



# Amid the Clouds (Brave New World #1)

**Author:** *Marian Pattechat*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** It should have been a simple supply run: take the med kits and don't get eaten by the monsters. Now I'm the one being taken, and the winged hunk plans to eat me. Out.

Having survived three apocalypses as if one weren't enough! – I knew how to stay alive in a world overrun by nightmarish monsters. Going on a supply run to my infested workplace should have been simple: go in, bag the meds, get out as fast as a cat from a bathtub.

Little did I know that what awaited me in that creepy building would be more than a gun-wielding scientist could handle. As in, an overbearing hunk sporting blue skin, bat wings, and a naughty tail, who would fly me off to an unknown destination despite my opinion on the matter. The jerk thought a toe-curling kiss would make it all better. The nerve.

Now I'm in a place beyond my wildest imagination, and going back to my community of survivors might prove more difficult than expected. Especially when I'm being seduced into staying.

**Total Pages (Source):** 27

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:08 pm*

If someone had told me the hot British actor playing James Bond would be attending the corporate party, I wouldn't have hesitated that much before going.

On the other hand, if someone had warned me that same Adonis would turn into a flesh-eating monster by the end of the party...

I would have caught a flight to another continent instead of attending.

Not that the distance would have helped. Nowhere was far enough when an apocalypse hit. Trust me; I had a penchant for apocalyptic shows and a science degree. Plus a lab job at the same company whose party turned into a zombie outbreak six months ago, marking the start of the first apocalypse.

And yet, here I was now, inside the cutting-edge building that had once been my workplace.

Back of my own free will at ground zero of human civilization's fall.

I was either an idiot who would get herself eaten, or the person who would bring much-needed medication to her small community of apocalypse survivors.

The verdict was still out, but my prospects of surviving were slim.

I kept sprinting down the long corridor, my hungry pursuers hot on my heels.

Past the decomposing bodies of people I once knew, away from the exit and further into the infested office building.

Talk about my life coming full circle. Why, oh why had I agreed to go on a supply run here, of all places?

I had barely made it out last time, so my return was basically tempting fate to finish the job.

Sure, I wasn't the helpless woman from half a year ago.

The 32-year-old lab scientist who had arrived at an office party worried her hasty updo sucked and her borrowed dress might be broadcasting her hips in widescreen.

Only to run down this same corridor an hour later, bloodied and worried about the unsuspecting residents of the city mere three miles away from the newly established zombie central.

The me of today was dressed in combat trousers, armed, and capable of handling a few zombies all on her own.

Unfortunately, what was currently chasing me was more dangerous than the walking dead.

I had killed—permanently—five of the monsters, but the remaining three had blocked my way to the exit.

I had also run out of bullets, leaving me with nothing but an army knife against their yellowish claws and two rows of shark-like teeth.

I would have stood a chance had my supply run buddy—that weasel Carson—not ditched me with a half-shouted, half-screamed, “Fuck this!”

He was now outside, in the safety of the sunlight where our attackers couldn't follow,

unless they wanted to start a bonfire party. While I had been forced to flee in the only monster-free direction available, leaving the exit far behind.

As I ran for my life, a high-pitched call sounded from the upper floor. Oh, great. There were more of these creatures in the building, and they were calling a reunion.

My pursuers ignored the call and kept hunting me. Of course they would. Living, breathing humans were a rarity these days. What vampire in their right mind could resist such a delectable treat?

If only I were dealing with intelligent, seductive, and sparkling hunks ready to offer one special woman immortality by their broody side...

Alas, the vamps who showed up as part of the second apocalypse were Slender-man-look-alikes; they hunted in packs, bit down on an artery, and enjoyed a meal and a bath all in one.

They didn't turn you; they drank you dry.

Unless I wanted to become their lunch, I had to get to sunlight.

But how? The building's security features made sure I couldn't leave while on the first floor, at least not before the super fast vamps caught up to me.

There was a fire escape ladder I could access from another level, but would I make it up there?

A talon scraped the back of my tank top. I was out of time.

Heart thundering in my chest, I took a sharp turn into the next corridor and—There! The stairwell! Before me were the concrete steps that once took me down to my lab,

now bathed in natural light. Kudos to whoever had designed the glass roof and hi-tech system with reflective panels on the landings.

I dove into the sunlight.

The sound of running feet behind me stopped. To be replaced by hissing in what I imagined was disappointment at an afternoon snack missed.

I was tempted to look back and flip the bird in the vamps' elongated chalk-white faces.

Instead, I kept running up the stairs, feeling their cold red eyes on my back as I climbed.

Just because I had escaped these predators didn't mean I was safe.

Who knew what else was lurking in this God-forsaken place.

Vampires were bad news, but they were not the only monsters behind apocalypse number two.

As a co-worker had said before joining the walking dead and trying to eat my face, "Evolution can't be stopped, Sue.

Neither can it be controlled. One day, something stronger than us will appear, and we'll either adapt to the brave new world, or go extinct.

"Brad had failed to predict only one thing: that those superior beings would be more than one species and would show up all at once as part of what was dubbed the 'supernatural apocalypse.'

Humanity did not stand a chance, and neither would I if I encountered any other human-hungry creature with only a knife on me.

I had to find a deserted floor where I could access the fire escape ladder.

I had to get the meds, still safe inside a bag tucked in my belt, back to the military bunker my community lived in. So, up the stairwell it was for me.

Damn Carson . He was so dead if I ever got my hands on him. I wouldn't be in this situation if he had stayed to fire at the vamps in the lobby by my side. He was probably already halfway home, no meds but alive and smug about it.

To think that he had been shamelessly hitting on me mere minutes ago, taking advantage of us being alone on this supply run.

He might be pretty on the outside, but his personality was anything but; his arrogance had cost a life once.

And now that he had left me to become monster fodder, I'd rather date Zombie 007.

Even as a monster, the actor famous for his role of Bond had been drop-dead gorgeous, pun intended.

Those ruby-red eyes and pulsing blue veins on his face couldn't reduce his allure that much.

Well, he'd had a creepy voice during a conversation with me as I was escaping this building back then, but I was sure I had hallucinated our tête - à - tête .

After all, zombies were incapable of speech.

I stopped my mad climb on a landing to catch my breath.

I hadn't run this much since a swarm of pixies had chased me weeks ago.

I looked at the number on the wall: Floor 6 .

That should be high enough, given that the vampiric call from earlier had come from the second or third floor.

It was time to leave the sun-lit stairwell and brave the route to the fire escape ladder on this level.

I opened the fire-proof door and took a peek. A short dark corridor lay ahead, empty. I went in and made my way to the door on the other end, this one made of tinted glass. So far, so good.

I pulled the door open just a fraction... and was hit by a cacophony of sounds. Growls. Hisses. Snarls of fighting animals... Blades cutting through flesh?

My eyes went as wide as a loris' as I processed what I was seeing through the crack. There were vampires and zombies fighting side by side. Working together . And their common enemy? Winged humanoid creatures wielding swords.

I should shut the door and run back to the stairwell, but I was glued in place, dumbstruck by the sight of the unknown monsters.

They were as big as bodybuilders in the making.

Their skin was a dark shade of blue, and the wings protruding from their powerful backs were like a bat's.

Dressed in loincloths and sporting long hair, they reminded me of Tarzan but one holding a two-hand sword.

What the hell.

Actually, the first prize for bizarreness went to the battle scene as a whole.

I'd never seen—or heard of—the apocalyptic monsters hunting together and sharing food.

Not to mention it made no sense for two predatory species competing for a limited number of prey, to live in symbiosis.

I had a Master's in applied animal behavior, I should know.

And yet, the two vamps and one zombie to my left were jointly cornering a bat-man. Then there was that fallen bat-man in the right corner of the room serving as a shared platter for three zombies and one vamp.

Insanity.

Suddenly, three zombies munching on a dead bat-man lifted their heads all at the same time, as if they were puppets on the strings of a single puppet master. And they turned back to look straight at me with their milky-white eyes.

Ookay. Enough of this freak show.

I bolted. Back to the stairwell and up. If the zombies abandoned their feast to give chase, with them being World-War-Z fast, I would be screwed.

No one followed me. Phew. I kept climbing, desperate to put a few floors between me



and the monster buffet. Just as I bypassed the door to the ninth floor, it flew open.

I froze several steps away.

A bat-man emerged, his blue skin covered in blood and guts. Sword in hand, he was breathing heavily. A set of black eyes devoid of pupils zeroed in on me.

I didn't move. I didn't dare breathe.

All the creatures responsible for the second apocalypse—at least, those encountered by people who had lived to tell the tale before the radios had gone silent—killed humans.

With his massive wings, the bat-man could get to me in seconds, regardless of how fast I could run. Better to face death head-on.

He sniffed the air in my direction and spread his wings.

I crouched, tiny knife ready.

The bat-man flew away. Down the stairwell, quickly disappearing from sight.

I let out the breath I was holding. My hand around the knife relaxed. I might survive, after all—

The door swung open again. A whole bunch of zombies came pouring out into the stairwell. Seriously?

I ran up, and they gave chase. I was so tired already, what was I going to do? I couldn't just pick a random floor to try for the fire escape ladder, not with so many of the floors being unsafe and those things right behind me!

As I reached the top floor, I was left with a single option. Legs and lungs burning, I made a dash for the entrance to the single room up here. A conference hall, which at my last visit had its furniture replaced with cocktail tables.

What was it with history repeating itself today? Really now.

I shut the heavy door behind me right as several sets of decomposing hands reached for me. One turn of the lock, and I blocked out their blood-chilling snarls.

Only to hear the wet, unmistakable sound of something munching behind me.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:08 pm*

From one buffet onto another. Lucky me.

Just five or six steps away from where I stood, amid overturned cocktail tables, broken glasses, scattered food remnants, and bodies at various stages of decomposition, four zombies were eating a bat-man.

The zombies couldn't have possibly missed my loud entry, yet they didn't so much as spare me a glance. Maybe they preferred a bat-man to a Sue dish? I wasn't staying long enough to find out.

I had to reach the double doors at the far end of the hall. Beyond lay a corridor leading to the emergency exit and the fire escape ladder. My freedom from this nightmare was mere steps away!

I got moving, keeping close to the walls. No one paid me any attention. Halfway to the exit, I got to see the victim's face.

God. The bat-man was still alive. He lay still and silent, but his eyes were wide open and staring back at me. Pain and determination warred in their dark depths, making me pause in my tracks.

The creature's gaze shifted to my left. I followed it to what turned out to be a sword lying next to a vampire's headless body.

The bat-man wanted me to get the sword. To help.

A monster wanted my help? I was expected to risk my life for someone whose kind

probably ate mine for breakfast?

Madness.

Even if the victim were human, I would think twice about engaging four zombies with my knife.

Yeah, the sword would allow me to strike from a safe distance, but I had never used such a weapon.

Now was not the time to try sword-fighting.

And for what? There was no saving the creature from the deadly wounds.

A chunk of his lower abdomen was missing, for heaven's sake.

The bat-man would die with or without my help. Then possibly turn into a zombie bat who would chomp on my face. No, thank you. But if I made it home with the meds, his death would at least have served a purpose.

I resumed my slow progress toward the exit. Focused. Determined to survive. Not feeling any sympathy for the monster. Any guilt over leaving to a horrible death a stranger who wasn't human. Because that would be foolish, and I was no fool. I wouldn't have survived three apocalypses if I were.

Nope, no idiots here. No dangerous compassion whatsoever—

Fuck!

I sheathed my knife, rushed back, and picked up the sword with both hands. Then charged the zombies with a wild cry.

The first two were too slow to react before the surprisingly light sword chopped half their heads off. The others attacked, but thanks to my long weapon, they couldn't get close enough to do any damage.

One stabbed itself on the blade to get to me. I pushed until I had the creature pinned to the padded wall panel like a bug. Hands free of the sword, I pulled my knife out just in time to stab the other zombie in the eye.

Only one monster was left standing. It tried to reach me, but I ducked to the left, immobilized its more decayed arm and gave the zombie a knife to the brain through its oozing ear. Now that was scientific precision.

Breathless and shaky from the adrenaline rush, I stepped back to take in the carnage I had caused. Crazy stuff. What was I thinking, going kamikaze like that? Had the sword's light design not compensated for my inexperience...

The reason for my suicidal behavior lay with his eyes half-closed. His bluish lips moved as I stepped closer, but no sound came out. Black blood kept flowing out of his abdomen, chest, and left thigh to pool on the floor under his outstretched wings.

He was a goner. At least, he had gone down fighting, judging by the many vampire and fresher-looking zombie corpses around us. In my book, that was the most dignified death one could get these days.

When his eyelids closed, I knew the end was near. A strong wave of sadness washed over me. "Safe journey to bat-men's heaven, big guy."

It made no sense to feel this way for a monster, yet here I was. Another mystery to add to today's list. One I wouldn't get to share, unless I got my ass moving.

With a final glance at the bat-man, I headed for the double doors, sword in hand. The

weapon was light and efficient, and its owner wouldn't need it anymore.

My mood improved when I found the corridor outside the conference room empty and the emergency exit sign at the far end. I ran down the corridor, unable to help myself.

The door to the outside was unlocked. One push, and I was greeted by sunshine and the sight of the fire escape ladder leading down to salvation. Yes! –

The blare of sirens filled the air.

No! It was too early in the day for that; I was supposed to have an hour more!

Bad timing or not, the sirens kept howling their eerie warning. The invaders from above were coming again.

On cue, the sky over the nearby city darkened as the alien ships arrived.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:08 pm*

### Don't Beam Me Up

I was having yet another episode of being frozen on the spot and staring ahead.

Once again, fate was laughing in my face like that bitch who had stolen my boyfriend two years ago. After everything I had survived today, I was going to miss my chance of escape when it was under my very nose.

From the ladder's landing, I could see my bicycle waiting for me down by the building. It was knocked down, probably by Carson's hasty departure on his own bike, but it was there. All I had to do was go down fifteen floors, hop on it, and ride home for eight miles...

I would never make it. I knew it, yet I stood there, watching the black triangular ships over the city in the distance.

They would start dropping their bombs any minute now.

Being out in the open when that happened was suicidal.

If the bombs didn't get me, the shockwave or the aliens themselves would.

After all, the whole point of the sirens was to make any humans run for cover, exposing themselves to the invaders from above in the process.

No wonder the bombings were starting earlier than scheduled. They were no longer aimed so much at the monsters infesting the city as at detecting any humans moving

to a shelter. Clearly, the aliens were starting to get desperate as the competition for human survivors was becoming fiercer.

Sure, the aliens didn't want humans for food.

They had actually shown up sometime after the second apocalypse as our self-proclaimed saviors.

It was some soldiers who had revealed over the radio that the aliens were an apocalypse in themselves.

Abducting humans to use as test subjects and incubators for their eggs.

So, no, don't beam me up. Keep your seven tentacles to yourselves, please and thank you.

I sighed and closed the emergency door. It would be best to return to the conference hall.

Its reinforced windows had withstood the previous bombings, so I should be safe there while having a clear view of the outside.

As soon as those ships flew away, I would ride my bike to the bunker like my ass was on fire.

I did not want to be on the road when darkness fell.

The hall looked the same as before, the aftermath of the corporate party like a safe harbor amid the bombings outside. My gaze drifted to the bat-man. The creature lay motionless, just as I'd left him. Dead. Permanently.



As if pulled by an invisible string, my legs took me to him.

It had to be my scientific curiosity kicking in: what better chance to explore this new type of monster?

Sword in hand, I bent over the massive body for a closer look.

Not too close, though. I stayed out of reach of any limb in case the being came back to life like in some B-grade horror movie.

I just had to be careful not to step any further to the right to avoid tripping over the thick cable on the floor there.

Starting from the top: perfectly straight shoulder-length hair tucked behind a pair of pointed ears.

Eyebrows as raven-black as the hair. High cheekbones.

A well-shaped nose. A strong, angular jawline.

Tips of extra-sharp canines, much like the fangs of a vampire in movies, peeking between parted blue lips.

Face smooth and dark-blue, reminding me of the sky's color before sunrise.

In short, nothing grotesque. Peculiar, yes, but also kind of... handsome.

My gaze dropped to his chest, broad and hairless, then to his arms and legs, thick with corded muscles. Black claws tipped each finger and toe, completing the picture.

Nothing extraordinary here either. Unless the bat-man's loincloth was hiding

something extra special... But I wasn't going to inspect what hid underneath. Absolutely not.

The loincloth was interesting in itself, though. Unlike the brown clothing of the bat-men I had seen thus far, this one was a knee-length rectangle of golden leather that shimmered in the sunlight. It spoke of craftsmanship and fashion, even. Was this monster dressed to impress?

I was definitely impressed. In all honesty, I found him striking.

I knelt to examine his wings closer. There were sharp bones at each wing's upper tip. The skin looked smooth, veins tracing intricate patterns beneath the surface. Tempted, I ran my fingertips along the length of a wing. Silky-smooth. I ran my palm next, unable to resist the softness.

Then I noticed it. The wound on his abdomen was smaller than before. My heart skipped. The tear in his thigh had gotten smaller, too. He was regenerating!

I jumped back, only to trip on that damn cable. I fell backward, my sword clattering to the floor as I waved my arms in a futile attempt to break my fall. I braced for impact—

I stopped falling. Just as my ass was about to hit the floor, something curled around my waist and pulled.

Suddenly, I was back on my feet. And face to face with the bat-man.

A pair of pupil-less eyes stared back at me. The dark tail holding me—the long and thin appendage I had foolishly mistaken for a cable—tightened.

My heart felt like it would burst out of my chest. I quickly diverted my gaze, in case

that got interpreted as a dominance display.

I ended up staring at the wound on the creature's thigh instead—or what remained of the wound.

The torn edges were knitting together before my eyes.

Just like the wounds of vampires healed, though a bit slower.

Maybe the bat-man was a type of vampire, after all, with those long canines of his, just one battling with the vampires I was familiar with. Over food, undoubtedly, given the dwindling supply.

Death by bloodsucking it would be for me, then.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:08 pm*

I was pulled toward the monster. Gently.

The bat-man's nostrils flared as he sniffed me: my hair, my face, my neck. He lingered there the most, and I used this last chance to grab hold of my knife. Only to realize it was trapped in its sheath by the tail around my waist. I shut my eyes, bracing for the fatal bite—

“What is your name, little human?”

My eyes shot open.

The bat-man held me at arm's length and lifted to his eye level. His dark-blue gaze studied my face, his own expression calm. “Do not be so surprised I speak your language. I'm fluent in three,” he said in a deep, rumbling voice.

I gaped.

“Your name?”

“S-s-sue?” I stuttered. This was unheard of. Supernatural creatures did not speak to humans; they killed us.

“Sue?” It seemed he didn't like my name. “Little human, did you touch my wing?”

My mouth opened and closed, like a fish out of water.

He grunted from deep within his chest, fully healed by this point.

“Yes,” I managed to mumble. “Sorry?”

“I am not insulted,” the bat-man said with a reassuring tone. “However, I do prefer to be awake, and not in a healing sleep, when a female is bold enough to touch what only a mate is allowed to.”

My eyes were as wide as a tarsier’s at this point. My jaw hung open.

A claw-tipped finger lightly lifted my chin. “Close that enticing mouth of yours, female, unless you wish to have it claimed by my lips.”

I blinked.

He revealed one pearly white fang in a lopsided grin. “So you want to be claimed with a kiss?”

A breathless laugh slipped from my lips, laced with disbelief. Was I in the Twilight Zone?

The bat-man’s smile grew. “Alright, play hard to get. I will be given what I desire later, when the environment is safer... You do want to come with me, do you not?”

Go with him? What—

“Let me paraphrase: do you want to be flown to safety, or should I leave you to the flesh eaters and blood suckers? Darkness is almost here.”

I turned to look through the windows. The alien ships were moving away from the city, but sundown was fast approaching. There was a high risk of the dark catching me on the road. A road that cut dangerously close to the Elf-infested nature park.

I had been hunted by the night-dwelling Elves once, and the only reason I had survived that brief encounter was the sunrise. Daylight made them more or less blind.

“Well?” The bat-man gave my waist a light squeeze with his tail.

I shifted my gaze back to his face. Was accepting the offer of an unknown monster smarter or more stupid than trying my luck with the bow-wielding enemy I knew? I would soon find out.

“Could you... um... by any chance... uh...” God, this was crazy. “Could you drop me off at... a location of my choosing?” I shouldn’t lead him to the bunker, but the nearby filling station would do as a landmark.

“Do I look like a taxi to you?” He grunted. “Trust me to take you to a safe haven. Or don’t and stay here. You are a skilled fighter; you might kill several flesh eaters before the rest eat you up—”

“I saved your life,” I reminded him, hoping that meant something to a being like him. “You won’t eat me if I come with you, will you?”

He flashed me another fangy smile. “I do not eat humans. I swear on it.”

“Will you suck me dry?” I had to rule out all possibilities.

His smile grew and his tongue—long and forked like a snake’s—passed along one canine. Then the bat-man put me down and stated matter-of-factly, “You are coming with me.”

Wonderful. I had amused him enough to be taken away from here regardless of my opinion on the matter. Not that I had formed one already. I wished there were instructions on what to do when faced with a giant intelligent bat-man offering you a

ride.

While I stood there, wondering what to do, he released me from his tail and went to retrieve his sword.

He pressed something on the handle, and I watched with fascination how the blade folded on itself like in a sci-fi movie.

Handle now tucked in the belt keeping his loincloth in place, the bat-man went to the windows.

He looked them over, a deep line creasing his forehead.

“Where are the handles?”

Oh. “There aren’t any. You can’t open these windows. It’s a safety feature—”

He slid his claws under the frame of a window and pulled. The powerful muscles on his back rippled under the strain.

“Hey, that’s not going to achieve any—”

He tore the large frame with the glass off. Just like that.

“You were saying?” He directed a smirk my way. Once he effortlessly set the glass aside, he extended a hand to me.

“Uh...” I stared at the large blue palm.

Before I could make up my mind, the bat-man took the distance separating us with a stride. Next thing I knew, I was scooped up in his arms like a bride on her wedding

day.

“Come, female,” he said as he carried me to the open window. “You hesitated too long. A gargoyle king can only be this patient.”

And then, we were airborne.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

I couldn't help it. I screamed.

"Calm down. You are safe."

Safe? I would have cackled, but I was too busy shrieking as I held on for dear life.

I might face deadly creatures without losing my cool, but it wasn't every day that I flew across the sky with nothing but thin air beneath me.

We were already so high that the fifteen-story office building was shrinking by the second.

Also, we kept rising faster and faster, propelled by those massive wings—or should I say, gargoyle wings?

"Little human, have mercy."

Right. I had to pull myself back together before I damaged the pointed ears of the only one keeping me alive at the moment.

I squeezed my eyes shut and hid my face in the crook of his neck, hands still gripping his brawny shoulders.

This was simply a glass elevator ride in the tallest skyscraper ever. Yep, scary but safe .

And kind of comfortable. Now that I wasn't looking down, I had to admit that my

ride was not bad.

The gargoyle's strong arms held me securely against his chest. His skin ran hot, so I was warm despite the biting air at this height.

His wings flapped fast enough to shelter me from the wind's powerful bursts. Comfy.

I tentatively released his shoulders from my death grip and rested my hands against his wide chest. Warmth seeped through my fingers right away. Ah, much better.

A deep, primal grunt vibrated through my palms. "Do not test my patience."

I cringed and snatched my hands away. "Sorry! I didn't mean to anger you."

An amused laugh tore from him, surprising me. "You have no idea what you are doing to me, do you? I have not picked up a female from the ground in many years, so I have forgotten you are not familiar with a gargoyle's erogenous zones."

"What!"

I tried to put as much distance between our bodies as possible under the circumstances. As in, I pulled my head back by an inch or two. The rest of me stayed plastered against him.

More laughter. "Do not worry: I will educate you. It was not your delicate fingers on my chest that inflamed me. It was your nose right where a female would take in my scent to determine whether I am worthy of her attention. A longer sniff equals full approval, and then the claiming can begin."

Had my feet been on the ground, my knees would have buckled. Not only had I accidentally given a gargoyle a come-on, but I had also been sniffed by him back at

the conference hall. That had been a long sniff over the side of my neck.

The gargoyle found me worthy. Of a claiming . And he'd said he would get what he desired from me once we got to safety. What had I gotten myself into?

"Where are you taking me?" A look around revealed we were engulfed by cloudy whiteness.

"My palace, of course."

"Of course." Silly me, still thinking of him as a stone sentry on a medieval cathedral having come to life. Hadn't I learned that no creature in the apocalypses was as depicted in movies? This gargoyle was a king with a palace. Wasn't I lucky. "Why are we going there?"

"Because it is safe," he replied with a shrug, as if the answer were obvious. "And it will continue to be so as long as my brethren and I draw breath. You will like it. Humans are always fascinated by the view of the night sky when they first arrive."

"You've taken many women there?" I barely hid the quiver in my voice.

To think I had chosen against venturing out during the bombings to avoid joining the aliens' breeding program...

Sure, this gargoyle didn't have two heads, seven tentacles, and a scaly blob for a body. He was physically appealing, but still.

Oblivious to my incoming panic, he explained.

"I have taken my fair share of humans over the years, though my brethren have been more active in that department than I will ever be. In the last three years, I have been

limiting myself to rare claimings of the unmated females living on my homecloud. No females from the ground.”

It took me some time to process his words. “So humans were abducted for years before the apocalypses?”

“ Abducted? ” His lips curled in a sneer and his nostrils flared. “Are you implying a gargoyle would take someone against their will, like the Gods-cursed extraterrestrials do? You are comparing me to them ?”

I pressed my lips into a thin line. “You took me against my will.”

“Did I?” He stopped so abruptly I got dizzy. Dark eyes bore into mine. “You wanted out of that building, did you not?”

I lifted my chin. “You didn’t give me time to decide. Nor did you tell me there was fine print.”

“Fine print?” His thick brows knitted together. “I am not familiar with this term. Care to elaborate, bold little human?”

“It means you never told me what agreeing to come with you entailed. I wanted out of that building, nothing more! You owed me that much for having saved you. Instead, you take advantage and drag me away to—to your breeding cloud—palace—whatever!”

His frown deepened. “I am not interested in pips yet—children, as you humans call them.” His tone conveyed surprise rather than anger. “I am more than mature for the responsibility, but I have not found my mate yet. I do not intend to have pips from anyone else but my mate.”

Hmm. I'd thought mate was a mating partner, like in the animal kingdom, but now I wasn't so sure. Perhaps he meant wife ?

Hesitantly, I asked, "If you don't want to use me for breeding, why are you taking me to your palace?"

"You did save my life," he noted, resuming our flight.

"The blood suckers and flesh eaters had overwhelmed me by sheer numbers. Although I had killed all but four of my enemies, those four had been enough to overpower me in my exhausted state. Any other human would have run away, but you risked your life for mine. I had to repay you by saving yours."

His words sounded honorable, but... "Why not drop me off at a place of my choosing?"

The gargoyle shook his head, a solemn look on his face. "The ground offers no safety anymore. My homecloud is the safe place to be. My kingdom in the clouds."

"Okay, but—"

"I admit there is a second reason why I decided to save you." One corner of his mouth quirked up. "Your scent was heady, and my regeneration had left me raw with hunger."

"But you said you don't eat humans." I was getting more confused by the minute.

Blue lips tipped up into a smile that was undeniably naughty. His exposed left fang gleamed. "I said I would not eat you. I never said I would not eat you out."

Heat rose to my cheeks. By hunger he hadn't meant need for food—

“And when you not only touched my wing but also smelled so compatible, and went as far as to suggest I might suck you dry? I could not possibly resist bringing you home to my bedchamber. A gargoyle can only take so much innuendo.”

I should have been concerned about destination bedchamber .

Instead, I was burning as red as the setting sun, currently peeking behind the clouds.

His words, coupled with that deep, rich timbre of his, awoke something in me.

A vivid picture bloomed in my mind. I could almost feel it: his powerful body pinning mine, his muscular arms keeping my thighs spread wide as he dove in for a taste—

“Gods, you are gorgeous like this, all flushed and aroused.”

I sputtered. “I’m not aroused!” Liar, liar, combat pants on fire.

How was this possible? I had shoulder-punched Carson for a similar suggestion earlier today; I had gagged at the very thought. Yet here I was, throbbing down south after an indecent proposal from a gargoyle .

Some special pheromone had to be at play here. There was no other explanation for my overwhelming attraction to a monster.

Flushed, but this time with anger both at myself and him, I said firmly, “I demand you let me go. Right now.”

His black brow crept up, then he chuckled and stopped our flight. “Alright.”

Huh? He wasn’t angry that I’d rather risk my life on the ground than visit his

bedroom? “You will do it?”

“Of course. I will do as you wish.” Mischief sparked in his eyes.

His arms released me.

I started free-falling. My heart leaped into my throat. My limbs flailed wildly. The wind hit me full-force, its roar now deafening. I opened my mouth to scream—

The fall stopped. I had the gargoyle’s tail around my waist, holding me tight. He used it to return me to his arms, and I let him. Oh, did I let him. The moment he was within reach, I wrapped my arms and legs around him, clinging like a sloth to a tree trunk.

He smiled, his face a breath away from mine. The corners of his eyes crinkled with amusement.

“You jerk!” I couldn’t seem to catch my breath. That free-fall had lasted only a second, but the suddenness of it had gotten to me. “Why the hell did you do that?”

“I hope jerk is a term of endearment?” His left arm replaced the firm hold of his tail around my waist, while his right hand cupped my thigh.

“Of course I would let you go. You demanded it.” He gave me a lopsided smile as he added, “Also, we had to change positions. This one is much better for what I have in mind.” His smile turned wicked.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He kissed me. The gargoyle king pressed his lips to mine for a heartbeat and stole a kiss.

I was left breathless and dazed, lips parted.

He waited for me to react and when I didn't, he brought his face closer, slowly but surely. His dark-blue gaze was on my mouth, his intention clear.

I didn't pull back.

He dove in for another taste.

I could pull away. I should pull away. But I was swept away by the electrifying feel of his lips on mine.

Their softness. Their warmth. All the raw passion that he poured into that kiss...

It was intoxicating. Long-dormant needs taking over, I melted in the gargoyle's arms and let myself succumb to his gentle exploration.

A light tug at my upper lip. A suck at my bottom lip. A claiming of them both. A delicate lick at the line where my lips met. Then a sensual dance of his tongue with mine, because I opened my mouth to him without hesitation.

I had never been kissed like that. I mean, I had been kissed in a similar way, but never had it felt so good.

So toe-curling. So scorching hot. Heat ignited in my core and spread downward like a tidal wave.

I was suddenly dough in the gargoyle's hands that he could mold however he pleased, as long as those lips stayed locked with mine and our bodies remained entangled.

Was that me growling in frustration when he broke the kiss?



I saw him grinning through my slightly blurred vision. I had forgotten to breathe, completely lost in the feel of him. “There, that is much better. Flushed, aroused, and willing. You are ready.”

“Huh?”

Instead of replying, the gargoyle flapped his wings a few times and... landed. “Welcome to my homecloud.”

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

There I was again, staring and gaping. The whiteness around us had cleared to reveal the blue sky and the vast surface of a cloud.

It reminded me of those pillowy clouds I loved watching from a plane's window and imagining I could bounce on.

Only that the cloud before me was tinted with shades of blue and pink, could support our weight, and led to a defensive wall.

It was as though we were standing on the flat, open area in front of a medieval fortress—if both the ground and the building were made of cloud the color of cotton candy.

In the fading daylight, I could distinguish the defensive wall's bricks and two watchtowers, rounded and puffy. There was no gate in sight.

Surreal.

The spade tip of a tail slid up my arm. I swiveled back to look at the gargoyle, his face still close enough for our noses to touch. Pride shone in his pupil-less eyes.

“Come now. My palace awaits.”

He tried to set me on my feet, but I latched onto him like a koala. My cleavage was practically shoved in his face, but I didn't care. I did not want to experience another freefall.

The gargoyle's chuckle sent vibrations down my breasts. "You will not fall." He caressed my back with his tail over my tank top. "We are on solid ground. My wings are folded, see?"

Sure, his wings were tucked against his back, but I knew better. "I don't know whether or not the laws of physics apply to you, but I do know I cannot stand on a cloud."

He exhaled loudly through his nose. "You think I am lying? Why would I bring you all the way up here just to let you fall?"

I leveled a glare at him.

A deep grunt came from his chest. "I will not argue with you, stubborn little human." His tail encircled my waist and pulled.

So much for my death grip. He had me hanging in the air by his tail in an eyeblink. Then placed me on my feet.

I braced for the fall... It never came.

"Holy crap!" I was standing on a cloud! I tapped the blue-pink surface with the toe of a boot: it was as solid as earth, it simply appeared puffy. This was... magic!

"Save the dirty words for my bedchamber."

I froze mid-tap. Bedchamber, right . I was not here to explore the sights that defied science.

The gargoyle king took my hand and gave my ass a little tail nudge. "Let us go and not waste any more time."

He sounded and looked serious, not a sign of his playful smile, but it was clear what he meant. He was in a hurry to have me in his bed without further delay.

What he would get was my knife at his dick. Or whatever hid under his designer loincloth. But I would try reason and politeness first, stabby tactics next.

“Look,” I said as I pulled my hand out of his. “I admit you’re an amazing kisser. Your technique is unparalleled. But, I’m not sleeping with you.”

The corners of his lips tilted up.

“I’m serious,” I said firmly. “If you won’t take me back to the ground, fine. I’ll stay on this homecloud of yours for tonight. But I won’t let you have your way with me. Okay?”

He stepped closer until our bodies were almost touching. The power of his presence washed over me, undeniable. His face hovered over mine, my head barely reaching his chest.

I looked up to meet his gaze squarely. He was wrong if he thought his imposing size would make me cower.

Heat shone in his dark eyes. His next words, said in a husky voice, made me realize that intimidation was not his intention.

“I will not have my way with you, female. I shall claim you and you, me. In my bedchamber or elsewhere in the palace, should you prefer an audience.”

His words and seductive timbre had my body reacting instantly. My pulse throbbed between my thighs. What was wrong with me?

“Call it whatever you want,” I snapped. “Not. Happening. Your Majesty .”

His tail slid along my leg, and he caressed my cheek with one long finger.

A feather-light touch that sent a shiver of excitement down my traitorous body.

“There is no need to address me by my title. Just Xaniban will suffice.” His thumb glided across my lips.

“I look forward to hearing you scream it as we claim each other.”

An incredulous laugh burst out of me. This guy was so sure of himself. There was no convincing him I wasn’t interested. My scent telling him otherwise wasn’t helping matters, nor was the fiery kiss I’d allowed earlier. What a mess. Go me!

“I don’t know you,” I reminded the gargoyle—Xaniban in a last attempt to reason with him. “We met, what, an hour ago?”

“Thirty minutes,” he kindly specified. All the while, the tip of his tail was drawing teasing lines along my thigh, his eyes on my mouth smoldering.

I stifled a shiver of pleasure. “It doesn’t matter whether it’s thirty, sixty, or ninety minutes. What I’m trying to say is that—”

“We cannot try the regular sixty-nine, I am afraid.” His lips stretched into that wicked smile of his.

“When I lie on my back, should a female straddle my face, her knees would come dangerously close to my sharp wingtips. There are, however, many positions which a human can never offer you. That is why, when our lust for each other was satiated, many females I have brought with me from the ground chose to settle here. Be it with

a claiming partner or their mate.”

Face on fire, I growled in exasperation. “Would you stop that?”

“What?” he asked, all innocence.

Yeah, right . I swatted his tail away from my thigh. “Stop distracting me from what I’m trying to say by talking dirty.”

“The only dirty thing here is your clothing.” He passed a claw along one of my tank top’s wide straps.

“I’m not built that way!” I raised my voice this time. I was desperate to get my point across before my anger could subside under his disarming touches and tempting promises. “I don’t lay around with strangers for the sole purpose of scratching an itch.”

A frown creased his brow. “You need a male for scratching?”

I groaned. “I don’t do one-night stands, is that clear enough for you?”

... I’ve always looked for an emotional attachment, and even the end of the freaking world can’t make me change my ways.

” I let out a deep sigh. “Just forget about getting in my pants, okay? Go satiate your animalistic needs with one of those women who have allegedly come here willingly.”

He exhaled loudly through his nose like earlier–Gargoyles’ version of a snort?–but did take a step back from me.

Finally. Progress–

“I declare my desire to claim you and you alone in so many ways, and you demand I replace you with another female? Is this some kind of test?”

“Oh my God.” This was hopeless. Why had I thought I could reason with a being from another world?

“Test or not,” he carried on, taking my hand in his, “I assure you I will be devoted to you and only you while we are together. And our togetherness will continue for more than one night, do not doubt that. I have never claimed a female smelling so compatible. Therefore,” he smiled with one fang showing, “I do not have to forget about getting in your pants.”

I opened my mouth then closed it. What more could I say?

Visibly pleased with my silence, Xaniban hand-led me toward the defensive wall. It looked more blueish than pink, now that the sun was closer to setting. If there were guards on the watchtowers, I couldn’t see them. Just like I was yet to see a gate.

“I must beg your forgiveness in advance,” Xaniban told me as we walked. “I will not be able to join you in bed right away. Pressing matters require my attention first.”

It hit me then that his haste after we landed might not have been bedroom-related. “What matters are those?”

“I am Xaniban to you, but to my brethren I am the king of this homecloud. I must check how many of my warriors have survived today’s battle and plan our next move.”

Oh! “Those were your soldiers, back in the office building! I saw them fight on one of the floors. They were greatly outnumbered because of the vampires working jointly with the zombies.”

His wings fluttered. “Yes. The alliance between flesh eaters and blood suckers was not something I had anticipated.” Xaniban sounded grim. Gone was the playful tone: this was the king talking about a military defeat, not the gargoyle talking about claiming me.

A nice change, if you asked me.

“Why were your soldiers so spread out inside the building?” I couldn’t help but ask. “Why were you all alone on the top floor?”

“Gargoyles rarely fight as a close-knit unit the way your kind do,” he explained, seemingly not bothered by my curiosity. “We are strong enough to deal with a small number of enemies individually. In this case, individual battles were very risky, but we had no choice.”

“But why go to that abandoned building in the first place?”

“To kill their king, of course.” To my shocked look, he elaborated.

“It took us some time to determine where the very first flesh eaters of his new army had been created. I thought I might find him still there, operating from the place he had chosen to start this war from.” Xaniban’s wings fluttered again.

“I found a fortress but one of many, not his prime stronghold. I was foolish, and he was cunning. I led my warriors into a trap.”

I gave his hand a squeeze. “You couldn’t have known.”

He hummed and squeezed my hand back. “I need to plan my next move more carefully. Hopefully, some of my warriors have found clues I could use to locate my foe. That was why we split up: to go through the entire building quickly before the



king could escape or his minions could destroy valuable evidence of his whereabouts.”

“I see.” It was nice of Xaniban to tell me all this, but it raised so many questions.

How could zombies have a king? They didn’t have higher brain functions, I was sure of it. And they were allies with the vamps, who I knew as no smarter than a wild cat? How did they form an alliance when they were incapable of speech? I needed time to process this shocking information.

Only, I didn’t have time, because we reached the wall. And Xaniban pulled me inside it.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

I squeezed my eyes shut. If my face was about to go pancake on the wall, I didn't want to see it.

No pain followed. I felt coolness against my exposed skin, the air became thicker like in a dense fog, and my ears popped as if there were a change in air pressure. But those sensations were gone so fast I might as well have imagined them. I cracked an eye open.

I was in a courtyard full of gargoyles. Armed with shields and swords, they were an impenetrable wall between us and what looked like a medieval castle.

My survival instincts went into overdrive. If these creatures wanted me dead, I was a goner. My knife was but a chopstick against their long blades, and fleeing was not an option. Hence I hid behind my gargoyle's back.

Silence fell.

I sneaked a peek from behind a folded wing. Every single gargoyle was down on one knee, head bowed, sword planted in the pinkish ground.

"Rise, my loyal brethren!" Xaniban's voice carried over the courtyard. He had his hand and tail raised in greeting or command; I could only guess.

As everyone got up and put their swords away, I went back to hiding. I was hoping to remain out of sight until I could orient myself in the situation.

No such luck. Xaniban stepped to the side and gave me a nudge with his tail. I was

suddenly on full display, and some twenty pairs of pupil-less eyes were on me.

On instinct, I pressed myself to Xaniban's side. Dignifying, I know. But it gave me a sense of security I desperately needed in this pickle of a situation. Gripping his biceps, I whispered, "What's going on?"

His wing pressed against my back, soft but reassuring. "Have no fear," he murmured, then spoke loudly, "My brethren wish you no harm. They are simply surprised at my return with a human after so many years of abstention."

His words were followed by a flap of wings by everyone present. Was that a 'Yes, my king'?

"Perixal." Xaniban turned to a chestnut-haired gargoyle in a red loincloth, the only one not dressed in black.

Perixal stepped forward and bowed. He was large, ripped, and with long hair straight out of a shampoo commercial, just like the others of his kind. I would assume these were palace guards, and he was their commander. Still, what did they feed these males?

"How many of my warriors have returned?" Xaniban asked. He spoke authoritatively, in full king mode now.

"Twelve, my liege."

"Have they fully regenerated?"

"Yes. They are ready to serve you yet again."

"Good. Summon them to the war room. Have they eaten?"

“Not yet. Food was just about to be served to them when our scouts informed us of your return.”

“Order the food served in the war room, then. I will not have my warriors deprived of sustenance. They can expect me to join them there.”

Perixal bowed again. “It shall be done, my liege.”

“As for our fallen brethren,” Xaniban continued, “I will personally inform their families of the loss.”

“Yes, my liege.” One more bow, and Perixal took flight.

I wanted to see where he was headed, but another gargoyle landed in his place, demanding my attention.

This one was blond and looked different than the rest. He was lean, with narrower shoulders and less defined muscles.

His face had softer features, no sign of the rugged jawline everyone around me sported.

I’d say he was a teen, but he might as well be a flat-chested female for all I knew.

I studied his white loincloth. Was there a bulge under there?

“Have a robe ready for her.”

Wait, what did I miss?

“She needs clean clothes after her bath.”

“Yes, my liege.”

Wonderful. I had been so busy staring at gargoyle crotches I had missed part of Xaniban’s orders. Which happened to involve me.

“Will that be a white robe or a blue one?” the newcomer asked. His voice was distinctly masculine.

“The blue, Samuin. My human has been claimed by others before me.”

I sputtered. “Excuse me?” Had Xaniban just told an entire courtyard of males that I wasn’t a virgin?

And why did it sound like I was being prepped for him, like a dish to be served once washed and seasoned with a dressing of his choice?

“Have some food delivered to her,” the almighty king continued with his orders, ignoring my murderous glare. “Her scent speaks of malnourishment.”

“Yes, my liege. Should I serve the food in your chambers or in the harem?”

“Harem?!” I took a step back from Xaniban. Perhaps this way my death stare would have an effect.

The king chuckled. Snickers came from his subjects.

“She is a jealous one, is she not?” Xaniban asked all in attendance, his tone laced with satisfaction. A chorus of wing flaps followed. “Very territorial, just like a strong female should be.”

Resting his eyes on me, he added, “Do not worry. I keep no harem; Samuin speaks of

the chambers where my father used to house his numerous females before he mated my mother. Now I offer that space to my female of choice, to use when I am away from my chambers. The harem shall be yours now.”

“I’m flattered,” I deadpanned.

“The food will be served in my chambers, then,” he told the young gargoyle.

“Yes, my liege.” Samuin bowed and extended a hand to me. “My lady.”

I stared at his blue hand, then at his bowed head, and finally at Xaniban beside me.

“Go without fear.” He gave me an encouraging smile with a hint of fang. “Samuin will ensure you are warm, clean, and fed until I return to your curvaceous side.”

I stepped further away to avoid another tail nudge. “I am not going anywhere with him.”

A ripple of surprised gasps spread through the courtyard.

Yeah, what a shocker, not obeying the king. Xaniban was not my ruler, and I was nobody’s bed toy. Still, some tact was necessary here, in case my disobedience was punishable by imprisonment or execution in this world.

“I already told you I am not going to your bedchamber, my liege . If your claim that you wish me well isn’t false, then I shall eat with you now.”

Xaniban’s brow furrowed. “I have kingly duties to perform. I do desire to fulfill all your wishes, but my brethren’s needs always come first. I must meet with my warriors now. Afterward, I promise to make it up to you by bringing you to ecstasy a myriad of times before the moon reaches its peak.”

Oh my God . He declared that loudly for everyone to hear! Cheeks burning, I forced myself to stay on track. “I wish not to keep you from your tasks,” I said respectfully, “but to join you and your warriors for dinner.”

Gasps from all around yet again.

Xaniban gave me an approving look, though.

“You are feisty and courageous. You fought against our common enemy and survived when other skilled warriors fell. However,” his tone grew firm, “with so few females remaining both of my kind and yours, war is something you must not be involved in. You must be protected, not plunged into the violence my warriors and I face.”

I scoffed. “Sorry to inform you, macho gargoyles, but neither I nor the women in my community have the luxury to sit on the sidelines. We fight for our survival alongside the men, and guess what? We’re still standing.

So, if you want to protect us, let me attend your war council and learn more about our common enemy. ”

The king took a deep breath, his impressive chest expanding, then exhaled loudly through his nose. All the while studying me with an unreadable look on his face.

When he finally spoke, it was to Samuin. “Take her to the harem.”

“Yes, my liege.”

I yelped as I was tail-grabbed and thrown over Samuin’s shoulder like a sack of grain. “Wait!”

He held me in place with one arm and a tail and took off at a dizzying speed.

“Wait, dammit! I’ve got info! The zombie king!”

But we were already high in the air, Xaniban remaining far below us. I could barely see anything with those wings flapping right in front of my face.

“Halt.”

“My liege?” My ride stopped mid-air.

I held my breath. All I could do was listen, since I didn’t have eyes on my ass.

“What do you know about the zombie king, little human?”

Hope flared. “I will tell you... in the war room.”

A loud exhale. “You know nothing. Samuin, take her away.”

“No! I’m not bluffing!” I think.

“If this is a trick—”

“It’s not! I do know...” I paused for greater effect. “How about the whereabouts of the zombie king?”



## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

Two minutes later, I was back in the arms of the gargoyle king and being flown to the war room through his palace. He even told me a bit about each room we passed through, pride easy to detect in his tone. This was his home, and what a home it was!

What had looked on the outside like a mid-sized pink castle plucked out of a fairy tale book, was astonishing on the inside.

I had expected a mostly plain interior fitting of the facade's medieval style, and everything to be made of clouds shaped like furniture, but no.

Think tables and China Cabinets of solid dark-red wood with intricate carvings, wall-sized paintings and tapestries, and lush, handwoven carpets.

The ceilings weren't plain either; their pink cloudy surface was morphed into various shapes to decorate the corners: animals, human figures, gargoyles carrying the weight of the ceiling on their wings... Beautiful.

Everything was adapted to accommodate the physical specifics of Gargoyles.

From the chairs being bigger but with smaller backrests, to the ceilings being higher and the rooms having two wide-framed doors one on top of the other.

Several gargoyles, dressed in white loincloths and carrying food trays, flew through those upper doors while we were using the standard ones.

The art on the walls was also relevant to the palace residents. Depicted were gargoyles in flight hunting deer, or doing battle in the sky, or having a feast. There

was also a painting of a gargoyle posing with a bunch of scantily clad human women.

Welcome to the Renaissance period, gargoyle style.

We reached our destination some six or seven rooms later—this palace was way bigger than it looked from the outside.

Another surprise awaited me here, because I had not pictured the war room so...

cozy. Sure, the vast canvases adorning the long walls depicted battle scenes, but nothing else in here screamed, let's plan bloodshed .

The ceiling was as pink as cotton candy, with brighter areas here and there that bathed the windowless room in soft light.

Candles were placed on the massive rectangular table in the center of the room.

The individual tablecloths matched the blue color of the cushions on the chairs of dark-red wood.

To say that my scientific curiosity was piqued would be an understatement. I was in contact with a culture that probably just a handful of humans knew existed! I itched to touch and explore everything, especially since the warriors hadn't arrived yet.

Alas, the feast laid out on the table brought me back to reality. I was starving.

The second Xaniban placed me on my feet, I ran to the food. Even if I had eaten today, I would still be unable to tear my eyes from the incredible sight.

“You’ve got real meat! Oh God, strawberries! Holy crap, is that chocolate cake?!”

I reached for the mouth-watering pastry—

I was pulled back by a tail around my waist until my back was pressed against Xaniban's chest.

I wanted to scream bloody murder.

Xaniban's lips ghosted over the edge of my ear. "Not yet. My warriors start eating first."

I groaned, though that tradition sounded honorable. "They'll never know a single strawberry is missing," I insisted, eyes glued on the glass bowl overflowing with the big, ripe fruit.

I would eat strawberries even if they were half-rotten. Months of canned food would do that to you.

"I will know," he underscored, his warm breath against my skin tugging at a different kind of hunger deep inside me. "We must show restraint. I can, so can you." The last words were a whisper, followed by a nip at my earlobe.

I gasped, an electric zing shooting straight to my core. Dammit. How could he piss me off one minute and turn me on the next?

Xaniban walked past me, his tail slipping away, the smile on his face suggesting the restraint he spoke of was not just food-related. He pulled the chair at the head of the table.

"Come, sit. My brethren will be here any second, then no one will go hungry."

Forget about being turned-on. Tears stung at the back of my eyes as his words

brought me back to reality at a dizzying speed. To the world below, where my community would go hungry.

When Carson and I had left the bunker this morning, another party had gone out in search of food.

We were getting low on the military food reserves, and the risk of going outside was unavoidable.

I had no way of knowing whether that group had survived the supply run, or whether they had found anything to eat.

Yet here I was, marveling at this magical place and grumbling that I had to wait a few minutes before stuffing myself.

Not only that, but amid the mind-blowing events of the last hour, I had forgotten about the meds.

The bag was no longer tucked in my belt.

It must have fallen off during the flight up here, and I hadn't even noticed.

I was an utter failure.

"Please, do not be sad," Xaniban spoke with concern from his chair. "Come, let me comfort you while we wait." He patted his toned thigh.

I blinked. Did he seriously expect me to sit there?

Before I could give him a piece of my mind, feet appeared through the ceiling. I dashed to his side before the gargoyles coming down could land on me.

Clearly, the ceiling didn't simply look like a cloud: it was one. A cloud that was both a ceiling and a door. God, this place.

"Sit, my brethren," Xaniban addressed the newly arrived gargoyles, each of whom had gone down on one knee upon landing. "I should be bowing to your courage and skill in battle, not the other way around."

I took in the newcomers. All were dressed in brown loincloths and looked impressively built, except for one who was almost twice as big and wide as the rest. He had some trouble fitting in a chair as everyone took their respective seats.

Suddenly, all eyes were on me. I stiffened. I saw only curiosity in their dark gazes, but I would have to be a fool not to feel intimidated as the focus of twelve warriors' attention.

An arm snaked around my waist. I yelped in surprise as I was tugged back and deposited on its owner's lap.

"Relax, it's me," Xaniban murmured while his tail was replacing his arm around my midsection in a secure hold. "We must all be seated for the dinner to begin."

This was absurd. He kept manhandling me, and now I was supposed to be his lap girl? I knew that his kind's attitudes and customs were different than mine, but—

I sighed inwardly. Protesting would do me no good.

As much as I was fuming inside, I had to suck it up.

I was in the war room, and not in the gargoyle king's harem.

A small victory that could turn into a big one provided I learned things of importance

for my community's survival. I might not be a complete failure then.

"This is Sue," Xaniban announced as soon as I relaxed against him. Finally, I had a name. "She's here to offer her own report on the events of today."

"Sue was on the battlefield," a warrior spoke.

I recognized the gargoyle from the stairwell by his distinctively short black hair. Everyone else was digging the long hair style.

Xaniban nodded. "Yes, Fixgor. And not just that: Sue fought our enemy and saved my life."

Impressed looks were directed my way, followed by flaps of wings and respectful nods at me.

I was astonished. The overconfident king publicly admitted he had needed saving and had been rescued by a woman. And he sounded proud as he said it. As if I weren't just a female brought here to warm his bed. Had I been wrong to assume Gargoyles considered women inferior?

With the reason for my presence in the war room explained, the warriors finally began eating.

I expected a toast to the fallen, but the glasses on the table appeared to be filled with water, and the guests simply dug in.

Battles and their consequences had to be a regular occurrence for these guys. Just another day at the office.

I turned carefully to Xaniban, since our faces were close enough to brush, and gave

him a questioning look.

A knowing smile tugged at his lips. "Help yourself to whichever dish you desire."

Ha. That would be every single one. The moment he moved us closer to the table so I could reach the food, I started building a mountain in the glass plate provided. Cheeses, salads, cured meat, fruit, freshly-baked bread—you named it, they had it, I tried it.

It was one explosion of tastes after another in my mouth. Maybe it was my diet since apocalypse one, or maybe the food was simply phenomenal, but I couldn't hold back. Happy little noises escaped my lips after each bite.

I was moaning around a mouthful of cake when I realized all eyes were on me. Smiles played on the warriors' faces, some more fangy than others due to tooth size differences. I mean, that extra large gargoyle's canines were so long they couldn't fit in his mouth.

"Sorry, everyone," I mumbled. "I haven't eaten today, apart from several rusks in the morning. And your... homecloud food is delicious."

Xaniban hummed appreciatively. "No more malnourishment for you." He rubbed my belly with his large clawed hand. "I will keep you well fed."

I cleared my throat. I should not be enjoying the warmth of his touch at all, yet when he left his hand there, I did not try to remove it. "Why aren't you eating?"

I had only now noticed he hadn't touched the food, while his warriors and I were almost done with dinner.

He flashed me one of his lopsided smiles. "Watching you eat is fulfilling enough."

My brows shot up. Here I was, gulping down food like a walrus, and Xaniban found that pleasing to the eye? “Don’t be absurd. Eat.” I handed him what remained of my cake.

Instead of taking the piece, he cupped my hand. Then guided it slowly to his lips and ate the dessert off my fingers. The tips of his forked tongue skimmed my fingertips. His eyes remained locked on mine throughout.

“Um...”

“My female is both territorial and overprotective of me, brethren! Have I not been blessed by the Gods today, twice even?”

A chorus of wing flapping.

I tucked my hand against my chest. I wouldn’t be surprised if he tried to lick the crumbs of cake off my fingers, one by one. He had already misinterpreted enough of my gestures as it was, believing I was signaling interest.

I was not interested. I did not want to snuggle in his lap and let his body heat seep into me.

I did not crave more of his scorching kisses and arousing touches.

His manhandling tendencies got my heart racing with indignation, nothing else.

I wanted to get to know him better, but only so I could get back home and not empty-handed. No other reason.

I hid a contented smile behind my second dessert when Xaniban began eating. He deftly used his claws to help himself to cured meat and cheese.



I wished there was more cake for him, but I had inhaled the last piece. And I was pretty sure the others had left it for me on purpose. Thoughtful gargoyles.

No longer distracted by the food with my belly full, I studied the paintings in the war room to learn more about my hosts.

The one to my left depicted gargoyles descending from the darkening sky with their swords drawn.

Underneath was a small army of cloaked figures marching along a meadow.

The hoods of everyone but the mounted leader's were pulled down, leaving their faces in shadow.

The horse rider had his hood drawn to reveal overly pale skin, reddish eyes, and two rows of pointed teeth bared at the incoming enemy.

I did a double take. "Is that Dracula?" I blurted out.

The vividly painted face of the vampire bore an uncanny resemblance to the portrait of Vlad Tepes I used to have on a fridge magnet. It was a souvenir from a trip to Romania years ago, so I'd spent a lot of time rummaging through my fridge under the piercing gaze of the Impaler.

"Do not worry." Xaniban patted my thigh. "He is no longer among the living. My uncle took his head years ago, putting an end to the spread of his blood curse beyond the monsters he had already created. Whoever leads the remaining cursed is not as cunning."

"So vamps existed as far back as the 15th century? I knew it! You Gargoyles existed at the time, too, didn't you?" Then the meaning of his last words sunk in. "Wait, you

mean Dracula was alive until years ago?”

My hypothesis was correct, then! The creatures behind the second apocalypse had been here for a long time. They just knew how to hide from humans very well.

When I took in the painting to my right, I realized the same applied to the monsters who had caused the first apocalypse.

Because what the gargoyles were fighting in this work of art was a group of Black Death victims. They were rising from a pile of corpses against the backdrop of a freshly built Notre - Dame de Paris.

And leading this small army of the dead was a rider whose plague doctor's mask was lifted to reveal a familiar face.

Ignore the long hair and bushy beard, and you had Agent 007.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

The talented actor who played Bond in five movies—alive centuries ago and leading an army of zombies. Insanity. But there was no mistaking that unwavering expression. Especially once you'd seen it from up close while trying to get away from a corporate party gone terribly wrong.

There went my concern that I might have bluffed my way into the war room. My suspicion about the zombie king's identity had just been confirmed.

"He isn't dead. Not permanently," I told the gargoyles. "At least, he wasn't six months ago."

"Speak freely. Let us hear what you know, and then my brethren and I will talk in private." Xaniban sounded serious. Dinner and teasing time was over.

"I'll tell you all I know, but I want answers, too." I gave him a firm look. He would not be sidelining me.

Xaniban looked at his warriors, who responded with a flap of wings. Only then did the king nod at me.

I got up, and he let me step away. I suddenly felt uneasy without his tail around my waist and his solid presence at my back, but I quickly pushed the strange feeling down. I had to focus.

I stopped next to the Zombie 007 vs. Gargoyles painting and faced the room. I could do this. It was simply a regular presentation to my bosses, not a report in front of a supernatural war council. Mhm, nothing out of the ordinary here.

“I met him half a year ago.” I put a finger next to the face of the actor I used to have a crush on in university.

“He’s a famous person in this century, and as such was invited to attend this special party at my workplace—today’s battlefield, as you call it.

My bosses had pulled some strings and filled some wallets and, voilà, he would be the face of our new product.

An anti-wrinkle cream based on cutting-edge technology in cosmetics.

My team believed it would revolutionize the industry. ”

Yeah, more like obliterate it along with the world.

I stopped for a breather, half expecting the usual questions I’d gotten from friends.

“How is this cream any different from all the other useless goo companies are trying to sell us?”, “How do they expect us to believe such creams work, when the actresses advertising them are too young to have wrinkles in the first place?”, and “Will the frequent use of your cream make my face as rock-solid as the villain’s in that Catwoman movie? ”

No one raised a hand—or tail—to ask a question. Instead, Xaniban’s eyes narrowed. “You do science? Experiments?”

“Yes?”

“Some of my brethren have become victims of science over the centuries. Caught in a moment of weakness, such as a claiming-turned-mating. Or captured while fighting to protect a female from the many dangers on the ground.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” I said ardently. “I’m not that kind of scientist. I have never been involved in animal testing.

The company did not do it, either, or I would have spat on their job offer.

I’d never hurt an animal—that is, unless it’s trying to eat me.

I’m all about protecting animals and nature, I swear! ”

Silence followed, broken only by audible sniffs.

“You speak the truth,” came from Xaniban, his look my way reverting from suspicious to soft.

I heaved a sigh in relief. Thank God for Gargoyles having an in-built lie detector.

“You are an environ-mentalist, then?” The modern word caused a hiccup in his English.

“Yep, that’s me.” A biologist researching plant-based compounds that could protect skin cells against the aging effect of the environment, to be exact. “I’m a tree hugger and animal lover.”

A pleased smile played on Xaniban’s lips. He gestured for me to continue.

So far, so good. But now the hard part of the story was coming.

“At the party, I was introduced to the guest of honor. I even shook his hand. He was a living, breathing human, not a cold corpse hungry for flesh. An hour or so later, a group of colleagues returning from the ladies’ room...

They started attacking others. Jumping on their backs, bringing down waiters...

” My voice hitched as the memory dragged me back into that gruesome day.

“There was blood everywhere. That’s when everyone realized this wasn’t some brawl caused by intoxication... They were eating people!”

So much for my scientific neutrality. My report had turned into the emotional confession of a patient to their psychologist. Only in my case, the psychologist was winged, tailed, and multiplied by twelve.

“Come.” Xaniban beckoned me with his tail. “I cannot stand to watch you upset.”

His offer of a hug was tempting. In his powerful arms, I would feel protected at a moment when I was reliving the beginning of this whole nightmare... But I would also go soft and might break down into a shaking, teary-eyed mess. I had to finish my report like a proper soldier.

“I’m okay,” I assured both him and myself, and stayed next to my presentation screen. It was a good reminder that my story was a retelling of the past, just like the painting. It couldn’t harm me now.

“So,” I marched on, “panic erupted. New flesh eaters, as you call them, kept showing up.

People were running, screaming, overturning tables and pushing each other in an attempt to escape.

I was too shocked to move. I just stood there and watched in disbelief how the dead were standing up and going for the running masses.

“Amid the carnage, the only other person not running was this guy.” I pointed at the plague doctor in the painting.

“He wasn’t staying out of fear, though. His eyes were bloodshot, almost to the point of glowing, and he had blue veins pulsing across his face.

He smiled at me and tipped his cocktail glass in salute. ”

I paused in case there were questions, but my audience was all ears, expressions unreadable.

“I started running after that. Looking at his face had me convinced our cream was somehow to blame for the zombie outbreak, hence I had a duty to stop it from spreading. I caught up with one of my bosses and told him to lock down the building with his security clearance. I myself would go seal the underground labs. We had to prevent whatever this was from reaching the nearby city.” A heavy sigh escaped me.

It had all been wishful thinking, but at the time I had been so clueless.

“I managed to shut those labs with the help of a brave colleague,” I continued, “but he lost his life for nothing. Because when I got to the lobby, the doors lay wide open, living and nonliving pouring out into the parking lot. My boss had not failed: he had not even tried to put the building on lockdown, as I discovered later. The weasel had headed to the roof and the company’s highly automated helicopter, only to get killed steps away from safety. ”

“The coward was awarded accordingly,” Xaniban rumbled.

“Damn right... With the zombies unleashed, I finally started thinking about my own survival. The communications were strangely down, the parking lot was infested, so running outside looked suicidal. Instead, I got to the roof and the helicopter. I was

confident that between its automated functions and the amateur flying lessons I had been taking over the past year, I could fly that thing.”

And now, the trippy part of my presentation.

“I climbed into the cockpit without sparing a glance at the passenger cabin. The aircraft took off on its own, then I directed it away from the city. Too many flight risks there, not to mention I feared I was infected.” At the time, I’d thought zombie scratches were deadly; only later had I discovered blue goo in the mouth of zombies did the infecting.

“Shortly after getting clear of the building, I heard movement behind me. That was when the zombie king squeezed past me into the co-pilot seat.”

Wings rustled as the warriors’ attention peaked. Xaniban’s tail swished vigorously beside his leg.

“At the sight of that monster, I almost lost control of the helicopter. The only reason why I didn’t was the speech that followed.

I told myself I was hallucinating due to the infection.

He still had that unnerving smile from earlier as he told me he was impressed by my bravery.

So impressed, actually, that he wished to grant me a place among his generals.

A ‘gift from a king,’” I air-quoted. Those words were how I had made the connection between Zombie 007 and Xaniban’s “king of the flesh eaters.”

“He said he could turn me into a brainless minion or make me like him,” I specified.



“Alive-looking and mind intact. That would be the royal gift. I asked for a third option where I got to die quickly and painlessly as myself, if he was being so generous. He said I deserved to see the new world he’d create, so permanent death was not on the menu.

‘Maybe some time will help you come to your senses,’ he said afterward, still with that unnerving smile on.

‘The trip to our destination is long.’ And then,” I took a deep breath, “he told me the exact coordinates I must fly us to.”

Xaniban exchanged a hopeful look with his warriors. “You remember these coordinates?”

I grinned. “Yes. I did not get to see what’s there, but I’m great at memorizing numbers.” I repeated them for the war council. “Do you think he’s still at that location?”

“It is probable.” Xaniban got up. “Anyone have better intel?”

Not a single wing flap.

“Then we shall look further into these coordinates,” the king said, and returned his attention to me. “What happened next?”

His question caught me unprepared. I had assumed that with the coordinates divulged, my reporting time was over. Everything else was details that concerned me, and not his war.

The hint of a smile appeared on Xaniban’s lips. “You refused to obey him, did you not?”

“Yeah.” I shrugged. “I still believed him to be a hallucination caused by the zombie infection. My scientific explanation was that it was pushing me subconsciously to go somewhere it could thrive. You know, like those freaky hairworm larvae that mind-control their insect hosts with chemicals to force them to jump into a body of water?”

Wide eyes stared back at me.

“Um, anyway... The king knew how to fly the helicopter and threatened to turn me into a mindless zombie, unless I cooperated or sat peacefully next to him as he flew us to our destination.”

“And you chose...?”

“I chose to stop myself from getting any more people killed while I still had control over my actions. I told him—or what I believed to be the infection messing with my brain—that I’d rather die free. He moved to grab me, and I jumped off.”

Xaniban’s smile grew. “How did you survive?”

Well, since he was so interested, for some reason...

“By some crazy luck, I fell into a river deep enough to break my fall. I hadn’t been flying high, anyway.

When I re-surfaced, I saw the helicopter staying on its course.

I figured the machine had automatically switched to autopilot...

I’ve been pushing that whole episode to the back of my mind ever since.

There’s no such thing as talking zombies, and also—What? ”

Xaniban was giving me a triumphant smile. He took the distance between us in two strides and pulled me into the circle of his arms. Then kissed me.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

The kiss was short and sweet, not heated like our previous one, but it left me breathless and dazed just the same.

Xaniban cupped my face amid cheers and the excited flutter of wings. “You are a blessing from the Gods, truly. Never have I encountered such a remarkable female.”

“Oh...” His words, his kiss, the public display of affection—I was at a loss for what to say.

“A female who can fight,” he went on, gaze holding mine, “fly in the sky without wings of her own, put her own safety at risk for others who would never know of her sacrifice, resist a temptation few have not given into... I would not believe such a female existed, had I not seen her in action. Had I not smelled the sincerity in her every word.”

I blushed. He made me sound remarkable, but I was not.

My actions at the day of the outbreak hadn’t helped anyone, and for months I had believed my project was to blame for the zombie apocalypse.

I still wasn’t completely sure the anti-wrinkles cream was innocent, since I hadn’t been involved in every phase of its production.

“Why did the zombie king choose my workplace to start the apocalypse?” I asked, gently removing Xaniban’s hands from my face. “You mentioned earlier that it was there he began making his new army?”

“Yes, he personally marked the beginning there.” Xaniban replaced the touch of his hands with tailed caresses along my back as he spoke, and I found those too soothing to move away.

“But around the same time, his generals started creating mindless flesh eaters in big human cities across the continent. It was a well-planned operation that made it hard for us to pinpoint ground zero, and hence find him and nip this war in the bud.”

“But would killing the king have made much difference? Wouldn’t one of his generals have taken the crown and continued the operation?”

There was amusement in Xaniban’s eyes at my many questions. He took my hand and led me back to the head chair, where I returned to his lap without making a fuss. I didn’t want to interrupt him when he was so willingly sharing crucial information.

“Flesh eaters can be given purpose only by the king. His generals are intelligent on their own, as such is his royal gift, but they cannot control other flesh eaters, just pass on the curse. Only the king can control them, for the curse in his blue blood links him to all his creations. Kill him, and the flesh curse dies with him. His generals, along with the mindless minions, would rot away within a couple of months.”

I couldn’t believe it was that simple. All the effort the authorities had put into containing the zombie outbreak before humanity went to hell, and the solution had been Kill Bond, Kill the Apocalypse .

“Our ancestors fought him more than once,” Xaniban told me, “but he always got away. Went into hiding until the right time would come to try and build an army again. The last time he vanished, he was gone for so long we assumed he had been killed without our knowledge. But he was hiding in plain sight and planning a large-scale attack the likes of which has not been seen before.”

“I still don’t understand why he chose a cosmetics company’s party to start all this,” I reasoned out loud. “Does he have a bone to pick with the industry? For all the makeup he had to wear on screen?” I joked. Mostly.

“We will probably never know.” Xaniban patted my thigh.

“The reason is of no importance at this late stage of his plan. His generals—humans who have accepted the king’s curse onto themselves willingly—have already taken control of entire cities on your continent.

And now that the remains of Dracula’s army have joined him, the situation on the ground will aggravate. ”

Splendid. Zombies and vampires were close to achieving dominion over Europe. The aliens were next in line. What chance did we humans have?

Xaniban turned to fully face his soldiers.

“We should seek the flesh eaters’ king at the coordinates provided, my brethren.

If he is no longer there or his forces far exceed those who volunteer to join me for yet another risky attack on the enemy’s stronghold, I would suggest finding an ally of our own as Plan B. ”

After a flap of wings from everyone in the room, he specified, “I strongly believe the Elves should be our first point of call on the ground. With them guarding the green territories between human settlements, they are already preventing flesh eaters and blood suckers from moving freely. It will be risky to negotiate with the Elves and hard to convince them to hunt beyond their territories, but we must try.”

More flapping of wings.

“Word shall be spread,” a warrior said through a growly rumble. He was that monster of a gargoyle who was too big for his chair. “The warriors’ vote will be known by sunrise.”

Voting? Volunteering? Wasn’t this an absolute monarchy?

“Good, Ris. We shall examine a map of Europe now.”

With that said, Xaniban looked back at me, gaze lingering.

I gave him an innocent smile. “Don’t mind me, I’m just sitting here and keeping my mouth shut.

” I needed to learn more about the agenda of the different species from the second apocalypse.

Why had these creatures revealed themselves to humans now, and not centuries ago?

Why all at the same time, and with murderous intent?

My smile was wasted. “It is time for you to retire to my chambers,” I was kindly informed. “Samuin will escort you and give you whatever you need to prepare. I shall join you soon.”

“But—”

He got us on our feet and flapped his wings in a way that produced a loud whoosh.

“Xaniban, I—” Dammit . Samuin was already flying in through the upper door.

“Yes, my liege?” he asked while in the air.

“Please take care of my little blessing,” Xaniban said with an affectionate smile directed at me.

Now it was him who was wasting smiles. Cute nicknames as well. “I will not be so easily dismissed. I want answers, as we agreed,” I reminded him. “If you won’t give them to me, have me taken to my community. Unlike you, they need me.”

Xaniban shook his head, still smiling. “Your desire for knowledge is admirable. Whatever questions you still have shall be answered. Whatever needs your community has will be discussed. Later.”

“But—”

He held up a clawed finger. “We’ve lost enough time on our first night together. You shall go with Samuin now and leave us to discuss battle strategies.”

“Why can’t I participate?” I insisted, grasping for anything that could postpone the inevitable. “Let me see where those coordinates are. I might know the place better than you—”

He exhaled loudly through his nostrils, and I tensed up. Would I be thrown over Samuin’s shoulder again?

Xaniban caressed my arm with his tail’s tip. “I wish you not to be bored of war planning,” he rumbled softly, “but clean and dripping wet for me while waiting in my bed.”

I bristled. “Wish whatever, you jerk.” I drew back from his tail’s touch. “The only wet thing waiting for you in the bed will be a wet dream. Because in reality, you’re going to get one fat nothing from me.”



“A challenge?” He sounded intrigued, and the warriors flapped their wings in excitement.

“I love challenges. Here is my promise to you, playful little human.” He tipped my chin up with a cocky smile.

“The one to have wet dreams is you. Because once I have claimed you, you will be too exhausted to resist sleep. At the same time, you will miss my touch so much that you will be dreaming of me.”

I raised an eyebrow at his arrogance, which came so naturally to him that it sounded more like a mere statement of fact. Then I gave him a withering look, but its effect was ruined as I was flown out of the war room, sack-of-grain style again.

“T his is ridiculous. I can walk.”

Samuin kept flying, like a good little servant. With my emotions conflicting and my thoughts shifting between what I’d learned and what was to come, I barely paid attention to the rooms we passed through.

When I was finally placed back on my feet, my scattered thoughts suddenly coalesced into a single one: that bed is massive .

Looming in front of me was a four-poster masterpiece of richly carved wood, exquisite blue curtains, and a coverlet of dark-green velvet begging to be touched. Louis XIV of France could have slept in this bed and felt like home.

No wonder Xaniban called his bedroom a bedchamber . It was too vast and lavishly furnished to be called anything else.

“This way, my lady.”

I turned to face Samuin. He was gesturing with both hand and tail toward a door at the far end of the bedchamber.

I followed him but kept taking in my surroundings.

The bed was to the left of the entrance; to the right lay a working desk with rolled-up scrolls placed neatly on top.

A large tapestry depicting a breathtaking panorama hung on the right wall, while the

left was decorated with an impressive collection of swords and shields from different time periods.

A small section of that wall was bare and looked paler blue than the rest of the walls here. Cloudier, too, if that made sense.

“My lady, please.”

I had stopped walking without realizing it. I continued after Samuin along the plush carpet, but had to know. “What is that?”

“A balcony door,” he replied without looking back to see what I was pointing at.

Apparently, the bare wall was what most women asked about. Since Xaniban claimed he hadn’t brought anyone from the ground for three years, this meant Samuin had been a servant to the king for longer than that.

“How old are you?”

That won me a glance over his shoulder.

Ha! I’d managed to surprise the stoic servant.

“I will reach maturity in a year, my lady,” he answered as evenly as before.

“Is that 18?” I persisted. Scientific research mode: activated.

“Twenty.”

“Will you still be a servant after that?” I asked in a hurry, since we were already at the mystery door.

His hand froze on the golden doorknob. He turned to face me completely before saying with a hardened expression, “I am not a servant, my lady. I am King Xaniban’s Chamberlain.”

“Oh. Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you.”

He studied me for a moment before bowing lightly. “No offence taken. You are new to the homecloud; it is understandable.” He reached for the doorknob again.

“Chamberlain!”

He froze again.

“Is that the highest position in the palace?” Okay, I was curious but also grasping for straws. I had to postpone the next stage of whatever awaited me tonight.

“It is an honorable position that prepares me the best for the path I’ve chosen in life.

” To my expectant expression, Samuin elaborated.

“Every gargoyle is free to choose any profession upon reaching maturity. The only exception is warrior and homecloud guard; those positions are reserved for males. Females are too few to risk exposing them to danger daily.”

He straightened slightly before adding, “As the son of King Kaxin, I wish to follow in my father’s footsteps. For such a position, I had to begin studies at 15.”

“Wait, there is more than one king?”

“Sixty-three, to the best of my knowledge. But the number could have dropped since the start of the war for the ground. No one knows for sure how many homeclouds

have been destroyed by our flying enemy already.”

Ah, so this homecloud was a single kingdom, not the Gargoyles’ entire world. And there was no complete safety even here, thanks to those damn aliens.

“So, if your father is a king, why aren’t you studying how to be a good ruler under his guidance?”

Samuin straightened further. “A good king is made away from the pampering of parents. Here I watch, listen, and learn every single day. My liege is a great gargoyle, and his homecloud and mine have been allies since the dawn of time. That is why even when I reach maturity, I will remain here for the next stage of my studies. Now, my lady needs to—”

“What is the next stage?”

His wings extended then folded in what I interpreted as impatience, but he indulged me.

“I have learned how to be a king in a palace: from battle planning through alliance-making to claiming a female. Next, I must learn how to be a king in the field: as a commander on the homecloud and on the ground.”

He reached for the doorknob a third time, but stopped himself and turned to me once more. There was pride in his voice when he said, “I will finally be allowed to step on the ground. If the Gods favor me, perhaps I will find a willing human female to claim. Find my mate, even.”

“Ah.” Huh? What was it with this claiming and mating I kept hearing about? Clearly, it was an important part of Gargoyles’ culture if they studied it alongside military strategy.

Then again, in this society where women were few in number, it wasn't surprising that finding a partner was considered a serious matter. The big question was, what would a male in such a society do if the only available woman from the ground wasn't willing to be claimed ?

I glanced back at the vast choice of swords on the wall. I then followed Samuin inside what turned out to be a spacious bathroom.

At the sight of a medieval-looking toilet in the left corner, all thoughts of how to stop Xaniban's advances evaporated. I was entirely consumed by the need to pee. The seat, dark-blue like the cloudy tiles around me, had my undivided attention.

"I shall leave as soon as I fill the bathtub for you, my lady."

Yeah, my need for privacy was that obvious. "Thank you, Samuin," I said as I went to take a peek down the small hole at the center of the toilet seat. I could see stars twinkling down there. No plumbing in the clouds, apparently.

I turned in time to see Samuin pulling a thick rope that was hanging from the ceiling.

Which, in turn, was as cloudy and pinkish as the war room's ceiling, with glowing spots to provide light in the windowless room.

Mere seconds later, the section of the ceiling above the oversized bathtub of golden porcelain turned blue. Then it started raining over the tub.

"Holy crap."

"Do not worry, the water is quite warm," I was duly informed. "The shower is powered by a tropical storm cloud."

“Sure, of course.” Incredible. “You know, I don’t care what the water temperature is,” I admitted with a longing look at the quickly filling tub. “I haven’t taken a bath in half a year.”

We did have electricity at the bunker, but the water reserves were limited, so showers had to be rare and quick.

Before finding shelter there after the third apocalypse, I had tried washing up in a river, only to emerge bloody and terrified.

And with a new entry for my Worst Ways to Die in an Apocalypse list: death by mermaid.

“I have heard stories of how bad the situation on the ground is,” Samuin told me. His tone remained coolly polite, but there was sympathy in his gaze my way. “You are safe here, my lady. Try to relax the way you did before the war. Here, the view will help.”

Two tugs at the rope, and the pink cloud above my head started getting paler and paler until it became transparent. Overhead lay the night sky, stars glittering all over. With the blue walls around me and the dark above me, it was as if I were floating among the stars.

“Holy crap, yes?”

I looked Samuin’s way. A slight smile was playing on his lips.

Finally! I had broken his icy exterior, and by teaching him swear words. I grinned and nodded. Now I knew what Xaniban had meant by saying women were impressed by the view of the night sky from his homecloud. I could stay in this bathroom forever.

Shortly after, Samuin announced that my bath was ready. The tropical cloud above the tub was now replaced by a view of the starry sky.

“Enjoy yourself free of concern, my lady. The patrols above cannot see you as the ceiling is transparent only from this side.”

“Good to know,” I mumbled, acting as if I had always known there were gargoyles flying over my head. As dark-blue as they were, they blended into the night completely.

“I shall leave you to your preparations.” Samuin headed for the door. “Your new attire will be waiting for you on the chaise lounge.” He stopped at the exit, looking as if he was contemplating whether to say something more or not.

“Yes, Samuin?”

That did it. “Please, put the robe on,” he spoke softly. “My liege prefers to take it off personally—not be welcomed by a naked female in his bed. Just some advice, my lady, because I—I approve of you.”

“Um, thanks.” It was kind of him to help me win his king over, but what I really needed was help pushing Xaniban away.

Actually, Samuin still might be of assistance. “Did your liege throw out those women, displeased by their nudity? I wouldn’t want to make a mistake that gets me rejected—er, unclaimed.”

“My liege chooses his females carefully,” Samuin said reassuringly. “He does not bring every compatible and willing person to his bedchamber. If a female is here, she is special.”



That was not what I needed to hear.

“He is not displeased by such overeager females,” Samuin specified, “but he does not claim them more than once. Consequently, I have had to escort some very angry humans beyond the palace walls to keep them at bay. Thankfully, those who chose to stay on the homecloud quickly found claiming partners or even their mates, so they did not cause trouble for long.”

I was close to bursting into laughter. I was picturing a mob of crazed women scaling the defensive wall for one more night with Xaniban. For just one more ride on his magical gargoyle dick, or whatever hid under his loincloth. Come on now.

“I hope I do not have to escort you off the premises,” Samuin added. “I’d prefer you stay and teach me modern ground words.”

I smiled at him. Behind the cool, detached exterior might hide a sweetheart. “I’ll see what I can do,” I said cryptically.

“My lady.” He bowed and closed the bathroom door behind him.

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

I sank into the bathtub with a contented sigh. Whatever came next, I was going to enjoy this moment.

If there was one positive thing about the end of the world, it was that I had learned to appreciate the calm times in between the battles for survival.

The me from before would spend this bath time worrying about the upcoming clash with the gargoyle king.

The me of today was going to relish the hot water against my skin and the serenity of floating on the surface as the stars shone bright above.

Free of thoughts about danger and death for the first time in months. If only I could stay here forever...

A knock echoed through the bathroom.

I pushed up into a sitting position, heart pounding.

“My lady? It is me.”

I relaxed a fraction. “Yes, Samuin?”

“Just letting you know that you have time,” his voice reached me through the door. “My liege told me to inform you that once he visits the families of the fallen, he will bathe in the harem. This bathtub is all yours to take your pleasure in.”

Funny choice of words there. “How generous of him.”

“My liege also said that once he joins you in the bedchamber, as late as it may be, he will keep his word of bringing you to ecstasy a myriad of times. It will simply happen after the moon reaches its highest point. End of message.”

I didn’t know whether to laugh or panic. “I’m sure he used exactly those words,” I muttered under my breath. No way could I forget Xaniban’s promise made in front of a courtyard of warriors. Gargoyles, apparently, were pretty open about intimate stuff.

“He did, my lady. I memorize each order my liege gives.”

Gargoyles also had a heightened sense of hearing. I would do well to remember that. “Thank you, Samuin.”

“Enjoy the night.”

“Sure.”

I immediately grabbed the jelly-like soap and began scrubbing the filth off my hair and body. Relaxation time was over; I had to finish up here so I could put in action my horny-gargoyle-king deterrence plan.

For starters, I should not get squeaky-clean, since Xaniban kept insisting I bathe, but I decided I would allow myself the luxury.

I would, however, put my old clothes on after giving them a quick rinse.

That should leave me looking and smelling dirty enough.

If I lost my clothes in the upcoming battle, my unshaven legs should form a second

shield against the king's intentions.

I couldn't imagine Gargoyles, being body hair-free, staying enthusiastic at the sight of the jungle I was sporting.

A few minutes later, I was out of the bathroom and on my way to choose a sword from the wall collection.

I still had my army knife, but I wouldn't convince the seven-foot-tall Xaniban I meant business with that toothpick.

I needed something long and sharp to keep him at bay and convince him that my no meant no.

As I crossed the room, I noticed it was warmer than before and the lights in the cloudy ceiling were dimmed. Candles were lit in strategic places, casting a gentle glow over the room. Samuin had set the mood, alright.

Halfway to my destination, I stopped and did a double take.

Placed by the balcony door was the chaise lounge he had mentioned.

It was an old-looking piece of furniture with a dark-green fabric cover, gold-yellow twisted cord trims, and carved fruit motifs on the backrest. On that chaise lay a two-piece outfit impossible to ignore.

This so-called robe could meet the Sub-Zero fetish of any Mortal Kombat fan.

The lower piece was similar to the rectangular loincloths everyone here wore, except the hem was arrow-shaped.

A closer look revealed integrated blue panties of a softer material and delicate laces on either side of the integrated belt to fasten the clothing in place.

The upper piece was a crop top with wide shoulder straps and a boat neckline of the same leather the loincloth was made of.

However, downward the navy-blue fabric gave way to an intricate fishnet of shiny blue threads.

A fishnet. Over my bare breasts. If I wore that, as tightly-woven as the fishnet may be, my nipples would still be playing peek-a-boo with anyone looking too closely.

Me putting that on? Pigs might start flying first.

I returned to my sword shopping more determined than ever.

Unfortunately for me, the weapons I could reach were older, judging by their rusty blades and worn-out handles.

One clash with Xaniban's sword, and I risked remaining with a broken blade.

The only sword that was neither rusty nor blunt was much heavier than the king's. Fuck. It would have to do.

I rested my new weapon against the chaise and went to explore the balcony door. What if this was my way out of the palace? I could go beyond the palace walls and find one of those humans Samuin had mentioned, or a gargoyle willing to take me back home. It was worth trying.

My hand met a solid, cool surface. The door must be closed. I tried pushing with both hands but it didn't budge. I slid my palms along the cloud in the hopes of finding

some kind of a lock. That was when the blue surface turned transparent.

The view left me in awe. The balcony was so high up I could see the top of the defensive wall and what lay beyond the palace grounds.

Thousands of little lights illuminated the streets and low-rise buildings of a city.

It went on and on, as far as the eye could see, with dark patches here and there that must be parks.

Above the city was the sky, traversed by winged shapes; I distinguished them only thanks to the disappearance of patches of stars.

There were gargoyles in the streets as well, their wings visible under the soft streetlights despite the distance.

No humans out there, at least not at this hour.

Then the unexpected happened.

A palace guard landed on the wall walk opposite the balcony, his back to me.

He waved at someone beyond the wall and flew down there, out of my line of sight.

When he returned, there was a human in his arms. A woman not much older than myself, if the torchlight on the wall walk wasn't playing tricks on my eyes.

She wore the same outfit Samuin had brought for me, but hers was black, like the guard's.

She was holding a basket, and once the gargoyle put her down, she pulled what

looked like a sandwich from inside.

The guard was given the food and a quick kiss on the lips.

His reaction? A playful slap on the woman's rear.

The woman gave him another kiss, this one longer and passionate, after which they sat down, their backs to me.

I saw him break the sandwich in two and hand her one half of it, which earned him a smack upside the head.

The woman then pulled a second sandwich out of the basket, this one for her.

He rubbed the smacked spot, threw his arm around her shoulders, and pulled her closer until her head rested on his shoulder.

They began their dinner, the whole city at their feet.

I stepped away from the balcony door. They deserved their privacy.

Besides, I couldn't help but feel a pang of longing.

Such happiness couldn't be found on the ground.

Not anymore. There wasn't time for carefree tenderness, because any moment of distraction could mean death.

Love wasn't impossible; it was simply deadly.

I suddenly felt so tired that I couldn't stand on my feet any longer. I went to sit on the

edge of the chaise, pushing the robe aside. What was the point of surviving the apocalypses if we weren't truly living? Why fight to stay alive in this new, nightmarish world?

Hope. That was what kept me going, I suppose. Hope that things might get better, that they could go back to normal and I'd get to find my friends from before civilization's fall. It was silly, but I held on to hope.

And now, though I had my hand around the sword handle, I felt hopeful that I wouldn't have to use it.

That the gargoyle who had brought me to safety wouldn't hurt me.

Instead, he would tell me why the apocalypses had occurred and whether he planned to do more about them once his zombie enemy was defeated.

Perhaps, he would not only take me back to my community but also help us survive.

So, I waited.

And waited.

And waited.

My back began to hurt from sitting on the edge, so I shifted until I was resting on the elevated end of the chaise. For a moment there, I imagined myself as an Ancient Roman at a feast, with grapes between my fingers instead of a sword handle.

Who knew, maybe this furniture was as ancient as the Roman Empire. How long had Gargoyles existed as a species? What was the average life expectancy of a gargoyle? So many questions to ask—I felt dizzy just thinking about it.



Hand still on the sword handle, I got more comfortable, with my head on the backrest and bare feet up on the chaise. Its fabric was so soft against my skin, like a velvety caress. So nice and warm. Cozy, too... And safe from creatures trying to eat me...

I could let myself relax... for just a few... more seconds... No harm... done... in enjoying... the feel... of...

Warmth... at my back... and belly... Cloud-like pillow... under my cheek—

Pillow?

My eyes shot open. Where was I lying? When had I closed my eyes?

The last thing I remembered was looking at the bed at the opposite side of the room. Now I was on that bed, facing the wall of swords. Hanging there was the blade I had been holding what felt like a second ago. And the very person I needed that sword to protect myself from? He was spooning me.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

The gargoyle king had a hand splayed over my belly and a tail draped across my hip. He had disarmed me, carried me to the bed, gotten comfortable as my big spoon, and I'd slept through it all! How could I let this happen?

"Mmm." His warm breath tickled the top of my hair. "The best first night with a female in my bed ever," he murmured huskily. "Thank you."

I hadn't moved a muscle, but Xaniban must have felt me stiffen upon waking up. Of course he had. My body was pressed against every hot and hard inch of his. Pretending I was still asleep was pointless. Talking him out of whatever he planned for us was my only option left.

"Why are you thanking me?" I asked tentatively.

"For surprising me like no other before you." His voice carried a smile.

"I expected to find you still in the bathtub, or dressed and enjoying the view from the balcony. Or wearing nothing but your alluring self whilst splayed on the bed. Perhaps pleasuring yourself, having lost patience in my return."

"Someone actually did that?" How sex-crazed were the women he brought here? Or was it all him and some sex pheromones at work?

"Never did I expect to find you curled like an unborn pip on the chaise, sword in hand. My great-great-grandfather's sword, to be exact."

"Can I have it back?"

“You do not have to sleep armed anymore,” Xaniban rumbled. “You are safe in my palace and in my arms.” As he said it, his tail around me tightened, bringing us even closer.

His chest was so warm against my back that I wouldn’t need a blanket in his arms, either. Just his naked skin against mine, our bodies intertwined—

Down, Sue! No thinking about how nice it was to be held like this. No wondering about the very long and very hard rod I could feel against the small of my back. That way lay danger.

“I needed the sword and knife to protect myself from you ,” I spoke firmly. “Since you kept ignoring my nos, I was hoping a blade to the groin would curb your enthusiasm.”

Xaniban laughed.

Great . I was amusing him again.

“You know little of my kind.” He patted my hip with his tail. “You wielding a weapon would have turned me on even more. I told you I love challenges. They are but another chance for me to prove myself worthy of your claiming.”

“Then give me back the blade!”

What he did was wrap his tail around my leg from thigh to ankle. “Maybe tomorrow night. My self-control is wearing thin already.” He nipped my earlobe like he’d done in the war room.

Again, that nip sent a jolt of electricity through my body. My nerve endings came alive, starved for more of his touch. How could he affect me so much?

“I was planning to just sleep next to you tonight,” he whispered huskily, “and bask in the joy of having you peacefully asleep in my arms. But then you woke up and... I am awake, too. Every single part of me, ready to pleasure you.”

Yes – no! “Enough!” I pushed against his hold, angry at him as well as myself. “I’m not interested, get it? No means no!”

He let me go, but before I could get off the bed, I found myself on my back. Xaniban loomed over me. Not a single part of him was touching me, yet I couldn’t move. I was pinned in place by his gaze alone.

“Say that again to my face.”

I stared up at him. He was so large and so powerful, but I was not afraid. His expression was not one of anger but confusion.

“Your lips say no, but your scent says yes. Which is it? For no gargoyle would strive for ecstasy against a female’s will.”

“But your pheromones make sure no one says no, don’t they?”

One corner of his lips quirked. “I assure you, my kind do not produce mating pheromones. What you feel,” he tilted my chin up with a finger, “is all you and me. A passion that will set us both ablaze, if you say yes.”

I was speechless. That couldn’t be right. If he was telling the truth, then that attraction I’d been feeling ever since our flight was natural. Oh God . I had the hots for a gargoyle.

“I am here to please you in any way possible,” he continued, “in the hopes that you will find me worthy of another claiming. You trusted me by coming here. Do you not

trust me to bring you to ecstasy?”

My clit throbbed at the heat packed in that single word. I shook my head vigorously.

Xaniban frowned. “You are not interested in experiencing pleasure like no other? In reaching peaks of bliss no human male can take you to? I have been told by many that males on the ground can barely give you one ecstasy per claiming, let alone five.”

“Five?” I snorted. I’d heard boasting like that, and the result had been zero orgasms for me. I had faked it with my two exes too many times to keep count.

Not that it mattered now. Because I. Was. Not. Interested.

“Yes, sweet little human. As many peaks of bliss as you will of me.” Xaniban smirked, one fang showing. “Shall I start taking you to your first peak for the night?”

“Just stop it.” I hid my face in my hands.

If he kept going like that, I would say yes. I would give in to a gargoyle. It made no sense!

Sure, he looked like a wet dream, made me feel protected and special, acted like an honorable guy, treated his people with care, spoke of orgasms and pleasure when I couldn’t remember the last time I had experienced any... I probably never would, given the state of the world—

No, no, no. I should be focused on why not to sleep with Xaniban! Why was I thinking of reasons to give in? Why was I wondering how his mouth would feel on my skin, how the weight of his body would feel on top of me, how—

“You think me a liar?” Xaniban pressed on. “You think I make empty promises I cannot fulfill?”

“I—I mean...” I groaned. “It’s not that I don’t believe you... Maybe it’s you being so experienced that’s the problem.” Yes, that was a good reason! I lowered my hands from my face to look up at him. “Why would I want a womanizer like you?”

“You want a virgin?” He sounded utterly perplexed. “Why? A gargoyle who has just reached the age for a first claiming is incapable of a third of what a seasoned gargoyle can offer you.”

“How old are you?” I blurted out, as if that would change anything.

“I have recently entered the decade of a gargoyle’s prime,” he told me with pride. Seeing the lack of reaction from me, he added, “I am 33.”

Oh. He was just a year older than me and in his physical prime. Not that it would change anything, it was just that—

His lips swooped down to catch mine.

I gasped into the unexpected kiss. A heartbeat later, I was already lost to the feel of his mouth on mine, no resistance coming out of me.

He left me all the space I needed to get off the bed, but I didn’t.

I French-kissed him instead. I joined my tongue with his for a sensual dance that had liquid heat pooling between my thighs.

It was his hand under the hem of my top, inhumanly hot against my bare skin, that brought me back to my senses. I broke the kiss and got off the bed as if it were lava.

Heart racing, I whirled around to see what Xaniban would do.

He was still stretched out on the bed, a smile on his face. His lips were as swollen as mine felt from those scorching kisses. “Little blessing?”

“Look, this can’t happen,” I said shakily.

With his eyes drinking me in and his voice a seductive rumble, I was a breath away from jumping back in bed.

I was losing the battle with my horny self, but there was still hope of dissuading him.

“My body is a mess, you know. I had a healthy lifestyle before the zombie apocalypse, but then the whole world went to hell, and there were no more gyms and proper food and... Do you have any idea how much sugar and salt there are in canned food—”

“You are curvaceous,” Xaniban countered. Under his appreciative gaze, my nipples hardened further.

“What if I have a nasty infection down there?” I insisted. “Hygiene during the apocalypses has been—”

“My kind are immune to human diseases and carry none.”

“I haven’t shaved since forever. My legs will give you nightmares.”

“Wet dreams, you mean.” The fire in his eyes never dimmed. He sat up, his abs flexing deliciously.

“But I’m stinky! Look at these clothes, it’s gross—The whole of me is!”

“Your natural scent drives me wild.” He moved off the bed with feline grace, his wings flexing, his muscles bulging. “As for the clothes, I will remove them soon enough.”

I gulped, unable to tear my gaze away from the approaching gargoyle.

“I’m bad at this, Xan!” I said in a hurry, a last attempt to change his mind before he could reach me.

Because I couldn’t move away. With his wings spread open in their full glory, all I could do was stare at his magnificence.

“I’ll be a disappointment,” I whispered.

Xaniban stopped a step away, gaze fused with mine. “I could be a disappointment, too. We will not know unless we claim each other, will we?” Then he said with the most panty-wetting voice, “Come to me, little blessing.”

I stepped forward.



## Page 14

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

X aniban cupped my face and bent down. I went on my tiptoes and, hands on his chest for balance, met his lips halfway.

There was no holding back this time. No soft, gentle exploration.

I was overcome by an undeniable hunger, a primal need so powerful I felt I would combust if he didn't give me more.

My heart was pounding, my body was on fire, and my clit was pulsing with each stroke of his forked tongue against mine.

It was as if he wasn't just kissing me; he was drinking me in.

Then there were his big hands roaming down my back, cupping my ass and squeezing me to him.

His tail moving up and down my leg, the tingling heat penetrating the thin fabric of my trousers...

He was sending my senses into overload, making it hard for me to give as good as I got. I had no choice but to let him lead.

Not that I minded. For once, I felt ready to let go of my need to control everything and leave my partner to take care of me.

Xaniban lifted me effortlessly and guided my legs to his waist. With me straddling him, he moved us until he had me pinned against the wall.

I gasped at the feel of the cool surface at my back and the heat of his chest against my front.

And when he started trailing kisses and flicks of his tongue down my neck, I moaned and dug my fingers into his shoulders.

My neck was one of my erogenous zones, and Xaniban's merciless assault on that territory was making me so wet that no more foreplay was necessary.

I was easy like that, and both my exes had taken advantage to save themselves the trouble of postponing their own pleasure.

Not the gargoyle king. He must be able to sense how wet I was for him already.

Yet, once his lips and tongue reached the neckline of my top, he lifted me higher up his body until my breasts were at the level of his mouth.

The next territory he intended to conquer.

With no bra amid the apocalypses, I felt his lips lock around my left nipple perfectly well through the thin fabric of my top.

I moaned.

He sucked.

I groaned.

He bit me lightly.

I nearly came.

“Holy—”

His mouth took mine, leaving me breathless.

I had never been so turned-on in my life, and he hadn't gotten me out of my clothes yet. What if his talk about his prowess hadn't been empty words but a statement of fact? I needed more scientific evidence to reach a conclusion.

Xaniban slid a finger under one strap of my top.

Rather than cut through the fabric with a claw, he pulled the strap down slowly, eyes flickering between my gaze and my breasts.

Another pull, and my left nipple was bare to his hungry gaze.

He blew on the tight bud, bringing it to an ever stiffer peak.

That was sweet torture, but he didn't leave me waiting for the remedy: he took me in his mouth.

All of me. Having small breasts had its perks.

While his forked tongue was teasing one nipple, his fingers were pinching the other and his tail was drawing teasing lines along my back underneath my top.

I was melting like chocolate in the heat.

I could hardly lift my arms when he pulled my top over my head.

The discarded clothing had barely landed on the floor when my other nipple disappeared into his mouth.

All I could do was make breathy little noises and run my fingers through his hair.

It was incredibly soft and from this close, I saw it wasn't black but dark-blue, the tresses shining under the candlelight.

I wanted to say it was beautiful, but I had lost my ability to speak.

I was incapable of offering Xaniban anything as breathtaking as what he was giving me.

All I felt was wave after wave of pleasure. Not once did I feel the sharpness of his fangs while he sucked and licked and nipped and tugged. And then he coaxed a mini-orgasm from my body, and I whimpered.

"One down, many more to go," I heard him say through the haze.

My legs couldn't hold me when he lowered me to the ground.

It was only the wall behind me and the tail he had around my waist that were holding me up.

His finger skimmed across my chin, and I found myself looking into a pair of midnight-blue eyes shining with want. He had that wicked smile of his on.

"Let us move to the next course." His gaze slid deliberately down my body, and he licked his lips.

Oh. It was hard to form words, but I had to, because Xaniban's deft fingers went for my belt buckle. "You can't... The next course is... unshaved... It's a jungle down there!"

Taking my belt out of loop after loop teasingly slowly, he met my gaze again. “I love the jungle.”

I bit my bottom lip under that smoldering gaze. “The real jungle—yes, but I meant the—” I gasped as the tip of his tail flicked my nipple.

Down slid my trousers. Since after my bath I hadn’t found the willpower to put my dirty panties back on, I was suddenly fully exposed to him. Wide hips, overgrown bush, everything.

The disappointment I expected to see on his face never came. Instead I saw desire, triumph, and... pride? It was hard to say for sure when I couldn’t compare his gaze with anything. No one had ever looked at me like that during sex.

His tail around my waist lifted me off the floor just enough for my trousers to slide off my ankles. Then I was back on my feet and pressed against his magnificent body with nothing between us but his loincloth. He attacked my mouth again, and I barely noticed we went airborne.

A moment later, Xaniban laid me on the lower end of the chaise. His tail looped around one of my bent knees, pulling it away from the other.

“Xan,” I said on a sigh at the sight of him on his knees between my thighs.

Damn. He was truly about to go down on me. He barely knew me, yet here he was, devouring my pussy with his gaze before doing it with his mouth. None of my exes had agreed to do this—

“Yes!” Xaniban’s tongue was on me, and it was incredible. My thighs quivered as he tasted me inside, but he held them wide open with his tail and hand. His other hand was on my pussy lips, holding me spread open for the next sensual attack. He licked

me and growled at my taste in his mouth.

I felt the wave of ultimate pleasure coming already.

I grabbed the backrest to keep myself grounded, but resisting was impossible.

Xaniban alternated between fucking me with his tongue and playing with my clit, all the while his appreciative rumbles and growls heightened my pleasure.

When his lips closed around the engorged nub and sucked, I was done for.

I had braced myself for a wave, not a tsunami; I was swept away, crying out his name.

When I came back down, I realized his mouth had never left my sex.

“Welcome back,” he whispered over my pussy lips. The tip of his tail caressed my inner thigh while the length was still looped around my leg.

“No more,” I said hoarsely.

“The taste of your honey on my tongue is as intoxicating as your scent filling my lungs,” he spoke huskily over my mound. He planted a sensual kiss there. “It could be a sign.”

What sign was he talking– “Xan!” My back arched off the chaise as he took a long lick. “Please!” I could take no more foreplay. I felt emptier than ever.

He smirked. “Do not worry. One more sip was all I wanted. Now I will still have the taste of you in my mouth while I am claiming you.”

I shivered in anticipation and a pinch of insecurity. But when Xaniban got up and extended a hand to me, I slipped my hand in his after just a slight hesitation. Except, as soon as I sat up, my legs went Jell-o. Good thing my gargoyle was there to catch me.

With me in his arms, Xaniban flew to the bed. Ever so gently, he placed me on the lower end so I could sit comfortably on the silvery sheets. Then he took several steps back and started untying the laces holding his loincloth in place. Deliberately slowly.

Oh my . I had never expected the removal of a loincloth could be so hot. If I had the strength to stand, I would enjoy doing the untying myself while looking up into Xaniban's eyes. Maybe next time—Not that there would be a next time. I would be leaving in the morning.

Finally faced with the gargoyle king's naked glory, I felt my heart skip a beat and heat rise to my cheeks.

His cock was shaped like a human's, just blue and...

I bit my lip. To say he was well-endowed would be an understatement.

I pressed my thighs together at the thought of taking the whole of him inside me. Would it fit?

That was when reality hit me. "Xan, wait!" He hadn't moved toward me, just spread his wings wide in what I guessed was a display of all he had to offer, but I had to speak up while I was still thinking clearly. "What about protection?"

"Hmm?" He folded his wings but kept the panty-dropping smile on.

"Contraception?"

His brow creased and his tail curled.

“Protection against pips ?”

“Ah.” Xaniban’s tail relaxed, and he stepped my way. “I told you I do not want pips yet. Do not worry.”

I moved back in the bed to put distance between me and his naughty intentions. “Sorry, but I’m still worried. Not wanting doesn’t equal not having.”

He chuckled as his tail got a gentle hold of my ankle. “It does. I shall father a pip when I will it so. It will not be tonight.”

His hand sliding up my other ankle made it harder to think. The sight of him, long and thick and pulsing with need, made the emptiness in my core intensify. “You should know that taking your thing out of my thing in advance rarely works!” Great, spoken like a true scientist.

I squeaked when he pulled me by the ankles and, with the silk sheets offering no resistance, I slid all the way to him at the edge of the bed.

He then bent over me, propping himself on his elbows on either side of me.

With his length applying pressure on my clit, his face hovering right above mine, and the strands of his soft hair teasing my breasts, he had my full attention.

Xaniban’s lopsided smile was back, one fang gleaming. “Relax. I will not be taking anything out before our claiming is complete. You will be fully satiated.” He gave me a quick kiss. “And safe. You have my word.”

Could I trust him? I had gone too far to doubt him now. I pulled him down for



another kiss.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

“S till wet for me?” he whispered against the side of my neck, making my whole body tremble in anticipation.

“Yes,” I replied on a breathy sigh.

He slid a finger inside me. Our mouths tangled in a kiss as he added another, exploring me, stretching me, getting me ready for that thick cock of his.

I was wet, alright. And getting wetter at his expert finger-fucking. He switched his weight to his left elbow so that he could get that perfect angle inside me and also give his tail space to play. As the spade tip circled my pebbled nipple, Xaniban added a third finger in my slick pussy.

I was so full, but I didn’t want him to stop.

I couldn’t tell him to stop—only primitive sounds of pleasure were coming out of me.

I was clinging to the sheets over my head as I rode his fingers closer and closer to the precipice.

And when he quickened his merciless strokes and pressed at my clit with his tail’s tip, I broke apart with a hoarse cry.

My body shook from the aftershocks of the best orgasm I’d ever had. I closed my eyes and saw stars. Wow . Xaniban had undone me, and I couldn’t be happier. I sensed him leave my side, but I needed a moment to recover. My heart was beating a mile a minute.

When I caught my breath and opened my eyes, I saw the curtains of the bed were drawn, creating a more intimate setting.

A candle in a wall sconce behind me was the only source of light, and it revealed the gargoyle bent over me.

He was like the night sky, the glow of a single star illuminating the blue infinity.

“Now you are ready,” Xaniban spoke softly to me as he leaned down for a kiss.

I wrapped my legs around his waist to keep him where he was. No more waiting. It was time to give him the release he deserved.

I slid a hand between us and closed my fingers around his cock. Or tried to. He was big .

Xaniban growled deep in his chest, and his wings extended. He had to be close to exploding after all this time of insanely patient foreplay.

That was why I didn't tease him. I pumped him once, twice, then brought his tip to my entrance. With his length slick already and me dripping wet, he just might slide right in, but either way I was willing to take a little pain for him.

He stilled me with a chuckle. “Not this position yet.” To my confused look, he said with a smile, “This one is reserved for the end of the claiming. For when we look into each other's eyes while coming undone as one.”

“Oh.” That sounded amazing—“Hey!” I yelped as Xaniban lightly tail-slapped me on the ass cheek.

“Turn around for me.” He ordered with a wicked smile.

That gave me the answer to the question I had yet to ask. The doggy pose. I should have known he preferred that one. He was a dominant male, and all my exes loved this position the most.

I didn't. I wasn't fond of being pounded into from behind without seeing the face of my lover. While he grunted all the way into his release, leaving me face down into the sheets, my pleasure and even my identity seemingly of no importance to him.

Yet, I had agreed in the past so I wasn't going to say no to Xaniban, after the care he had shown for my needs. Besides, we barely knew each other, so this night wasn't supposed to be romantic.

Something must have shown on my face as I turned to stand on my knees, because his tail caught me by the waist before I could tip forward on all fours. Xaniban's hands caressed my shoulders. "This is the least uncomfortable position. The Gods were a bit too generous when they made me."

I gaped. He was doing this for me? To make sure I would take his cock with as little discomfort as possible?

Touched by the gesture, I swiveled to lock eyes with him. I pressed my back against his chest, both of us kneeling as we were. "Don't wait any longer, Xan. Claim me."

And claim me he did. He entered me slowly and began with explorative thrusts, to make sure he was not hurting me. He wasn't. I felt a slight burn at the stretch that was quickly replaced by delicious fullness as I adjusted to his girth. He then started moving at an ever increasing pace.

I would have lost my balance, had he not kept me anchored with his tail around my waist, his left arm across my chest, and his right hand on top of mine, our fingers interlocked on the sheets.

His lips kept placing little kisses on my shoulders and upper back.

His wings were extended, as if to keep me sheltered from either side.

Did I say the doggy pose wasn't intimate?

Scratch that. He was all around me and inside me, his body and mine molded into one, joined on every level.

He fit perfectly inside me, filling me completely but not to the point of pain.

I fit perfectly against him, my smaller frame clicking right into place underneath his powerfully built body.

I felt every shudder that went through him, every groan of pleasure while he moved in and out of me.

He felt my pleasure, too, because as another tsunami loomed on the horizon, he nibbled on my earlobe and said with a commanding tone, "Come for me, little blessing."

"No, I want... with you," I panted in between his breathtaking thrusts that hit my sweet spot. I wanted us to come as one, just like he had mentioned.

"Now." His firm tone brooked no argument.

His commands would have been enough to make me embrace the incoming climax. But he didn't stop there. He moved his hand to my clit and stroked me.

Three strokes, two deep thrusts, and I shattered.

It was precisely when the orgasm was washing over me that his hands and tail pulled me up on my knees. He drew me against him, arms wrapping around my chest, and sank his fangs into the crook of my neck. I keened in ecstasy.

The mixture of pleasure and pain made my orgasm last for many more pulsations, leaving me enraptured in his possessive grip.

“Forgive me,” he told me while I was trying to remember how to breathe. His tongue was licking the place he had bitten, soothing the twinge of pain.

“What for?” I asked in between my oxygen intakes.

Had I known a proper orgasm could be such a cardio experience all by itself, I would have ditched the HIIT classes at the local gym long before it had been blown to bits by an alien bomb.

Then I would have looked for a proper boyfriend—a gargoyle boyfriend.

“I do not bite during claiming,” Xan told me, moving away from me so that there would be space for me to turn and lie on my back. I couldn’t stay on my knees without support, even if I wanted to.

“Mmm...” I smiled lazily, floating on my personal post-orgasmic cloud. Did that mean I was better than all his previous lovers, to have driven him to take a bite? I hoped so. “It’s okay, Xan... I kind of... liked it.”

I really had enjoyed being bitten by him, as strange as that was given my painful post-apocalyptic experience with sharp-toothed monsters.

“It is another sign.” He looked pensive as he said it, but maybe it was just my slightly unfocused vision.

When his fingers traced a line down my body from the valley between my breasts to my pussy, my eyes regained their focus. I couldn't take any more of his claiming –that was why I had told him to join me a minute ago.

When he positioned my hips in line with his, his shaft standing proud to attention and glistening with the evidence of my pleasure from tip to hilt, I told him, “I don't think I can–”

“I must,” he murmured, his tip right at my entrance.

I stiffened.

“I will be gentle. But I must know.”

He'd already shown me gentleness, so I took him at his word and nodded my consent. “Know what?” I asked, but lost my train of thought at the feel of his hard cock stretching me.

“Do not close your eyes,” he commanded, making me realize I had indeed closed them.

He kept his gaze fused with mine as he slid back inside me. Then he wrapped his tail tightly around my leg from thigh to ankle, connecting us on that level, too. It couldn't get more intimate than this. And with his massive wings outstretched on either side of me, I felt protected and safe.

He moved slowly, his thrusts shallow so as not to hurt me.

The pleasure began building again but I didn't close my eyes.

I watched him move above me, mesmerized.

While our previous coupling had been fast and primal, this one was slow and sensual, awakening something in my heart I couldn't name.

It was as though our very souls were connected, not just our bodies.

Inexplicable elation filled me. I raked my fingers down Xaniban's biceps and closed my legs around his waist. I wanted to pull him even deeper inside me, to lose sense of where I ended and he began.

He growled and took my mouth in an all-consuming kiss. Then we were both coming, joined both in body and ultimate pleasure.

As the climax hit him, Xaniban threw his head back and roared, his large wings fully extended.

Magnificent. I let my eyes close as I finally succumbed to exhaustion. Post-coital bliss overcame me, or at least that's how I interpreted the feeling of boundless joy and fulfillment that overtook me. I also felt whole. Complete. At perfect peace. Huh. Was this how it felt to be high?

"It is you ," my personal drug said, sounding awed. "I should have realized it earlier... My anima ."

I opened my eyes. His face hovered over mine.

One arm and tail were wrapped around my waist possessively.

Our lower bodies were still joined. His wings were closed around us, cocooning us in.

The candlelight was barely penetrating the membranes of his wings, so I couldn't see his face, but Xaniban's words had carried tenderness in them I couldn't comprehend.



He hadn't talked to me like that before.

Ah, it had to be the euphoria from his orgasm talking. I couldn't blame him: I felt soft and mushy, too. He could say whatever he felt like saying, as long as he stayed exactly where he was, his arms, tail, and wings wrapped around me.

"Did you feel it?" he went on excitedly, forcing me to open my eyes again.

Did he have to involve me in his monologue? I was completely and utterly spent, in the best way possible. All I wanted was to fall asleep, not a care in the world for just a little while longer.

"Feel what, Xan?" I found the strength to lift an arm and caress his face in an attempt to learn what my eyes couldn't tell me in this dark and warm cocoon of ours. My fingertips traced the curve of his lips. He was smiling.

"The mate bond, how it clicked into place!... Gods, it was as smooth as my sword's handle the first time I picked it up! I did not even sense when my wings folded around you, accepting you as part of me, mine to protect... I am yours, too, anima."

Forget sleeping. "The mating what now?" Was my gargoyle getting funny ideas about us after this unforgettable experience, like us being married or something?

"Mate bond, little blessing," he said, giving me a quick kiss. "The bond linking us for life and beyond. We are a mated couple now."

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

“E xcuse me?” I blurted. “Linked for life ?”

“Yes, you are my mate, and I am yours.” Xaniban sounded beyond himself with excitement. “ Anima and animar .”

“No, no, no.” I tried to get away from underneath him, but he was practically molded around me, his wings like solid walls. “I haven’t married you. The sex was mind-blowing but with no strings attached, you told me so. You never mentioned a lifelong relationship—”

“I did not know you were my mate.” His hand cupped my cheek tenderly.

“I started to suspect something the more time we spent together. But I did not dare hope for the greatest blessing of the Gods! When I tasted your honey and then when I accidentally bit you during the claiming, it all clicked into place. I had been blind. I should have known the moment you touched my wing on the battlefield and gave my regeneration a boost. You are my anima. ”

“No, don’t you anima me!” I removed his hand from my face. “One night of otherworldly sex doesn’t make me your wife.”

“I could put a ring on your finger, if it would appease you,” he continued in a soothing tone.

“But in time you will understand that the mate bond is not a marriage. Some mated humans here call it so, but it goes way beyond that. You will understand once I explain in the morning, when you are rested.”

Like hell. “I won’t understand crap and rest until you get off me.”

“I cannot let you out yet.”

“Dammit, Xan!”

“I really cannot,” he said apologetically.

“My wings have to unfold on their own; it is a reflex triggered by the mate bond clicking into place. It has something to do with the fierce need to protect the newly found mate at her most vulnerable moment: a claiming-turned-mating. I could switch positions, though. Do you prefer to be on top?”

I dragged my hands down my face with a groan. This was not happening to me.

Xaniban’s response was to roll us both. I ended up lying on top of him, his wings now imprisoning me from above.

I let out a heavy sigh. “This is just as bad.”

“No, it is worse. I am no longer inside you.”

Freaking unbelievable . “Will you stop it?” I snapped. I didn’t need any reminders of how good it had felt to have his cock deep in my pussy and how empty I felt now.

It had all been a huge mistake. What had I been thinking, letting a gargoyle in my pants? I should have known better. There were always consequences when I let my guard down, apocalypse or not.

How was I going to get out of the mess I’d made? I couldn’t even get out from underneath Xaniban’s wings, let alone leave the palace and the homecloud. Fuck .

My anger slipped toward desperation. My next words came out more as a plea for mercy than a demand. "Let me go."

"Hmm, you are not happy about our mating," he muttered.

"You think?" A bitter laugh rose in my throat. I pressed my face into Xaniban's chest in an attempt to stifle a sob.

"I see." His hand and tail began to rub my back.

If his intention was to sooth me, he failed. The deep sense of contentment at his touch made me sadder. How stupid and easy to manipulate could I be?

"Someone is afraid of commitment."

"What?" I lifted my head to stare at him. I couldn't see his features in the gloom but could tell by his voice that he had a smile on. "I'm not afraid of commitment!"

"No?"

Yep, he was definitely smiling. The jerk.

"No! I'm not afraid. As a matter of fact, I'm all about commitment.

Always have been." The more I talked, the more ardent I became once again.

I guess that was an improvement to the weepy version of me.

"However, finding a man who won't cheat on me or abandon me, who is willing to commit long-term, is like looking for a needle in a haystack. "

“I am your needle.” He patted my ass. “You found me.”

“We barely know each other.” I accentuated every word in the hopes of him hearing me, really hearing me, amid the mate fantasy he was lost in. “We’re not the same species. And you’re talking about us having a long-term relationship?”

“To death and beyond,” he politely corrected me.

If I could throw my hands up, I would. “Precisely! Commitment ‘to death and beyond’ with a stranger from another species—can’t you hear yourself?” I was truly in the Twilight Zone. There was no doubt about it.

“We are not strangers,” Xaniban stated ever so calmly, as if he were speaking to an unreasonable child. “I know your body, and you know mine.”

“Yeah, as if that’s all that matters—”

“I know you are a brave, caring, protective, possessive, smart, strong-willed, stubborn, curious, and sensual little human,” he said without a single pause in hesitation. “Let me paraphrase: you were made for me. By the Gods themselves.”

I shook my head in disbelief. Me, brave and smart?

If I had been any of those things, I wouldn’t be here, lying naked on top of a gargoyle who had no intention of letting me go.

Instead, I would be trying to find my way back home in the dark, having left that office building immediately after the bombings.

Not a very smart move, but definitely smarter and braver than leaving in Xaniban’s arms.

“See, that’s the thing,” I kept arguing with the besotted king. “You speak of Gods , while I speak of God .”

Xaniban chuckled. “Religion cannot be an obstacle to our mate bond. Nothing can be an obstacle, anima .”

“It’s not about religion per se.” I pressed a finger to his lips before he could interrupt me.

The more he talked about this mate crap, the more I lost hope of convincing him no such thing existed between us.

“I’m talking about beliefs, culture, upbringing...

There is so much more to a person than some qualities you can pick up on quickly, provided you’re a good judge of character.

I’m clueless about your world, your society, your history.

Your life’s history, Xan, or that of your family and your people—I don’t know any of that! ”

He kissed my finger. “You will. Time is ahead of us.”

I groaned. I was getting nowhere with him.

“I’m not your mate! You link your life to someone when you’ve learned many things about them and like what you’ve found out.

How can you claim I’ve been made for you when you don’t yet know anything about my past, habits, and hobbies?

I bet you already hate how much I talk—imagine how many other things you’ll discover you don’t like about me in a day or two.

And yet, you talk about us being together forever. You’re making zero sense!”

“I am making perfect sense, little blessing.” Xaniban patted my rear with his hand again.

I only now realized he hadn’t removed it from there. His hand had been resting on my ass for our entire conversation, and I hadn’t noticed. As if it belonged there.

“You, on the other hand, are acting human,” he finished.

“I am human,” I said firmly. And just as firmly removed his hand from where it did not belong.

“You are, deliciously so,” was his reply, coupled with a fangy smile and his tail taking the place of his hand. “But you need to stop thinking like a human, anima .”

Agh! He seriously had to stop calling me that. Just like he had to quit caressing my sensitive places with a fifth limb I had no idea how to deal with. I had enough on my plate as it was, given the hot rod growing harder under my belly by the minute.

But I did not tell him to stop. His tail started drawing little circles on my ass cheek and his hands began moving up and down my back, and the word enough got stuck in my throat. The multiple orgasms must have completely scrambled my brain.

“Marriage doesn’t exist here,” Xaniban explained.

“There are no rings to exchange, vows to make, hearts to break when the marriage turns out to be a mistake. The mate bond makes no mistakes, because it exists to

prevent the mistakes from happening. It comes into being, linking a male and a female, not because they could exist as one based on a liking for each other's qualities, beliefs or past. But because they have existed as one once.

They have belonged together and they will again, to death and beyond. ”

Ridiculous . “I think you Gargoyles have watched too many astrology videos on YouTube and taken the whole soulmate concept too seriously.” Make that taken the concept to a sky-high level of cheesiness.

“I do not know what tube you speak of, but I sense you are being sarcastic.” That sarcasm of mine won me a light tail slap.

I gasped. Now was the time to protest. I should tell him to stop immediately—

He pressed a finger to my lips. I was the one who had to listen this time.

The words of protest died on my lips. Perhaps it was a good idea to hear him out. In the meantime, why not allow myself the guilty pleasure of his caresses, just for a few more minutes? Then I was getting away from him, one way or another.



## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

“We were one species once, very long ago,” Xaniban told me, running his hands along my back.

“We lived on our homeclouds—not that many back in the day—and we had no concerns about the ground and its creatures.

We had everything up here, our females were plenty, and pips of all genders were born daily.

“But then a king got greedy. He wanted to be worshiped by all Gargoyles and have dominion over all homeclouds. Many gargoyles grew so confident with what they had that they forgot where it all had come from—the Gods, our creators and protectors—and followed the foolish king. It was a time of division and bloodshed.”

The movie fan that I was, I immediately imagined how with some epic music in the background, that story would make a great opening to a Hollywood blockbuster. Too bad Hollywood was overrun by vampires.

“Suffice to say, the Gods were angered,” Xaniban carried on.

“They chose to punish Gargoyles, so none of us would ever forget to appreciate what we were given. The punishment was harsh but just: the soul of every gargoyle was split into two, and one half was cast out from the sky. Placed in a body devoid of wings, that half was destined to remain on the ground, reincarnation after reincarnation, unable to reunite with the other half.”

“Okay...”

“The ground being so vast, the chance of the two halves finding each other is slim. Not unless the gargoyle half lives an honorable life that would grant them the Gods’ forgiveness and blessing.

Then, on a fated flight over the ground, the gargoyle will find the missing part of their soul and be whole once more. ”

“But not before the gargoyle claims as many partners as possible, right? Just to make sure his soulmate isn’t some other busty woman or strapping guy.”

My joke was met with another light tail slap.

But come on now, how could I take his beliefs seriously when they sounded copy-pasted from a romance novel?

On the positive side, the absurdity of the mate lore had reduced my frustration somewhat.

That might also have to do with tiredness catching up to me.

“There are signs to help recognize one’s mate,” Xaniban told me. “Those are easier to notice when the gargoyle is open to the possibility that the Gods have already granted their blessing. Still, the best way of knowing is through a claiming.”

How surprising . “Let me guess. The more claimings, the better?”

“No.” His tail twitched against my ass cheek in warning.

I’d better keep the sarcasm to myself. “One claiming is all it takes not just for the recognition of a mate, but also for the mate bond to lock into place. To bind the two halves into one soul. There can be no splitting them apart ever again, in this life or

what lies beyond.”

Xaniban’s soft touch on my back stilled. “The bodies carrying the two halves remain separate but feel the constant need to be close to each other. Separation brings restlessness, pain, even death... The death of one’s mate can cause insanity or the end of the grieving half.”

“Uh...” I didn’t feel sarcastic anymore. Xaniban sounded gravely serious.

“That is how my father died,” he admitted, voice low. “He couldn’t bear to live without my mother, who lost her life upon birthing my little brother.”

“Oh God.” I was well familiar with the horror of losing both parents at the same time. A home fire had taken mine five years ago, and the pain of that loss was my constant companion. “I’m so sorry, Xan.”

“Do not be.” He tenderly traced my jawline with a knuckle. “Their souls are now one whole, beyond the death of their mortal bodies.”

That was a comforting way to look at it, I guess. “What about your brother?” I found myself asking. I hoped that, unlike me, Xaniban had a sibling to share the loss with.

“My older brother chose to become king once my father decided to join my mother, but fell in battle soon after I reached maturity. I took up the burden and honor of kingship, while my little brother chose the path of warriorhood. He is now the commander of another homecloud’s army.

Rest assured, you will meet him at the celebrations. ”

“Celebrations?” I stiffened. I couldn’t take any more surprises.

“The feast for our unity, little blessing,” Xaniban’s smile came back.

“This is not a good time to feast, as much as I want to present my gift from the Gods to all my brethren, but the celebrations cannot be overly postponed. The Gods need to see how grateful I am, and everyone needs to know you are mine.”

His last words sent a thrill through me. Part of me—a large part—liked being called his. Still, Xaniban could take possessiveness to a whole new level. Getting away from him might prove as difficult as losing a pack of werewolves.

“But that is a task for another time,” he said, returning my attention to the present. “Now I want to finish convincing you that my soul and yours are one.”

My brows nearly reached my hairline. “You have proof?” Yeah, right.

His fangs flashed white in the semi-darkness. “I have endless ways of proving we are mated. Right now, however, I will start with what you will like a lot. I will, too.”

I narrowed my eyes at him.

He cupped my ass and pulled me further up his body. Getting my pussy in the right position to be impaled on his fully-erect cock.

“Don’t you dare!” I sputtered. “I will kill you if you try to put it—”

“Kill me?” He laughed out loud. “With what? You are soft and plump all over—I should know.” He gave my rear a squeeze, which only increased the friction between our lower bodies.

“Xan. I’ll poke your eyes out. How about that?”

“Such a fierce warrior.”

“Xan!”

“Relax,” he spoke in a tender tone. “I know you are sore; I am just messing with you. You are gorgeous when you are mad and blushing.”

“I’m not blushing!” Damn. His night vision was too good. “If this is the proof you mentioned, I don’t like it—”

“The proof will come once you let me turn you around.”

“Oh?”

“I need you on your back without squashing my manhood in the process.”

“Ah.” Moving me up his body made sense now. “Wait, why should I be with my back to your front?”

“So that you can touch my wings, right where they meet over your head, and thus make them open. Only my mate can have such an effect on them, because only she is allowed to touch them.”

“Right.” How convenient . Of course his wings would unfold at my touch—he would open them himself. After all, they had served their purpose: keeping me prisoner for his story about the mate mumbo jumbo.

Xaniban either didn’t catch my sarcasm or chose to ignore it. “My wings have a self-preservation instinct of their own,” he elaborated. “They are very vulnerable in an attack. They would allow only my anima –a part of my very soul—to place her claws where a tear would be fatal.”

Fear gripped me. “But you can regenerate?”

“Wings heal very slowly. Unless you are on your homecloud or surrounded by loyal brethren to protect you from enemies, a tear is fatal.”

“Oh no.” The thought of Xaniban dying had my heart in a vise. Just thinking of him getting hurt made my blood run cold.

How could I be so attached to him already? I had lingered too long. I must get away from him immediately.

“Turn me around,” I demanded. “I am doing the wing touching, then going to the bathroom. To pee.” Don’t you dare follow me. I had to be alone to start thinking clearly again and make a new escape plan.

He chuckled and did as asked. Pressing a kiss to my shoulder, he said cheekily, “Go on, use both hands. Be gentle.” He made it sound as though I was about to touch not his wings but what was now jutting proudly between my thighs.

I elbowed him in the chest. “Stop it.”

“My wings are extremely sensitive, little human. I just wanted to warn you.”

Ha. The very picture of innocence, this gargoyle.

“Here, I will keep you balanced.” His tail went across my belly and his hands cupped my breasts, instantly igniting my body.

It was decided. He was getting his eyes poked out.

“I hope you have a good enough hold, little jerk,” I muttered as I reached for his

wings.

My fingertips had barely touched the membranes when a groan came from Xaniban. Pleasure rippled through his body underneath mine. His hands automatically squeezed my breasts.

A moan tore from my lips. My fingers slid along his wings on reflex.

He roared. His wings opened at the same time as I felt him come on my belly.

My God. When he'd said his wings were sensitive, I hadn't imagined this. His hot cum, pearlescent blue on my skin, and the knowledge that a single touch of mine had undone him... They made me feel hot inside, too.

"My anima," he murmured reverently, "only you can make me lose control like that. Only you."

Satisfaction filled me. But so did worry at how his pleasure seemed directly linked to my own.

"Gotta pee," I squeaked, and scrambled off Xaniban as if pixies were after me.

He didn't try to stop me and actually offered me a helping tail while I was clumsily getting off the bed on unsteady legs. "Go, relieve yourself," he told me as I began an embarrassing, stiff-legged trek to the bathroom. "Then I will come in to wash you."

"I can wash myself," I huffed without looking back. If I did, I might be tempted to return to his sweet embrace. The loss I felt at leaving him tugged at my resolve to stay away from him.

"I know you can, anima." I could feel his gaze following my every step. As if the

separation of our bodies bothered him, too. His next words came out strained. “We will bathe together.”

Yes – no – agh! I was in so much trouble.



## Page 18

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

I splashed the water in the washbasin—a crystal bowl filled with rainwater—and listened. Did it sound like I was still peeing? Would that keep Xaniban away a bit longer?

Yes, I was being ridiculous, but there was no lock on the bathroom door to keep him out. Telling him not to come in here would have the same effect as my previous attempts to tell the king what to do: zero. For heaven's sake, I couldn't make myself behave.

I needed alone time to get my priorities straight.

Returning to my community should be at the top of the list. It would be great to show up at the bunker with food and medicine, and Xaniban had mentioned that was up to discussion, but now that he thought me his mate, I had the strong suspicion he wouldn't let me go anywhere dangerous.

I could ask him to bring my people here... He'd mentioned he didn't bring just anyone, but if he met them, he would see they were good people. Well, except Carson, but he might not have survived the trip home. If Xaniban agreed, that would be the perfect solution for everyone.

Butterflies fluttered in my stomach at just the idea of staying with him.

It wasn't about the best sex I'd ever had, although I now understood those women ready to storm the castle for another round in his bed.

I simply craved to be close to him. To bask in the strength of his presence, in the

warmth of his embrace, in the shelter of his wings—

So sappy. See, that was why I was afraid of sticking around.

This magical place lulled me into a false sense of security, when my instincts should stay sharp.

Xaniban chipped away at my protective walls, when I should guard my heart now more than ever.

As long as the aliens were on Earth, there could be no safe haven. Love remained deadly—

Xaniban came in. Didn't knock, just walked right in and came straight to me, watching me with a burning intensity that made my breath hitch. As if he couldn't stand a second longer of us being apart. As if he would not allow anything, not even a closed door, to stand between us ever again.

He crushed me to him as his lips took mine.

I buried my fingers in his hair to keep him right there, mouth fused with mine, fangs grazing my bottom lip, deep kisses sparking a whirlwind of sensations.

When we came up for air, I noticed the cloud over the bathtub was on. Xaniban must have used his tail to pull the rope. Seeing the direction of my gaze, he smiled mischievously and offered me a hand. I took it.

He led me into the tub and resumed our kiss there, standing under the tropical rain. Hands at my back and tail around my leg, Xaniban kissed me slowly now, the urgency from earlier gone. This was about savoring every second of our lips being locked, and I was right there with him.

I was going to live in the moment and enjoy what remained of my night with Xaniban. Come morning, I would go back to reality.

He brushed wet locks away from my face, his eyes filled with wonder.

“I cannot believe I have found you, anima . I thought I had yet to prove myself to the Gods, and I thought I knew how strong the effect of the mate bond would be, but... One touch of your fingers along my wings, and you undid me. One minute without you in the circle of my tail, and I was already hurting.”

My pulse sped up once more. His words were laced with raw emotion that tugged at my heartstrings. I lowered my gaze, feeling overwhelmed.

“Did you not hurt, too?”

I didn't reply. I wasn't willing to admit anything either to him or myself.

Xaniban traced my cheek with his knuckles. “You are still refusing to accept the mate bond as real. I understand; I am afraid myself.”

“You are?” What was a gargoyle king afraid of?

“The mate bond changed everything,” he said, tracing my lips with a clawed thumb.

A tender touch that warmed me as much as the raindrops on my skin.

“I was alone before, and now I have you to care for and protect. I was ready to die in battle, but now I want to live for you and the future we will share together.” A flutter passed through his wings.

“While I was free of fear before, for whatever the Gods will shall be, now I feel it

clawing at my heart at the mere thought of seeing you hurt. Losing you..." His voice dipped, thick with emotion.

I swallowed hard, trying to steady myself.

His unwavering belief in us being meant to be together was so intense that I couldn't help but question my own beliefs.

What if the mate bond truly existed? What if the fairy tale of one true love was real?

After all the things I'd witnessed today that could only be explained with magic, why consider anything impossible at this point?

Warm hands cradled my face. "No more of our unity of soul tonight. You need your rest."

"Yes, I should get some sleep." Once I caught some shuteye, I was certain I would see things more clearly and have reason, not emotions, guiding me.

"Can we both fit in here?" I asked when Xaniban sat in the tub and extended a hand to me.

"Of course." His tone was more relaxed now, just like his posture in the water. "My father, before he mated my mother, could fit four females with him in this tub."

"Uh..." Talk about heritage . "That's awkward." I let his tail guide me down until I was sitting with my back to his chest, the water up to my shoulders. "Have you done that? Bring several women here with you?"

He laughed. "No, jealous little human." He planted a long kiss on my shoulder that sent a pleasant tingle down my body. "I consider bathing a female a ritual to be

performed only with my anima . You cannot imagine how many times I have dreamed of this very moment.”

I couldn't hide my smile. “Alright.” I, too, would enjoy being bathed by Xaniban. “But don't tease me,” I warned. His cock was hard—again—against my lower back. “We just wash up, okay?”

He didn't reply; he started soaping up my shoulders instead.

I bit my lip. He was going to tease me, wasn't he?

He didn't. Not even once. I wanted him, though.

Because his affectionate touches, coupled with his eyes on mine once I turned to face him, were so much more dangerous.

They made it hard to think of this thing between us as a purely sexual connection.

Under his caring ministrations, it was easy to believe we were linked in a way my human mind couldn't comprehend.

So when my turn came, I tried to steer us toward a safer direction by teasing him. Admittedly, I also wanted to explore the perfection that was his body and was tempted to test that impeccable self-control of his.

Xaniban didn't budge. My advances with the soap anywhere below his waist got blocked. So did my reach for one of his wings while I was distracting him with a kiss.

“You are sneaky,” he rumbled, a pleased smile dancing on his lips, but his tail's hold around my wrist was unyielding.

“Why can’t I wash your wings?” I asked innocently. “They will let me since I’m your mate, won’t they?”

“Do not start something you cannot finish,” he whispered in my ear, hands sliding along my back.

“I’m sure I can wash them thoroughly before I get too sleepy—”

“Do not touch my wings even with a single fingertip. Not unless you are ready to be claimed over and over until sunrise.”

Cheeks burning, I pulled away. I now knew he delivered on his sexy promises, and I definitely couldn’t handle another round with him tonight. Enough playing with fire, Sue.

Xaniban scooped me up in his arms and tail and flew us out of the tub. He landed next to the towels and dried me up, with his eyes drinking me in but his touch never straying. I did the same for him, having learned my lesson.

Then, without the need for words, he picked me up again and flew us to bed. As he laid me on the sheets, I noticed someone had changed them. They were incredibly soft and as green as fresh spring grass.

My eyes began closing as soon as my head touched the fluffy pillow, but it was when Xaniban spooned me that my body relaxed completely. With his arm around my waist and his tail over my hip, I surrendered to a deep and peaceful sleep.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

I woke up to the whoosh of wings. My heavy eyelids opened just in time for me to see Samuin flying out the upper door. I tried to go back to the best sleep I'd had in months but failed. First, because Xaniban's warm presence was missing, and second, because I smelled something delicious.

I rolled on my back and scanned the room.

There, at the lower end of the large bed, lay a glass breakfast tray.

At the sight of what was on the plate, I sped on all fours toward it.

Sitting on my heels with the bedsheet pressed to my bare chest, I eyed the two orange-red fruits without daring to touch. This had to be a dream.

Focused on the sweet treat, I nearly missed Xaniban's entry. He came through the left wall—er, balcony door. It was transparent upon his entry but turned pale-blue again behind him, letting sunlight into the bedchamber.

He beamed at me, both fangs showing. "Morning, anima ."

I smiled back, my heart performing a little somersault at the sight of him. "Mangoes!"

My childish excitement made him chuckle. He flew to the foot of the bed and moved the tray to the side. Then wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me to him along the silk sheets.

Hands flat on his broad chest, I welcomed his possessive embrace and the molten-

lava-hot kiss that followed. Now that was a good-morning greeting I could get used to.

When our lips reluctantly parted, Xaniban sat on the edge of the bed and positioned me, clad in the bedsheet, onto his lap with ease. He kept me balanced with his tail around my waist while he was sliding the tray closer.

“Sleep well?” he asked as he peeled one perfectly ripe mango with the claw of his index finger.

I nodded, my mouth already watering. I also couldn’t help but wonder how his claw could be as sharp as a knife and yet not cut me last night. I blushed at the memory of what he had done with those long, talented fingers.

Xaniban didn’t miss a thing. “What has you so temptingly flushed, little blessing? Name it, and you shall have it.”

“It’s stupid, forget it.” I reached for the piece of mango he had just sliced. He pulled his hand out of my reach. “Xan.”

“A mango for your naughty thoughts.”

“Oh, come on. Do you know when the last time I had a mango was? Zombies didn’t exactly have a positive effect on imports from tropical countries, you know. And I love mangoes.”

“I noticed. I didn’t even get a good-morning from you.” His broad smile indicated he wasn’t offended. And yet, his hand still held the mango away from me.

I huffed. “Fine. I was just wondering how you haven’t hurt me with these sharp claws of yours.”



“Ah.” He handed me the piece of mango, and I closed my eyes as the rich flavor hit my taste buds. So good .

“I clipped my claws before joining you in bed.”

My eyes flew open. “What?”

He rubbed my thigh through the bedsheet. “It is not painful. Unpleasant, yes, but worth it. Your luscious body should never bear a scar from me. And as you can see, the claws regenerate overnight.”

“Mhmm,” I exclaimed around the second to last bite of my mango.

I had just popped the last piece in my mouth when his lips caught mine. Next thing I knew, the piece was stolen.

“Hey!”

He smirked and handed me another slice, bringing it directly to my mouth.

I rolled my eyes but let him hand-feed me. To be honest with myself, I found that rather sweet. I also enjoyed redirecting some of the bites to him. He needed to eat, too.

“Where do you get all this food from?” I asked as we fed each other. “Do you send gargoyles to different parts of the ground to get it?”

“My homecloud is allowed to fly only over what you call Europe. This is the ground territory claimed by my ancestors. I speak English, Spanish and French, in case my curious little human is wondering.”

“Impressive.” Why did he need so many languages?

Then again, speaking French was known to do wonders with the ladies. A gargoyle probably needed to use every trick up his sleeve—loincloth to win a woman over for a quickie in the sky. The thought of Xaniban doing that made the mango in my mouth taste bitter.

“Therefore,” he went on, “our food does not come from the ground. We do import some produce from other homeclouds, but the majority is grown locally.”

“You grow fruit and veggies on a cloud?” Pinch me now. “What about farm animals?”

“My homecloud is famous for its chicken, rabbit, and goat farms.” He handed me the last slice of mango. “I can take you to an animal farm, if you wish.”

“Yes!” I didn’t know when that could happen, but the very idea of hugging a goat had me raising my hands in excitement. Sweet drops from the mango in my hand landed on the sheet I was wrapped in. “Oops, sorry.”

He said nothing. He was too busy staring hungrily at the several drops sliding down my cleavage.

“Xan?”

He was at my breasts before I could finish, licking and sucking the drops off my skin.

My breath caught and I nearly dropped my mango. By the time Xaniban was done with me, I was no longer interested in the fruit but in what he himself could offer.

I moved to capture his lips, but he pulled away with a deep sigh. “Forgive me, I

started something I cannot finish.” There was longing in both his tone and gaze. “The sun is rising, and my warriors will be waiting for me.”

Fuck! I was so wrapped up in our wholesome morning that I forgot. “The attack! What happened? Did your warriors vote for plan A or B?”

His expression grew serious. “The battle awaits. Enough volunteers responded to Ris’ call last night.” Then he added with determination, “We are ready to face our flesh-eating enemy.”

“That’s great.” Hopefully. Xaniban and his soldiers would be heading into who knew what danger, all based on my info. What if it was another trap? What if Zombie 007 was there but guarded by hundreds of undead? Fear for Xaniban seized me. “How many warriors volunteered?”

He guided my hand with the mango to my lips, but I shook my head. Eating was out of the question. I had postponed my return to reality for too long, and now it was back with a vengeance.

Xaniban brought my hand to his mouth and ate the last bite of fruit, then licked my fingertips clean.

“Xan, stop trying to distract me. We have to talk about the battle and what’s next.”

“Come.” He got us to our feet and extended a hand to me.

Confused, I placed my palm in his and let him guide me further into the room, bedsheet and all. Sometime during last night’s joint bath, Samuin had taken my dirty clothes away, so it wasn’t like I had something to wear.

Wait, that hadn’t been there yesterday! No way could I have missed all those

sparkles. Samuin must have brought it along with the breakfast tray.

Laid out on the chaise was a new creation of Gargoylish fashion: yet another daring two-piece outfit but in the same golden color as Xaniban's loincloth. Countless little gems were sewn onto the fishnet, shining like diamonds in the sunlight.

Xaniban led me to the chaise. "You were right to refuse the blue robe, anima ," he said with pride in his tone. "You were made to wear the robe of a queen."

"I-I..." I didn't know what to say. After a single night with me, Xaniban already expected me to be with him forever and rule at his side. Talk about a guy moving too fast.

He tail-patted my behind. "Go on. Put it on."

"Xan, I..."

"You don't like it. More diamonds can be added. Moon crystals, too."

"Diamonds?" I took another look at the sparkly outfit. There had to be over 50 gems sewn onto it. So many, in fact, that the golden fishnet might actually provide full nipple coverage.

"You don't want them? I shall have them replaced immediately with precious stones of your choosing. Name them, and they shall be yours."

"Xan." I turned to face him. "The robe is gorgeous as is, but... This is not the right time to talk about clothing. Or queen stuff."

"I wish to see you in the robe before I leave." His tone grew serious. "This could be my last chance to see you wearing my color. And if I fall, your queenly attire will let

everyone know what you meant to me. This palace will remain your home, regardless of who takes my place.”

“You are not going to fall.” My words sounded like a threat, and maybe they were.

He should not be talking about dying. I placed my hands on his chest. “I’m sorry, but this palace is not my home.

I have a community on the ground, without whom I wouldn’t have survived.

I owe them my help, and if you return me to them or assist us—”

“No.” His entire body tensed and his tail curled then uncurled behind him.

My heart clenched, and I pulled my hands away from him. “You won’t help us?”

“I will not return you to the ground,” Xaniban said, voice low and unyielding.

His wings unfolded on either side of me, as if to shield me from an invisible threat.

“You belong here, anima . This is where your soul was born and where it lived before the Gods cast it out. You are among your kind and you shall remain one of them, with or without me in this world. Do you wish me to fall?”

“No! Of course not. But—”

“Then do not ask me to leave you on the ground while I do battle.” His eyes bore into mine, unwavering as he spoke.

“How do you expect me to focus on the fight while worrying about your safety? My focus is jeopardized as it is because of the raw mate bond. It makes it impossible for

me to keep you off my thoughts and not long to be next to you every second I draw breath, now that I have just found you. Do not make my fall more certain, little blessing.”

For heaven’s sake. He wouldn’t let me off this cloud, fine; he hadn’t said no to assisting my people.

But to end up dying because of a made-up connection between us?

“Enough with this mate crap,” I snapped.

“You’ll be perfectly focused on the battlefield once you realize there is no mate bond.

Whoever made it up wanted to manipulate na?ve gargoyles like yourself to ensure the continuation of your species. ”

Chest heaving, I stared up at him. Had I gone too far? Pissed him off? How would a gargoyle act when angered?

Xaniban drew his wings away from me, lifted his tail in the air and... smiled.

Huh?

He stepped back, never breaking eye contact.

“We will see who is na?ve when I return. I, who believe in our mate bond, or you, who deny its very existence. And I promise to return to you, skeptical little human, if only to see your reaction upon our reunion. I shall not fall in wait for that exact moment.”

“Ha.” I crossed my arms over my chest. “And what reaction would that be?”

“You will see.” His smile grew smug.

I scoffed. “Whatever. You just come back in one piece, you hear me?”

“Yes, my Queen.” His smile faded while his gaze lingered on me, as if he was committing me to memory. Then he took to the air.

“Whoa, you’re leaving already?”

“My warriors await,” he said halfway to the upper door without looking back. As if having read my thoughts, he added, “No need for goodbyes, anima . I keep my promises.”

And with that, he was gone.

## Page 20

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

Splendid. What was I to do now? I couldn't just sit around waiting for Xaniban. I didn't even know when he would return. If he would return—

No. No thinking like that. He was coming back. And until he did, I would learn as much about his world as I could.

With newfound determination, I headed for the door, only to get tangled in the bedsheet and trip. Ugh. I had to find something else to wear, unless I wanted to faceplant outside or accidentally flash someone.

What should I wear, then? I looked around in search of something I could work with, and my gaze was drawn to the wall of swords. Hmm. I hoped Samuin would forgive me.

Some ten minutes later, I was on my way to the door in a beach wrap dress fashioned out of cut sheets. Hair tied into a bun atop my head, relieved—always pee before a mission!—and armed, I was ready to explore.

I swung the door open, only to stop short. One more step, and I would smash my face into Samuin's back.

He turned around and gave me a light bow. "My lady."

"Hi." My surprise at seeing him quickly morphed into suspicion. He was clearly stationed at the door; the question was why. To assist me if needed? To guard me from harm? Or to keep me from leaving?



He took in my sword and home-made dress without batting an eye—or wing. “Can I get you anything to eat? Drink? New bedsheets, perhaps?”

I winced. “Sorry about that. I needed a change of clothes to go for a walk. Can I pass, please?”

He remained where he was, blocking my way out. “Forgive me, but your attire is inappropriate.”

I raised a brow at him. I was covered from chest to mid-calf, while women here wore something off the set of a film about ancient Egypt—the porn version. And he called my attire inappropriate? “Will you bring me my old clothes back?”

“Impossible. They have already been destroyed with a disintegration lightning.”

“What!” I pressed my lips into a thin line before unintentionally teaching him a new curse word. Those clothes were the only ones I had!

“My lady can walk wherever she wishes,” Samuin kindly informed me, “with the robe my liege has provided for her.”

I gaped. Xaniban, you son of a... gargoyle! He had Samuin in on his stupid plot to get me into that fishnet. I was sure of it.

I might have looked murderous, because Samuin eyed me cautiously. “My lady?”

“If I’m wearing proper attire,” I grumbled, “will I be able to go wherever I please?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Will I be able to walk freely, or will you be shadowing me?”

“I shall be your shadow only if you wish it so.” He nodded respectfully.

“No guards?”

“My lady does not need guards where she is perfectly safe.”

I sighed, then went back into the bedchamber and shut the door behind me. Time to face the music, aka embrace the local culture and put diamonds on my nipples.

It took some wiggling around and stretching to tie the laces at my back, but I got into the skimpy outfit.

To my chagrin, I found it quite comfortable.

I could move freely, and the integrated panties ensured I wouldn't be flashing anyone in the process.

The precious stones actually provided good coverage, and if anyone stared at my chest inappropriately, they risked going blind from how much I sparkled in the sunlight.

I opened the door and stepped outside with as much dignity as I could muster.

Samuin bowed deeply. “My Queen.”

I nearly burst into hysterical laughter. “Okay, uhh... I want to visit the city.”

“I am afraid you cannot do that.”

I narrowed my eyes. “You said I could go wherever.”

“Wherever within the palace walls,” he explained with as much calmness as ever.

Murderous mode: reactivated. “Why the hell can’t I go beyond?”

“For your own safety. My liege has not announced his mating yet, and if you just appear among my brethren in his color, the joy will be uncontrolled. Discipline must be maintained.”

Seriously? I was in danger of overjoyed gargoyles?

I thought Xaniban didn’t want me in the city out of suspicion I would find someone there willing to fly me home.

Or because the king’s opposition might attack me, or take me hostage as a bargaining chip...

Guess his subjects loved him—most of all the women, I bet.

How many had Xaniban slept with? Given their small number, probably all of them? My blood began to boil at the mere thought—

“My Queen?”

I pushed down the sudden fit of jealousy and refocused on the conversation. “Fine, no leaving the palace. What can I do inside?”

“I would suggest visiting the library. The Mate Bond Scroll could be of interest.” To my confused look, Samuin added, “I have heard the stories of how hard it is for some humans to accept the existence of the bond. I was told by my liege you are one of the skeptical females. The scroll can help you believe.”

Not this again. Still, the library sounded like the perfect place to learn more about Gargoyles and other beings that went bump in the night. I just had to make sure my curiosity didn't get the best of me. I had to be out of the library and back into my wrap dress before Xaniban's return.

"Lead the way, Samuin."

"It would be my honor."

Once I left the heavy sword and stifling boots behind on his advice, Samuin led me down a wide, brightly-lit corridor. The cloudy floor was warm under my bare feet. Tapestries of famous sites around the globe decorated the walls. I wished I could stop and take in each one.

"Is the library close?" I wasn't sure how big the palace was. Being flown around tended to leave a person with a distorted perception of space.

Samuin slowed his pace so I could keep up with his long stride. "It is under the central tower of the palace."

"Which is located...?"

"It is on another level of the palace. Under normal circumstances, I would fly you there."

I blinked. "These are not normal circumstances?"

Samuin shook his head. "Unless it is to protect you from danger, I cannot touch you. Any scent other than your mate's on your skin, and my liege will be overcome by deadly rage."

I snorted.

He gave me a look somehow more serious than his usual one.

“You’re not joking, are you?”

“Any male risks death by my liege’s claws and fangs, should he lay a finger on you. The mate bond demands it, it is instinctive.”

“Does it work the other way around?” Not that I was starting to believe in the bond’s existence, I was just... asking for a friend.

“Of course. Although a human female’s sense of smell is not strong enough, I have read that even the suspicion of her mate having been touched by another is enough to cause a fit of rage.”

My stride faltered. “Jealousy, you mean?”

“My Queen has already felt what I speak of. That is good. It is one of the many manifestations of the bond.”

“No, I–” I shook my head to myself. It was impossible to lie to a gargoyle. “Jealousy is natural,” I reminded both him and myself. “It doesn’t prove the existence of a magical connection.”

Did the corners of his lips twitch? “It matters not. I still cannot fly you to the library.”

We turned left into another wide corridor, this one with a taxidermy collection displayed in glass cases along the walls.

My stride faltered yet again. I was thrown off by the first sight here that I didn’t like.

“What are these? Hunting trophies of gargoyle kings?”

“Animals from the ground that have since gone extinct or are about to. A memory of them has to be preserved. These specimens were found dead. Their lives were not cut short by my brethren.”

“Thank you for clarifying that.” The look on my face upon entering this place must have conveyed how appalled I was.

I tried to keep walking without getting distracted by the sight of a dodo next to a sabre-toothed cat. Some preservation magic had to be at play here. Just how far back did this collection—and Gargoyles—go?

“Samuin, can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Why are you so invested in the ground? I get that you have to go there to find mates. But, you didn’t need to stuff a Tasmanian tiger to get in a woman’s pants.”

To my surprise, Samuin’s lips tipped up. A second smile from the most serious gargoyle in 24 hours? I was a certified comedian.

“These creatures are here not because of the Gods-imposed search for our mates. The ground may not be my kind’s home, but it has sustained the missing pieces of our souls one reincarnation after another. We owe it a debt we can never repay.”

Excitement surged through me. That sounded promising. “Is this why you fight against the flesh eaters now? Because they’re the greatest threat to the ground?”

“The flesh eaters’ king started the war centuries ago when he purposefully began

spreading the curse of his blood. He has overstepped before but never on a scale this big. We must finish our ancestors' fight and eliminate him. Once and for all."

We exited the corridor with the natural history museum vibe and headed toward an imposing wooden staircase. Its spiral stairs left enough space for those with wings to fly around it while ensuring wingless visitors could climb comfortably.

Samuin took flight as I went up the stairs, but he flapped his massive wings at a speed that kept him airborne at my level. I immediately took advantage of his decision to keep me company on the way up.

"Will you do something about the other threats to the ground?" I asked. "If the zombie king is defeated and his creations die out, will you try to eliminate what remains of the vamps, for instance?"

"It is up to my liege to decide what options there are for our homecloud. Then my brethren will choose one."

"Can Xan—the king choose on his own? At least, in times of war?" I was all for democracy but wasn't blind to its flaws. The majority didn't always make the best decisions.

Samuin's tail curled as he flew beside me.

"My Queen speaks of the unthinkable. That is treason to the homecloud. I have studied that on the ground, a leader could go so far, but here this would never happen. If my liege decides on his own to go to war with a new enemy, no warriors will follow him. How will he win his war? A king is nothing without his people."

Yeah, if only humans had learned that lesson over the centuries. "But even for today's battle, where I think the king got approval from the Army..."

“Yes?”

“He still relies on volunteers only.” I slowed down my pace to be able to talk without running out of breath. “Isn’t that counterproductive?”

“Every single warrior is free to decide which battle to join. He needs to personally believe in the cause to fight to the death for it.”

Meaning that the chances of the Gargoyles fighting for humans beyond their ancient war with zombies, were slim. So much for my hope that the tide of the apocalypses could be turned. Things could never go back to normal.

I stopped abruptly stairs away from the last landing as a previous concern of mine resurfaced. “How many warriors volunteered for today’s attack?”

Samuin’s tail twitched. “Nothing can stop my liege from returning to you.”

“Fuck.” I gripped the wooden railing, fear freezing my limbs at his evasive answer. Xaniban had replied to the same question in a similar fashion. “They’ll be outnumbered, won’t they?”

I’d been so stupid, refusing to consider his death as a possibility.

How could I think of Xaniban as unbeatable when I had seen him almost dying a day ago?

Just a day ago! He could regenerate, yes, but not as quickly as vampires could.

He was far from invincible in battle, and today he might be facing more monsters than ever.



He might be dead already. And here I was, thinking about getting changed so as to rob him of the satisfaction of seeing me in his color. I had thought I wouldn't be able to stand the smug smile he would give me then, but... what if I never saw that smile again?

Sadness, as sharp as a blade, cut into me.

“My Queen?”

Samuin flew closer, and the air moved by his wings made my eyes burn. I reached up, and my fingers came out wet. “What the...” I hadn't realized I was crying.

“Do you feel unwell?” Samuin asked with palpable concern in his tone, tail restless. “Drained of energy?”

“No.” I quickly wiped the unexpected tears away, but my voice still came out shaky. “Why?”

He pulled away, body visibly relaxing. “One can sense the death of one's mate. Even when the mate bond is still raw.”

“Raw, as in new?”

“To some extent. But it is not so much about its newness as it is about its consummation.”

“And that means what exactly?”

He flapped his wings to stay hovering at my eye level.

“The initial need of newly reunited mates to be one, just like their souls were once

one, is so potent that most mates do not leave their bed for days after the mating. Once their soul and body settle with the knowledge that they will not be parted again, the mate bond is no longer raw.”

“Um... I think I get it now,” I mumbled, feeling awkward all of a sudden. The idea of spending days in bed with Xaniban sounded so appealing that I could imagine locking the bedchamber door myself. With both of us inside.

“My Queen will better understand everything she is feeling once she reads the Mate Bond Scroll . I have learned the basics from there, and my friends’ stories added very little to what you can read in it.”

I guess that was his polite way of saying I should stop with the endless info-drilling. With me no longer in need of a guard, he surely had better things to do than answer questions about the meaning of consummation .

“Sorry for keeping you, Samuin,” I told him, quickly climbing the last remaining stairs to the landing. “Just get me to the library and go do your thing.”

He landed next to me and started walking down the only corridor available, a single wooden door at its end.

“Your company is most welcome,” he assured me as he reached for the lever handle. “Once my liege returns victorious, I will certainly be deprived of the refreshing conversations you so generously offer me.”

I scoffed. “I enjoy your company, too, and no unfounded jealousy by a certain king will change that. I’d like us to be friends.”

He paused with the door half-open. “My Queen.” His voice wavered, and he gave me the deepest bow ever.

I smiled and gave a clumsy curtsy, which had the corners of his lips twitching.

I meant what I said. The question was, would I stay here long enough to make friends?

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

I had visited many libraries over the years, from ultra-modern university ones to old monastic libraries that took your breath away with ceiling frescoes or Rococo architecture. And yet, none of those could compare to the Gargoyles' library I found myself in.

The place was like a tower, with shelves upon shelves of scrolls along the rounded blue walls, all the way up to the domed ceiling.

And up there, when I craned my neck, I saw clouds.

Right under the ceiling, small puffs the color of cotton candy were coming in through one wall and exiting through another.

“Holy crap, my Queen?”

I laughed, still feeling like my eyes were playing tricks on me. “You’ve got that right. There are clouds in your library! I know this whole building is basically a cloud, but what if it starts raining inside?”

“These clouds are of a special variety. Their movement is limited to the library’s top level for the purpose of maintaining stable temperature and humidity. This prolongs the life of our collection.”

“Amazing.”

I walked to the single round table in the center of the library. There were four chairs around it, all made of the same dark-red wood I’d seen around the palace. With the

bright light coming in from above and the clouds drifting lazily, the space felt cozy. I could spend a whole day here.

“What will my Queen like to read first?” Samuin asked from his position by the door.

I looked around. This library had clearly been designed with winged readers in mind. There wasn't a ladder in sight, so apart from the scrolls on the lowest shelves, I couldn't reach anything. “I was thinking about a read on the history of your kind? Then something on your culture?”

I was mostly hoping to learn more about the creatures the Gargoyles had fought or worked with before. If there was such a thing as supernatural politics, I needed to be in on it.

“Our history spans centuries. Would you like to see the most recent scrolls telling the history of this particular homecloud? Those have been drawn and written in English by my liege's mother. The other works on history and culture are in Gargoylish, I'm afraid.”

“Oh.” With everyone here speaking to me in English, I hadn't considered their own language. “Can you bring me everything that's written in English or in the form of drawings?”

“It would be my honor.”

He flew up and started gathering scroll after scroll from various shelves. I was starting to worry that the literature I had requested wasn't as limited as he'd suggested, when he landed by the table with only five scrolls in hand.

“Is this everything?”

“There are two more works—the most important ones, if you would allow me the recommendation.” Samuin walked to a shelf behind me and pulled out two worn-out scrolls. “It is humans who read them the most, hence the easy access. Please return them to the same shelf once you are done.”

I accepted the two bestsellers carefully. I didn’t want to damage them, so I was relieved to discover they weren’t made of paper but fabric that felt like silk. “What are these about?”

“One is the Mate Bond Scroll , the English version. It was translated and adapted to the female point of view by my liege’s grandmother on his father’s side.”

“Huh.” Was there no escape from the mate stuff?

“The other scroll contains drawings by my liege’s mother again.

I was told she was a talented painter of...

” A pensive expression crossed his face, and his tail swished.

“Ah! Co-mics . She drew co-mics, my Queen. She took it upon herself to leave detailed information for all humans yet to arrive here with their newfound mates.”

“Information about what?” I asked, already unrolling the scroll.

A naked gargoyle stared back at me. Little arrows pointed from various body parts to long descriptions under the heading A Gargoyle’s Erogenous Zones .

Another heading below the very generously endowed gargoyle read, Gargoyle Claiming Positions: For Experienced and Flexible Users Only! Illustrations followed.

I closed the scroll at lightning speed, my face undoubtedly tomato-worthy. Samuin had handed me a Kama Sutra for Gargoyles. Hand-drawn by Xaniban's mom.

I shot a look at my winged librarian. He appeared as serious as usual, but I didn't miss the twinkle in his eye.

"I will leave my Queen to her useful reading," he told me with a light bow.

"If you need anything, pull this right here, and I will be with you shortly." He pointed at a rope by the table that I hadn't noticed before, probably because I didn't expect to see a rope sticking out of the floor, ramrod straight.

"Please be informed that only water is allowed in the library," he added. "No drinks or food. Your lunch will be served in the dining garden, to which I will personally escort you."

Dining garden? That sounded promising. "Thank you, Samuin."

One wing flap later for a polite goodbye, I was left alone with what I hoped would be useful reads.

I dug into the history scrolls first. It turned out the late Queen Mother had been talented as well as gifted with a great sense of humor.

The huge gargoyle warriors in the middle of what was described as the first war among their kind had a crying emoji for a face.

Decades later, a ripped warrior with a broadsword was staring at a woman in a crinoline dress, his eyes two big stars.

In the next drawing, these two were standing together in regal clothing, expressions

dopey and tiny hearts floating around their heads.

I burst into giggles. The Queen Mother had been a genius. Why translate tedious historical texts when you could simply turn the key moments into comics and make most of them hilarious? I hadn't laughed like this in a long time.

Around an hour later, I rolled up the last history scroll feeling lighter but not much better informed.

I now knew that Gargoyles had battled lots of creatures—including dragons and what looked like Bigfoot—but the drawings and the occasional short descriptions didn't tell me why those conflicts had occurred in the first place.

Why did the different kinds of intelligent monsters do what they did?

Zombie 007 and the vampires following him wanted world domination, but what about the werewolves, Elves, and whatever else was out there?

All in all, Gargoyles' history wasn't much different than ours.

There had been kings and queens, conflicts with neighboring homeclouds and with creatures threatening lives on the ground, days of prosperity, days of hunger that no regeneration could save Gargoyles from, years with high mortality among humans and children on the homecloud...

All the babies were born with slightly extended human lifespans, wings, and tails. The gargoyle genes prevailed over the human ones.

I placed a hand on my belly. What if my one night with Xaniban had gotten me pregnant? What if I was carrying his child, and he didn't come back?



I tried to distract myself from that dreadful thought with the scrolls on culture, but it was no use. Then my eyes drifted to one of the scrolls Samuin had recommended. It wouldn't hurt to take a quick peek inside, would it?

By the time Samuin came to pick me up for lunch, I had examined the erogenous zones scroll extensively enough to write a scientific report on it. Though, I wasn't sure some of the positions depicted in the Kama Sutra section were physically possible. I mean... wow .

As I followed Samuin to the dining garden downstairs, he informed me that there was no news of Xaniban, but that it was still early for the warriors to return. I could only hope the Chamberlain's reassurance wasn't just that--reassurance.

The dining garden turned out to be a room transitioning into a garden; all the pieces of furniture in here had plants growing on them.

Think chair legs covered in vines, table legs wrapped in delicate stems with red blossoms here and there, and grapes hanging from the vine on the high ceiling.

Light was seeping through it, bright enough to give me the outdoor feel. Stunning.

A plate overflowing with rabbit meat and roasted potatoes awaited me.

There was a bowl of salad, a selection of cheeses, and dessert as well.

I asked Samuin to have lunch with me, but he had already eaten so he just kept me company.

Instead of inundating him with questions this time, I told him what he wanted to know about the ground.

Mostly about wooing a woman, to “ensure my studies are up to date, my Queen.”

“Will you return to your reading?” Samuin asked while I was inhaling the cake with sweet lemons and oranges.

“I’m not sure.” I didn’t have much left to read in the culture scrolls, but I also didn’t feel like a touristy stroll through this museum-worthy palace would distract me from my worry over Xaniban. What could I do to occupy my mind?

“If I go back to the library, will you let me know as soon as the scouts see the king returning?”

“Immediately. Your presence outside upon my liege’s return will be much needed by both of you.”

There it was again, the same thing Xaniban had hinted at before leaving. Everyone except me seemed to know how I would react if– when he came back.

I heaved a sigh. Enough avoiding the Mate Bond Scroll. It was time I found some answers and dispelled any doubts I had about the mate bond being just lore.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

Did I say reading the scroll would give me peace of mind? Scratch that. I was now more uncertain than ever about whether the mate bond was made-up or not.

The Mate Bond Scroll basically consisted of long lists of the mate bond's effects in specific scenarios.

And the list of effects under the subheading Signs of Bond's Appearance came pretty close to the euphoria and happiness I had experienced in bed with Xaniban.

Maybe that was because female bodies didn't react so differently to a mind-shattering orgasm, or five.

But since I'd never come so many times in a row, there was nothing I could compare last night's fireworks with to draw a plausible conclusion.

Then there were the feelings listed under Short-Term Separation: When Bond Is New .

It was as if someone had written down everything I felt today.

Increasing worry? Check. Inability to concentrate?

Check. Overconsuming thoughts about mate?

Check. Lack of interest in favorite activities?

Check. Then again, I hadn't experienced "loss of appetite, anger fits, uncontrollable

crying, and mood swings.”

I honestly didn’t know what to think. If this was a myth created to prevent Gargoyles’ extinction by convincing them cross-species relationships rocked, kudos to whoever had made it so realistic.

If the mate bond did exist, then... I could only hope that my animar would return.

Because the listed effects of a mate’s death were horrifying.

Several hours later, I no longer cared about mate bonds and scrolls. Nothing could distract me from the fact that Xaniban was not back yet. Not a tropical bath with a view of the sunset. Not an exploration of the palace with a plate of cheese in hand. Nothing.

When night fell and there was still no news on Operation Kill Zombie 007, I put a mental check mark next to “loss of appetite” and “mood swings”.

“My Queen should eat something,” Samuin said at the bedchamber’s door.

“No, I can’t. My stomach is twisted in knots.” I closed the door on him and walked back into the room.

He poked his head inside through the upper door. “Some dessert, perhaps? How about ice cream?”

“Ice cream?” I sighed. “I don’t think I can enjoy even that.” When I spoke again, anger slipped into my tone. “You seriously believe ice cream will help? I don’t want ice cream. I don’t want food. I want Xan!”

“You shall have him soon.”

“How can you be so freaking calm?” I raised my voice. “You can’t know whether he’ll return. You know crap.”

“You stand strong before me, not unwell, drained of energy or heartbroken. Therefore, I do not know crap.”

Hope surged through me, washing the anger away. “You’re sure that I would have felt him die? That he’s alive?”

“I already told you so.” Samuin’s tail curled then uncurled, revealing his frustration. “Shall I bring you the ice cream? You can have it in bed. No need to walk all the way to the dining garden.”

“In bed?” One look at the big bed, as empty and cold as I felt inside, and tears welled in my eyes. “Forget the ice cream! I want Xan back... Why, oh why, didn’t I kiss him goodbye?”

“I shall leave my Queen to rest, then. I will be nearby, should you require anything.”

“Rest, ha!” I half sobbed, half laughed.

“There will be no sleep for me tonight.” I snickered as a thought hit me.

“I should make my contribution to the Mate Bond Scroll . Grandma hasn’t added sleep deprivation to the endless list of side effects of short-term separation.

I can draw it, so as to add color to that boring piece of silk.

It will depict me with bloodshot eyes and big blue circles around them—Hold on!

What if the readers mistake me for a vamp? ”

Samuin didn't reply, the smart gargoyle. He politely nodded and flew away, leaving me to laugh at my own stupid joke.

Seconds later, my laughter turned to sobs.

Yep, the mate bond was crap. I didn't believe in it for a second.

I spent the night pacing in the bedchamber like a caged tiger. There was a whole palace for me to pace through, but I preferred to be on my own. The way I had gotten used to being in the early post-apocalyptic months.

Daylight found me still awake and close to hysterical. I couldn't just wait and do nothing any longer.

"I wish to speak with the warriors," I said the moment I opened the door and found Samuin standing outside. "Or the guards. Or whoever is allowed to go to the ground and can survive down there."

"Good morning."

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"I am afraid my Queen cannot be allowed to do that."

I did not have the patience for this. "Why the hell not?"

"I understand you wish to leave. But this is your home now, regardless of whether my liege has fallen or not."

"I don't wish to leave," I snapped. "I wish to know where Xan is! I have to know what happened, don't you get it?"

“My Queen—”

“Yes, I’m supposed to be your queen,” I reminded him. “So I will talk to somebody and I will find volunteers to go scout the location where their king went to. And I will be going with them.”

“Impossible. Even if volunteers are found, you cannot expose yourself to such danger.”

“I have lived in the center of the capital of danger for half a year,” I spat out. “All I need is a weapon, which you can feel free to bring me from the upper section of the wall. Then you will take me to whoever can get the job done.”

“My Queen—”

“Don’t my-queen me!” I poked him in the chest. “Move out of my way, Samuin.”

He stepped back but not enough to give me room to squeeze past him. “You should not be touching me. Your scent on my skin could be my death sentence.”

“I will kill you myself, unless you let me get to the warriors.”

That was when the frown on his face disappeared and he smiled at me. Smiled.

Was he amused by my threat? Didn’t he realize I was beside myself with worry? Trying to stop me from getting to Xaniban was not going to end well for him—

“You can go to the guards in the courtyard,” he said, his feet leaving the ground with a powerful wing flap.

“I can?” That was a quick win against Samuin. “They are allowed to go to the

ground?”

“They are not, but they do not have to go anywhere. Neither do you.”

It finally clicked.

“Yes, my Queen,” his smile broadened, “I just heard the call of the scouts. My liege is coming home.”



*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

For the first time, I wished I had huge bat wings. My legs simply couldn't take me to the courtyard fast enough.

I made it outside, breath heaving, heart racing, stomach twisted by a mix of excitement and nerves. I ran to where the guards had gathered, and they parted to let me inside the circle they had formed for landing. Xaniban and his warriors were yet to arrive.

I tried to get my breathing back to normal as I stared up in the sky. Shocked gasps came from around me, combined with the flutter of wings and the words "queen" and "mate" being whispered. Only now did I realize I was still wearing the queenly robe.

Well, fuck it. Xaniban was here, and that was all that mattered.

The courtyard erupted in wing-flaps as he appeared above the palace wall, flanked by his warriors. His loincloth shone like gold in the sunlight. He was truly back!

My hands and feet went cold. My pulse sped up.

I felt light-headed and weak in the knees.

Tears filled my eyes at the same time as a huge smile broke across my face.

The realization that each of these sensations was listed on the Mate Bond Scroll under Reunion after Short-Term Separation was something I would dwell on later. Much later.

Xaniban wasn't smiling while he and his soldiers were descending.

There was no triumphant look on his face at seeing me dressed as he wanted and waiting for his arrival exactly as he'd predicted.

His dark eyes were fixed on me with blazing intensity.

Had I not known Gargoyles didn't eat humans, I would have expected to be devoured.

A smart creature would be running for its life at the sight of such a hungry-looking predator approaching.

I kept smiling, and heat pooled low in my belly.

Xaniban landed, took the two steps separating us in a heartbeat, and wrapped me in his arms, tail, and wings.

The whole world around me disappeared. Within those wings, warmth and semi-darkness engulfed me. I couldn't see his face, but I didn't need to. His mouth found mine with hot urgency.

The kiss was hard, possessive, and deep enough for me to feel his fangs.

I linked my fingers at his back and tried to pull him closer, though that was impossible.

His fingers were in my hair, angling my head just right for the searing kiss.

The only reason our lips parted at some point was that we both needed oxygen.

“Anima,” Xaniban murmured reverently, his forehead resting on mine. He brushed away the tears rolling down my cheeks. “My mate... My little blessing...”

I buried my face in his chest. His heart beat strong and fast. He was alive. He was here. I couldn't think about anything else right now.

Okay, maybe just one other thing. “Did you find the flesh eaters' king?”

“Yes.” There was no mistaking the pride in that single word. “We bring you his head.”

“Good,” I said fiercely.

He tilted my chin up for another smoldering kiss. Then he opened his wings.

The light returned, and with it came the reminder that we weren't alone. The courtyard was filled with kneeling gargoyles. Had they been on their knees since their king's arrival? Oops.

“Rise, my loyal brethren,” Xaniban said, keeping me in the circle of his arms and tail.

Which was good, because I wasn't letting go of him anytime soon.

“Our centuries-old enemy has been defeated! Many fell for this victory, and we will honor them with a feast tomorrow, from dusk until dawn! I shall officially present my mate to the whole homecloud then. May it be a celebration like no other!”

Cheers, roars, and wing-flaps accompanied every part of the king's short speech. I joined them to the best of my ability, beyond myself with joy. The zombies were done for, and I had Xaniban by my side.

Were we mates, two parts of one soul brought back together after centuries of reincarnating apart?

Maybe. Maybe not. I felt what I felt, whatever the scientific explanation, and I was going to follow wherever those feelings led me.

Was I afraid to be vulnerable with someone, and in a post-apocalyptic world?

You bet. But if the last 24 hours had been any indication, I had already opened up my heart.

It was too late to run. It was time to be brave... and stay.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

I looked up in search of Xaniban's gaze. I wanted to let him know exactly how he made me feel. How I wanted to celebrate his return to me, alive and victorious.

I found him already looking down at me, grown oblivious to the cheering around us just like I had. The hunger in his eyes matched my own. And mine was all-consuming.

Then we were airborne, me nestled in Xaniban's arms. I rested my head on his shoulder, face nuzzled into his neck.

I took in his scent: he smelled of male and something I could only describe as gargoyle.

Warm, musky, spicy. I wanted to rub myself against him like a cat, to get his scent on me and mine, on him.

That was how possessive he made me feel.

He flew us over the palace before descending to a small balcony. He didn't say anything during our short flight except, "I passed through a raincloud. No need to bathe."

Thank God—and the Gargoyles' gods—for that. I was burning so hot that I would have had Xaniban even with the signs of battle still on him.

Relief flooded me when the balcony we landed on turned out to be that of his bedchamber. It was ironic how a day ago, I had wanted so desperately to get to this

same balcony and escape. And now Xaniban couldn't bring me inside the bedchamber fast enough.

The second we were in the room, my legs went around his waist and my arms around his neck. His mouth met mine in a fiery dance of passion that had me dizzy with want. He was drinking me in, consuming me, tracing the curve of my neck with lips and tongue... I loved it, but I needed something else.

"No foreplay," I managed to say in between my gasps and moans. When he stopped sucking the skin over my pulse and pulled back enough to look into my eyes, I added, "You. Inside me. Now."

His lips stretched into that sexy lopsided smile of his, and he kissed me, long and hard.

"I need that as much as you do, anima ," he whispered over my lips, "but you are not ready to take me yet. I will not hurt you, ever."

I rubbed myself against his impressive bulge, our loincloths the only obstacle between us.

He groaned at the tease, his grip on my ass growing firmer.

Holding his gaze, I told him, "I'm ready. I got wet the moment I saw you land in the courtyard."

A low rumble sounded from deep inside of him. "I will taste your honey after. I will not be denied then."

"Not ever."

His tail patted my thigh. “Turn around for me.”

I slid down his irresistible body to the ground and did as asked. One of his arms immediately pulled me against him, my back to his chest and abs. His tail made sure my lower body remained flush against his, while his hand slipped under the fishnet to cup a breast.

My breath hitched. I had not realized the top provided such easy access from below. Now Gargoylish fashion made more sense.

Xaniban’s fingers played with the tight bud while his mouth nibbled on my ear and his other hand loosened the laces keeping my loincloth in place. Integrated panties included. He had agreed to skip the foreplay, but what he was doing now was getting me just as soaked.

With me naked from the waist down, Xaniban proceeded to free himself from his sword and the offensive clothing separating us.

He didn’t leave my side, though. His tail slid sensually slowly along my left hip, across my belly and up between my breasts all the way to my right shoulder, thus keeping our heated skin in constant contact.

I had a thing for that strong, naughty tail.

When it went around my waist and Xaniban’s hands gripped my hips, I knew it was time. Finally! I pressed my palms against the cool balcony door to steady myself, arched my back and—“Wait.” The inspiration hit me so fast my mouth spoke before my mind could discard the bold idea. “Take us up, Xan.”

I looked over my shoulder, blushing furiously. His eyes were wide in surprise. Then he grinned.

“My mate has done some reading,” he said, sounding pleased. He brought my back against his chest again and took my mouth in a backward kiss that had me melting in his embrace. “Are you sure?”

“Don’t keep me empty and incomplete any longer.” No more fear from my own desires. I was ready to be claimed by my gargoyle in the most primal of his kind’s ways.

“Yes, my Queen.” His fangs graced my neck. “I want to be whole again, too.”

I gave out an unsexy yelp when my feet suddenly left the ground, but there was nothing to worry about. Xaniban was holding me securely against him as he flew up. He stopped halfway to the ceiling, ensuring there was enough space above us for his wings to keep us airborne.

“Hands on the door, anima .”

Biting my lip, I obeyed.

He maneuvered me expertly with hands and tail until I was straddling him in reverse. With my palms on the balcony door and his grip on my thighs, I was perfectly stable for what came next.

Was I flexible enough for what came next? Anticipation surged through me. Only one way to find out.

I groaned as he entered me but not in pain. Xaniban took his time, making sure not to hurt me. How he had the self-control to go slow, after our separation had made us so starved for each other, I had no clue. He was the king of patient foreplay. My king.

“Yes!” I could feel every single detail in this position.



Every ridge, every vein, every pulsation of his cock on his way to my core.

The brush of air against my skin as he flapped his wings was indescribably arousing.

The dim-lit room amplified each sensation, sight having given precedence to my other senses.

His tail's tip began working my clit, and I cried out. When he finally bottomed out, I unraveled.

"Gods!" He growled as my walls contracted around him with the aftershocks of my unexpected orgasm. "You keep trying to rob me of my control."

"Mmm..." I managed as my body quivered, every nerve alight with pleasure. Flying Doggy was officially my new favorite position.

Then Xaniban began moving again, hips snapping forward at a pace set by the flaps of his wings, and I could only make noises too primitive for words.

I felt dominated, I felt possessed, and I didn't mind one bit.

I could finally let myself go completely, trusting my partner to take both of us toward nirvana.

He surrendered, too, his growls as he claimed me turning feral.

Knowing I could drive a male so controlled to the edge was the greatest aphrodisiac.

The pressure inside me started building again, and I could feel Xaniban's cock growing bigger as his own release loomed. This time, we would come together—

He stopped. I growled in protest but there was no need. One second we were landing and the next, I was turned to face him and lifted up with a tail around my waist. Then he was inside me again, hot and hard and throbbing. The king was back in his palace, where he absolutely belonged.

Fingers digging in his shoulders, I threw my head back, a sigh on my lips. The feel of him inside me, stretching me to my limits, making it impossible to tell where he ended and I began... Perfection . I was finally free of the emptiness and loneliness that had plagued me in our time apart.

“Eyes on me, anima. ”

Our gazes met and held. There was raw passion in his eyes but also devotion that made my heart skip a beat.

“Always, Xan.”

And then he was moving inside me again, his tail bouncing me on his cock as one hand kept me flush against his chest and the other slid under my top to tease a nipple. I caught him glancing at the net of golden threads and diamonds before meeting my gaze once more.

“My color...” His words were a half-growl against my lips. “My mate... Mine!”

“Yours! And you... are mine. ” I pulled up and bit the tip of his ear. A gargoyle’s erogenous zone.

His wings unfolded as he exploded with a roar, pulsing deep inside me. That pushed me right over the edge, and I unraveled. At that exact moment, Xaniban’s fangs sank into the crook of my neck.

A second climax hit me that went on and on, all the while he kept filling me up.

He sank to his knees, me still in his arms and tail. I didn't know how long we stayed entwined like that, breathless and spent. What I did know was that I was unimaginably happy. I didn't want this moment to end.

Several slow and tender kisses later, Xaniban whispered over my lips, "Let us go bathe, little blessing."

"Yes," I said through a playful smile. "Then we'll do this all over again."

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

Our plans for after the tropical rain bath were sabotaged by something none of us had expected.

I fell asleep. Not him who had returned from battle and given me three orgasms in a row, but me.

My sleepless night of waiting for his return had finally caught up to me.

I remembered resting my head on Xaniban's shoulder while he was carrying me toward the bed, then... nothing.

Thankfully, our plans were not ruined, simply postponed to dusk, when I was awoken with a kiss on my lips. My nether lips.

"What the—" I gasped as my clit got flicked. I threw the covers aside.

My gargoyle smiled languidly up at me from between my thighs. "Morning, anima . Or should I say, evening?"

I bit my lower lip to stop a moan from escaping at the sensual lick of his tongue. "You could have," moan , "woken me up", groan , "first."

"You said you would never deny me the taste of your honey." He pressed his soft blue lips to one inner thigh then the other. His eyes met mine. "And I woke up ravenous."

Damn. He always knew the right thing to say to make me melt in his arms. And then

there was the sight of him between my thighs. So incredibly erotic.

“Maybe... you should... ask for real food... Xan!” His name ended on a cry since his tongue began circling my clit.

If he kept going like this, I wasn't going to last long.

“Or... do you plan to keep us here... starving until the feast... Yes!” His tongue was now inside me, and my hips bucked under the rush of sensations.

My hands gripped his hair. Good thing Xaniban had a firm hold on me with hands and tail.

“The feast is not tomorrow.” His hot breath over my throbbing nub made my back arch. “The real feast is right here, right now . ”

“Oh God!”

From there onward there was no talking anymore, unless it was to call out his name. I knew he liked that. I could tell by the way his tail twitched and his wings fluttered slightly, partially unfolded as they were.

But my attempt to please him like that while he was pleasuring me, kind of backfired. Just when my climax was within my grasp, his mouth moved away and I was told to call him by his real name.

“Xaniban?” My brain was too scrambled to solve riddles.

He blew over my clit punishingly. “My title, anima. ”

“My king?” I sounded disappointed as I said it. He hadn't demanded titles until now,

acting like a man free of the need to have his ego stroked.

His tail curled and uncurled in displeasure.

Did we really have to play Guess Who now?

His eyes bore into mine, accusing me of not remembering the correct answer.

And then it clicked.

Yesterday, I wouldn't have called him that. Today, I felt ready to do it. And not because I was really desperate to come.

“ Animar . My animar ,” I said possessively, my gaze meeting his head on.

A growl came from the back of Xaniban's throat. He gripped my ass cheeks and lifted my lower body off the bed, bringing my pussy to his lips like a man parched.

And drink from me he did.

This time when I came, it was with animar on my lips.

Afterward, he did order actual food. We had a feast on the chaise, with me straddling him. I fed him meat and cheese the way he had fed me mango a day ago: with fingers and lips. I enjoyed every second of it.

When we got to the ice cream— thank you , Samuin —Xan overtook the feeding part. The sneaky gargoyle made sure the majority of the spoonfuls were overflowing so there would be ice cream for him to eat, too. Off my chin, neck and breasts.

We needed a bath after that, he said, but what he did to me in the tub required yet

another shower.

When we eventually returned to the bed and he still needed release, I remembered how good it had felt to be straddling him. So I did just that.

As I moved for both of us, I drank him in.

Sprawled on his back with his wings outstretched and his long hair spilled on the sheets, his whole body a blue perfection against the golden silk sheets.

From this angle, it felt like he was impossibly deep inside me, reaching a part of me that no one else had ever touched. And I knew that no one else ever would.

There would be no one else for me. Insane or not, I had fallen for a gargoyle, and in the span of two days, at that. I could no longer imagine my life without him.

He couldn't stop touching me while I was leading us both to the explosive finale.

His hands and tail were everywhere, working me, stoking the fire in me higher and higher.

One hand tweaked a nipple, the other squeezed my ass, and the tip of his tail drew teasing lines down my back.

Then both his hands cupped my breasts and his tail urged me on with playful slaps.

And then his fingers dug into my hips and his tail pulled me down into a molten kiss...

Xaniban was driving me crazy with a sensual overload.

I reciprocated with a feathery stroke of his wings as I rode him. He pulsed inside me and his tail lost its grip around my waist, but this time my touch did not undo him.

Guess I would have to do a lot more exploring of his body in order to break that ironclad control of his again. Maybe I should try that move on his tail that the scroll described in detail? That would be an intriguing start of my little sensual experiment—

Xaniban shifted underneath me, changing the angle at which our bodies met. My movements faltered as I was hit by even more pleasure. He took over, thrusting upward into me with possessive growls.

I dug my fingers in his pecs and met him thrust for thrust.

The tip of his tail rubbed my clit.

I fell apart, and my release triggered Xaniban's. He pulled me down onto his chest and enveloped me in his wings, every shudder of ecstasy shared between us. He held me to him with all he had, as if I were the most precious thing in his world.

I fell asleep to the warmth of his embrace and the strong beat of his heart.



## Page 26

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

Next time Xaniban woke me up, it was with a kiss on my upper lips. His intentions were innocent: he wanted me to see the sunrise over our homecloud.

We watched it through the balcony door while sitting on the lush carpet, my back to his chest and my legs outstretched between his. It was a magnificent view—both that of the sunrise outside and of the muscular blue thighs inside. I gazed at the former and caressed the latter. Mmm.

The fire-red color of the clouds above the city—which, as I had learned, served to keep the homecloud hidden from enemy eyes while also providing a stable, favorable climate—reminded me of blood.

I know: what normal person thinks of blood in such a romantic setting?

But three days in heaven couldn't make me forget the situation on the ground.

While I thrived in the safety and comfort of this magical world and its king's embrace, my community was still in the nightmarish reality.

It was high time I did something about that.

“Xan, can I ask you something?... Somethings ?” I hugged my knees to my chest and turned until I could see his face.

He had a languid smile on. “Anything and anythings .”

His tail went around my waist and his arms pulled me closer until I was as snug as a

bug against his chest but could still see his face. He must have felt I was nervous to talk. As always, his body radiated such heat that I didn't need anything on my naked skin but him.

“You killing the flesh eaters’ king... It’s a huge victory. You succeeded where your ancestors failed, despite the fact that they weren’t facing a full-blown zombie apocalypse.”

“That is true.” He patted my hip. “But it is not a question.”

I took a deep breath. “What happens next?”

The tips of his wings rose in a shrug. “We celebrate.” Then he specified with a fangy smile, “We feast.” After he got from me the blush he had most certainly intended, Xaniban added, “The head of the king will be added to my ancestors’ trophy room, right next to the head of the blood suckers’ king.

Have you explored that part of the palace yet?

Or were you too busy reading certain scrolls in the library? ”

I rolled my eyes and poked him in the pec. “Stop teasing me, Your Majesty. It’s not like you don’t benefit from my reading preferences.”

He grinned and flapped his wings once.

“Luckily, I missed the trophy room during my stroll yesterday.” Imagine biting into a cheese slice a moment before you come face to head with taxidermied Dracula. I preferred the fridge magnet version, thank you very much. “I meant what happens now, as in the grand scale of things?”

Xaniban brushed his knuckle along my jawline. “You are my mate. You do not deny that anymore.”

I nodded. My scientific brain demanded more evidence that such a thing as a mate bond existed, but there was no denying my feelings for the gargoyle I had yet to get to know, but felt as if I already did. In his arms, I was protected, happy, loved. Home.

“You are also my queen,” he added. “You are no longer denying that either.”

I made a face. The moment I had shown up among Xaniban’s subjects in diamond-covered nipples, I had sealed my fate. Not that I knew what being a queen up here entailed, but that was a topic for another conversation.

“Then you know what awaits us, little blessing.” He cupped my face to ensure I met his gaze.

Those midnight-blue eyes, so beautiful in their alienness, shone with love.

“I will care for you, keep you safe, and cherish you until my last breath. Afterward, I will wait for your soul in the Great Beyond so that we truly become one, beyond the death of our mortal bodies.”

My breath faltered. Xaniban’s words might sound cheesy, but I knew he meant every word. I felt it with every fiber of my being.

I placed my palm over his heart. “I’ll love you right back, animar .”

His wings fluttered and his tail tightened around me. “Will you give me many pips , too, when you are ready?”

I raised a brow at him. “Do I actually have a say in the matter?” His tone suggested

he was not asking a question but stating a fact.

“Of course. You determine when you are ready for the first pip and at what number to stop after the third pip .”

My eyebrows reached my hairline.

Xaniban smiled confidently and patted my thigh.

I shook my head, incredulous. “Whoa. Such a generous king you are, to give me the freedom to choose past baby number three.”

His dark brows knitted together. “You want fewer than three?”

Poor Xaniban sounded so confused by the possibility of a woman not wanting to birth a small kindergarten. How many children did a Gargoylish family have on average? That was a question I suspected I would eventually find the answer to, most probably by becoming part of the statistics myself.

I caressed his chest until his frown disappeared and a pleased rumble escaped him.

“I haven’t thought about kids before, so I have no idea, honestly.

I had lost hope in finding a good man to raise a family with.

” And I hadn’t found an actual man, had I?

All along, the one I had been searching for had been waiting for me amid the clouds.

“Anyway, I believe the matter should be left in the hands of God—er, Gods. I mean, I might already be pregnant, with us getting carried away for days and all.”

Xaniban chuckled. “ Anima , you can’t be carrying a pip yet.

I haven’t willed it so.” My eye roll made him squint at me.

He patted my belly with the tip of his tail.

“When I fill you up with fruit-bearing seed, you will know. Because you would have demanded it of me, once ready. The decision on the first pip is yours to make, not mine. That is the law of the Gods.”

“Okay...” I guess? It might be time to suspend all disbelief and simply roll with the impossible. My gargoyle could will his swimmers to become fruit-bearing ? Sure. Of course. Next.

“Are you saying you are ready now?” Hope and yearning were clear to hear in his voice.

I gave a shaky laugh. “Down, boy. I’m not ready to go there with you yet.” Feeling his tail droop around my waist, I quickly added, “ Yet , Xan. I will be someday. Just give me time.”

The smile returned to his face. “I will wait patiently.”

I pulled him down for a kiss to let him know how much I appreciated his patience. Then it was time to ask the big question, this time without leaving space for misinterpretation.

“What happens with the ground now? With the zombies soon to be out of the picture and the vamps disorganized once more, will you do something about the other threats to humanity? You want to save humans, don’t you?”

Xaniban exhaled loudly through his nose—a sigh, I now knew. He shifted until he was sitting more comfortably with me on his lap.

“Any family members of yours are my family, too, and are welcome here. Individual humans who agree to come to the homecloud once approved, I can save. Humankind... is beyond my abilities to save, anima . Even if all homeclouds were to unite—which has not been done in centuries—it would still not be enough. The hope was lost the moment the aliens approached Earth, and the human leaders chose not to fight, too greedy for the technologies offered. They chose to stand disunited, unwilling to share those technologies with other kingdoms.”

I went slack-jawed. “You’re saying that some governments knew the aliens were coming but decided to keep it a secret?”

Wait, why was I so surprised? Then again, in movies the humans always chose to fight when aliens showed up, even when the extraterrestrials were peaceful. Why hadn’t humanity acted like that now? For once, it wouldn’t have been a dumb move; the third apocalypse might have been averted. Dammit.

“I had my informants on the ground,” Xaniban told me, “so I knew the human leaders were keeping more than the contact with the aliens a secret from each other. They were also planning to use the alien technologies against other kingdoms. Humankind was divided and vulnerable, and its incoming fall was foreseen by all shadow kinds with informants of their own. It just so happened that the flesh eaters’ king was the first to take advantage of the situation. ”

“He wanted to take over before the aliens did,” I thought out loud. “But what do you mean by shadow kinds ?”

Tracing soothing circles up and down my arm, Xaniban explained.

“The kinds who used to live in hiding from humans. They chose to come into the light before the alien ships infested the skies. Many of the shadow kinds perceive as theirs what humans call their own, and they finally saw a chance to take it back.”

“Like the Elves?” Everything I’d seen and heard lately was starting to make sense now. “They want the green territories of the world for themselves, like forests and parks.”

“Yes, it is so.”

“And those predatory mermaids have taken over the rivers, lakes, and seas.”

“There are also those who want control over the ground for its resources. The moon-cursed and the pixies, to name a few, need humans to replenish their numbers.”

I fell silent. Gargoyles, as romantic as they were, were also among the shadow kinds Xaniban was talking about. They needed women to survive, and so they were part of the war for Earth themselves. But if there was such a thing as good guys in this war, it was the Gargoyles.

I had been unbelievably lucky to find myself in the arms of one.

And one hell of a gargoyle, at that. Which made me decide that if Carson had made it back to the bunker in one piece, I wouldn’t kill the coward.

I would thank him for forcing me to stay in that monster-infested building, thus helping me find my Xan.

Only then would I beat the crap out of Carson for leaving me behind to die.

*Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 5:09 pm*

“So, the aliens joined the party last,” I noted, finally piecing everything together.

“They pretended to want to help us—what remained of our civilization, anyway—so that we would go to them willingly. Like lambs to the slaughter. And while gathering the survivors up for experiments and reproduction,” I shuddered at the thought despite Xaniban’s warmth, “they also began bombing the cities. They needed to get rid of the zombies and vamps as the greatest threat to the aliens’ precious human resource. ”

Xaniban kissed the top of my head. “Now you understand why my kind cannot save yours. It is too late.”

“But you can continue fighting! You plan to do so, don’t you? You spoke of an alliance with the Elves in the war room.”

“An alliance to defeat the flesh eaters,” he reminded me.

“We no longer need to take the risk that alliance talks with the Elves always entail. We have fulfilled our ancestors’ duty.

The war is over for us. Now I must focus my limited resources, as my brethren will of me, on protecting this homecloud and saving individual humans whenever possible. ”

My heart fell. “But you’ve always protected the ground.”

“We live in a different world now,” Xaniban said firmly. “The ground is lost, or it will be very soon. If we lose our warriors protecting it, this homecloud will be lost,



too. I must put your safety and that of my brethren first.”

I shifted in his embrace until I was sitting on my heels, facing him completely.

“You don’t have to lose your warriors,” I told him just as firmly.

“You said it yourself: to be divided is to be vulnerable and weak. Why make humankind’s mistake by trying to survive disunited, every homecloud for itself, letting the aliens destroy you one by one?

You can’t remain hidden from those black ships of theirs forever.

They will come for every single homecloud once they’re done with the survivors on the ground.

They will come for me and for the mates of all your brethren.

Then it will be too late to save your kind, Xan. ”

My fervent speech was met with calmness. He must have considered such a future, the smart king that he was. “You speak of an alliance between all homeclouds.”

Hope bloomed in my chest, and I threaded my fingers through his.

“Start with that. Since you said it still won’t be enough, try to negotiate with any shadow kind who want the ground for themselves but don’t need all humans dead to achieve that.

The aliens are their enemies, too, because test subjects are always needed. ”

“ Anima ...”

I pressed a finger to his lips before he could say no.

I scooted closer. “Once everyone is united against the common enemy, you hit the aliens hard. You bring your wingless allies to the alien ships and kill the motherfuckers!” His eyes went wild at the swear word, and I realized he might be interpreting it literally. Oops.

“And I, Xan, will be right there beside you. Because my community hides under an air base with an operational fighter jet, and I’ve been studying the manual and trying the flight simulator there.

I believe I can get that aircraft airborne and send it crashing into an alien ship, if nothing else. I’ll blow them right out of the sky.”

His eyes narrowed. “Anima—”

“With the aliens defeated, you can move on to the lesser threats, whatever else is out there killing people. Your allies can have the ground. The surviving humans can be restricted to safe havens of sorts where your kind will always be welcome. Your single warriors can find their mates there—just tell them that and see if they won’t volunteer to be on the front line of the war with the aliens. ”

“ Anima. ”

“But before you do all this,” I continued in a hurry, “you first have to take me to the air base. My community will trust your kind only if they see me with you. Give them a chance, please. If you don’t approve them for a move to the homecloud, at least bring them food and medicine. Let them become your first allies and—”

His mouth descended on mine, stealing my breath away. When Xaniban pulled back, I had trouble remembering what I had been about to say.

“Here is what will happen,” he stated, getting up and pulling me on my feet along with him.

“I will waste no more time answering your questions, which are not questions at all but demands of a queen from her king.” This time he was the one to silence me with a finger on my lips.

He brought my body flush against his. “Today is for us, a gargoyle and his mate.

Tonight as well. We must celebrate our unity in front of our brethren and the Gods themselves, as well as honor our fallen.

“Tomorrow, I will send scouts to this air base you speak of to assess the situation before our official visit, while I will be showing you an animal farm. You will be too sore for anything else once I am done with you tonight.”

The sinful promise in his eyes made me tingle from head to toe. “And the day after tomorrow?”

One corner of his lips quirked up into a fangy smile, and his tail went around my thigh. “I will take my queen to my warriors and let her personally present our war strategy to them.”

“Our strategy? So you approve of my plan?” Come on, even I knew my ideas were more suitable for a blockbuster script than an actual strategy.

“Yes.” His tail twitched against my thigh. “Mostly.”

“Let me guess: you don’t agree to me joining the battle.

” Admittedly, I would be just as opposed to him exposing himself to such danger.

Not to mention, one year of amateur flying lessons and a few rounds on a flight simulator did not make an Air Force pilot.

Not that I would tell Xan that tiny detail.

His tail twitched again, and his wings fluttered. My gargoyle was nervous.

“Xan?” I asked with trepidation.

He brushed my chin up, eyes searching mine. “This is what you want?”

Was he truly considering it? Unable to summon a word, I nodded.

Determination filled his gaze at the same time as he said grumpily, “You will be fighting only by my side.”

“Oh, Xan!” I flung myself into his arms, clinging to him, overwhelmed with relief and excitement.

He was going to help my community and try to save my kind.

I knew in the end things were not up to him but his—our subjects, but what mattered was that I had his support.

Despite his fear for my safety, despite the rules in his society to keep women away from danger, despite the madness that my plan was, Xaniban was right there with me in all this. My animar .

“Do you think many warriors will volunteer to—Hey!” I yelped when he tail-slapped my ass lightly.

“No more talking about war today,” he reminded me. Hands cupping my ass cheeks

possessively, he added over my lips, “No more talking at all, anima .”

I bit my lip and pressed my palms against the center of his chest. “Just one final question.”

His brow furrowed. “What is it?”

“Why did you say I would be sore tomorrow?”

The frown disappeared, replaced by a devastating smile. He offered me his hand. “Let me show you why... Come to me, little blessing.”

I smiled right back and, without any hesitation, put my delicate hand in his large blue one. “Always.”

THE END