoned, gargoyles having fled or been knocked unconscious. Rubble from the dais smolders where the Alpha fell. Thunder rumbles overhead—whether from an approaching storm or remnants of magic, I can't tell. The entire fortress might collapse if more pillars crumble. Elyria lifts her gaze, scanning the cowering gargoyles who remain. None dare approach her shining aura.

She tries to haul me upright, hooking an arm under my shoulder. I grit my teeth, biting down a scream as my broken wings jostle. Blood slicks the floor. We stagger toward one of the archways leading out. My eyes blur with tears from the pain, but her presence steadies me. She's battered too, collar half-broken, arms trembling with residual power.

Soldiers or enforcers might linger in the corridors, but the arena is in disarray—panic reigns. Elyria's unstoppable display has shattered their morale. We slip out, stepping over debris and unconscious gargoyles. My heart hammers, each step a jolt of agony. But we keep going, guided by her trembling determination. Torchlight flickers in the corridors beyond, revealing empty halls. They fled. Or they're regrouping. We must move fast.

She slows near a side passage, glancing back. "Which way?" she asks, voice tight. She expects me to know the fortress layout. My mind races. We can't scale the main gates, it's too exposed. A side route to the old catacombs might lead us out.

I point weakly. "Down the eastern hall... a hidden exit behind storage." My voice is hardly audible, but she nods, supporting me. Step by agonizing step, we traverse corridors etched with gargoyle runes, passing half-collapsed storerooms where I once trained or stored supplies. The memory feels so distant, like a different life. My wings ache, a savage reminder of how thoroughly I've severed ties.

Occasionally, we hear scuffles or distant cries. The fortress reels from the vacuum left by the Alpha's downfall. No one tries to stop us—some gargoyles peer from

doorways, but they shrink back upon seeing Elyria's silver aura. They fear her raw purna might. My battered face contorts in a bittersweet smile. She is unstoppable now.

Finally, we descend a narrow stair leading to an abandoned corridor used for old supplies. My mind fuzzes with exhaustion. She half-carries me, breath ragged, tears still streaming. "Stay with me," she pleads. "Don't pass out."

I cling to consciousness, leaning into her warmth. The corridor ends in a rusted iron gate. She sets me down gently, hands trembling as she tests it. Locked. But she summons a faint crackle of silver flame, hissing as she scorches the lock until it breaks. The reek of melted metal stings my nostrils.

With a final push, she swings the gate open. A cold draft wafts from beyond—a tunnel leading under the fortress walls. Relief pulses in my chest. We're nearly out. She helps me along the tunnel, each step an agony. My broken wings drag, leaving a trail of blood. My vision dims again, black spots dancing. Just a bit more, Korrin.

We stumble out of a low arch into the open air. Night has fallen fully, a sky of faint stars overhead. The fortress walls loom behind us, but we see no immediate pursuit. A rocky slope extends downward, leading to a narrow ravine. The wind bites, cold against my fevered skin. Elyria breathes a shaky sob of relief. "We're out," she gasps.

I sag in her grip, near collapse. "Far enough... we must go... farther," I whisper, voice cracking. She nods, tears glistening. We begin descending the slope, but each step jars my ravaged back. My mind wavers, consciousness threatening to slip away.

"Hold on," she urges, trying to keep me upright. Her aura has faded to a faint glow, the collar partially fused around her neck. Blood mats her clothing too, from her own injuries. We're both so close to the brink. But we're free.

As we reach the ravine floor, I can go no further. My legs buckle, sending me crumpling to my knees. She tries to ease me down, but the scalding agony rips a cry from my throat. Warm, slick blood coats my hands. My chest heaves with ragged gasps. “Elyria,” I rasp. “Leave me... run... they’ll come.”

She drops beside me, cradling my face. “No,” she chokes, tears streaming. “I won’t leave you. Not after everything.”

I let out a ragged laugh that dissolves into a cough, tasting more blood. My wings are destroyed, my mind ablaze with pain. “You can... survive without me,” I insist, though my heart stutters at the thought. Her eyes flare with fierce devotion.

“We survive together,” she says, voice trembling but resolute. She glances over her shoulder at the fortress high above. No sign of immediate pursuit. Perhaps the chaos within buys us a head start. She lifts a shaking hand, silver sparks dancing faintly on her fingertips. “I can... try to help,” she murmurs. “I don’t know how to heal, but maybe I can burn the wounds shut.”

Fear and hope war in my chest. Cauterizing my wing stumps with purna magic? That might kill me from shock. But it’s better than bleeding out here in the cold. I manage a nod, tears sliding down my cheeks. “Do it.”

She positions me so I lie on my side, wings splayed behind me. Gently, she tears strips from her ruined tunic, pressing them to the worst of the bleeding. Then, trembling, she summons that spark. My entire body tenses, a raw moan of pain escaping. She sets her hand above my left wing stub, a glow forming. “This... will hurt,” she warns, tears in her voice.

I bite down on a piece of cloth, shutting my eyes. The first lick of silver flame sears my flesh, drawing a muffled scream from my throat. My muscles spasm. Elyria sobs, but she continues, forging that glowing heat into a brand that scorches the wound

closed. The stench of charred flesh curls my stomach, black spots dancing in my vision. I can't black out. Summoning everything, I endure. She does the same to the right wing stub, tears and silver flame dripping from her trembling hands.

By the end, I'm half-senseless, shaking violently with feverish pain. But the bleeding has slowed, at least. She collapses beside me, pressing her forehead to mine, hearts beating in ragged unison. "I'm sorry," she mumbles over and over, voice raw with grief.

I can't speak, only grip her wrist, letting her know I understand. My entire being is numb except for the throbbing agony in my back. Yet relief stirs: we're outside, away from that monstrous ring. Together. The fortress lights flicker above us, but no gargoyles appear in immediate pursuit. Maybe they have bigger problems—like reeling from Elyria's unstoppable storm of magic or dealing with their wounded Alpha.

Night wears on as we embrace each other in that ravine. I drift in and out of consciousness, mind drifting with pain. Elyria does her best to bandage me further, though we have no real supplies. She whispers soothing words, tears never far. I dimly recall her pressing water to my lips from a shallow puddle, telling me to hold on. The collar remains fused around her neck, half-ruined but still present. I see the faint runes flicker, as if powerless now. She overcame them. A shaky pride flickers in me. She overcame the entire clan's might.

At some point near dawn, the sky lightens, a pale hush over the mountains. My fever breaks slightly, allowing me clearer thoughts. Elyria dozes in a weary slump beside me, one arm protectively across my chest. She stirs when I shift, blinking awake with bloodshot eyes.

"Korrin," she whispers, voice hoarse. "How do you feel?"

I swallow, forcing a breath. “Hurts... but alive,” I manage, which is miracle enough. She lets out a tiny relieved sob, leaning her forehead to mine. Her tears glisten in the early dawn’s light, each droplet a testament to how close we were to doom.

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After a moment, she helps me sit upright. The pain is excruciating, but I clench my teeth, determined. “We must move,” I rasp. “They might search the valleys.”

She nods, although tears remain in her eyes. “I’ll help you. We’ll find a cave or a hidden path, something.” A flicker of that silver aura pulses around her fingertips, responding to her emotion. She flinches, half afraid. “I—I can’t control it well yet.”

I grip her hand gently. “You saved us with that power. We’ll learn to harness it,” I say, voice trembling from exhaustion. She stares at me with an odd mixture of hope and sorrow. We’ll face this new reality together—my wings destroyed, her magic newly awakened.

Slowly, with her supporting most of my weight, we stand. I hiss as the freshly cauterized stumps on my back press against the air. The world spins, but I manage to stay upright with her help. She wraps an arm around me. Our eyes meet in the hush of dawn, the ravine’s shadows retreating. We’re free... in the sense that no immediate gargoyle hunts us. Yet the future looms uncertain. The clan remains hostile, the Alpha possibly alive under that rubble, dark elves still out there. But at least we hold each other, battered survivors forging a new path.

She brushes a hand across my cheek, tears mingling with a faint, waning glow around her fingertips. “I’m so sorry about your wings,” she whispers, voice catching. “You did it... for me.”

A shaky breath escapes me. “They were never truly mine if it meant harming you. I’m free of them, and free of that old vow.” The pain is beyond words, but my resolve stands. “We’ll keep going, Elyria. Together.”

She swallows tears, nodding. Our gazes lock, a quiet understanding passing. We nearly died—nearly killed each other at the clan’s command. But we refused. In that refusal, we’ve carved a love out of ashes.

Carefully, step by agonizing step, we begin our trek through the ravine, guided by the pale sunrise that spills across jagged rocks. Each movement jolts agony through my severed wings, each breath a challenge. Yet Elyria’s presence steadies me, her frail body lending surprising strength. My mind flicks to the indefinite future: we must find refuge, a place to recover and learn to control her magic, far from gargoyle or dark elf tyranny.

As we limp forward, hand in hand, I feel the first surge of real hope. We shattered the clan’s ring of cruelty, defied the Alpha’s edict, awakened a power that might protect us from here on. My wings are gone, but I’ve never felt more certain of who I am—a guardian for the woman I love, forging a new life beyond the clan’s twisted shadow.

The wind sighs along the cliffs, carrying distant echoes of gargoyle roars. But their fortress stands behind us, a place we pray never to see again. Elyria helps me over a rocky outcrop, her collar half-broken, smoldering with dormant runes. The chain rattles uselessly at her side, no longer binding her. We share a weary glance, hearts beating in unison. We’re free, though battered to the core.

In that fragile dawn, we vanish into the wild foothills, broken wings and awakened magic, hearts bound by a vow stronger than any chain. We have no illusions—it will be a difficult road. But we survived the clan’s verdict by choosing each other over the world. No alpha, no oath, no dark elves can break that bond.

I wake to the thin breath of dawn brushing across my cheek, the air cold enough to make me shiver despite the ragged cloak draped over my shoulders. The rocky hollow where we've sheltered is cramped and uneven, barely shielded by a leaning slab of granite. Even so, it's a haven compared to the horror we left behind. The events of last night weigh on me like a millstone: the gargoyle arena, Korrin's wings sheared by his own blade, my magic erupting in a tempest of silver-white flame. My entire body aches, remnants of that surge still coursing through my veins, leaving them raw and oversensitive.

I adjust, careful not to jostle Korrin, who lies propped against the rock behind me. He's asleep, or something close to it—his face pulled tight in pain, breath shallow. My gaze flickers to the bandaged stumps where his wings used to be, each wound blackened at the edges from my frantic cauterization. Even in the dim gray light, I see his flesh is tender and swollen. My chest constricts at the memory of him lifting that sword with trembling arms and hacking his own wings off rather than kill me. A wave of guilt and fierce love tangles in my throat. You gave up flight for me. I can't ever repay that. My tear ducts sting, and I blink rapidly to keep them at bay.

Over the past hours, we dozed fitfully, half expecting gargoyles to descend at any moment, drawn by the reek of blood or the raw magic that might still cling to me. Each time the wind howled, my heart hammered, imagining a patrol's wings overhead. But so far, no one's found us. Maybe the fortress is still reeling from the chaos we unleashed. The entire clan was in an uproar, and the Alpha lay half-buried under collapsed rubble. Another pang: Will he survive? And what about the dark elves who allied with them?

At the thought of the dark elves, a fresh wave of panic seizes me. They once enslaved me, then nearly recaptured me. They'll not stop just because we escaped the fortress. My hands shake around the half-broken collar that remains fused to my neck, a harsh reminder of how close they came to reclaiming me. I swallow the bile rising in my throat. Don't lose yourself again. We got out. For now, that's enough.

Korrin stirs behind me, exhaling a low groan. My chest aches at how weak his voice sounds. "Elyria," he murmurs. I twist carefully to face him, placing my palm on his feverish brow. His eyes half-open, gold irises dulled with pain, yet relief flickers there when he sees me.

"Good morning," I say softly, fighting the urge to weep. "How do you feel?"

A bitter laugh rasps past his lips. "Like I fought the entire clan," he mutters, wincing. Then his gaze drops to the bandages. The sorrow in his expression is so raw it steals my breath. He'll never fly again. I brush my forehead to his, letting him sense my support without words. He closes his eyes, tears glistening on his dark lashes.

I brush my fingertips over his temple. "You're alive," I whisper, voice trembling. "And free from them. We both are." My mind returns to the desperate moments in the arena when he raised the blade, me kneeling in chains. He chose me. He shattered everything he was for me. What feels like a tidal wave of love surges through my chest, almost painful in its intensity.

He nods, breathing ragged. "I'd make the same choice again," he says, as if reading my thoughts. A tear slips down his cheek, raw honesty shining in his eyes. "Though... I'd prefer not to lose quite so much blood next time." A shaky attempt at humor. My throat tightens, tears burning at the corners of my eyes. He can still smile, even with the world against us.

I stroke his hair gently. "No more losing blood," I manage in a wobbly voice. "We have to survive. The clan might still hunt us. The dark elves too." My words taste of dread, but it's the truth.

His jaw tightens. "We'll manage," he murmurs. Then, with effort, he forces himself upright. He stifles a cry as the motion aggravates his wounds, fresh blood staining the bandages. My entire body tenses, wanting to lay him back down, but I see the

determination in his face. He refuses to remain helpless. A pang of guilty pride tugs at me. He's unstoppable in spirit, even wingless and half-dead.

When he's seated against the rock, breath rasping, I inspect the bandages carefully. They need changing, but we have limited supplies. My cloak is already ripped to tatters from the frantic flight. The memory of searing his wounds with my half-controlled magic still haunts me: the stench of burnt flesh, his tortured screams. My eyes prick with tears again. But I swallow them. Now is not the time for despair. I rewrap the cloth as best I can, ignoring his soft groans. Each muffled cry pierces my heart. I will not let him die here.

"Korrin," I say, voice low yet urgent, "I need to find water, maybe some herbs. Something to help with infection." We have no healing magic, no potions, just the faint scraps of knowledge gleaned from survival. The memory of the monastery's texts flits through my mind, but the fortress destroyed that chance to learn more. We're on our own.

He nods, though worry shadows his features. "I'll be all right," he murmurs, but the tremor in his voice betrays his pain. "I'll stay put... watch for trouble." His lips twist in a rueful smile. "Not that I can chase them off easily."

My heart breaks at the resignation in his tone, but I nod, kissing his forehead softly. "I'll be back soon," I promise. "Stay hidden."

He closes his eyes, exhaling shakily. I wait a moment, reluctant to leave him alone, but necessity drives me. If we don't address those wounds, he could succumb to fever. And if we can't move soon, the clan or dark elves might find us unprepared.

Rising, I test my own battered limbs. My ankles ache from the shackles, my wrists chafe raw. The half-melted collar still clings to my neck, runes flickering dead—thank the gods. My hair is matted with soot and sweat. But physically, I can

walk, at least. The arcs of magic that once danced under my skin remain dormant now, leaving me trembling from the memory. I used unimaginable force. Could I do so again if pressed? I have no clue. Fear ripples through me: Magic that wild might kill me or Korrin as easily as any foe. But I push the thought aside, focusing on the moment.

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I slip from our rocky alcove, scanning the rugged foothills for signs of movement. Dawn's light reveals a valley studded with boulders, sparse trees, and patches of grass. No gargoyle silhouettes mar the sky. No dark elf squads roam in sight. My shoulders sag in relief. At least for now, we're alone. A biting wind stirs dust devils, stinging my eyes. I set off, hoping to find a stream or edible plants.

As I traverse the rocky slope, I catch fleeting memories of Korrin's final stand in the arena—the savage grace of him swinging that sword, the heartbreak in his eyes when he realized he couldn't do what they demanded. My chest tightens again, tears threatening. He gave everything for me—his wings, his clan, his place in the world. I vow, right then, to protect him from the next onslaught. If the clan or dark elves come, I'll stand between them and him. I can't let them take him again or punish him further.

I find a narrow stream trickling between the rocks, half-choked with sediment but still yielding fresh water. Kneeling, I cup my hands to drink, the cold liquid shocking my system. A faint tingle runs through me—perhaps the remnants of purna magic. Or just the chill. I fill a battered tin can I salvaged from Korrin's pack earlier, sealing it with cloth. Next, I scour the rocky outcrops for any sign of herbs. My knowledge is limited, gleaned from old tales or half-remembered lessons. Still, I spot a cluster of small, pale blossoms that I think might be moon-kiss, known for its antiseptic sap. Carefully, I harvest a handful, ignoring the small nicks on my fingers.

All the while, I remain alert for any patrol. The wind moans across the desolate stones, but no wings beat overhead. A hush lingers, as though even predators avoid this cursed land. My heart flutters with gratitude. Let them keep their distance. We need time to recover.

With water and a meager stash of questionable herbs, I head back, scanning the horizon each time I crest a boulder. Every step rattles my half-burned collar, a metallic jingle that makes my whole being on edge. One day I'll pry this thing off for good. But for now, I push onward, determined to return to Korrin as quickly as possible.

Reaching the alcove, I find him slumped in a half-doze, lips parted in silent pain. My heart clenches with fresh worry. I took too long. At the scuff of my boots, he startles, wincing as the movement jars his injuries.

"You're back," he breathes, relief flooding his voice. "No trouble?"

I kneel beside him, setting the water and herbs aside, pressing my palm to his forehead. He's still feverish, but not as hot as before. "No trouble," I confirm, voice soft. "We're alone for now."

He exhales, tension draining from his shoulders. Then he notices the herbs and tin can. "You found something."

I nod, swallowing. "A stream, and these." I hold up the pale blossoms. "They might help clean your wounds." A tremor shakes my hands. "I'm not an herbalist, but I'll do what I can."

He offers a faint nod of thanks, pain etched on his face. Gently, I peel back the bandages on his wing stumps, ignoring the coil of nausea at the sight of dried blood and charred flesh. My eyes burn with tears, but I keep them at bay. Focus. I dampen a cloth with water, wipe away the crusted grime, and apply the blossoms' sap with careful dabs. Korrin groans, muscles tensing. My breath hitches. I hate causing him pain.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, tears brimming. "I—I don't want to cause you harm."

He bites back a groan, forcing a shaky smile. “Better pain than infection,” he murmurs. “I trust you, Elyria.” A flush of warmth battles my despair, hearing that quiet devotion. He trusts me, even now.

Methodically, I rebind the stumps with fresh strips from my cloak. My own arms sting where the dark elves scored me, but I ignore it. Korrin’s survival matters more. Each bandage snug, I settle back, panting from the exertion. He slumps against the rock, eyelids drooping.

The hush that follows feels oddly serene. The valley remains empty, the morning air crisp. I close my eyes for a moment, letting his presence ground me. Then, heart hammering, I lean in, brushing a tender kiss across his lips. He responds with a soft exhale, pressing back, tears sliding down his cheeks. The taste of salt and sweat tangles on my tongue. Romance and heartbreak fuse in my chest, a swirl of gratitude that we’re not parted by death.

When we break apart, breath ragged, I rest my forehead to his. “I love you,” I say, voice trembling. “No matter what hunts us, we’ll face it together.”

He nods, tears trailing into his stubble. “I love you, too. I gave up the clan for you, and I’d do it again,” he whispers. The sincerity in his eyes anchors me. We are each other’s lifeline now.

Time drifts as we gather ourselves. My mind churns with ways to escape further into the mountains, maybe find a hidden cave or old ruins where we can hide. Korrin dozes fitfully, still weakened by blood loss. My eyes roam the rocky slopes, alert for any sign of pursuit. We can’t remain here indefinitely.

Midday sun creeps overhead, warming the stones. Korrin manages to stand with my help, though he leans heavily on my shoulder. We begin limping across the valley floor, scanning for a path that might lead to a forested ridge beyond. If we can reach

tree cover, we can build a more secure shelter, maybe hunt small game. We must keep moving. Our footprints smear blood across the stones—a trail any decent tracker could follow. Anxiety gnaws at me, fueling each shaky step.

We've only covered a few hundred yards when I hear the unmistakable scuff of footsteps behind us, accompanied by a sharp hiss in a language I recognize all too well: dark elves. My pulse skyrockets. No. We turn, hearts hammering. Two elves emerge from behind a boulder, crossbows leveled. My stomach plummets. They're battered, indicating they might have survived the fortress chaos, searching for us or returning to their own lines.

I glance frantically at Korrin. He's in no condition to fight. My own powers remain unsteady—I can't summon a storm at will. But I must protect him. The elves scowl, stepping forward. "Purna," one growls, face twisted in malice. "And the wingless gargoyle. Perfect. The fortress collapsed around us, but you can't escape."

I brace Korrin behind me, heart thudding. If they fire those crossbows, we're done. But I refuse to surrender. My collar rattles, half-broken. Rage at all they put me through flares hot. "Leave us," I warn, voice trembling with suppressed fear. "We have nothing you want."

The second elf bares his teeth, crossbow aimed at Korrin. "Wrong. The bounty on your heads is worth a small fortune." He sneers. "Not to mention how the clan will pay for your demise. If the Alpha survived, he'd reward us. Or the dark elves can keep you for their own uses." His eyes flick to me, a lecherous gleam.

Korrin stiffens, trying to stand straighter. "You won't take her," he rasps, voice hoarse. He can barely hold his stance. My heart clenches. The elves exchange smirks, seeing how weak he is.

A wave of protective fury floods me. I must act. I can't conjure a huge storm again, but

maybe I can muster enough spark to disrupt their crossbows, buy us time. Silver flickers along my fingertips, responding to my desperation. The elves notice, eyes widening in alarm.

“She’s building magic!” one shouts, raising his crossbow to fire. I fling out my hand. A small arc of silver lightning darts across the rocks, snapping with static. The crossbow malfunctions, the bolt misfiring into the ground with a sharp crack. The elf yelps, stumbling back. The second elf, however, fires his shot at Korrin.

My heart nearly stops. “No!” I scream, tackling Korrin sideways. The bolt whistles past, grazing his bandaged side. He hisses in pain as I half-collapse with him, my chain clanging on the stones. The elves reload in frantic haste.

I scramble upright, summoning that spark again. My entire body shakes. The collar’s dead runes hamper me less than before, but my magic is still sporadic. Another burst of silver arcs from my palm, striking the second elf’s crossbow. The weapon sparks, forcing him to drop it with a curse. Smoke rises from scorched metal. A surge of relief hits me—I disabled both crossbows. But the elves can still fight with daggers.

Sure enough, they draw short blades, exchanging a glance. One leaps at me with a snarl, the other circles toward Korrin. I brace for a close-quarters fight, terror filling me—my wrists are still raw, and the half-broken collar dangles from my neck. Korrin can barely stand. But we must try.

The first elf’s blade slices at my collarbone. I recoil, managing to block with my chain-laden forearm. Pain lances through me, but I grit my teeth and push back. He’s stronger, trained in close combat, while I only learned scraps from Korrin’s frantic lessons. Yet I recall enough to pivot aside, letting him overextend. With a trembling hand, I release a minor spark of silver force at his side. It’s not much, but enough to make him flinch. I dive forward, slamming my knee into his stomach. He grunts, staggering. My breath ragged, I try to follow up, but my chain tangles my feet. Damn

these shackles.

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On my right, the second elf lunges for Korrin. Korrin tries to dodge, but the movement reopens his wounds. He cries out, dropping to one knee. Panic grips me. He's helpless. The elf grins, raising his blade for a killing strike. I can't reach them in time physically. I must fling magic again. Summoning a desperate spark, I fling my arm outward, trying to recall the feeling of unleashed power. For a heartbeat, nothing. My heart clenches. No, no, no. Then a tiny jolt flickers along my palm, just enough to distract the elf. He jerks sideways, the blade slicing into Korrin's shoulder instead of his throat. Korrin roars in agony.

Fury ignites a deeper surge in me. They won't kill him. This time, a sharper arc of silver lightning crackles from my fingertips, slamming into the elf's chest. He's thrown back with a scream, dropping the blade. My mind reels at the raw violence, but I can't stop. Protect Korrin. The elf hits the ground, twitching, eyes rolling back. The second elf recovers from my earlier knee strike, eyes wide with horror.

He glances at his fallen partner, then at me, fresh arcs dancing around my trembling arms. I must look half-insane, hair wild, face streaked with tears, collar half-shorn from my neck. He curses in the dark elf tongue, turning to flee. Relief floods me. He's running. I lurch forward, but my chain snags again, nearly causing me to trip. I watch him vanish into the boulders, presumably to warn others. My chest heaves. No time to chase him. Korrin's bleeding out.

I drop to Korrin's side, tears slipping from my cheeks. "No, no," I whisper, pressing my hand over the fresh wound at his shoulder. Dark blood seeps through my fingers, adding to the gashes on his wing stumps. He moans, eyes squeezed shut. My mind roils: we can't keep fighting off squads like this, not with him so wounded and my magic so erratic. We need to get somewhere safe.

His lashes flutter. “Elyria,” he rasps, voice so faint. “S-sorry. I can’t... stand.”

I cradle his cheek, tears falling onto his battered skin. “Don’t you dare apologize,” I hiss, trying to hide my terror. “We’ll get through this.” My gaze darts around. The elf I hit with lightning lies unconscious or dead, the other fled. We have moments at best. We must move. But how? Korrin can barely stand.

My chest constricts with panic. Then, an idea tugs at me from the memory of that unstoppable power in the arena. I recall how, in my final surge, I lifted a wave that flung heavy gargoyles aside. Could I use it to carry Korrin, to flee swiftly? The thought terrifies me—my control is so unrefined. I might harm him further or cause us both to crash. But we’re out of options.

I brush hair from his face. “Korrin, hold on to me,” I murmur, voice shaking. “I’m... I’m going to try something.”

He groans, half-lucid. “Whatever it is, I trust you.” The softness of that statement nearly undoes me. He trusts me even with raw destructive magic.

I steel myself, hooking an arm under his shoulder. My mind drags up the sensation of that silver aura swirling around me in the arena, the unstoppable wave that parted the clan. Fear glimmers: What if I lose control? But I banish it. He’s dying if we stay.

Drawing a trembling breath, I summon the flicker in my blood, the purna inheritance. My battered collar crackles ominously. My entire body seizes with tension as the magic responds, swirling in my chest like a searing sun. I whisper a desperate plea—some half-formed incantation or prayer—and direct that power into my limbs, imagining a cushion of force beneath us, a surge that might carry us. My arms tingle, arcs dancing around my wrists. Korrin gasps as the air around us thickens.

We rise a few inches off the ground, a shimmering bubble of silver light forming

under our feet, lifting us slowly. My heart leaps: I can do it. Korrin clings to me, eyes wide in shock. The bubble wobbles precariously, threatening to collapse. My arms shake. Pain bites into the half-melted collar. But I cling to the thread of magic, ignoring the tears that stream from my eyes. "Hold tight," I choke out.

He nods, pressing his face to my shoulder. With a strangled cry, I push the bubble forward, drifting a foot or so above the rocky ground. Each breath is a labor, my lungs burning as the magic scours my veins. Just enough to move swiftly, so his feet don't drag. We lurch forward, swaying unsteadily, but it's faster than limping. My entire body quivers, yet determination spurs me on. We must find cover.

With teeth gritted, I guide the bubble across the valley floor, scanning for an overhang or cave. The effort is immense. Sweat drenches me, and dark splotches dance at the edge of my vision. Korrin remains silent, trusting me, cradling his shattered wings. The slope ahead rises toward a stand of stunted pine trees. If we can reach them, maybe we can hide among the brush. Almost there.

The bubble flickers dangerously. My control slips. I let out a sob, forcing the power to hold a moment longer. The collar crackles, runes glowing faintly in protest. My scalp prickles with pressure, migraines stabbing behind my eyes. We're so close. We crest the slope, pine needles brushing the shimmering edge of my conjured force. Then the magic collapses entirely, dumping us onto the ground. I gasp, arms wrapped around Korrin to cushion his fall. We roll in a tangle, pines scattering needles on our exhausted forms.

By some miracle, we land softly enough not to aggravate Korrin's wounds too severely. I lie there, chest heaving, the last arcs of silver dancing across my arms before fading into numbness. My entire body throbs, head pounding from magical backlash. I can't maintain that again soon. But we're among the pines now, mostly hidden from prying eyes. The slope behind us conceals us from the open valley. Breathing heavily, I glance around: the pine stand is dense, the ground covered in

needle litter, forming a quiet grove. This might be safe enough for the moment.

Korrin groans, clinging to consciousness. I shift to cradle his head in my lap, tears flowing down my cheeks. “Korrin,” I whisper, brushing hair from his damp brow. “We’re... we’re hidden. Rest.” He nods faintly, eyes half-lidded with exhaustion and pain.

I exhale, scanning the area for signs of pursuit. The pines stand silent, wind stirring their branches. No elf voices, no gargoyle wings beating overhead. A trembling relief seeps into me. We escaped immediate threats.

For a long while, we remain there, catching our breath. My magic is dormant again, leaving me shaky and hollow. Korrin’s face is pale, lines of pain bracketing his mouth. Yet he’s alive, chest rising and falling under my palm. We can’t keep running indefinitely. We must fortify or find a deeper refuge. But at least, for this fleeting moment, we’re free from the fortress’s blood-soaked ring, from the clan’s cruel decree.

He stirs, voice raspy. “You saved me again,” he manages, grimacing at the twinge in his shoulder. “I... can’t repay?—”

“Stop,” I interrupt, pressing a trembling kiss to his forehead. “You gave everything first. We do this for each other, no debts.” My tears slip onto his cheek, and he closes his eyes, a soft moan escaping. We’re battered, but together. Overflowing love fills me, overshadowing the terror of the last hours.

Time drifts, the morning light brightening into a sunlit day. Slowly, we muster the strength to explore the pine grove. Korrin limps, leaning on me heavily. We find a shallow indentation at the base of a boulder where we can huddle, out of direct sight. I gather pine needles to make a makeshift bedding, ignoring the stinging in my arms. He sits with a pained groan, letting me examine his new shoulder wound. My chest

aches at the raw slash, but the bleeding has slowed.

I wash it with the leftover water, murmuring apologies each time he hisses. He never complains, only watches me with sorrowful devotion. The closeness of the pines, their resinous scent, mingles with the copper tang of blood. Despite the grimness, I find solace in his presence. They forced a public execution. He refused them all to stand by me.

When I finish, I cradle his cheeks, searching his eyes. “We defied them,” I say softly, “both gargoyles and dark elves. We’re free, but we’re hunted. Are we truly prepared to keep running forever?”

He closes his eyes, exhaling a ragged breath. “I can’t run,” he murmurs, voice thick with pain. “Not far, at least. My wings are gone, my body battered.” He rubs the scorched stumps, biting back tears. “But if we must fight again, I’ll stand. I won’t let them reclaim you.”

I swallow the knot in my throat. “I won’t let them reclaim me either,” I vow, fire in my belly. “My magic is wild, but it responded to our need. Maybe we can harness it to defend ourselves if they corner us.” My chest tightens with fear. Unleashing more devastation could kill me or him, but we have no choice.

His lips press into a faint, wry smile. “You were terrifying in that arena, you know.” He tries to laugh, but it turns into a cough. I support him gently, heart twisting. He’s so broken.

Still, the fact that we can share this moment, even marred by suffering, is a testament to our survival. My eyes drift to the collar, half-fused around my neck, runes blackened. I finger it gingerly. “They can no longer use it to strangle me, but it’s still stuck.” I let out a humorless laugh. “Irony, that even free, I wear a symbol of captivity.”

Korrin's gaze flicks to it, regret softening his features. "When I can stand better, we'll pry it off. Or I'll break it with a stone. I promise."

I nod, tears brimming. The memory of him snapping his own wings to break the clan's hold resurfaces. We both wear scars of captivity. But we have each other. That is enough reason to keep living.

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The day passes in uneasy quiet. We remain hidden, rationing the scraps of food left in Korrin's satchel. My magic remains dormant, giving me no fresh headaches, but I can feel a hum in my blood that warns me I'm on the edge of unleashing it if threatened. Korrin dozes fitfully, and each time his breath catches from a new wave of pain, I cradle him, whispering reassurance.

As dusk approaches, the sky dims. I sense an itch at the back of my mind—like a gathering presence. My instincts shout danger. I stiffen, carefully scanning the pine shadows. Korrin rouses, noticing my tension. "What is it?"

I hold a finger to my lips, heart pounding. Something shifts in the woods beyond, branches cracking. My worst fear realized: They found us. I motion for Korrin to stay low. He grips a dagger from his belt, though his arms shake with the effort. My own body goes taut, every sense alert.

A moment later, a small band of dark elves emerges from the gloom—three, maybe four, armed with bows or crossbows. They prowl between the pines, scanning the ground. My breath catches. They're tracking our blood trail. Korrin curses softly under his breath, face paling. He's in no condition to fight more than one. My magic might help, but I'm exhausted too.

I glance at Korrin, reading his despair. My chest seizes. We must do something. The elves fan out, footsteps rustling needles. They're close, less than thirty paces away. If I wait for them to see us, we'll be pinned. Fear merges with fury—They will not drag me away, not harm Korrin. My collar rattles as I rise to a half-crouch, ignoring his frantic whisper to wait.

One elf steps into a patch of dying light, crossbow raised. He mutters something to his companion. They see a smear of blood on the needle-carpeted ground, pointing. They're so close. My heart hammers. I must strike first. I glance back at Korrin, giving a silent apology. Then, summoning that flicker, I release a gentle wave of silver energy forward. It won't be like the arena. I can't manage that scale again. But a smaller force might disorient them.

The wave ripples across the pine needles, making them swirl. The elves curse, reeling as the force buffets them. One crossbow fires prematurely, the bolt lodging in a tree trunk. Another elf stumbles, arms flailing. I seize the chance, launching forward with a desperate cry. My chain tangles, but I keep my balance, sliding around a tree trunk. The elf tries to bring up his blade. I blast him with another tiny arc of silver lightning. He collapses, twitching.

Three remain, regaining their footing. One leaps at me, a short sword cleaving the air. I duck behind a pine, branches scratching my arms. The sword slices bark, showering us in splinters. My heart thuds. This is madness. But I must protect Korrin. Clenching my fists, I hurl another spark of silver at his feet, forcing him to trip. He lands hard, cursing. I attempt to follow up, but the chain snags, halting my momentum. He recovers, slashing at my leg. I cry out as the blade grazes my thigh, warm blood trickling. Panic surges. I can't keep this up alone.

An outraged snarl echoes behind me. Korrin? He emerges from behind the rock, dagger in hand, face etched with agony but eyes blazing. He can barely stand, yet he's coming to fight. Fear for him spikes in my chest.

One elf, noticing Korrin's weakness, lunges at him. Korrin blocks the strike with surprising skill, but the impact jars his broken wing stumps. He cries out, knees buckling. My stomach lurches. I try to strike with magic, but the other elf slashes at me, forcing me to defend myself. We're pinned from both sides.

“Elyria!” Korrin gasps, pinned down by furious strikes. My mind reels. We can’t handle them all if we fight separately. The collar chain rattles, reminding me I still move with difficulty.

Desperation floods me. My arms hum with that chaotic power. I must do something bigger. But my chest tightens—If I unleash the full wave again, I risk losing control. Could I kill Korrin in the crossfire?

But if I do nothing, we’re dead anyway. My eyes lock on his battered form as the elf drives him back. He tries to parry, but his strength fails. The blade nicks his side again. No, I can’t watch him bleed any more. My tears scald, heart pounding with reckless determination.

I gather what’s left of my purna spark, gripping the collar’s edges. The half-broken runes sputter. With a savage cry, I force the magic outward, ignoring the searing pain around my neck. The chain glows, metal turning white-hot. The runes crack further, failing to contain me. A swirl of silver flame erupts around my body, forming a shimmering shell of power. My skin prickles with intense heat. The elf in front of me yelps, stumbling away as arcs of light lash out.

“Get down!” I scream to Korrin, though my voice is half-choked by tears. He sees the raging aura, recognizing the final onslaught. He drops to his knees, covering his head with one arm, trusting I’ll spare him. My collar smokes, the metal scalding my neck. I grit my teeth against the agony, letting the wave expand in a ring of silver fire.

It’s smaller than in the arena, but enough to blast outward, striking the elves who close in. Two are hurled against trees, weapons clattering. The third tries to raise a crossbow, but the swirling flame knocks it aside, scorching the wood. A frantic shriek echoes as they scramble to flee or defend themselves. My chest is ablaze with pain, the collar searing into my skin, but I press the power, forcing it to intensify. I want them gone. They can’t keep doing this to us. The ground trembles underfoot, pines

rustling furiously. The silver wave arcs higher, flattening branches.

The elves, seeing no chance, bolt into the darkness, stumbling over rocks. My tears blur them as they vanish. They'll probably bring more. But for now, we're safe. My entire frame shakes, magic flickering dangerously. I must rein it in or I'll burn everything. Summoning the scraps of will left, I subdue the aura, letting it dissipate. The collar's remnants crack, metal sloughing off. A final hiss escapes it, and it falls from my neck with a dull clang, scorching my collarbone. I gasp, chest heaving. It's done.

As the silver flame fades, the quiet returns, thick with the smell of scorched pine needles. The swirl of dust settles. I stand, swaying on my feet, chain gone, the collar in pieces at my feet. I'm truly free of it. Tears trickle down my cheeks, mixing relief and agony.

Korrin kneels a few paces away, face lined with pain. He gazes at me, awe flickering in his wounded eyes. "Elyria," he breathes, voice shaking. "You... you destroyed it."

My entire body sags, knees buckling. He struggles to catch me, ignoring the throbbing stumps of his wings. I collapse into his arms with a sob, burying my face against his chest. "I had to," I whisper, tears soaked into his tattered shirt. "They wouldn't stop. I can't let them keep hurting you."

He trembles, arms wrapping around me, ignoring his own pain. "You saved me again." The raw gratitude in his tone shreds my heart. We're battered, but together.

We hold each other in that swirl of ash and pine needles, the forest silent aside from our ragged breathing. The collar lies in a melted hunk behind me, the final chain that once bound me to the fortress. My mind reels with the knowledge that I awakened destructive purna magic again. What does that mean for us? Are we unstoppable, or condemned to be hunted by all?

But for this moment, none of that matters. I press my lips to Korrin's, tears mingling with the taste of soot. He kisses me back softly, wincing at each motion, yet pouring every ounce of devotion into that contact. My heart aches with love so fierce it feels like a fresh wound. We have survived the clan's cruelty, the dark elves' chains, and even our own self-doubts. We stand here, battered but undefeated.

When we part, I rest my forehead on his. "No more running from ourselves," I whisper. "We fight back whenever they come. I won't be caged again."

He nods, tears catching on his lashes. "Neither will I." His voice trembles. He lost everything—wings, clan, pride—for me, yet he stands unbroken in spirit. My chest swells with reverence.

We linger a moment, quietly clinging to each other, letting the morning wind swirl away the remnants of fear. The pine stand stands battered but not destroyed—like us. Far in the distance, I sense a hush across the foothills, as though the world waits for our next move. We can't stay here. The elves will regroup, gargoyles might reorganize once the fortress recovers. But for a fleeting window, we have peace.

Korrin helps me stand. Our synergy is awkward, both wounded, but the intangible bond pulses strong. I cast one final glance at the melted collar pieces and the scorched patch of ground. Good riddance.

He meets my gaze, swallowing. "Where to now?" A shadow of uncertainty crosses his features. "We can't face them all again, not in our state."

I consider, heart hammering. "We go deeper into the mountains," I decide. "Find a remote valley or cave where we can heal, learn to control my magic, and plan our future." The words taste foreign but bracing. "We might never stop being hunted, but at least we can choose how to live."

A flicker of relief brightens his eyes. "I trust you," he repeats, voice low with love. He leans on me heavily, and I wrap an arm around his waist, mindful of his wing stumps. Each step he takes is laced with pain, but his jaw sets in determination. I realize with a pang that he'll never again soar on leathery wings, never again command the skies. He gave that for me. My tears threaten once more, but I bury them, focusing on hope.

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We pick our way through the pines, leaving the site of my final stand with the elves behind. The forest floor softens our steps, dappled sunlight warming the needled ground. Occasional bird calls break the hush. My ankles throb, leftover from the shackles, but without the collar, I feel lighter, unburdened. Even my magic sits calmer in my chest, no longer forcibly contained. Perhaps I can learn to wield it gently, without death or chaos.

Korrin stumbles, and I catch him with a gasp. He tries to smile, though his face twists in pain. "I'm all right," he mutters. "You keep me steady."

I lean into him, kissing his temple. "We'll find a place soon," I promise. We have to.

The rest of the day passes in slow, deliberate progress. We follow a hidden deer trail that meanders up a ridge, guided by faint sunlight flickering through the canopy. Korrin's wounds make travel agonizing, and we pause often so he can catch his breath. Each time, I check his bandages, ensuring no new bleeding. He's feverish but fights it with stoic resolve. My heart lurches with each pained moan he can't stifle. I must find better herbs, or a safe haven where he can rest properly.

Despite our suffering, a sense of fierce elation hums beneath my fear. We defied them all—Alpha, clan, and dark elves. We stand on our own, forging a path no one else can control. My mind replays how Korrin shattered his wings, how I unleashed the purna flame to break the final chain. We are unstoppable in our unity, as battered as we are. The thought girds me against despair.

By dusk, we crest the ridge's slope, panting. The view expands before us: a valley cloaked in dusky shadows, the horizon crowned with majestic peaks. No fortress

spire stands in sight. My chest relaxes as I cry. We made it beyond their immediate reach.

We settle beneath a spreading pine whose trunk offers partial shelter from the wind. Korrin half collapses in my arms, breath ragged. I check his bandages: damp with fresh blood but not hemorrhaging. He tries to speak, voice raspy. “Elyria... I’m sorry I can’t stand guard tonight.”

I cradle his face, brushing tears from his cheeks. “You stood guard for me for so long,” I whisper, pressing my forehead to his. “Let me guard you now.” My voice trembles with tenderness. He closes his eyes, a tear sliding down the corner. We’re reversing roles: once, he was the unstoppable executioner; now, I shield him. The thought steels my resolve.

Nightfall drapes the ridge in star-studded darkness. I gather what wood I can find—only damp sticks and pine cones. With careful coaxing, I conjure a tiny flicker of silver magic to spark a fire. My entire body flinches at the memory of that destructive wave, but I manage just enough to ignite the tinder, forming a small, comforting flame. Korrin watches from where he rests, awe shining in his tired eyes.

The fire casts dancing shadows across his face, highlighting the lines of pain and the raw heartbreak of losing his wings. He gave everything for me, the thought repeats, a painful ache in my chest. I settle beside him, nestling under the cloak, arms wrapped around each other for warmth. The sparks drift skyward, lost among the stars.

As we drift in near silence, I replay the day’s events—my small acts of magic that fended off dark elves, the knowledge that gargoyles might still roam these foothills. We’re not safe yet. But if they come, I’ll do whatever it takes to protect Korrin. We have no illusions that this is the end of our conflicts. The clan might reorganize under a new alpha, or the old one might crawl from the rubble. The dark elves might send trackers. But we’ll face them, side by side.

I stroke Korrin's hair, tenderly mindful of the scabs on his scalp. "We'll make them regret coming after us," I say softly, voice trembling with a mix of dread and defiance. I no longer cower behind illusions of safety.

He lifts his gaze, eyes brimming with gratitude. "We stand together," he agrees.

Emotion spills over me, love, anguish, relief. We lean our foreheads together, lips brushing in a tender kiss that tastes of soot and tears. In that quiet moment under the pines, with a meager fire crackling at our feet, I realize how far we've come from the days of captivity and forced obedience. We shape our own destiny now.

The night deepens, stars wheeling overhead. I keep vigil while Korrin dozes, stirring each time he whimpers from pain. Gently, I hush him, pressing a comforting hand to his brow. He clutches my wrist like a lifeline. My own eyes burn with exhaustion, but I fight to remain alert, scanning the dark silhouettes of pines, listening for any sign of approach. Wind murmurs in the branches. An occasional owl hoots, yet no enemies appear.

As dawn's pale glow returns, painting the eastern sky in soft oranges and pinks, I lower my guard. Korrin mumbles, blinking awake, wincing from the night's stiffness. I offer him the last of our water, then help him to his feet. The day's stillness feels precarious, a lull before storms we know might come. Yet my heart thrums with quiet determination: We survived another night in enemy territory. Our bond remains strong, fueling a hope we can't surrender.

We begin a slow trek deeper into the mountains, leaning on each other. Each step is a testament to our vow to defy every chain. My ankles sting from the memory of shackles, his shoulders quiver from severed wings. But our hearts beat as one, forging a path the clan or the dark elves no longer control.

At midday, we pause on a rocky ledge to rest. The view is breathtaking—a patchwork

of forested valleys, distant hills. No fortress spires, no columns of smoke marking an army. I exhale, letting the wonder soothe me. Korrin, slumped at my side, tries a weak smile. “It’s beautiful,” he murmurs. “I never saw these slopes from the ground. I used to fly.” His voice breaks on the last word, tears pooling in his eyes. I wrap an arm around him, pressing him close. A pang of sorrow twists my gut.

“I’m sorry,” I say, my voice hushed with empathy. “I wish you could still?—”

He silences me with a shaky kiss, tears slipping down his cheeks. “I choose this,” he whispers fiercely. “I’d rather walk with you than fly alone.”

My chest squeezes, tears brimming. We might never be truly safe, but we choose each other every step of the way.

As the afternoon drifts, I reflect on the final part of the vow we made. United against gargoyles and dark elves—the impetus for what we just survived. In a sense, we already united, standing back-to-back in the arena. But the war is not over. We remain outlaws in both worlds. My newly awakened purna magic might be the only thing that keeps them at bay, and Korrin’s lethal skill—though wingless now—remains formidable, if he can heal. We must prepare for more threats.

I realize that the act of uniting has already happened: we rescued each other from the jaws of our once-masters. We defied the fortress, the clan, the old laws demanding my death, and the kill order demanding Korrin’s loyalty. In that final stand, I rescued him from the Alpha’s execution, from Varzak’s spear, from the elves’ crossbows. And he rescued me from the ultimate betrayal—he would not become my executioner. We stand free of their control because we saved ourselves.

At last, we crest another ridge, entering a narrow canyon. The wind howls off the cliffs, but the path is fairly level. Korrin leans heavily on me, silent but determined to keep going. The sky overhead threatens rain, clouds roiling in swirling patterns. My

gut churns at the memory of storms past. I can't conjure that scale of magic again so soon.

Near the canyon's midpoint, we discover a hidden pocket—a shallow cave carved into the rock face. The opening is half-concealed by a tumble of boulders. My heart leaps with relief. A perfect place to rest and hide. I help Korrin navigate the rocky approach, supporting him as he nearly collapses with exhaustion. Inside, the cave extends a short distance, enough to shield us from weather or prying eyes.

Gently, I lower him onto a patch of dusty ground. He groans, sweat beading on his forehead. The stumps of his wings need another cleaning, more of those moon-kiss blossoms if I can find them. Still, we're more secure here than we were in the open. We'll patch ourselves up, gather supplies. Maybe from here, we can plan a route deeper into the mountains.

A hush settles as we catch our breath in the cave. I kindle a small fire, using tinder from the pine stand. Korrin sits with his head tilted back, eyes half-closed, face etched with weariness. Yet when I settle beside him, he opens his eyes, a faint smile tugging his lips. "We did it," he says, voice hoarse. "We're free—for now."

My throat tightens. "Yes." I brush hair from his forehead, gazing into his golden eyes. "I wish... I wish we had more time to simply live, not just survive." A tremor shakes my shoulders. I'm tired of being hunted, of constant pain.

He cups my chin with surprising gentleness. "We'll make it," he murmurs. "We'll find a place to rest, gather strength, let you master your magic. Then if they come, we'll stand against them. Together."

Tears slip from my eyes, love and gratitude mingling in my heart. I press my forehead against his, inhaling the faint smell of smoke and salt. "I won't let them chain me again," I vow. I destroyed that collar. If I must, I'll destroy a hundred more.

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He nods, pressing a soft kiss to my lips, a promise that lingers between us in the quiet gloom. The sound of our breathing, slow and matched, fills the cave. For a moment, I recall the arena's roar, the Alpha's lethal staff, the unstoppable clan. We overcame them. My pulse thrums with a fierce joy that tears can't fully express.

As evening deepens, the cave grows chilly. I tuck the battered cloak around Korrin, wishing I had more to offer him. We share a handful of the rations left in the pack—dried meat, stale bread. It's not much, but enough to quell hunger pangs. The flickering firelight casts dancing shadows on the cave walls, revealing the rough shape of our battered bodies. Each bruise and scar is a testament to defiance.

Eventually, I lean into him, letting exhaustion weigh down my eyelids. My mind swirls with images: the clan's twisted amphitheater, my unstoppable magic bursting forth, his wings shattering. Then I see him cradling me after the final blow, telling me we are free. That last moment defined everything.

For so long, we both served masters who treated us as tools—dark elves or the gargoyle Alpha. No more. We've rescued each other from that yoke, forging an alliance that no chain or collar can break. My chest warms with pride and love as I realize that in saving him, I saved myself. And in saving me, he discovered a life beyond the clan's tyranny.

He shifts beside me, wincing at the movement. "Elyria," he murmurs, drowsy. "When... I can walk better... we'll keep going... find a real home." His words slur with fatigue. My heart aches at his vulnerability, yet also brims with hope. A real home—someplace the clan's claws can't reach us, where my magic can be used gently, not in desperation.

“Yes,” I whisper, smoothing a hand over his hair. “We will. I promise.”

A small, content sound escapes him. His eyes flutter shut. I watch the flicker of the fire dance across his face, tears silently falling. We’re battered, haunted, and uncertain, but we remain free. My stomach twists with the knowledge that gargoyles or dark elves might soon come for us. But for tonight, in this hush of the cave, we’ve won a battle that nearly killed us. My magic, his sacrifice, our love forging a path the old tyrannies can’t control.

Outside, the wind hushes across the stone slopes, stars drifting overhead in a sky we can’t fully see from the cave’s mouth. Even so, I sense them shining, a quiet testament to possibility. Our future remains precarious, but we face it hand in hand. I nestle closer to Korrin, letting sleep edge in. If danger arrives, I’ll wake, if my magic doesn’t sense it first. For now, I trust in the fragile peace of night.

We have survived the worst of clan and elf. We’re battered, broken-winged, but defiant. If they come again, we’ll stand together. If my purna power stirs, I’ll harness it for us, not for them. Because no chain or wing can define us now—we define ourselves in love and rebellion, forging a new road in these savage mountains, unshackled by the masters we once served.

And as I drift into restless dreams, Korrin’s heartbeat against my shoulder, I dare to imagine a life beyond constant flight—a life where we rebuild from the ruins they left us. Where no Alphaor dark elf can claim dominion over our hearts. Where love transcends even the darkest nights of the soul.

16

KORRIN

I wake to the hush of our hidden cave, pain radiating through my severed wings. Each

breath aches, but the steady warmth of Elyria's body beside me soothes the raw edges of my despair. Dawn spills across the rocky threshold, illuminating her sleeping form—hair tousled, collar half-shattered at her throat, cheeks smudged with soot. Even battered, she radiates a quiet, fierce beauty that cradles my heart.

My thoughts swirl, drifting back to the onslaught we escaped. The fortress behind us; a handful of dark elves who nearly recaptured her. The stumps of my wings pulse with each memory, a dull, unrelenting throb. I chose to destroy them so I could spare her life. And in the end, her awakened purna power saved us both, sending gargoyles and elves scattering. Yet we remain hunted, perched on a precarious edge. We can't run forever, not while the Alpha might still breathe. The possibility that he survived the arena's collapse gnaws at me. My chest knots with a fierce mixture of dread and resolve: If he hunts us, we must face him once and for all.

I shift carefully, ignoring the spike of pain in my back, and pull the tattered cloak higher over Elyria's shoulders. She murmurs in half-sleep, pressing closer to me, her breath soft against my collarbone. The faint bruise around her throat, remnants of chain and magic, reminds me how close she came to dying in that arena. Never again. I stroke her hair gently, marveling that we're still here, free of those devouring stares, forging a new path in these savage mountains.

My lips brush her temple. A wave of affection wells up—raw, consuming. She gave me everything: hope, freedom from the clan's shackles, a reason to keep living. The hush of the cave feels like a cocoon around us. For a fragile moment, we can pretend the world outside has forgotten its hatred, that no Alpha or dark elf awaits. Just us, breathing in tandem, hearts bound.

Her eyes flutter open, dark lashes lifting. She blinks at me, a drowsy smile curving her lips. "Morning," she whispers, voice husky. I see the worry in her gaze, but also love shining like dawn's first light. My heart constricts.

“Morning,” I manage, voice rough. “How do you feel?”

She exhales, nuzzling closer, as though reluctant to rejoin the world’s perils. “Tired... but I’m alive. And you?” Her hand slides over my chest, carefully avoiding the bandages that cover my wing stumps.

My chest tightens with a pang of sorrow. “I’ve felt better,” I admit wryly. My breath catches as she traces a soft path up my neck. Even through the haze of pain, my pulse stirs, awakened by her tender touch. She’s not just a partner in war, but in love. Warmth floods me, tangling with the ache.

She props herself up on one elbow, hair tumbling across her face. “Let me see,” she murmurs, voice laced with concern. Gingerly, she peels back the bandages, revealing the messy cauterized wounds. Her eyes flick with tears. “I’m sorry,” she chokes, recalling the brutal night I hacked away my wings rather than kill her.

I cover her hand with mine, ignoring the dull throb in my back. “I’m not,” I say, fierce sincerity flooding my tone. “I’d do it again.” A tremor runs through her, tears slipping free. Gently, I cup her cheek, guiding her gaze to mine. “Elyria, I’d rather stand wingless beside you than soar alone under the Alpha’s orders.”

She lets out a shaky breath, pressing her brow to mine. Our tears mingle in the silence of the cave. This is our vow—our bond. My entire being aches with the desire to assure her we’ll make it out of this living. I want to show her that my love runs deeper than any wound or clan decree.

In that quiet dawn, something shifts between us—a soft, pulsing need for connection, not just in words but in body and soul. My pulse quickens as Elyria’s fingers glide along my collarbone, brushing past fresh bruises. She leans closer, the chain at her neck rattling lightly, the half-burned metal no longer binding her magic. Her eyes search mine with a longing that stirs warmth in my chest. We’ve fought so hard for

each other, risked everything. This moment is ours, stolen from the jaws of war.

I slip my arm around her, careful of my injuries. She sinks into me, breath hitching. Our lips meet in a fragile, questing kiss—tentative at first, as though we fear reawakening the horrors left behind. But each passing second sends sparks dancing through my veins, overshadowing the pain. Her body trembles against mine, relief and yearning blending. No more running, no more fear. Just us.

We break apart, breathing ragged. Elyria's cheeks flush in the dim light, tears glistening on her lashes. She runs a trembling hand across my bare chest. "Are you sure... your wounds?" she asks, voice quivering with love and worry.

A soft groan escapes me. The pain remains, yet the ache of longing for her runs deeper. "I need you," I confess, voice husky, pressing my forehead to hers. "Not just physically, but—by yoursides, heart to heart. Every inch of me is broken except where you hold me together."

Tears brim in her eyes, and she nods, lips parted in raw emotion. Without further words, we fuse into another kiss, this one deeper, urgent. My battered body complains, but I hush the pain, letting the flood of her warmth and scent envelope me. She clutches the back of my neck, mindful of the bandages, but determined. Our hearts beat in sync, forging a bond that transcends the violence behind us.

In careful movements, we maneuver on our makeshift bedding of pine branches and cloth scraps, the cool stone beneath softened by a stray blanket. The cloak covers us in patchwork shadow. Each brush of her skin sends flares of heat racing through me, banishing the fortress's chill. We have so little time. The memory of the Alpha's wrath lingers in my mind, but I push it aside. Now is ours.

Elyria trembles, pressing a shaky kiss along my jaw, tangling her fingers in my hair. I slide my hand along her waist, feeling the flutter of her pulse. Our breathing

quickens. This is not just lust but a desperate need to affirm we're alive, still able to share tenderness after such brutality. She guides my hand over the curve of her hip, and I feel a fresh wave of gratitude for her trust. My lips skim the line of her throat, tasting salt and tears. Her sigh resonates deep in my chest.

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Time drifts into a haze of touch and whispered devotion. She shifts, hooking her leg over mine, her body pressed flush. I bite back a groan as pain lances through my back. She halts, eyes wide with worry. “I’m hurting you?—”

“No,” I breathe, voice choked. “Never.” Gently, I reposition, leaning so she’s partially atop me, easing pressure on my wings. The battered stumps pulse with dull agony, but I can manage. Her face hovers above mine, tears streaking her cheeks. I seelove warring with sorrow. I brush a thumb over her lips, a silent reassurance.

We come together in a slow, cautious rhythm, our bodies weaving a fragile tapestry of comfort and desire. I guide myself into her with aching care, my cock pressing against the heat of her pussy, both of us shuddering at the contact. She’s so wet, so ready, but still, I hesitate—not from doubt, but reverence.

“Korrin...” she says with so much love and care in her voice, it makes my heart ache.

Her breath hitches as I sink deeper, inch by inch, her body stretching to accommodate me. A whimper escapes her lips, not from pain but overwhelm, and I cradle her shoulders, pressing her close. Our foreheads touch, tears mingling between us.

“Oh, Gods... Korrin... you undone me...” she moans in between her breaths.

“You make me complete... I never regret fighting for you...” I vow, feeling emotional.

Each movement is laced with lingering pain, her bruises, my shattered wings—but we guide each other with careful grace. Her hips tilt upward, urging me forward, and I

groan as her pussy clenches around me, slick and tight. My name spills from her lips in a shaky whisper, and my heart swells until I fear it might burst. I roll my hips, dragging myself almost entirely out before pushing back in, savoring the way her breath catches. Her nails dig into my back, not to draw blood but to anchor us both.

She arches into me, face contorted in a swirl of pleasure and grief. I press my brow to hers, our tears slipping freely now. This is not just sex—it's a profound ceremony, a vow sealed in flesh and spirit. My cock throbs inside her, but I force myself to keep the pace slow, deliberate. I want to memorize every hitch of her breath, every flutter of her walls around me. Her legs wrap around my waist, heels pressing into the scars along my spine, and I hiss at the sting—but I wouldn't pull away for anything.

Our breath stutters as tension coils between us, ignited by the raw longing we tried to bury under terror. I feel her inner spark of magic flutter along my skin, a faint silver shimmer bridging us in deeper intimacy. Her purna power is not just destruction but life, vibrancy, an echo of love. It dances where our bodies join, her pussy pulsing around my cock as if her very essence recognizes mine. The sensation is dizzying—I'm not just inside her; we're woven together, soul-deep.

"Yes... more... almost there, Korrin... Make me yours..." Elyria whispers in my eyes.

I shift slightly, angling my hips, and her back bows off the bedding with a gasp. "There," she sobs, fingers twisting in the cloak beneath us. I obey, rocking into that spot again, and her cry fractures into a moan. Her pleasure is a living thing, sharp and sweet, and I drink it from her lips as I kiss her. The taste of her, salt and tears and something indefinably Elyria—washes away the memory of blood and fear.

Her thighs tremble around me, and I slide a hand between us, thumb circling her clit. She jerks against me, a broken sound tearing from her throat. "Look into my eyes," I rasp, and her eyes fly open, dazed but achingly present. I need her to see this, to know

that every roll of my hips, every ragged breath, is a promise. Her pussy grips me tighter, her magic flaring brighter, and I know she's close.

When the crest washes over us, it's a wave of fierce tenderness rather than unbridled lust. Her orgasm crashes through her first—her body locks around me, her pussy milking my cock as she chokes out my name. "Korrinn!"

The sight undoes me. "I'm coming!" I follow with a groan, spilling into her, my wings (what's left of them) straining against the air as if they could shield her from the world. We cling to each other, tears mingling with soft cries, souls bound more tightly than any collar or chain.

A sense of completeness hums in my chest, banishing the ache in my severed wings for a moment. Our hearts hammer in unison, forging a promise that outlasts the fortress's cruelty. As the aftershocks fade, I stay inside her, unwilling to sever the connection. Her fingers trace the sweat-damp lines of my face, her magic still thrumming between us like a second pulse.

"You feel that?" she whispers, awed.

I do. Her power isn't just in her—it's in me now, a gentle glow knitting through muscle and bone. The agony in my wings dulls to a bearable throb. I press my lips to her palm, too raw to speak.

We remain entwined, breath settling into a shared rhythm. The world outside is still cruel, still cold—but here, in this stolen moment, we are whole.

We remain entwined, breath settling into a calming rhythm. Her fingers stroke my hair, and I close my eyes, savoring the soft hush. A strange tingling warmth blossoms where her skin meets mine, a gentle hum that resonates deeper than mere contact. Her magic? I feel it threading through me, not with scorching force, but a tender glow. It

seeps into my battered flesh, alleviating some pain, bolstering my spirit. A small miracle amid the ashes of war.

Elyria notices, gasping quietly. “It’s like... we’re sharing energy,” she whispers, pressing a palm over my heartbeat. I nod, too overwhelmed to speak. My exhaustion recedes slightly, replaced by a cautious vitality. The wing stumps still ache, but the edges of agony soften. Our joined breath forms a synergy of quiet power.

We hold each other like that for an uncounted time, the day’s light shifting. The swirl of her hair, the warmth of her lips, the rhythmic pulse in her throat... it all anchors me. For once, our bond is not overshadowed by immediate terror. The realization stirs tears of gratitude. She brushes them away with trembling fingers.

But the world does not grant us peace for long. Late afternoon’s sun slants across the cave mouth, shadows lengthening. I sense a tremor in the air, a surge of hateful energy that prickles my scars. Elyria stiffens too, eyes darting to me. “Someone’s out there,” she murmurs, dread creeping into her voice.

I push upright, ignoring the flare of pain. We scramble into ragged clothes, discarding the tender hush of our union. My renewed vigor from our magical intimacy helps me stand without toppling. Elyria summons a flicker of silver in her palm, brows knitted with fear. Together, we creep to the cave entrance, hearts pounding. If it’s dark elves, I can manage. But if it’s the clan...

A massive silhouette blots the sun. My blood runs cold. The Alpha, horns silhouetted against the dying light. His obsidian skin streaked with new scars, a ragged wound on his shoulder, staff clutched in one claw. He looms at the threshold, eyes blazing with lethal fury. Two gargoyle enforcers flank him, though they appear battered—likely survivors of the fortress’s collapse.

“Korrin,” the Alpha says, voice echoing in the cramped space. “You thought you

could flee forever?" The staff crackles with red sparks. My gut twists. He survived the rubble.

Elyria tenses, raw energy dancing at her fingertips. I meet her gaze, exhaling. We just sealed our bond in the most profound way— and now we face the monstrous tyrant who demanded her death. My wings are gone, but fury fuels me. We must end this, once and for all.

The Alpha steps forward, staff raised. "You cost me my fortress, my clan's loyalty," he growls. "You destroyed your wings for a worthless purna. Now I finish what the arena started."

A savage chill grips me. "You can't break me anymore," I say. My voice resonates with new steadiness, thanks to Elyria's supportive magic. "Wingless or not, I'll protect her from you."

He laughs, low and menacing. "What can you do without your wings? That worthless purna's power saved you once, but I am the Alpha." He brandishes the staff, arcs of crimson lightning dancing.

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Elyria presses close, silver flickers forming around her palms. “I am not worthless,” she hisses, tears of rage glinting. “And I won’t let you hurt him.”

The two enforcer gargoyles lunge past the Alpha, presumably to neutralize me or keep Elyria from attacking. Elyria flings a bolt of silver at one, driving him back with a yelp. I thrust forward, dagger in hand, intercepting the second. Pain rips through my stumps, but adrenaline surges. I slash across the gargoyle’s chest, forcing him to reel away, growling curses.

The Alpha stands back, staff humming with malevolent power. “I will not let your union stand,” he snarls. “You defy the clan’s very creed.” He directs a bolt of red lightning at Elyria, trying to cut her down. I leap between them, bracing for the impact. Agony rakes my nerves. But I remain upright, gritting my teeth. He can’t kill us so easily. We’re stronger together.

Elyria, tears shining, channels a swirl of silver flame around me, offsetting the red lightning in a crackling flash. My battered body wants to collapse, but I force myself to keep moving, parrying another enforcer’s swing with my dagger. I will not yield. The synergy of our bond, sealed mere hours ago, hums in my blood, dulling the worst of the Alpha’s wrath.

In a flurry of savage intensity, the two enforcers converge, one aiming for me, the other for Elyria. She blasts hers with a wave of light, sending him crashing into the cave wall. I lunge at the one attacking me, ignoring the burn in my back. I bury the dagger into his side. His eyes widen, a muffled gurgle escaping before he collapses. Guilt pricks me—he was once a clan brother. But there’s no room for mercy now. We can’t let them kill us.

The Alpha roars, staff blazing, arcs of lightning crackling in the confined cave. Chunks of stone collapse from the ceiling, sending dust and pebbles raining down. Elyria cries out, shielding me from a falling boulder with a silver barrier. My chest lurches in gratitude.

He steps forward, staff leveled, madness in his obsidian eyes. “I should have ended you at birth, worthless traitor,” he spits at me. “I’ll bury you and this purna together.” Another surge of red lightning courses toward us. Elyria intercepts, silver flame colliding in a brilliant flare that nearly blinds me.

For a heartbeat, they stand locked in a clash of energies—her silver wave, his red storm. My heart hammers. This could destroy the entire cave, bury us all. The floor quakes underfoot. Elyria’s face twists in strain, tears streaming, the collar’s melted runes sparking. She leans on me physically, her magic weaving around both of us. The Alpha snarls, pushing harder. My mind screams: We must strike now or be crushed!

Summoning a ragged cry, I push forward, ignoring the blasts scorching my arms. The synergy from our lovemaking ignites a final well of strength. I see the perfect moment—his staff is directed fully at Elyria’s wave, leaving his flank unguarded. Gritting my teeth, I lunge, driving my dagger at his chest with every ounce of force. He tries to twist away, but our energies lock him in place.

The blade sinks in, meeting resistance, a wet gasp escaping his lips. He staggers, staff faltering. Elyria’s silver onslaught slams into him, finishing the job. Crimson and silver swirl, an explosion of violent sparks that shakes the cave. I fling myself sideways, dragging Elyria with me, as the Alpha collapses in a roar of agony. Chunks of rock tumble from the ceiling, the staff’s glow extinguishing.

A hush follows, broken only by our ragged breathing. I scramble up, ignoring searing pain, eyes fixed on the Alpha’s fallen form. He coughs, black blood pooling around

the dagger in his chest. His obsidian eyes, once so commanding, glaze with disbelief. “Korrin... you traitor... you damn... us all,” he rasps. Then his chest heaves, and the life drains from him, wings splayed in the dust.

Elyria collapses into my arms, trembling, eyes wide in shock. The red lightning dissipates, leaving only the faint glow of her silver aura flickering. The final vestiges wink out, and we’re left in a battered cave, the Alpha’s corpse at our feet. It’s over. The gargoyle clan’s hold on me is cut at the root. My chest tightens with sorrow and grim relief. No more Alpha to chase us.

We crouch there, panting, clinging to each other’s shoulders. My severed wing stumps burn with fresh agony, but a sense of overwhelming release floods me. He’s gone. The clan lost its iron fist. Elyria sniffles, tears streaming down her cheeks. I cradle her head to my shoulder, pressing a kiss to her hair. “We did it,” I murmur, voice shaking. “We’re free.”

She sobs softly, trembling in my arms. “It’s over. He can’t hurt us anymore.” Her arms tighten around me, face buried in my neck. She nearly died so many times because of him. Now, his body lies still.

A final glance at the fallen Alpha stirs a pang of old regret for my once-kin. If only he had relented, let me and Elyria live in peace. But the clan’s fear of purna overshadowed all reason. I close my eyes as my tears drop. We can’t change the past. We can only move forward.

Carefully, I help Elyria stand, ignoring the fresh wave of pain. We gather what remains of our things— a battered cloak, a half-empty water pouch. The cave is unstable, new cracks zigzagging across the walls from the magical clash. We must leave before it collapses entirely. With one last look at the Alpha’s body, we exit into the open air, fresh dawn light kissing our faces. My heart lurches as I realize the sun rises anew for us—wingless, half-wild, bound by love, undefeated.

Elyria steadies me with a gentle arm, tears drying on her cheeks. The quiet mountains stretch before us. The clan might still exist in fragments, the dark elves remain a threat, but we ended the worst threat in a single savage stand. My head spins with exhaustion, body battered, but my spirit feels... light. We sealed our bond physically, forging a synergy that gave us the strength to stand against him.

She glances at me, a tentative smile tugging her swollen lips. "Shall we find somewhere calmer to rest?" she asks, voice quivering with hope.

I nod, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. "Yes," I whisper, ignoring the tight feeling in my throat. "No more running from them. If any remain, we'll stand together as we did now. We have each other, and that's enough to face any danger."

A breeze ruffles Elyria's hair, carrying the scent of pine and freedom. My severed wings ache, but the knowledge that I can walk forward with her at my side keeps me upright. She squeezes my hand, a silent vow that we'll survive whatever the horizon brings. We are free, united in love, having toppled our greatest foe.

Slowly, we descend from the cave's plateau, dawn's brilliance illuminating the rugged path. Each step is laced with pain, yet brimming with the promise of a future no clan or empire can tear from us. Her purna magic hums gently in the air, no longer surging with destructive might but forming a protective, comforting aura. I lean into it, heart swelling.

The final notes of night fade, replaced by the golden wash of a new day. My chest tightens with gratitude. We lived. She threads her fingers through mine, guiding me with careful steps. We're alive. We have each other, a bond sealed in blood and love. The memory of that final stand in the cave stirs a deep sense of closure. The Alpha once shaped my existence, but no more.

We cross a small stream, the water shimmering in dawn's light. Elyria lowers me

gently so I can drink, washing blood from my hands. I watch her, tears sliding down my face. She meets my gaze, a soft smile curving her lips, sorrow and hope mingling. This is the life we choose, forging a path unknown. But we choose it hand in hand, hearts bound by a vow that no collar, no wing, no clan edict can sever.

A hush of acceptance settles over us, as we rise and walk deeper into the mountains, leaving the fortress's tyranny behind. Each step leads us toward the next chapter of our survival—a story no longer shackled by the Alpha's demands, but guided by the fragile, indomitable flame of our united hearts.

17

ELYRIA

The morning sky stretches clear and pale, as if the world has shed the raging storms that devoured our nights. I stand at the edge of a jagged outcrop, surveying the valley that once echoed with the roar of gargoyle wings and the hiss of dark elf crossbows. Now, it's eerily quiet. The tang of scorched stone and lingering magic clings to my nostrils, reminding me that only hours ago, these foothills convulsed under the final clash that toppled the Alpha's reign.

My heart thuds with a dull ache, the residual tremor of adrenaline still coursing through my blood. He's gone. The Alpha—obsidian-skinned, staff brimming with red lightning—laid to rest by Korrin's dagger and my unleashed purna power. It happened so fast, yet also felt like an eternity. In those final moments, the entire fortress seemed to hold its breath as Korrin delivered that lethal strike, and I hammered the last wave of silver flame to seal our victory. He died, and with him, the twisted rule that demanded my execution.

The aftermath unfolds in slow ripples. Gargoyles, once so fearsome in their tight phalanxes, break ranks and scatter across these rugged slopes. Some slink away in

shame, others flee in fear. No new alpha emerges in the chaos. Without their leader, their cohesion fractures—packs dissolving into individuals with no unifying cause. They have no reason to fight once the alpha is gone. I watch from the ridge as small clusters vanish into the mountains, carrying their wounded. The great fortress that once loomed behind us is silent, half-collapsed from the battles that raged inside. It belongs to ghosts now.

From the opposite corner of the battlefield, I glimpse the dark elves retreating in ragged lines. Their crossbows droop at their sides, exhausted or broken, their sleek armor dusty and dented. I don't know if they slink back to their twisted fortress or scatter into the lower forests. Either way, they've lost the impetus to remain. Their uneasy alliance with the gargoyles collapsed the moment the alpha's staff fell from his dead claws. They have no reason to keep hunting me now—too many losses, too little reward.

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My chain clinks as I shift from foot to foot, half-expecting an arrow to whistle from somewhere. But none comes. The collar around my neck is half-melted, runes dark, no longer enslaving me. My chest tightens with bittersweet relief. We're not safe, not entirely, but we stand beyond the worst of it.

I turn back from the ledge to glance at Korrin, who stands a few steps behind me, leaning heavily on a crag of rock. His breath rasps in his throat, face pale from blood loss. Even in the thin light, I can see the sweat beading on his brow. My heart clenches. His wings—gone, severed in that final stand. The stumps remain bandaged, but they glisten with fresh seepage.

His eyes flick to mine with a weariness that speaks volumes. He tries to smile, but it's more of a pained grimace. "They're really scattering," he observes, voice low and raw, scanning the departing gargoyles. "I never thought I'd see the clan break apart like this."

Guilt tugs at me. He lost his entire life for me. In that single act—lifting the blade to hack his own wings—he severed not just bone and sinew, but the only home he'd known. I swallow thickly. "They have no alpha," I say softly, stepping closer. The wind snags my hair, pulling it across my face. "No reason to stay if they're not forced to."

He nods, jaw clenched. For a moment, we share a look brimming with unspoken sorrow and relief. We survived. Then his legs tremble. A flicker of alarm rips through me. "Korrin?" I say, rushing to brace him.

He tries to wave me off, but it's no use—his strength is nearly spent. "I'm fine," he

rasps, though the sweat on his forehead betrays him. Then his eyes roll back, and he collapses in my arms with a strangled groan, stumps brushing the air where wings once were.

I let out a panicked sob, easing him down onto the rocky ground. “No—no, no, no.” My chest seizes, tears pricking my eyes. My entire body shakes as I cradle his head, ignoring the metallic clink of the chain still looped around me. “Stay with me,” I whisper, voice cracking. “You gave too much for this—please don’t leave me now.”

The hush of the ridge wraps around us. Gargoyles still pass in the distance, paying us no heed, and the dark elves are long gone. My heart thuds wildly, each beat a question: Is this the moment I lose him after all we’ve overcome?

He doesn’t respond, eyes shut, breathing shallow. He’s alive, but so fragile. My tears slip like raindrops, landing on his battered face. For a breathless moment, I recall every step of our harrowing journey—his resolute vow in the fortress courtyard, our nights sheltering under broken walls, the scorching bond we forged that fueled our final battle. All that, only to watch him fade from blood loss on a barren ridge. The injustice of it roars in my chest.

I press my palm to his brow. Feverish heat simmers beneath the sweat. The stumps of his wings seethe red at the edges, bandages soaked. He needs healing we cannot provide. My purna power soared magnificently in moments of desperate battle, but healing is something else entirely. I have no skill for that, no control. The memory of my partial attempts stabs me: I seared his wounds in that cave, but that was hardly controlled healing.

“Tend him,” a faint voice in me insists, some leftover spark of magic whispering at the edge of my mind. “He gave everything for you.” My throat tightens, tears sliding down my chin. I have to try.

I steady myself, kneeling over him. My collar rattles, half broken, the runes extinguished. The chain rests limp in the dust. At least it can't stop me now. Gently, I place one hand on his chest, the other brushing over the bandage nearest his right wing stump. The scorching memory of my destructive power unleashing silver flame floods me with dread—What if I burn him again instead of healing? But no alternative remains. He's slipping away.

I inhale a trembling breath, closing my eyes. My entire body hums with leftover magic, the raw purna inheritance stirring. Focus, Elyria, I command myself, half terrified. I conjure the memory of the intangible bond we shared in that moment of intimacy, how our auras merged. We tasted each other's strength then. Perhaps that synergy can do more than slay foes.

A faint glow stirs beneath my palms, not the raging silver arcs that destroyed so many, but a softer luminescence, tinted with warmth. My breath hitches in wonder, tears stinging. Yes, gently. I murmur a half-formed prayer, calling on the essence of my bloodline for healing, not harm. The glow spreads over his chest, illuminating the battered bandages. He moans softly, brow furrowing in pain. My heart leaps with hope. He's reacting.

I let the energy flow, mind swirling with images of growth and life rather than destruction. It's precarious—my power yearns to flare in unstoppable waves, but I keep it contained, focusing on mending. A surge of heat pulses from my core down my arms, seeping into his wounds. He groans, head tossing as if in a fever dream. I press closer, tears slipping. "Don't die," I whisper, lips trembling. "Stay with me."

Gradually, the raw edges of his injuries ease, swelling receding, the flow of blood slowing. My chest tightens with relief. I'm no grand healer, but perhaps I can reduce the mortal danger. The sweet ache of magic in my veins intensifies, leaving me lightheaded. I'm pouring everything into him. The silver glow dims after a minute, the last flickers dancing around my fingertips. I slump forward, resting my forehead

against his uninjured shoulder, vision spinning. I can't do more.

Korrin's breath comes steadier now, though still labored. I glance up, breath catching at the sight: his face is drawn with pain but not as ghastly pale as before. A gentle relief spreads across his features, eyelids fluttering. He's not fully healed, but I've pulled him back from the brink. My tears overflow, chest shuddering with gratitude.

He stirs, blinking sluggishly. "Elyria?" he rasps. I exhale a sob, smoothing his hair from his forehead. "I'm here," I breathe, biting back tears. "I... I tried to help. It's not perfect, but..."

He offers a faint, wobbly smile that cracks my heart open. "You... did something," he murmurs, confusion and awe tinging his voice. His eyes flick to the bandaged stumps. They remain gruesome, but the bleeding has indeed lessened, the skin less inflamed. "Feels... not as bad."

I let out a shaky laugh that dissolves into weeping. He tries to reach up, wiping my tears, but his arm quivers with exhaustion. "Thank you," he says, voice cracking. A single phrase that resonates deeper than any speech.

I cradle him against my chest, tears falling onto the dust. For a heartbeat, we hold each other in the quiet of the ridge, letting the last stragglers of gargoyles and elves vanish from our minds. The alpha is slain, the clan scattered, the dark elves retreating. We remain—battered, alive, bound by love. That knowledge pulses in my chest, a fragile joy overshadowed by the permanent damage to his wings. He can't fly ever again. A wave of grief surges.

He notices my face contorting in sorrow, brows knitting. "Elyria," he murmurs, brushing trembling fingers over my cheek. "Don't cry. I chose this."

I nod, tears unstoppable. "I know," I whisper. "I just... I wish it didn't cost you

everything.”

His eyes brim with an emotion so tender it steals my breath. “You’re everything,” he says, voice thick. “I’d do it a thousand times more.”

A sob escapes me, a mixture of heartbreak and love. I lean in, pressing a shaky kiss to his mouth. He responds with a soft moan, the simple act laced with shared mourning and relief. My entire chest aches with longing for a world where he didn’t have to sever his wings. But I accept that no such world existed.

We remain huddled for a time, letting our tears subside into quiet acceptance. The ridge remains overshadowed by the day’s haze, the battlefield below us littered with the remnants of gargoyle armor and dark elf crossbows. No one lingers. Korrin tries to rise again, and this time I help him gently, mindful of the newly lessened bleeding. He leans heavily on me, arms looped around my shoulder, each step a test of his endurance.

We pick a path down the slope, avoiding the main route that once led to the fortress. The air crackles with a sense of finality. I see scattered gargoyle corpses in the distance, torn or scorched—remnants of that savage war. My stomach twists, but I push forward, guiding Korrin around the bodies. He spares them a sorrowful glance, yet his jaw remains set. They chose the alpha’s cruelty; we did what we had to do.

As midday heat builds, we pause near a rocky outcropping overshadowed by a lone pine. Korrin sinks down with a choked groan. I kneel beside him, brushing sweat from his brow. “Rest,” I murmur. “We’re safe enough for now. Gargoyles scattered, dark elves withdrew. No one wants to face us after that final stand.” My lips quirk in a humorless half-smile, remembering how my magic flared violently.

He exhales, tension draining. “I never imagined... we’d see them flee,” he says, exhaustion slurring his words. Then his gaze flicks to me, eyes brimming with

devotion. “Thank you.”

I frown, wiping tears from my cheeks. “For what?”

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He attempts a faint grin. “For staying. For dragging me from the fortress, from the cave. For healing me just now.” His expression darkens with memories of the arena. “You saved me from a fate worse than death: carrying out the alpha’s command to kill you.”

My chest tightens painfully. I recall the hush before he severed his wings, that savage choice overshadowing the forced blade at my throat. He truly freed us both that day.

I lean in, pressing a trembling kiss to his forehead, savoring the taste of salt and tears. “We saved each other,” I whisper, voice cracking. “From them. From ourselves.” He closes his eyes, tears leaking from the corners.

A gentle hush settles. Despite the heartbreak of his lost wings, or maybe because of it, I feel a surge of quiet love that begs to be expressed. We embrace, ignoring the dusty ground, ignoring the stench of spent magic. Our lips brush in a tender exploration, slow and comforting, an affirmation that we’re not alone in this shattered world.

He shudders, arms winding around my waist. “Elyria,” he breathes, longing raw in his tone. A wave of desire, gentle yet fierce, flares within me. Not the desperate coupling from before war, but a reaffirmation of life after so much death. My tears slip down as I deepen the kiss, letting the tension unravel from both our bodies. We’re alive, we must celebrate every breath.

Slowly, carefully, we let the moment unfold. He’s too injured for anything rough or frantic, but we find a slow, tender rhythm that merges our hearts. My breath catches as his hands slide along my sides, each touch a promise that no clan decree can separate us. I unfasten what remains of his tattered tunic, mindful of the bandages. He

flinches slightly, so I ease up, tears pricking at the corners of my eyes. “I don’t want to hurt you,” I whisper, voice shaking.

He holds my gaze, agony and need swirling in his gold irises. “Your touch never hurts me,” he rasps. The sincerity in his tone undoes me. A tear falls from my cheek to his chest, and I lean in, lips grazing his neck. Our bodies entwine with gentle caution, a slow dance of healing hands and tearful kisses. My heart thunders, recalling how close we are to losing this forever.

We find a position that doesn’t strain his stumps, me half-laying against him, the pine’s shade cooling our skin. Each quiet gasp, each press of our lips, breathes life back into the wounds left by betrayal and war. My tears flow unashamedly, matching the emotional tears on his cheeks. This union is not just physical; it’s a reclamation of what the alpha tried to steal—our bond, our ability to choose love over violence.

Amid this soft, intimate moment, a subtle warmth stirs beneath my skin, the purna spark responding to joy rather than fear. I channel it gently, letting it caress him, not in a destructive wave, but in a subtle glow that tangles with our shared breath. Korrin groans softly, a new sense of relief crossing his features. It’s not full healing, but it eases his pain, bridging our hearts deeper.

When the pleasure crests over us, it comes in a hushed sob, tears mixing with husky moans. We cling to each other, bodies trembling, minds swirling with relief and sorrow, love and loss. The oppressive gloom that overshadowed our hearts recedes under the testament of our unity. We do not face this world alone.

We linger in the aftermath, pressed chest to chest, tears still glistening. He strokes my hair absently, eyes distant. I sense a fresh wave of sorrow in him, deeper than the immediate pain. “I miss them,” he whispers, voice hoarse. “My wings. I’ll never fly again. That was part of who I was.” A tear slips from the corner of his eye, and my chest aches.

I cradle his cheek, matching his tears with my own. “I know,” I murmur, softly kissing his head. “I wish I could give them back to you.” The raw emptiness in his face is heartbreak incarnate. No magic can regrow limbs, at least not with my meager skill.

He closes his eyes, letting out a shuddering breath. “I don’t regret it, but... sometimes it hits me that I’m a crippled gargoyle now.” His lips twist in self-derision. He was once unstoppable, soared above foes. Now that identity is shattered.

I rest my forehead on his, tears sliding down. “You are more than your wings,” I say fiercely. “You’re the bravest soul I’ve ever known. And if you can’t fly, I’ll stand with you on the ground. Always.”

He exhales, tears streaming. Our foreheads press, hearts beating in shared grief. Eventually, the tension in him eases, replaced by gratitude. He kisses me again, a slow, trembling press of lips, as though reaffirming his vow to exist, wingless or not, as long as we’re together. I cling to him, breath shuddering. One day, perhaps he’ll accept his new reality fully.

We dress again in our threadbare clothes. The day drifts into late afternoon. Above, the sky remains free of gargoyles—at least none approach us with hostility. It seems the clan has truly broken, each gargoyle scattering to find a new path or lair. My chest tightens with an odd pity for them. They lost their alpha, their illusions. But they nearly destroyed us, so I stifle the pity. We owe them nothing except caution.

With renewed determination, we set off from the ridge. Korrin limps heavily, leaning on me. The synergy from our intimate moment lingers, fueling my purna magic with gentle warmth. Enough to keep him from collapsing outright. We cross the slope, stepping over scattered debris—remnants of crossbow bolts, shards of gargoyle armor. Each piece tells a story of the final war that ended here.

In the distance, I spot a few dark elves straggling away, carrying wounded. They glance our way, fear flickering in their eyes, then hurry on. I suspect rumors of my unleashed power or Korrin's unstoppable devotion swirl among them, enough to dissuade further pursuit. A surge of relief washes over me. We can pass unchallenged.

Eventually, we find a small waterfall trickling from a rocky ledge, forming a shallow pool. The water sparkles in the late sunlight, surrounded by a cluster of hardy shrubs. My pulse leaps—Fresh water. Perfect for cleaning Korrin's wounds, for rinsing the sweat and blood from our battered bodies. We approach, hearts lifting at the simple promise of nature's solace.

I help him settle on a broad stone near the pool's edge. The waterfall's gentle splash soothes my raw nerves. He closes his eyes, tension draining. "It's beautiful," he murmurs. I wipe tears from my cheeks, marveling that we can still appreciate beauty after so much horror.

We peel away torn clothing, boots soaked in dried blood. I gaze at the stumps on his back, each swathed in soiled bandages. My heart seizes again, but I steel myself. We must keep them clean. Gently, I ease the bandages off, discarding them. The wounds look angry, but less lethal thanks to my partial healing. He flinches, breath hissing. "I'm sorry," I whisper, tears in my eyes.

He grimaces, but manages a small nod. "Do what you must."

I soak a scrap of cloth in the pool, the water cool against my fingers. Then, with infinite care, I dab at the dried blood and grime around his stumps. He bites his lip, a tear squeezing from one eye, but he doesn't cry out. My chest constricts. He's endured so much.

When most of the residue is gone, I gently apply the leftover antiseptic herbs, chanting a hushed prayer. The silver flicker in my veins responds, a mild glow

suffusing my fingertips. This synergy might keep infection at bay. Korrin shudders, tears streaming silently, though relief softens his expression.

Finally, I rinse my own arms and face, scrubbing away layers of dust and dried blood. The half-burned collar remains draped around my neck, but the ring is broken, runes inert. One day I'll remove it entirely. For now, it's just a piece of twisted metal.

We rest there, letting the waterfall's music calm our shattered spirits. I hold Korrin's head in my lap, stroking his hair as the sun dips lower. A sense of final closure hums in the air. The alpha is dead, gargoyles scattered, the dark elves retreated. We have no more battles to fight, at least not tonight.

Night falls gently, the stars emerging over a sky that once boomed with storms. Korrin dozes, safe in the hush of the waterfall. I keep vigil, listening for any threat. None appears. Perhaps we truly ended it.

When he finally stirs, blinking up at me with weary eyes, I smile through tears. "We should find shelter," I suggest. "Somewhere near here, out of the wind."

He nods, pushing himself to a seated position. A fresh wave of pain crosses his face, but he takes a shuddering breath, letting it pass. Then he meets my gaze, a wry, tearful smile forming. "You're right. We keep going, together."

I help him stand, supporting his weight. The hush of the night embraces us as we skirt the waterfall's edge. Fireflies dance among the shrubs, a tiny wonder after so many horrors. My heart lifts, tethered to hope. No matter how battered we are, we survived. We stand here, leaning on each other, free from the fortress's tyranny.

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We discover a shallow cave on higher ground near the waterfall—less precarious than our battered ridge. A smooth patch of stone forms a natural floor. We gather loose branches, kindling a small fire with some coaxing of my leftover magic. The glow illuminates Korrin's face, etched in lines of pain, but also a quiet contentment. We sit close, arms entwined, the gentle crackle of flames offsetting the starry silence outside.

His voice breaks the hush: "They're truly gone. The clan... the dark elves. We ended that war."

I nod, a tear slipping free. "We did," I whisper. "The alpha's cruelty no longer binds them. They might scatter or find new ways to live. We can do the same." My heart almost stops beating at the memory of winged silhouettes overhead, the savage shrieks that once haunted me. But now, there's only the murmur of falling water and the flicker of flames.

He leans against me, tears of sorrow and relief glistening. "I never thought I could break free of him," he admits, voice trembling. "But you... gave me the courage. And I gave up... everything to stand at your side." His voice trails off, pained at the mention of his wings. I cradle him closer.

"You gave up your old life," I say gently, kissing his face. "But you gained a new one. With me, if you'll have it."

He exhales, tears sliding down his cheeks. "I want nothing else."

The fire crackles, casting dancing shadows across the cave walls. In the flickering

light, we share another quiet embrace, lips meeting in a gentle, weary kiss. Our hearts beat together, pulses settling into a slower, calmer rhythm than we've known in so long. No hunts tonight.

Eventually, we settle side by side, letting the night's hush cradle us. My collar jingles faintly, a final echo of the chains that once bound me. Soon, I'll tear it off entirely. But for now, it's a reminder that even if I carry scars, I'm free. We both are. We forged our path with blood and flame, but we did it.

I glance at Korrin, who dozes with his head on my shoulder, breath warm against my neck. My chest fills with a fierce wave of love. He can't fly anymore, but I'll walk every step with him. The memory of him severing his wings still sends tears brimming, but I let them fall. We're alive to grieve, to love.

When the morning dawns again, we'll face the question of where to go, how to survive in a land that might remain hostile. Perhaps we'll travel beyond these mountains, searching for a land unknown to gargoyle or dark elf. Maybe we'll carve out a refuge right here, hidden in the wilderness, letting my purna power defend us if needed. The details remain uncertain, but the foundation is clear: We stand by each other.

I wrap the cloak around us both, letting the weariness of battle slip away. The night air is cool, the waterfall's gentle roar a lullaby. Korrin's heartbeat slows, matching mine. I kiss the top of his head, inhaling his scent—smoke, sweat, and something purely him. He's my anchor, I'm his shield.

Outside, the stars wheel overhead, silent witnesses to our final stand. The Alpha is slain, the gargoyles scatter, the dark elves retreat. Korrin's wings lie severed, but his spirit—our spirit—remains unbroken. My tears glisten in the firelight as I let the calm of well-earned victory wash over me. We overcame everything they threw at us.

A quiet vow takes shape in my mind: We'll build a life from these ashes, wingless or not, free from collars and commands. The synergy of our love and my magic forms a new pathforward. With that promise echoing in my thoughts, I rest my cheek against his, drifting into a sleep that, for once, holds no nightmares—only the tender warmth of him pressed to my side.

18

KORRIN

My first sensation is the texture of cold stone pressed against my back—unforgiving, with a faint grit that scratches the raw, bandaged stumps where my wings once were. That jolt of pain sends a quiver through me, drawing a ragged gasp from between my teeth. My head feels sluggish, as though I'm emerging from a deep, drugged sleep. Then I catch a swirl of gentle warmth at my side—a small body, a familiar scent.Elyria.

I try to swallow, and my throat burns. My lips part in a rasped exhalation, the first movement in what seems like ages. Darkness presses at the edges of my vision, but there's enough ambient light flickering from a makeshift fire to let me see the shape of her, perched close to me. "Korrin?" she whispers, voice thick with relief and lingering fear.

My heart stutters.She's here.I blink, forcing my eyes to adjust. The faint orange glow of a small fire reveals a shallow cave. Rocks frame a narrow entrance, letting in the cool swirl of mountain wind. I try to lift my head, but nausea surges, and I let out a choked groan.

"Shh," Elyria murmurs, pressing a small cup to my lips. I taste water, cool and slightly metallic from whatever containershe's scrounged. The liquid soothes my parched throat. "Drink slowly," she instructs, her voice low yet commanding in its

tenderness.

I obey, each swallow stinging. After a few sips, I manage to catch my breath. My stomach flips, but the water stays down. “How long...” I mumble, my words slurred.

She brushes hair from my forehead, her touch feather-light. “You slept through most of yesterday,” she says. “And into the night. It’s nearing dawn again.” Her gaze flicks over my face, tears shining in her eyes. “I was worried you wouldn’t wake.”

A lump forms in my throat. I’ve been unconscious for nearly a full day. My chest seizes with the memory of the last thing I recall: slaying the Alpha, gargoyles scattering, my body giving out from blood loss. But here I am. My heart thuds, a reminder that I’m alive—and that I owe that life to Elyria.

She guides my gaze gently with her hand, her eyes searching mine. “You’re running a fever, but the worst has passed,” she says, voice trembling. “I’ve cleaned your wounds again. The bleeding has mostly stopped. But you’re still... fragile.”

I let out a shaky laugh that dissolves into a cough. My entire torso hurts. “Fragile,” I echo. “A strange fate for a gargoyle who once soared above it all.”

Her expression twists in sympathy. I sense a pang of guilt in her eyes—she blames herself for my shattered wings. But I muster a weak smile, fingers twitching for her hand. She grasps it, pressing it close to her chest. “I told you,” I croak, “I don’t regret anything.”

Tears slip down her cheeks, glistening in the firelight. “I know,” she whispers, voice thick. “Doesn’t mean I don’t wish...” Her gaze flicks to my bandaged stumps, a wave of sorrow roiling behind her eyes. She wishes I hadn’t needed to sacrifice them.

I draw in a slow breath. “We’re alive,” I say, as though reminding us both. “We’re

free. That's enough." My mind flits to the memory of the Alpha's final snarl, how our unstoppable bond cut him down. No more commands, no more clan tyranny.

She exhales a ragged sound that's half sob, half laugh. "Yes," she murmurs. "We are."

Elyria tends the small fire, stirring it with a makeshift poker—a branch stripped of bark. I watch her, half-propped against a rock. Each flicker of the flames paints dancing shadows across the cave walls, revealing the hollows under her eyes and the fresh bruises along her arms. She's as battered as I am, though she hides it behind gentle determination.

When she finishes adjusting the fire, she kneels back at my side, pressing a damp cloth to my forehead. I flinch at the coolness, but the contact soothes my fever. "I gathered more of those pale blossoms," she explains softly. "The ones you showed me. I've tried to apply them as an antiseptic. I think it's helping."

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My throat tightens with a swirl of gratitude. She's learning from me, from our desperate lessons in survival. I recall how, once upon a time, she was the captive and I the enforcer. Now, she's my caretaker, my savior. "Thank you," I manage, voice husky.

She bows her head, tears slipping. "I'd do anything for you," she says, quiet but resolute. "You've done so much more for me."

For a moment, I can't respond. A wave of emotion closes my throat. Instead, I squeeze her hand. We sit in silence, the hush broken by the crackle of flames and the faint drip of water from somewhere deeper in the cave. My body screams with fatigue, but my heart thrums with an unsteady calm. We made it to this moment. That's enough.

After a while, I shift, ignoring the pain, and gesture at the cave entrance. "I need to see... the outside," I say, though every muscle protests. "Need fresh air."

Elyria frowns, worry etched on her face. "Are you sure you're strong enough?"

My jaw sets. "I won't go far." My eyes flick to the shards of daylight creeping across the cave floor. "I just want to feel the sun."

She nods, pressing her lips together. With great care, she slips her arm around my waist, easing me upright. My vision swims, black spots dancing. I nearly collapse. She holds me, shoulders taut with tension. She's smaller than me, but her purna strength thrums beneath that fragile frame.

We shuffle toward the entrance. The morning air greets us, crisp and tinged with pine. I inhale slowly, wincing as my battered ribs protest. But the wind's coolness is a balm to my feverish skin. Elyria helps me settle on a flat rock outside the cave's mouth. The vantage overlooks a wide swath of foothills that gave birth to our final battle.

My chest clenches at the sight of scattered debris—broken gargoyle armor, the faint outlines of footprints worn into the earth. At some distance, a column of smoke spirals from what might be the fortress region. Or maybe it's just leftover from campfires. I scan the horizon, half-expecting to see a gargoyle silhouette. None appears. They're gone.

Elyria stands behind me, resting her hand on my shoulder. A gentle warmth radiates from her touch. "I scouted a bit earlier," she says softly. "No one remains except the dead. The living fled. The dark elves retreated south, as far as I can tell."

A shaky sigh escapes me. "So... it's truly over."

She moves around to face me, kneeling so our eyes meet. "Yes," she murmurs, her voice trembling with equal parts relief and sorrow. "We're free of them, but—" She hesitates, biting her lip. "We can't go back. Not to the clan, not to the fortress, not even to any human settlement, since they might fear my purna lineage or your gargoyle heritage."

A heavy silence descends. She's right. We're exiles in every sense. I parted ways with my clan in the most final manner possible, murdering the alpha and shedding my wings in the process. She's a purna witch who singlehandedly decimated a fortress alliance, leaving terror in her wake. We have no place in the old order. The entire world might see us as monstrous.

A pang of grief tugs at me. I once soared among gargoyles, believed in their mission.

Now, not only do I have no wings, but I have no clan. She has no human family either. We're alone. My throat works, tears threatening. Then I meet her gaze, and in her eyes, I see unwavering love. A soft conviction stirs: We have each other. That must suffice.

She takes my hand, pressing it to her chest so I can feel her heartbeat. "We'll forge our own path," she says, as though reading my thoughts. "We have nowhere to go but forward. If we must stay hidden in the mountains, we will. If we roam to unknown lands, we'll face it together."

The warmth in her eyes humbles me. My heart lurches with gratitude. "Elyria," I whisper, voice thick. "I'm no longer who I was, but I... I want to live beside you, no matter how that looks. Even if it means wandering these hills forever."

She bows her head, tears slipping. "I can't return to human lands," she murmurs. "They'd fear my magic, possibly hand me back to dark elves. I... I only want you."

My chest squeezes. The finality of it scalds me with both sadness and relief. We accept it: exiles, forging a life from the ashes. I gather her close, ignoring the pain that flares in my shoulders. Her arms loop around my waist. We stay like that, inhaling each other's presence, letting the morning sun wash over us.

Eventually, Elyria helps me back inside the cave, mindful that I'm still weak. We settle near the fire, which she stokes with a few branches. The warmth coaxes me out of my trembling. I notice her eyes flicking to my wing stumps with pained concern. Even with partial healing, the damage is permanent. My flight, my clan identity—gone forever.

She sits across from me, knees drawn up. The chain around her neck rattles faintly, though the collar itself is half-melted. Her expression is haunted. "I keep thinking about what we did," she says, voice subdued. "About how we destroyed everything

they built. Their fortress, their alliances. Guilt... it tugs at me.”

I swallow. I feel it too. Some gargoyles were my kin, trained with me, soared at my side. Now they scatter in shame or fear. “The alpha gave us no choice,” I say, voice rough. “He demanded your death or my unwavering loyalty. We had to stand.”

She nods, tears shining. “I know. But it doesn’t erase the sorrow.” Her gaze drops, slender fingers fidgeting with the broken collar ring. “All those lives lost... not just the alpha.” She sniffles, pressing her lips together. “We can’t undo that, can we?”

I shake my head, chest aching. “We can’t. But maybe we can do better from here on.” My lips tremble with sorrow. I never wanted to slaughter my clan, only to save her from their cruelty.

Her expression softens, tears glistening. “Yes,” she whispers. “We’ll do better.”

Silence wraps us again. We are both weighed by consequences, battered by a war we never asked for. But I sense a faint spark in her, something like hope. She tucks a strand of hair behind her ear, meeting my eyes with a tentative smile. “At least we have each other,” she says, reaffirming the vow from the ridge. We truly are each other’s refuge.

The day crawls by in a haze of cautious rest. Elyria scrounges for water from a trickle at the cave’s back. I doze on and off, fighting dizziness. She checks my bandages again, reapplying the pale blossoms. Every so often, I drift awake to find her humming softly, or reading a scrap of tattered parchment from my old kit—remnants of survival notes I carried. A pang of nostalgia hits me: I used to be so certain of my gargoyle training. Now, those notes serve us in exile.

Hours later, I manage to stand without blacking out. Elyria supports me, her slender frame deceptively strong. She suggests we gather more wood or edible plants. “We

can't stay in this cave indefinitely," she says, brow knitted with worry. "But until you can walk more steadily, it's safe to linger."

I nod. "Agreed." The thought of traveling far right now spikes fresh pain in my stumps, but I also know we can't remain stationary for weeks. The memory of dark elves or roving gargoyles discovering us mid-healing lingers. At least a few days of rest might be possible.

We venture outside, me leaning on her and an improvised crutch. The sunlight feels too bright, stinging my eyes. Elyria scans the rocky surroundings, lips parted in concentration. "If we climb that slope, we might find pine nuts or small game," she murmurs.

I recall my gargoyle senses—once sharp enough to spot prey from the sky. A wave of sorrow crashes over me. I can't hunt from the air. She senses my heartbreak, pressing her forehead to my shoulder. "It's okay," she whispers, eyes brimming with empathy. "We'll figure a new way."

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I exhale shakily. “Yes. A new way.”

We gather what meager resources we can: a handful of pine cones that might yield edible seeds, a few hardy root vegetables discovered near a trickle of water. Elyria’s purna magic flickers once when she tries to coax a small plant to grow, but it’s not her forte—she only manages to make the leaves glow faintly before exhaustion sets in. We share a rueful laugh, pressing our brows together. At least we tried.

We go back to the cave, stirring a scant stew from foraged roots. The taste is bland, but we eat in silence, grateful for anything. My appetite is poor, but Elyria insists I finish a portion to keep up my strength. Afterward, we slip into a drowsy hush, each lost in swirling thoughts of the future.

She nestles beside me, the chain around her neck rattling softly. “Tomorrow, I want to search for an actual sheltered glade—somewhere deeper in the forest, away from the old fortress routes,” she says, voice soft. “We can build a better camp. Maybe stay until you’re fully healed.”

I rest my chin on her hair, inhaling the faint floral scent that lingers from the blossoms. “I’ll manage,” I say, though my chest twinges at the thought of extensive travel. But she’s right—staying near the battlefield invites danger.

She glances at me, tears reflecting in the firelight. “We can do it slowly,” she promises, voice trembling. “I won’t push you too hard.” A flicker of shame crosses her features. “I know you gave up flight... and I?—”

My heart clenches. I press a finger to her lips. “Stop,” I murmur, voice choked with

emotion. “It was my choice. I’d sever my wings a thousand times if it meant saving you.”

Tears spill over her cheeks, and she nods, burying her face against my neck. The hush that follows wraps around us like a fragile shield, shutting out old regrets. I hold her, letting the exhaustion of the day seep into my bones.

At some point, I slip into a restless sleep and the stars start to flicker. But nightmares dog me—visions of the alpha’s staff crackling, the severed wings flapping on the arena floor. I jolt awake more than once, drenched in cold sweat. Each time, Elyria soothes me, pressing a shaky hand to my chest, whispering reassurances.

Toward early morning, I jolt upright again, pain shooting through my back. Elyria stirs, blinking blearily. “Korrin?”

“Just a dream,” I rasp, chest tight. My wings—or stumps—throb, bandages sticky with sweat. Will this torment me forever?

She draws me close, tears in her eyes. “We’ll get through it,” she murmurs. “I promise.”

I nod, exhaling a trembling breath. The sense of loss roars in my head—No more flight. But her presence tempers the darkness. I have her. That must be enough.

Elyria rummages through our supplies, distributing the last of the dried meat and a few pine seeds she managed to coax free. The meal is sparse, but it staves off hunger pangs.

We speak in hushed tones, each word laced with the knowledge that we can’t return to our old lives. I close my eyes, remembering the proud gargoyle spires, the daily rituals of executioners. All turned to ash. Elyria sighs, recounting her memories of

being a slave in the dark elf fortress, how she once believed she'd die with a collar around her neck. Now, the broken metal dangles from her throat, a trophy of defiance.

When we finish eating, we pack our few belongings—a battered satchel with a strip of bandages, an extra dagger, scraps of food. The chain around Elyria's neck clangs softly as she stands. "Ready?" she asks, giving me a questioning look.

I push to my feet with a low groan, ignoring the red-hot stab in my back. "As I'll ever be," I reply, voice tight. "Lead the way."

We leave the cave behind. The early light illuminates the battered foothills, the silent testimony of war scattered across them. But the morning air carries a faint sweetness, as if the land itself is relieved to see the conflict end. We traverse rocky slopes until we find a game trail leading into denser forest. Elyria helps me keep pace, her purna senses pricking for any leftover threats. None appear.

We reach a secluded glen, surrounded by towering pines and a trickling stream. Soft moss carpets the ground, the sun filtering through the canopy in golden spears. Elyria draws a trembling breath. "This might be a good place to set camp for awhile," she suggests, scanning the area. "Water, shelter from the wind, enough cover to hide."

I nod, relief mingling with exhaustion. It's perfect. My entire body yearns for rest. She helps me settle near the stream, removing the makeshift bandages again to let my wounds breathe. The fragrance of pine and damp soil soothes me, erasing the stench of carnage from memory. Nature reclaims what war discards.

She kneels by the stream, rinsing cloths, then returns to dab them against my seared flesh. A hiss escapes me, but I endure, letting her gentle care anchor me. She's so tender, even though she's battered herself.

After re-dressing my wounds, she casts a shy glance at me. “You should rest,” she says quietly. “Let me build a real firepit, gather food.”

A pang of guilt tugs at me, she’s doing everything while I can hardly stand. Yet I see the fierce glint in her eyes: She wants to protect me, as I once protected her. I manage a faint nod. “I’ll rest,” I promise, voice hoarse. “But be careful.”

She brushes a soft kiss across my forehead. “I will.” Then she leaves to gather stones for a fire ring, checking for edible plants or small game. I watch her go, heart thudding with pride and sorrow. She’s grown so strong, forging her own destiny beyond collars and chains.

Alone by the stream, I gaze at the reflection of my battered form in the water’s surface. My face is lined with fresh scars, dark hair matted with sweat. The stumps of my wings remain hidden by bandages, but the memory of them stings. I’ll never fly. The thought stabs like a fresh blade. But I steel myself. I did it to save her. That’s reason enough.

Elyria returns with a modest bounty: a few mushrooms, handfuls of edible leaves, and a small portion of wild berries. She even managed to catch a squirrel, though tears shine in her eyes at the act of killing. “It was so small,” she murmurs, voice trembling. I press her hand gently, acknowledging the moral burden. But we need protein. We share the meal quietly, hearts heavy yet grateful for sustenance.

Afterward, we nestle near the newly formed firepit. The forest hushes around us, crickets chirping in the undergrowth. The hush is thick with a cautious sense of hope. We’re exiles, yes, but we’re alive.

I shift, wincing at the pain in my back. Elyria notices, moving behind me to support my posture, letting me lean against her chest. Her warmth envelops me, and I rest my head on her shoulder, inhaling her faintly floral scent. “Does it help?” she asks softly,

arms around my torso to steady me.

I let out a shaky breath. “Yes,” I reply, voice trailing off as I savor the comfort of her presence. The memories of war weigh on my soul, but her embrace reminds me we won the right to exist without the alpha’s shadow. “This helps a lot.”

She presses her cheek to the top of my head, tears in her voice. “We can’t go back—either of us,” she murmurs. “No clan for you, no human settlement for me. But maybe... we can learn to live free. Here, or somewhere new.”

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My chest trembles with agreement. “We will,” I whisper, tears slipping down. “I never want to see the inside of that fortress again. Or any fortress.” The clan’s stronghold was my entire world, but also my prison.

Silence stretches, the flames casting dancing shadows across pine needles. The magnitude of our decision to remain exiles is daunting. We have no wings, no clan, no city. We have each other. That knowledge flutters in my chest, a mixture of sorrow and elation. A new life is possible.

As hours fly, our conversation shifts to practicalities, heads bent close, voices low. How to gather enough food, how to remain hidden if a dark elf patrol or renegade gargoyle tumbles upon us. I recall old survival tactics: pitfalls, concealed fires, watch shifts. Elyria’s eyes shine with resolve as she nods, absorbing each detail.

“I can hone my magic for more subtle uses,” she muses, biting her lip. “I can’t just blow everything up every time we’re threatened, or we’ll starve to death from scorched earth.” A wry laugh escapes her, though tears glisten in her eyes. We see the cost of raw destruction.

I rest a hand on hers, a gentle squeeze. “And I can still fight on the ground,” I say softly. “Wingless doesn’t mean helpless. My body remains strong enough to protect you if we meet small threats.”

She nods, pride flickering. “We protect each other.”

We fall silent, gazing at the fire. Yes, we do. The hush brims with unspoken acceptance: no old life remains. This is who we are now—vagabonds, nomads,

forging a quiet existence away from cruel warlords.

My heart lifts at the prospect of building a new home with her, free of the alpha's demands or elven tyranny. Yes, maybe we can carve a place in these forests. My mind drifts, imagining a small clearing by a stream, a simple shelter, nights spent telling stories under starlight. My chest tightens with longing. We can find peace.

She senses my thoughts, leaning to kiss my cheeks softly. "I see the hope in your eyes," she murmurs, tears shimmering. "I feel it too."

I stroke her hair, voice trembling. "I just want you safe, want us both to breathe without fear."

Her lips curl into a tender smile. "Then we do it. Step by step."

19

KORRIN

The dawn sky gradually shifts from ink-blue to a pale gold as I stir awake, my back pressed against the trunk of a sturdy oak. A gentle hush blankets the secluded glade, as though the entire forest stands poised for something momentous. The crisp breeze carries a hint of dew-laden leaves, and I breathe it in, sensing a subtle electric warmth prick under my skin. Elyria's magic, I realize, still resonating faintly around us. It's as though the land itself cradles our presence, blessing us with calm after so many storms.

I turn my head and find Elyria still asleep by my side, her cheek pillowed on the crook of my arm. My heart clenches with a wave of tenderness. She has lost the final traces of that battered collar; only faint bruises remain on her throat, fading with each day. Her hair spills across my chest, bearing the scents of pine needles and faint ash

from last night's fire. As I take in her peaceful expression, I recall how, not long ago, we were both battered fugitives, fleeing gargoyle dominion and dark elf enslavement. Now, we have carved out a space of belonging far beyond the reach of any master. We live as equals, forging our own destiny.

A flicker of movement draws my gaze, Elyria stirs, blinking sleepily. Her eyes meet mine, and she offers a soft, unguarded smile. I brush a lock of hair from her face, feeling warmth flutter in my chest. "Good morning," I say, my voice still husky from sleep.

She stretches, wincing only slightly at the bruises on her arms. "Good morning," she murmurs back, leaning forward to rest her forehead against my shoulder. Our breath mingles in the hush. Outside, the early sun washes the clearing in pale gold, revealing the newly sprouted wildflowers and the gentle trickle of a stream. We built a small lean-to near it, enough to shield us from the elements, but today the sky is clear—no storms threaten.

"I can't believe we've come this far," Elyria whispers, voice catching with emotion. "We no longer run in terror. We stand in a place of our own choosing." She lifts her gaze, tears glimmering at the corners of her eyes.

My chest tightens. She's right. We found an untouched valley, free from any sign of gargoyle or dark elf patrols. My severed wings remain only a memory of what I used to be—an executioner, a weapon for a cause I no longer believe in. Now, I live for her. "No regrets," I murmur, pressing a soft kiss to her temple. "We are who we choose to be."

She smiles, tears slipping free, and wraps her arms around me in a tender hug that steadies my heart. In that moment, I sense a stirring of something unspoken—an understanding that we have more to share than mere survival. We have a future, a bond deeper than anything forced by old masters. I exhale, meeting her gaze, my mind

dancing around the vow I want to make. A vow that cements us forever.

We spend the morning gathering fresh water, foraging for roots and berries, checking snare lines for small game. Each shared task hums with an undercurrent of anticipation. The forest hush feels different today—like it stands witness to a threshold we're about to cross. Elyria picks up on it, too; I catch her studying me with a curious tilt of her head as if she senses some intention just beyond the surface of my words.

We've spoken in fragments about forging a life together, about letting no chain or vow from the old world define us. But now, after all we've survived, I want something more than an unspoken understanding. I want to stand beside her in a rite that no clan or empire can break. I recall faint legends of how gargoyles once conducted private bonding rituals in the deep wilds—far older than the alpha's decrees. A union of hearts, not a forced pledge of clan loyalty. The thought pulses in me, stirring a deep excitement overshadowed by a humble acceptance of my new wingless reality.

Elyria and I rest under a broad oak, nibbling on nuts and a portion of dried fruit we stored last week. She eyes me thoughtfully as she chews. "What's on your mind?" she asks gently. "You've been quieter than usual all morning."

A fleeting heat rushes to my face. So she noticed. I swallow, glancing away, then steel myself. "I've been... thinking," I begin, voice trembling. "About us. About the bond we share. How we survived betrayal and bloodshed, yet still choose each other." My gaze drifts to the rocky slope in the distance, remembering how I severed my wings to spare her. "We're exiles, but... I want to do something. Something to show we stand side by side as equals, forever."

She shifts closer, curiosity shining in her bright eyes. "Something like a... vow?" She almost smiles, as if she's reading my mind, heart pounding with the same longing.

My chest relaxes at her easy acceptance. “Yes,” I murmur, swallowing a lump in my throat. “Where I come from, gargoyles once had a private mating ceremony, separate from any clan dictates. A personal vow shared between two hearts, not bound by alpha or law. I... want that with you.” The confession feels raw, almost terrifying. What if she doesn’t want to echo old gargoyle traditions?

But Elyria’s tears brighten, a trembling breath escaping her lips. “I want that, too,” she whispers, voice thick. “A ceremony just for us, no watchers, no chains, no forced scripts. We can vow ourselves to each other in freedom.”

Emotion surges through me, tears burning behind my eyes. I take her hands, pressing them to my chest. “Thank you,” I manage, voice cracking.

She smiles through tears. “We deserve a moment of joy,” she says softly. “We deserve to claim each other by choice.”

We decide to conduct the ceremony at dusk, when the forest hush embraces us in quiet twilight. For hours, we gather small tokens that might hold symbolic meaning. Elyria’s eyes gleam as she finds a handful of wildflowers by the stream, their petals pale white. She braids them into a slender wreath. A sign of her purna lineage, shaped by gentleness instead of destruction. Meanwhile, I shape two rings from polished wood—a tradition gargoyles sometimes used to exchange symbolic tokens. My own hands tremble carving the bark, mindful of my injuries, but I persist. Each ring is rough, unrefined, but holds the sincerity of my intention.

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We speak little, each lost in quiet reflection. My chest thrums with anticipation so intense it nearly chokes me. I can't believe after all we endured, we stand on the cusp of a mating vow free of any clan edict. My wing stumps flare with an ache, but a warmth suffuses my spirit. I'd trade flight a thousand times for this moment.

Elyria watches me with shining eyes as I finalize the wooden rings, smoothing them with a scrap of cloth. "They're beautiful," she murmurs, voice laced with gratitude. She presses a soft kiss to my cheek, tears glistening. "I've never had a ring... or anything that binds me in love, not force."

I exhale a shaky breath, tears threatening. "That's exactly what I want," I murmur. "To bind ourselves in love, not in chains." She nods, sliding her palm against mine, quiet acceptance saturating the forest air.

The glade glows in the afterlight, shadows stretching across the mossy ground. I limp to the clearing's center, staff in one hand, ring in the other. Elyria follows, holding her wildflower wreath. Our hearts are in unison. The hush grows almost reverent, as if the entire forest hushes to witness this moment—just as we wanted, no other watchers but the rustling leaves and starlight soon to come.

She stands before me, hair drifting in the faint breeze, collar gone, posture proud. My breath catches at her raw beauty. This is the woman I once nearly killed, the purna the clan wanted culled. Now she's free, her magic swirling gently around her ankles in faint silver motes. My chest aches with awe and longing.

She takes a shaky breath, meeting my gaze with unwavering devotion. "Korrin," she begins, voice trembling. "No fortress or empire controls me now. I vow to walk by

your side, not behind, not in chains. Together, we shape our destiny. I reject every old brand or collar that once bound me. My magic, my body, my heart—they're mine to give, and I give them to you freely."

Tears slip down my cheeks at her words. She lifts the wreath of white wildflowers, carefully placing it over her head. "I wear these flowers to symbolize the new growth in me," she murmurs. "A renewal of life beyond captivity."

My heart thrums, tears filling my eyes. I swallow, voice hoarse as I speak. "Elyria... I was once an executioner, a winged instrument of the alpha's cruelty. Now I stand wingless, but I stand for you, for our bond that transcends any clan edict." Mythroat constricts, but I press on. "I vow to honor you as my equal, never master or subject. We walk side by side in love and freedom."

She sobs softly, pressing a hand to her mouth. I retrieve the wooden ring from my pocket—carefully carved from a branch near our old shelter. "I made this," I whisper, holding it out. "It's rough, unpolished, but it carries the memory of the place we first truly learned to live free. Will you wear it?"

Her eyes well with tears, and she nods, extending her trembling hand. I slip the ring onto her finger. It's not a perfect fit, but it settles there, symbolic of everything we overcame. She inhales sharply, tears falling, then clutches my hand.

She lifts a second ring from her satchel—I didn't realize she had made one, too. My breath catches. She's shaped it from a piece of driftwood we found near the stream. "This is for you," she says, voice cracking. "A symbol that no matter how battered or broken, we find new purpose in each other."

Tears blur my vision as she gently slides it onto my finger. The wood is warm from her touch, small whorls etched with quiet artistry. My wing stumps ache, yet my soul feels lighter than it ever did with flight. We share a vow none can shatter.

A hush falls, but the air crackles with subtle energy. Elyria's eyes flutter closed, and I sense her purna spark awaken, not in fury, but in gentle resonance. Silver flecks swirl around our entwined hands. My breath quivers, recalling how I once saw her magic destroy armies, now harnessed to bless our union.

She speaks softly, voice carrying a melodic timbre, half incantation, half prayer. "By the earth that grounds us and the sky we can no longer fear, let our bond stand unbroken. My power is mine to wield, but I share it with you freely, Korrin, never to harm, but to heal and protect."

The silver flecks intensify around our hands, humming with warmth. My heart pounds as I let the aura wash over my battered spirit, not to shield me from battle, but to unite us in a vow the old world never taught. A faint shimmer envelops us, like a translucent veil of soft luminescence. My soul pulses with gratitude. We are forging a union that no alpha or dark elf brand can degrade.

Eyes shining with unshed tears, I speak in a hushed voice. "I stand as I am, wingless but unbound by false oaths. I offer you my strength on the ground, my devotion, my heart. Let no law or chain come between us, for we choose each other in love, not compulsion."

My own energy stirs— a remnant of gargoyle resilience, the primal force that once soared. Now, it weaves with her silver sparks. I sense the intangible swirl binding us in quiet arcs, not a violent clash but a symphony of acceptance. Elyria's tears fall, reflecting silvery motes. My chest brims with pure, uncontainable love.

Softly, we both exhale as the energy dissipates, leaving a subtle warmth coursing through our joined hands. The forest hush remains, branches overhead swaying in approval. Our rings rest on our fingers, a permanent testament that we no longer dance to another's tune.

Gargoyles once called it a “mating ceremony,” but this goes far beyond a clan’s function. It’s purely ours, free from any watchful alpha or cheering crowd. Just two exiles forging a vow of the heart. Elyria steps closer, tears shining, and I hold her, pulling her gently to me. The ring on my finger glints in the fading twilight. My bandaged stumps ache, but I focus on the unwavering love in her gaze.

We press our foreheads together, tears mingling on our cheeks. “We are mates,” she whispers, voice trembling with reverence. “In freedom, in choice, in devotion.”

My breath hitches. “Forever,” I add, voice raw. “No alpha can revoke this vow.”

She laughs softly, though tears spill down her cheeks. “No dark elf collar can bind me to another’s will. I choose you, and no one else.”

A surge of emotion chokes me. We stand chest to chest, hearts pounding in unison. With an aching slowness, I cradle her face in my hands, wiping tears with my thumbs. She leans in, capturing my lips in a deep, lingering kiss that ignites every corner of my soul. No chain can match this bond, no vow demanded by cruelty can overshadow the vow we forged freely. We are one, exiles turned partners, forging life on our own terms.

We remain locked in that kiss until the sky darkens fully, the moon rising overhead. Eventually, we break apart, foreheads resting together, breath ragged with mingled joy and heartbreak. A tear slips down my cheek—I used to believe flight was my identity, but now I see that love is so much more.

She notices my tears and softly kisses each drop, whispering, “Thank you for choosing me over everything.”

I can only nod, words failing as emotion surges. We stand under the moonlit pines, clasping hands, new rings shining. The hush around us thrums with acceptance. This

is our final image: two battered souls, no longer slave or executioner but equals, stepping forward as mates.

Eventually, we gather ourselves, crossing back to our small camp where the embers of a modest fire flicker. Elyria hands me my staff, and I take her hand in the other, leading her out of the clearing. Our hearts beat in an unspoken rhythm, fresh tears drying on our cheeks. The forest stands as our only witness, the hush of nature our only applause.

As we leave the glade behind, heading deeper into the unknown wilderness, I realize how drastically my life has changed. I no longer serve a clan alpha, nor do I stand as an executioner or winged predator. My identity rests in the vow I made tonight—bound to Elyria by choice, by love, by the synergy of purna magic and gargoyle resilience forging a new path. A sense of unstoppable devotion courses through me. If the world hunts us, let it. We stand together.

Elyria walks at my side, no longer weighed by a collar or fear of forced chains. Her purna power hums at her fingertips, but it is not destructive now—it is protective, an extension of the vow we share. Her eyes shine with quiet wonder each time she glances at me. The ring on her finger gleams in the moonlight, rough-hewn but radiating sincerity. We are exiles who no longer cower. We might be alone, but we aren't lonely.

We crest a small rise, the sky opening up above us, stars blazing in infinite patterns. My breath catches at the sheer immensity of possibility. Elyria slows, her gaze sweeping across the horizon. She sighs softly, contentment etched in her face. "Korrin," she murmurs, voice carrying a hush of awe, "this is the first time I feel truly free, like the entire world is ours to explore if we want."

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A lump forms in my throat. I slip my arm around her waist, mindful of my staff. “Then let’s explore it,” I say, voice thick with emotion. “Wherever we roam, we shape our story. No fortress or clan can overshadow that.”

She leans her head on my shoulder, tears glimmering again. “Yes. And we do it as mates, forging a life no one can sunder.”

A quiet surge of pride and love swells in my chest. My wing stumps twinge, but the memory of flight no longer torments me as it once did. I have something greater: a vow that grounded me in a love deeper than the sky. We remain side by side, staring at the endless stars, each breath a testament to the final transformation from who we were—slave and executioner—to who we are now: free exiles, forging destiny in each other’s arms.

We meander along a faint trail, hand in hand, the staff tapping softly against stones. The forest parted behind us, the future wide open ahead. Our battered bodies ache, but our souls hum with renewed faith in tomorrow. This is our life now—building a home from scratch, forging each day in gentleness or ferocity as needed, just the two of us. No masters, no forced loyalty. Only the vow we sealed tonight under starlight, with nothing but the forest’s hush to witness.

As we crest one last hill, the moonlight reveals a valley drenched in silver glow. I pause, breath caught in my throat. Elyria’s eyes light with wonder. In unspoken agreement, we step forward, hearts pounding in unison. The gentle slope awaits our footprints, a symbol of the road we’ll walk—once dreaded, now chosen with love. Our hands tighten together, wooden rings pressing lightly against our skin, a quiet testament to the vow we made.

We exchange a final glance of shared devotion. Then, we move onward, forging into that moonlit valley side by side. My staff clicks against rocks, Elyria's purna aura faintly shimmering around her ankles. The wind rustles the treetops, a hushed anthem for exiles who overcame all. My heart soars, even wingless, with the certainty that we shape our destiny by each other's side. We are no longer defined by slavery or execution; we are equals, bound by love stronger than any chain.

Thus we walk into a future beyond the horizon, the final image etched in starlight: Elyria at my side, my mate in freedom, forging a new world. We vanish into the soft darkness, hearts pulsing in a vow that transcends clan, empire, and fear. Our story continues, unwritten yet brimming with possibility, bound by the vow we sealed beneath the moon and the silent adoration of the forest.

ELYRIA

I wake to a hush broken only by the distant murmur of the stream we settled beside months ago. A soft dawn glow spills through the doorway of our rustic cabin—a simple structure we built from pine logs and earth walls, shaped with our own hands (and sometimes my timid magic). My eyes flicker open, adjusting to the muted gold light. Instantly, my heart warms at the sight of Korrin curled in sleep beside me.

His hair, cropped a bit shorter now, brushes the pillow, dark against the homespun fabric. The faint scars along his shoulders have healed to pale lines, and the bandages that once covered his wing stumps are long gone, replaced by patches of pale, smooth skin that no longer leak pain. Even so, he sometimes groans in the night, phantom aches haunting him. I press a gentle hand to the spot where his wings used to be, grateful that we've reached a place of peace despite all we lost.

He stirs, blinking awake with a sleepy grin. "You're up early," he murmurs, voice rumbling from his chest. "Already plotting how to coax magic from the earth?"

A chuckle escapes me. “Maybe.” I shift closer, letting our foreheads touch. Two years, and the wonder of lying at his side remains as fresh as the day we first pledged ourselves. “You’ve got me figured out,” I tease, lips curving.

He moves to sit, leaning on the carved walking staff that rests by our bed. Even after so much healing, he keeps it near—part symbol of his changed life, part practical support when his stumps ache. My heart twinges remembering how he once soared above these forests, but that twinge quickly dissolves into warmth for the man he is now, standing beside me on solid ground.

Our cabin is modest: a single room with a hearth, a table Korrin built, shelves we fashioned from driftwood. The walls are decorated with dried herbs, wildflowers, small wooden carvings. I see on the shelf the two wooden rings we once carved as tokens in our vow—set there for safekeeping whenever we do messy chores. The sight of them stirs a tender smile. We might be exiles, but in this home, we reign as equals.

The early sun bathes our clearing in cool gold. After a simple breakfast—dried fruit and leftover stew—I slip outside to tend our small garden. Under Korrin’s watchful eye, and with my purna spark, we coaxed a patch of wild vegetables into something reliable. Green shoots poke through the dark soil, leaves shimmering with dew. I kneel among them, feeling the faint hum of magic through my fingertips, encouraging growth without scorching the earth.

Korrin joins me, staff tucked under his arm as he inspects the fence we built around the garden. “No sign of critters sneaking in,” he notes with satisfaction. He gestures at the drooping vines of peas. “They’ll need support soon.”

I grin, warmth blooming in my chest. “You know,” I say, rising to dust off my skirt, “I still remember the day we were half-starved fugitives, scraping mushrooms off rocks. Look at us now, boasting an entire row of peas.”

He laughs softly, the sound like low thunder, and steps forward to tuck a stray curl behind my ear. “You were always good at coaxing the best from the land, even when you doubted your purna gifts.” He leans down, pressing a brief kiss to my forehead. My heart flips in that old, familiar way.

We spend the afternoon tending small tasks: checking the snares for game (finding two plump rabbits that will feed us for days), gathering herbs from the nearby glade, chopping firewood. Even after so long, we approach each chore with a shared reverence. We might still bear scars, but each time we set a snare or chop wood, we remind ourselves we live free, forging our destiny together.

Korrin’s strength has grown, though his shoulders remain forever changed where wings once sprouted. He jokes about it sometimes, calls himself a “ground-dweller for good.” But I see flickers of longing in his eyes whenever a hawk arcs overhead, or the wind stirs the pines in a way that once signaled flight. My chest tightens, recalling all he gave up. He never regrets it, though. That knowledge steels my resolve to love him unconditionally.

By dusk, the sky blazes with sunset hues: rich oranges and purples that reflect off our cabin’s walls. I help Korrin stack fresh logs near the hearth, and together we prepare a hearty rabbit stew, seasoning it with onion-like roots and wild garlic. The cabin fills with the comforting aroma, making my stomach rumble. He stands close, stirring the pot, occasionally brushing against me. Each small contact thrills me in a way that hasn’t diminished across two years of cohabitation. We found a life that suits us, one without the shackles or hunts.

While the stew simmers, we step out into the clearing to watch the last ribbons of sunset fade behind the distant hills. Korrin rests a hand on my waist, and I fold into him, cheek against his chest. The hush of evening envelopes us, the forest brimming with subtle night sounds. I recall nights in that fortress, how I trembled at every shadow. Now, the dark is ours, a friendly cloak rather than a threat.

He presses his lips to my temple. “Tomorrow marks exactly two years since we left the last battlefield behind,” he murmurs, voice thick with emotion. “Two years of forging a home in these hills.”

I nod, tears prickling. “Seems a lifetime ago,” I whisper. “Yet I still feel the echoes of those final vows we made, cutting off all ties to the old world.”

He shifts, turning me to face him. His gaze glitters with warmth under the starlight. “We vowed so many things—freedom, no more chains, shaping destiny together.” He slides his hand up to cradle my cheek. “I never want to forget how we overcame those battles.”

Emotions swell in my chest, tears slipping free. “I won’t let either of us forget,” I murmur. “But I also want us to move forward, fully. We did more than survive; we blossomed.”

His lips curl in a tender smile, and he dips his head to kiss me, slow and lingering. The forest hush cradles us, a silent witness to the love that thrived once we escaped captivity. My body warms at his nearness, heart thrumming with an old, familiar desire. Tonight, I want to reaffirm that vow in more than words.

After dinner—steaming bowls of rabbit stew that we savor in comfortable silence—we settle by the small hearth inside our cabin. The flicker of firelight plays over Korrin’s face, illuminating the faint lines of scars and the gentle set of his mouth. The staff leans against the wall, no longer as necessary as it once was, but kept near.

He catches my gaze and lifts a brow. “You’re giving me that look,” he teases, voice dropping low. “Like you have something in mind.”

A soft laugh bubbles from my lips. “Observant gargoyle,” I murmur, shifting closer.

My pulse quickens. “Yes, I was... thinking about how we used to cling to each other on the run, so desperate, so frantic.” My breath hitches. “Now, we have time, safety. I’d like to... savor that.”

Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 4:52 am

His eyes glow with warmth, a subtle hunger stirring beneath. He sets aside the wooden bowl, then reaches for me. Our fingers entwine, and the closeness ignites a spark deep in my belly. Two years, and his touch still sends currents through me.

He leans in, brushing a kiss along my jaw, voice hushed with reverence. “I savor you every day, Elyria,” he whispers. “But if you want to remind ourselves how far we’ve come...”

Heat blooms under my skin. “I do,” I answer softly, pressing my forehead to his, letting our breath mingle. No fear or constraints, just the promise of a night that belongs solely to us.

Slowly, gently, we shed the day’s dust and the remnants of old burdens. Each kiss is unhurried, each touch reverent, as though we are memorizing the map of our devotion anew. My heart pounds in my chest, recalling frantic couplings in caves and ruinous fortresses, overshadowed by danger. But tonight, in the hush of our home, we have only the flicker of firelight to bear witness.

Korrin’s hands glide along my sides, exploring the curves that hold two years of peace instead of scars. I let out a trembling sigh, burying my fingers in his dark hair, relishing the closeness of our bodies. The unspoken vow hums between us, the vow we made to choose each other in every breath.

We sink onto the woven blanket near the hearth, the heat of the flames dancing across our skin. His lips travel over my neck, stirring memories of the moment he shattered his wings to spare my life. A flood of gratitude and longing envelop me. I arch closer, pressing kisses to his shoulder. He hisses a bit as my nails skim the edges of his

stumps—still sensitive. I lift my head, apology brimming.

He exhales, pain flickering but overshadowed by devotion. “I’m all right,” he murmurs, voice thick. “Don’t hold back. I want to feel every bit of you.”

Tears slip from my eyes as I gently cradle his face, pressing my lips to his in a passionate kiss that speaks of more than lust—it’s the testament of two exiles choosing love over flight or fear. Our breathing grows ragged, the crackle of the hearth a steady counterpoint.

In the flickering firelight, we let ourselves surrender to the moment. His hands slide down my waist, fingers tracing the dip of my hips before gripping my thighs. I arch against him, breath hitching as his cock brushes my stomach, hard and hot.

“How much do you want me?” Korrin murmurs, voice rough. I obey, meeting his darkened eyes as he guides himself to my entrance. His thumb strokes my clit in slow circles, coaxing a whimper from my throat. “Tell me you want us, this.”

“Always,” I gasp, nails digging into his shoulders. “Every part of you.”

He sinks into me with a groan, our bodies joining in a slow, searing slide. The stretch is exquisite, the fullness stealing my breath. I clutch him tighter, thighs trembling around his hips.

“Gods, Elyria—” His forehead drops to mine, his rhythm deliberate, each thrust deep and unhurried. “You feel... fuck, you feel like paradise, my home, my everything.”

Heat coils low in my belly, building with every roll of his hips. My pussy clenches around him, drawing a ragged curse from his lips. The wooden ring on my finger glints in the firelight, a vow etched in every movement—our bodies speaking what words cannot.

“Korrin...” I moan, my heart swelling with so much love, it’s overflowing.

His kisses trail down my throat, teeth grazing my collarbone. “I love the sounds you make,” he growls, grinding deeper. “Love how you take me, so perfect and so beautiful. I love the way you taste, the way you smile, the way you comb your hair, even the way you talk... I can listen to you all day, all night...”

“I love you... I love you...” I repeat over and over as he pistons inside me, moving as if we only have tonight. But I know we have a lifetime... and forever.

Korrin ignites my body with ecstasy, driving me to the point of insanity. Pleasure crests, sharp and sweet. My back bows as my climax crashes over me, a silent cry tearing from my lips.

“Elyria!” Korrin follows, his cock pulsing inside me as he comes in me with a shuddering groan, his broken wings twitching behind him in instinctive reflex.

For a heartbeat, there’s only the sound of our ragged breaths, the crackle of the hearth. Then he collapses beside me, pulling me into his arms. His fingers trace my spine, reverent.

“You are my home,” he whispers, voice thick. “My mate. My everything. My world.”

I press a kiss to his sweat-damp chest. “And you’re mine. No matter where we roam, we carry each other.”

The fire dims to embers, but the warmth between us lingers—a quiet, unshakable truth.

A wave of contentment drapes over us, an afterglow so serene it eclipses the memory of pain. We remain locked in each other’s arms, the fire dying to embers, the forest hush lulling us into a state of blissful exhaustion.

Sometime past midnight, I stir, reluctant to break the warmth of his embrace. The cabin is dark except for the faint glow of dying coals. I peer at his sleeping face: the strong line of his jaw, the faint quirk of a smile even in slumber. My chest tightens with renewed love. We shape our own destiny—where no chain or vow can overshadow the freedom we claimed.

Outside, the wind moans softly. I ease from his arms, slipping on a simple robe. At the cabin doorway, I gaze out at the moonlit clearing, breath catching at the sight of starlight dusting the pines. My mind drifts to the vow we sealed hours earlier with our bodies—like a reaffirmation of the vow we once made under the battered sky, after we fled the alpha's fortress. But tonight, there was no desperation in our lovemaking, only quiet joy.

Behind me, Korrin murmurs, stirring awake. He rises, staff in hand, silhouette strong despite his wingless form. My heart soars, bridging the two-year journey from tortured executioner to free man who stands by my side. He hobbles over, chest still bare, eyes reflecting the gentle moonlight.

With a shy grin, he wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me against him. We stand in the doorway, overlooking the forest we learned to cultivate and love. "Tomorrow," he says softly, "we'll check the new orchard sprouts, right? Your magic coaxed them to blossom early."

I nod, tears brimming, unstoppable. "Yes. And we can expand the garden. Maybe find a second clearing for more vegetables. We can even set up a small watchtower on the ridge if you want." My voice shakes with excitement. So many possibilities.

He presses a tender kiss to my temple. "We have all the time in the world," he murmurs. "No masters, no hunts, no forced oaths. Just... us."

A sob escapes me, but it's a sob of happiness. I tighten my arms around his waist, cheek pressed to his chest. "Yes," I whisper, voice thick. "We walk forward, side by

side, shaping each day with love instead of fear.”

He holds me in that hush, the forest echoing our vow. Our final image is thus: two battered exiles, now equals, stepping beyond all we once were—her purna magic, my severed wings—forging a gentle future in a land free of tyranny. The moonlight bathes us, the hush of night resonating with the gentle throbbing of our hearts. This is our destiny, sealed in love, unstoppable.

No chain, no collar, no decree. Only us, mates in freedom, forging a new dawn with each sunrise.