



# Demon Monster's Little Human

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** I was stone. Cursed. Caged.

Then she walked into my tomb and woke me with her blood.

Liora's human—too soft for this world, too tempting for a beast like me. I should've snapped her neck.

Instead, I dragged her to my throne.

Now she's mine. By ancient magic. By blood. By right.

She doesn't remember the past—but I do. She betrayed me once. Sealed me in darkness. And I swore I'd never forgive her.

But the way she moans my name?

I'll ruin her first.

Before the war. Before the reckoning.

She'll kneel for her forgotten king.

Or I'll make her.

Reader Note: This dark fantasy romance features a cursed gargoyle king, a defiant human heroine, blood magic, betrayal, forced proximity, and a fated mates twist. Possessive. Dangerous. Addictive.. He remembers everything she forgot—and he'll make her pay for it in chains and kisses.. HEA Guaranteed.

**Total Pages (Source):** 53

# Page 1

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1

LIORA

The whip never falls. That would be too merciful. No, the dark elves have their own ways of reminding me what I am—what I will always be. Property. Disposable. Nothing.

The overseer's lip curls as he shoves a rusted bucket into my arms. "You enjoy making messes, girl?" His voice slithers over my skin like oil, thick with a pleasure that has everything to do with watching me squirm.

I don't answer. I don't have to. The welt on my cheek from this morning's slap is still fresh, stinging with every breath. He grabs my chin, forces my face up. His claws dig in, not enough to draw blood—yet.

"You'll clean that temple until your hands bleed," he says, breath foul with rot and decay. "Every crack. Every stone. And if it isn't spotless by sundown, I'll carve a lesson into your skin you won't forget."

He lets go. His hand vanishes, but the bruises it leaves behind will linger.

A few of the other slaves whisper as I trudge past. Some in pity, most in warning. They think I deserve this, that I should've learned by now to lower my head, keep my mouth shut. And maybe they're right.

But I am not sorry.

The punishment? It isn't for stealing, or breaking a tool, or even speaking out of turn.

It's for looking a dark elf in the eye.

For daring to meet his gaze instead of flinching away like a trained dog.

The temple looms ahead, half-buried in the mountain's ribs, its bones of black stone and crumbling archways silhouetted against the bleeding sky. No one enters willingly. No one speaks of it. There are stories, of course—curses, ghosts, monsters that never sleep.

Inside the temple, the world is silent. Not dead. Not abandoned. Just waiting.

Cold fingers of dust and forgotten things curl around my ankles as I step inside. The light barely reaches past the entrance, swallowed whole by shadows that stretch, shift, watch.

I press my back to the nearest pillar, exhaling slow. This is fine. This is nothing.

I've survived worse.

The bucket clangs against the ground, and the sound echoes, unraveling through the corridors like something alive. The temple was built for creatures much larger than me. The ceilings stretch into forever, the walls etched with symbols no human tongue can pronounce.

I work fast. I scrub until my hands are raw, until my fingernails split and the filth under them is replaced by streaks of red. The stone drinks it in, hungry.

A breeze slithers past my ear, though there are no open doors. No windows. No life.

I go still.

Something is here.

A sound scrapes against the silence—low, rasping, deep. A breath.

My heart hammers. I swallow, pushing up from the floor. The brush clatters to the ground as I reach for the rusted dagger at my hip. A pathetic weapon. A useless defense.

But better than nothing.

The darkness thickens, pressing against my skin, sinking into my lungs.

A movement too large, too fluid, just at the periphery of my vision.

I run.

My bare feet slap against the stone, each step sending pain jolting up my spine, but I don't stop. I don't look back.

The temple halls twist, stretching into impossible directions, and my breath turns ragged as I sprint deeper into the ruins, my only thought: escape, escape, escape.

The thing behind me moves faster. Hunting.

I lunge forward, gripping a broken column, twisting myself through a narrow passage barely wide enough for my shoulders. My ribs scrape against the stone, but I shove through, ignoring the burn, ignoring the blood.

Silence.

I press my forehead against the damp wall, forcing myself to slow my breath, to listen.

Nothing.

Maybe it was never there. Maybe it was just?—

A gust of breath at my nape.

The temple roars around me as I tear myself forward, nearly tripping over my own feet. The passage opens into a chamber, vast and open, the ceiling swallowed by darkness. The air hums, thick with a power so ancient it makes my teeth ache.

Something waits in the center of the room.

Not a monster. Not a beast.

A throne.

Black stone, shattered at the edges, covered in chains. Carvings of talons, of wings, of something once great now crumbled into ruin.

At its base, half-buried in dust and time, a wing.

Not just any wing. A gargoyle's.

It isn't attached to a body. At least, not one I can see. It stretches across the floor, massive, carved from obsidian and cracked with age.

My pulse thrums against my throat.

The power in this room—it isn't just in the walls. It isn't just the temple itself.

It's him.

The stones beneath my feet tremble.

The chains rattling over the throne tighten.

The world explodes.

The ground splinters, a light erupts from my hands, sharp and blinding, lancing through the temple like a bolt of raw magic. The air shudders, deep and guttural, the temple groaning as something ancient begins to stir.

I stumble back, my breath sharp, my vision flickering between this life and something else.

A memory of another me standing in this very spot, whispering words that burn my tongue.

I press my hands to my chest, my pulse slamming against my heart. The air crackles around me, thick with something I don't understand, something awake.

The chains snap.

Stone shatters.

The stone moves.

I have nowhere left to run.

## Page 2

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2

DAIN

P ain.

It isn't the sharp kind, the fleeting bite of a blade or the sting of an open wound. This pain is deep, rotted, embedded in the marrow of me—a sickness that stretches through every inch of my flesh, filling the cracks of my body with something old, something ruined.

I am trapped.

I have been trapped.

I will not be trapped again.

A sound pierces the silence, sharp as a blade, a gasping intake of breath that is not mine.

There is another.

A threat.

Something shifts beneath me, around me—stone breaking, chains rattling, a prison unraveling. Centuries sloughs off like crumbling ruins, my senses clawing back into my body piece by jagged piece. My skin tightens, stone flaking off in burning sheets,

raw flesh pulsing beneath. My wings, stiff and starved of movement, unfurl in jerking spasms, half-numb, heavy with disuse.

But my mind—my mind is a storm, fragmented and vicious, shattered memories bleeding into each other in a tangle of time and rage.

Who am I?

My fingers curl against the stone, claws scraping against the jagged edges of the broken seal. A throne. A war. A woman with fire in her hands and betrayal on her tongue. I see her, I feel her—she did this to me.

A hiss escapes me, low and ragged, dragging against a throat too long unused. It turns into a growl. A snarl. Something guttural and hungry.

The presence in the room shifts. A tremor in the darkness. A fragile breath, a pulse racing too fast, thrumming like a rabbit's in a snare.

I smell her fear.

It snaps something loose inside me.

I lurch forward, muscles shrieking in protest, my entire form raw and aching, but I push past the agony. My head snaps up, molten gold eyes locking onto her—the figure standing frozen near the ruined throne.

Small. Soft. Human.

Purna.

The word erupts from some buried part of me, dripping with venom, with violence,



with a hatred so deep I feel it deep in my core. They did this. They caged me. They stole centuries from me.

She flinches back, bare feet slipping against the dust-slick stone. The dim torchlight flickers over her face, illuminating wild storm-gray eyes that seem too large for her face, too bright, too familiar.

No, I do not know her.

I lunge.

She stumbles away, a strangled noise breaking from her lips, a plea, a curse, a whisper—it doesn't matter. I am on her in a breath, my claws slamming into the wall on either side of her head, stone cracking under the force. She trembles between the cage of my arms, the stench of blood, sweat, defiance curling around me like a challenge.

I could crush her. Should crush her.

But I don't.

Something stops me.

It is small at first, a flicker of hesitation that I shove down, baring my teeth as I curl my claws around her throat, just enough to feel the rapid flutter of her pulse. So fragile. So easy to break.

But my fingers won't tighten.

A memory surges—a different throat beneath my hand, a different woman, dark eyes burning with power, whispering something that shattered me.

Her lips part, but the sound that leaves them isn't a scream. It isn't a beg.

It's my name.

“Dain.”

My body seizes. My grip slackens just enough for her to move—a mistake.

She ducks under my arm, shoving herself free, and bolts toward the ruins of the temple doors.

I snarl, rage blistering through my veins, and chase her down.

She is fast. I am faster.

She darts between fallen pillars, bare feet skidding over the uneven ground, desperation carved into every breath. I gain on her, wings snapping open, ignoring the sharp crack of pain in my back. The temple groans, the walls splitting further from the lingering magic that still churns through the air.

She did this.

She woke me.

She should be dead.

A single burst of speed closes the distance. My claws catch her wrist, yanking her back—too hard, too fast. She slams against me, soft curves colliding with stone-forged muscle, a gasp punching from her lungs as I spin her, pressing her down against the nearest pillar.

I bare my teeth, my wings curling around us, trapping her in a cage of heat and fury.

She stares up at me, breath heaving, lips parted.

Something sharp lances through my gut.

It is not pity.

Not mercy.

Not anything I can stomach.

I should rip her throat out. Tear her apart. Make her bleed for the time stolen from me, for the chains, the cold, the curse that still lingers in my bones like poison.

But something in her stares back at me, something familiar.

The realization fills me with rage, deeper than before. I want to hate her. I need to.

But my grip won't tighten.

I force myself closer, crowding her against the pillar, letting her feel what hunts her.

She trembles. But she does not look away.

"I should kill you," I breathe, voice scraping against the raw edges of my throat.

Her lips part, and gods curse me, my eyes flick to them.

The moment stretches. Too long. Too wrong.

She lifts her chin. No words, just a silent challenge, a fragile thing daring to stand against a monster.

For some reason, I do not end her.

I shove myself away instead, chest heaving, body coiled too tight. My pulse pounds in my ears, my own fury choking me.

She watches me like she's seen me before.

Like she knows me.

I do not like it.

I will not let her live.

I stalk toward her again but the temple has other plans.

The ceiling trembles. The pillars buckle. Whatever magic she wielded has broken something deeper, and the temple collapses around us.

I don't have time to think, to act, before the floor vanishes beneath our feet.

The last thing I hear is her gasp, the last thing I feel is her body colliding with mine.

We are falling.

## Page 3

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LIORA

The world crashes down. Stone splits, dust surges, and the ceiling gives way like brittle bone, swallowing us in the temple's final, dying breath. I fall—we fall—plunging into darkness, my scream swallowed before it can escape.

Impact slams through me. Rocks dig into my side, scraping skin, knocking my breath out of me. The ground isn't even—it shifts beneath me, debris tumbling, my limbs tangled in the chaos.

Silence slithers in next. Too sudden. Too heavy.

I cough, the taste of grit thick on my tongue. Everything aches. My chest, my arms, my skull—bruised but not broken. Still breathing. Still alive.

A sound rumbles through the dark.

Not stone shifting. Not the ruin settling.

Something else.

I freeze.

A growl slithers between the jagged edges of my consciousness, something low and raw, vibrating against the walls of our prison.

He is here.

I press a hand to the uneven ground, forcing myself up onto my elbows. The chamber is narrow, trapped beneath tons of collapsed ruin, but there's a glow—a dull, molten red illuminating the dust-clogged dark.

Him.

The gargoyle.

I barely see him at first, crouched in the rubble, hunched over, one knee bent, massive frame shrouded in crumbling dust. His wings, those wings—shift against the ruined floor, battered but whole, their obsidian edges flickering like dying embers. His tail drags against the ground, curling once before going still.

The glow comes from beneath his skin.

Veins of deep-crimson pulse beneath the blackened stone of his flesh, streaks of molten gold flickering at the edges, brightening with each breath. His chest rises, ragged and slow. He should be dead. We both should be.

But he is not human.

Neither is the sound that tears from his throat.

A deep, guttural snarl, raw with pain.

I push myself up fully, ignoring the screaming protest of my sides. A mistake.

His head snaps up.

Eyes burn into me—not gold, not ember, but something deeper, darker, a molten pit of fury buried beneath centuries of silence.

I do not move. Neither does he.

A thin ribbon of air stretches between us, charged and unforgiving, both of us half-buried, half-alive, half-waiting.

He shifts, slow, predatory. His wings stretch outward, joints popping as though snapping back into place.

I inch backward. My heel catches against debris, stopping me short.

He notices.

A flicker of something dangerous gleams behind his half-lidded gaze. The corner of his mouth curls, sharp canines glinting.

He enjoys this.

“You run again,” he rasps, voice scraping against the cavernous dark. “It will be the last time.”

I swallow. The truth of it sits heavy in my core, tangled with the ache in my heart. I should be afraid. I am.

But something in me stirs—recognition.

Not from stories whispered by frightened slaves, not from ancient warnings carved into temple walls.

Something deeper. Older.

A memory that isn't mine.

A voice that should not be familiar.

What is this?

He moves first, shifting his weight, but it's not to lunge. His left side falters, muscles tightening in a way that betrays pain. My gaze flicks down.

The glow beneath his skin pulses unevenly, fractures of ember beneath a deep gash, raw and sluggish where his stone-like flesh has cracked. Dark blood drips, thicker than human, pooling at the jagged edges of broken stone.

He grits his teeth, still crouched, one hand braced against the ground as though holding himself together through sheer will.

He is wounded.

Without thinking, I move.

His snarl cuts through between us, snapping against my nerves, warning, threatening, commanding stillness?—

I do not stop.

I kneel before him, pressing a hand to his wound.

Heat sears through me.



A shock of power ripples up my arm, his magic colliding with mine, meeting at the boundary of my palm where his wound drinks in my touch. The glow beneath his skin flickers—not in pain. In something else.

I don't even know how I'm using magic. It's unfamiliar, but at the same time, familiar as if the instruction manual is carved in my very being.

He stares at me.

Not with hatred. Not with rage.

With something worse. Curiosity. I feel the same.

Neither of us speak. The silence is an unwelcome intimacy, neither of us daring to shatter it. His breathing slows, chest rising and falling in tandem with mine. I feel it, his body's warmth seeping into me, the unnatural pulse of his magic responding to something in me.

I pull back first.

The glow in his veins settles, still thrumming, but calmer. I exhale, fingers curling into my lap. I should have let him bleed.

His claws curl against the stone, slow, deliberate, a tension coiling in his frame that isn't rage—not entirely.

“Why?” The question is more breath than voice, rasping from his lips like something unwilling.

I shake my head. “I don't know.”

Lies.

His eyes narrow. “What are you?”

The question unsettles me.

He doesn’t ask who . He doesn’t ask how .

He asks what .

I bite the inside of my cheek. “A slave.”

He scoffs, low and dark. “A slave does not wield purna magic.”

My stomach twists. I have no answer for him. I don’t even have an answer for myself.

His gaze drags over me, calculating, reading too much, seeing too much.

Something shifts in the air around us.

A sound echoes beyond the rubble—a distant voice, barely audible, but coming closer.

His expression hardens. Not his fight. Not his problem.

He pushes himself up fully, towering above me, stretching his wings, testing his own strength. I scramble to my feet, something sharp tangling in my gut.

I expect him to leave me there.

But he doesn't.

Instead, he turns. Looks at me. Considers.

Without a word, he starts walking. Not away.

Deeper into the ruins.

He stops and turns to me. I hold my breath. He wants me to follow, doesn't he?

With the footsteps coming closer, I run after him.

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DAIN

The ruins breathe.

It's a slow thing, more a shift of presence than sound—the tremor of something else moving in the deep, the slow trickle of dust spilling from broken stone. This place is old, but it is not dead.

Something still lingers.

I walk ahead, leading the girl deeper into the remains of my prison, my wounds sealing sluggishly, magic flickering unstable beneath my skin. The unnatural hum of whatever force she carries lingers against me like a whisper, like a brand that should not exist.

It is wrong.

She should not have been able to wake me.

Yet, here she is, trailing close, silent but watching. I can feel her gaze, the way it drags over my back, the hesitation, the uncertainty.

She is afraid of me.

Good.

She should be.

She follows.

The tunnels beneath the ruins are tight, carved with ancient purpose, meant to keep things in, not let them out. Walls of jagged black rock press close, their surfaces slick with some dampness that was never meant for human flesh. I remember this place—not as it is now, but as it was before.

A tomb, yes.

But not just any tomb.

Mine.

A cage built for a king, forged by the hands of those who feared him most.

She steps on loose stone, a quiet scuff against the silence. I stop. She stops.

“Where are we going?” Her voice is hushed, strained. Not weak. Just... unsure.

I don't answer right away. Instead, I tilt my head, listening.

The air shifts.

Not from us.

Something else is moving, somewhere ahead.

Something big.

I roll my shoulders, flexing stiff wings, feeling the drag of ruined stone along their edges. The pulse beneath my chest stutters. Too slow. Too unnatural. My body is still waking, still finding its place between stone and flesh. The instability sits wrong, coiling in my stomach like spoiled food.

A weakness.

I do not allow weakness.

My gaze flicks back to her, measuring. “You ran when you found this place.”

She frowns. “You were there. Of course I ran.”

“Not from me.”

Her lips press together.

I step closer, watching the flicker of tension ripple through her frame. She doesn’t retreat. “Something else chased you,” I murmur, voice rough.

Her throat works on a swallow, barely visible in the dim light. “I—I didn’t see it. Just heard it. Felt it. Also, who are you? What do I call you? You can call me Liora.”

My claws twitch at my sides. Liora. Good name.

Curiosity will kill her, but I can’t stop myself from answering.

“Dain,” I whisper, staring at her.

“Dain,” she repeats, and something in me almost snaps. It’s as if it’s wrong and right at the same time. Why is that? I frown, disregarding my questions.

Now isn't the time. We have a more pressing problem.

If she stumbled in here by chance, if her magic had truly been an accident, then why had she been hunted?

Unless...

I exhale, slow, steady. The dark elves would never leave something as valuable as this tomb unguarded.

She shouldn't have escaped.

She was meant to die.

The realization settles over me like an old, familiar truth.

They fed her to the beast.

She doesn't realize it yet, doesn't understand the kind of death that had been meant for her.

But I do. And the beast still lingers.

A new sound crawls through the tunnel, slow, dragging. A deep inhalation of something ancient catching our scent.

The girl hears it too. She stiffens. Eyes go wide.

She is prey again.

I turn away from her, scanning the darkness ahead. My magic stirs, flickering in and

out of reach, sluggish and wrong, still too raw from waking. I feel the echo of something more, something vast and furious, but I cannot grasp it.

A growl builds in my chest.

The girl hesitates behind me. “You... You said I used magic.”

I glance at her, irritation flickering through me. “You don’t know what you are?”

A slow shake of her head. “I’ve never practiced. I’ve never been allowed to. It just... happened.”

No. That is not how magic works. Magic is forged, trained, shaped into something precise. It does not simply happen.

Unless—

My eyes narrow.

“It felt like instinct,” she murmurs. “Like something buried—something that was always there.”

Something engraved in her soul.

I go still.

That is not possible.

That is not supposed to be possible.

The beast shifts ahead, a sound like claws dragging over stone, deep and slow,



deliberate.

She stiffens, fists curling at her sides. “What is that?”

I don’t answer immediately. I let the question sit, let it sink into her bones, between us where something dark and old slithers into wakefulness.

A sound tears through the cavern.

Not a growl. Not a whisper.

A roar.

It shakes the walls, dislodges dust and debris from the arching ceiling, ripples through the ground itself.

Her breath stumbles.

I exhale through my nose.

“Welcome,” I murmur, voice low, “to the true depths of the tomb.”

She swallows, looking at me. “You know what it is.”

I do.

I remember.

A hunter of the old ways. A thing bred for war, for devouring.

A pet of the dark elves. Some serves the purnas.

A guardian of my prison.

She was never meant to survive.

I flex my claws. This will be fun.

A true, warm welcome for me.

## Page 5

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LIORA

The roar splinters through the cavern, carving through the tunnels like something solid, something alive. My bones rattle with the force of it, the sound so deep, so ancient, it feels like the walls themselves are screaming.

I freeze.

Not from cowardice, but from instinct.

Something that massive, that hungry, doesn't chase. It stalks. It waits for the prey to run, because running means panic, and panic means mistakes.

Mistakes mean death.

Dain moves first. His claws scrape stone as he turns toward the sound, head tilting slightly, listening. Not bracing to fight. Not preparing to strike. Listening.

He laughs.

The sound is low, guttural, full of something too dark to be amusement.

"Of course it still lives."

Still. Still.

Whatever is out there, whatever just screamed its hunger into the tunnel—it isn't just some wild beast. It's his.

“What is it?” My voice is barely above a whisper, but it doesn't matter.

It has already heard me.

Another sound slithers through the cavern—a wet, sticky pull of something massive dragging itself across the stone. The air thickens with a musk that is not entirely animal, something foul, something ancient and wrong.

Dain exhales, low and sharp. “A gift from the dark elves.”

A new sound claws into existence.

Not a roar this time. A clicking.

A chittering, wet and grinding, as if something with too many teeth is testing them, waiting for the moment to sink them into flesh.

The next sound is worse.

Breathing.

Not normal breathing. Not something natural. This breath comes from everywhere, from nowhere, from deep inside the dark. It surrounds us.

Then, something shifts.

A shape unfurls just beyond the reach of the tunnel's dim glow, too massive, too alien, its bulk shifting in a grotesque, uncoiling slither.

I step back. I can't help it.

Dain doesn't.

He stands his ground, rolling his shoulders like this is just another inconvenience, just another night spent dragging himself back from the precipice of something not quite human.

A dark chuckle. "They sent you to die here, girl."

The thing beyond the dark sniffs the air—a slow, wet inhale that makes my stomach curdle.

I swallow hard. "And what about you?"

His head tilts, as if considering. "They wanted me to watch."

The clicking sharpens.

I glimpse movement—a shimmer of flesh, something slick and segmented, long limbs ending in curved talons too long for any normal beast. A mouth that should not exist, a vertical split in the center of its head, full of teeth that aren't arranged in rows but in spirals.

My stomach turns over.

"That's not natural," I whisper.

Dain huffs. "Nothing they create ever is."

A second, larger sound shifts in the deep.

There's not just one.

There are more.

It moves.

Not in the way a beast moves. There's no weight to it, no thud of claws on rock. It scuttles. Fast, too fast, its limbs folding unnaturally, dragging its segmented body forward in jagged bursts of speed.

My muscles lock.

Dain doesn't wait.

He's on it before my mind catches up, slamming into the bulk of it, claws tearing into its armored hide. The thing lets out a screeching wail, recoiling, but its other limbs lash toward him.

He snarls. Dodges. Strikes back.

The cavern erupts into chaos.

I should run.

I should leave him to it, let him handle the monster and find a way to escape?—

But I can't because another shape moves in the dark, a second one.

This one sees me.

I barely throw myself sideways before it lunges, its too-long limbs cracking against

the stone where I stood a breath before. My shoulder slams into the ground. I roll, scrambling backward, hands empty, useless, weak.

Dain is too busy tearing through the first one to notice.

The second creature stalks toward me, moving too smoothly for something so massive. Its clicking slows, as if tasting the moment, savoring it.

The way a predator enjoys the way its prey shakes before the kill.

I scramble back, my breath a sharp thing in my heart, but there's nowhere to go.

The limb strikes.

I barely twist in time, the curved talon slashing across my arm instead of my throat.

Pain erupts. I choke on a gasp, pressing my free hand to the wound as blood spills too fast.

My pulse slams in my ears. The creature tilts its head.

It can smell it.

It likes it.

I clutch at the ground, my fingers finding nothing, no weapon, no defense, nothing but stone and death waiting to happen.

I'm going to die.

The beast tenses, ready to lunge?—

Then it happens.

Something bursts through me, not from my body but from beneath it, from the center of my heart outward, like a pulse that has always been there, waiting.

Power.

It erupts.

Not controlled. Not intentional. Just raw survival.

A blinding light rips from my hands, lancing into the creature's chest.

It screams.

The entire cavern shudders, a shockwave of energy blasting outward, shoving everything away from me.

Including Dain.

The first creature crashes into a wall. Dain slams into the ground, his wings snapping open to stop the impact.

The second beast shrieks, its flesh seared where my magic hit it.

The pain hits me. The magic rips itself out of me like a piece of my soul is being torn apart.

I collapse, gasping, cold, so cold, my limbs shaking as if every drop of life in me was just siphoned away.



The beast staggers but it's not dead.

Now, I can't move.

Dain rises, slow, deliberate, eyes locked onto me.

Not the creature. Me.

I feel it inside me—the shift in the fight, the shift in his focus.

He saw what I did and he didn't like it. The displeasure is clear on his face.

The beast snarls, trying to recover.

Dain doesn't let it.

He launches forward, slamming his claws through its skull, tearing it apart in a spray of black ichor.

The cavern falls silent.

I gasp, pressing a trembling hand to my chest, still shaking from the magic, from the emptiness it left behind.

Dain turns toward me. Slow. Intentional.

A predator with a new target.

He crouches, tilts his head. "That magic. What is it?"

I swallow, throat raw. "I told you, I don't know."

His lips curl. It's a dark, hungry sort of amusement.

Behind him comes another roar.

Louder and way closer. There are more.

Holy shit, how am I going to survive this?

## Page 6

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DAIN

The stench of burnt flesh still clings to the cavern walls, thick and sharp, but it's the silence that unsettles me.

Too still. Too expectant.

They aren't gone. Not all of them.

I lift my head, listening.

A shuffle in the deep. A guttural chuff from something too large, too hungry, waiting just beyond the tunnel's bend. Another breath, slow and measured, laced with the foul, wet musk of something that should not exist.

More are coming.

My claws twitch at my sides, shoulders tight with the fight behind me, of the fight still waiting ahead. I could take them—half-broken as I am, I could still tear through them, rip them apart piece by oozing piece.

But her. My gaze flicks to the girl.

She's still slumped against the cavern floor, trembling from the backlash of magic she shouldn't have. Her body doesn't know how to handle it, doesn't know how to

breathe without choking on the remnants of whatever power just ripped through her.

She's pale. Too pale.

A part of me resents her weakness.

A larger part of me resents my own. I should leave her here. Let the creatures finish what they started.

But I don't.

My hand moves before I can force myself to care about the consequences.

My claws wrap around her arm, dragging her up, pressing her against the cold rock to keep her upright. Her body shudders beneath my touch, pulse erratic beneath fragile skin. She makes a soft noise, not pain, not fear. Something else.

Something I do not like.

Her gaze is slow to rise to mine, unfocused, hazy, like she's fighting to hold onto consciousness.

I should let her collapse.

Instead, my grip tightens.

Her breath stumbles. I feel it, the way her muscles go tense beneath my palm, how her lips part just slightly, confusion flickering behind her storm-gray eyes.

She doesn't understand why I'm still here.

I don't either. But I don't have time to think about it.

The clicking starts again.

The cavern walls tremble. Dust cascades from the ceiling, slithering over stone like sand through a glass. The creatures are closing in.

She sways. Her knees nearly give out.

I snarl, catching her before she drops.

I should leave her. I should leave her, I repeat to myself. Instead, I hoist her up, forcing her to move.

Her fingers curl into my arm, weak and trembling, but she doesn't fight me. She clings.

I hate the way it feels. The proximity.

The way her breath warms the my throat, the way her body molds too easily to my own.

I hate that she fits there, like something meant to.

I jerk my head toward the deeper tunnels. "Move."

She doesn't argue. She doesn't have the strength to.

I drag her with me.

The tunnels curve into blackness, a deeper dark than what we left behind, one that

presses, thick and full of something ancient. My skin prickles at the familiarity of it.

This place was never meant for escape.

Something shifts in my mind, an old memory crawling from centuries of stillness, something I should not recall yet do.

The dark elves spoke of it.

A way out.

Not a door. A stream.

Water that cuts through the lower ruins, a vein of something older than the temple itself. They talked of it when they thought I was asleep, whispered of it as if the walls could listen.

They thought I was stone. They thought I wasn't watching.

"Where are we going?" Her voice is too soft, too human.

I don't slow.

"Out."

Her fingers twitch against my forearm. "You remember something."

It's not a question.

I do not like that she sees it.

“I remember many things,” I mutter, guiding her deeper, further into the dark, further away from the things that should have already killed her.

Her pulse flutters against my grip. Too fast.

“You think this is an escape route?” she breathes.

“I think it’s our only route.”

She exhales through her nose, barely keeping up with my pace, but she doesn’t complain.

She is stronger than she looks.

But not strong enough.

A sound slithers through the tunnel behind us, distant but closer than before.

They are still hunting.

I tug her forward, ignoring the way she fits too perfectly beneath my touch, ignoring the heat that curls in my gut at how easily she follows.

She is mine. I do not like how easily that thought comes.

I do not like how true it feels.

I lean my head to the side, thinking. Why do I feel this way toward a human girl?

7

LIORA

The tunnels move.

Not in the way stone should—settling with age, shifting under pressure. No, this is different. The walls breathe, twisting when I’m not looking, narrowing just when I think I have room to stretch. My skin crawls.

I can feel them. Watching. Waiting. Hunting.

The silence is worse than the noise. The way it stretches, pulls, teeters on the edge of something breaking.

Dain keeps his pace brutal, dragging me through the darkness with single-minded intensity. I barely keep up, my legs screaming, my vision blurred from exhaustion. He doesn’t slow. Doesn’t even glance back.

He expects me to keep moving. Or maybe he just doesn’t care if I drop.

I grit my teeth and hold on.

“Why are the tunnels—” My voice sticks in my throat, dry and raw. “Why does it feel like they’re alive?”

Dain exhales, the sound sharp, irritated. “Because they are.”



I stiffen.

He continues as if that answer should be enough.

“The dark elves breed monsters, but they also breed curses.” His voice is lower now, deliberate. “These tunnels were carved as a prison. You don’t think they planned for things trying to escape?”

I glance at the walls. Living. Shifting.

My stomach turns.

“Magic binds this place,” he continues. “But it’s old. Weak. It recognizes something in you—in me. It wants to pull us back in.”

It recognizes us? My pulse stumbles.

I don’t get to think about it for long because the clicking returns.

I feel it before I hear it.

That thick, sick presence curling over my skin, sinking into my gut.

Dain feels it, too. His body stiffens, shoulders rolling like a predator ready to strike. His wings twitch, claws flexing. He doesn’t stop walking, but his steps shift, more careful, more deliberate.

The shadow moves. Not the tunnel’s shadow.

Something else.

The creature steps from the dark, too tall, too twisted. Its body is wrong. The segmented limbs shudder as it leans forward, tasting the air, feeling us.

Dain exhales through his nose, as if this is just another inconvenience.

“Run.”

It takes me a second to process the command. And then the creature lunges.

Dain slams into it before I can scream.

The fight is brutal.

They clash in the tight tunnel, claws tearing, teeth snapping, the beast screeching as Dain shoves it back. But the tunnel is too narrow, the walls too close. He can't move properly.

Neither can the monster.

But I can. I move.

Instinct—not thought—drives me. My feet catch the loose ground, muscles pushing forward. My hands burn, that strange flickering energy curling at my fingertips again, the same thing that nearly killed me before.

But this time, I welcome it. It pulses, raw and angry, begging to be used, to be unleashed.

I reach for it.

Pain explodes in my gut.

I crumple. Dain sees it, the way my body locks, convulses.

His snarl deepens.

He doesn't hesitate. He grabs me.

The monster strikes at the same time the ground gives way.

The ground collapses again. Stone vanishes beneath me. I don't scream, don't have time to.

Dain's arm clamps around me, wings snapping open but it's too tight, too compact, the cavern closing in too fast. We're falling.

He shifts, turns, throws his body beneath mine. We slam into the rocks below.

The impact cracks through my bones, knocks the breath from my chest. His body takes the brunt of it.

I land on him and silence follows.

My breath stumbles out, shallow and shaking.

He doesn't move beneath me.

My fingers twitch, pressing against the solid, too-hot flesh of his chest. He's warm, too warm, his skin like heated stone, like something forged instead of born.

He could have let me take the fall. He could have let me break instead of him.

I don't understand why he didn't.

He exhales, low and sharp. “Get off.”

I shove myself back, limbs weak, legs unsteady. He moves slower than he should.

Not weak. Not broken. Just... watching me.

Like I did something he wasn't expecting.

It's as if wasn't expecting to protect me, either.

The space between us is too small, too charged.

A sound interrupts.

Water. A trickle.

Faint. Distant. But real.

I inhale. “Do you hear that?”

Dain doesn't look at me. But his wings twitch, head tilting slightly.

“Yes.”

Relief rushes through me.

We found it.

Suddenly, his body stiffens.

My relief turns cold.

He says nothing, but his gaze narrows into the darkness ahead. Not at the stream.

At something else. I follow his line of sight.

I go still.

A glow flickers in the distance, torchlight reflecting off metal, movement, figures.

Not creatures. Not beasts.

Dark elves.

An entire encampment.

They aren't alone. There are humans, too.

Their backs are bent, chained, shackled, dragging something from the depths of the stone.

Slaves. Like I once was. Like I still am.

I cannot breathe. Dain isn't looking at them. He's looking at me. And I do not like the way he watches me.

It's as if he knows what's running in my head and he already disapproves.

## Page 8

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8

DAIN

The purna artifact hums.

I feel it like a pressure in my skull, something sharp and invasive, pressing against the edges of my magic like grasping fingers. The closer I focus, the stronger it gets—a foreign pulse, something meant to seek, meant to track.

They're hunting me.

Liora hasn't noticed.

She's too distracted.

I watch her—the tension in her shoulders, the way her fingers twitch against her sides. The way her breath changes as she looks at the slaves.

She's not thinking.

She's feeling.

A mistake.

I step closer, keeping my voice low. "We leave."

Her head jerks toward me, her expression snapping from raw emotion to hard resistance.

“You can’t be serious.”

I exhale through my teeth. I am not in the mood for this.

“We are two people, against an encampment of dark elves and whatever else they’ve bred in this pit.” My claws flex at my sides. “They will kill you. They will kill me. And if we’re lucky, they’ll make it quick.”

She shakes her head, refusing to look away from the mine, from the chains, from the broken people bent beneath their cages.

“You want to leave them here?” she whispers.

“Yes.”

The word lands like a slap.

Her jaw tightens.

“Of course you do,” she says, and it isn’t just anger. It’s disappointment.

It grates against my nerves.

I step in closer, forcing her to tilt her chin up, forcing her to look at me instead of them.

“You think you’re strong enough for this?” I murmur. “To save them? To fight for them? You couldn’t even stand on your own an hour ago.”

She stiffens. I feel her blazing anger, the way it coils tight inside her, simmering beneath the fragile thread of her control.

I lean closer. “You want to die for them?”

She doesn’t flinch.

That angers me more than it should.

“They’re just like me,” she whispers, voice hoarse. “How can you stand here and just?—”

My hand moves before I think.

Fingers wrapping around her jaw, tilting her face up further, forcing her to see me, not them, not anyone else.

“You aren’t them.” My voice is lower now, something sharper beneath it. Something dangerous.

Her pulse stutters beneath my touch.

Her eyes flicker—not just with fear. With defiance. With something that slams against me, pushes back, refuses to be overpowered.

It infuriates me. It pulls at me.

I feel it again—that slow, possessive thing in my gut, curling too deep, wrapping around my instincts like a sickness.

The artifact hums louder.



My head jerks toward the camp, toward the source.

It's buried inside one of the elf-wrought structures, pulsing in tandem with whatever dark thing is being dragged from the depths of the mine.

The elves are digging for something old.

Something wrong.

It's in my magic—an interference, an unnatural pull.

It's messing with my body, my senses, my control.

Something about this place is more than just rock and chains.

Liora feels it, too. I see the way she shifts, the way her breath hitches, the way her fingers flex as if something inside her recognizes it.

She doesn't understand what it is.

Neither do I.

But I don't like it.

"They have a purna artifact," I murmur.

Her brow furrows.

I tilt my head toward the largest structure, where the unnatural pulse comes from. "In there. They're using it."

“To find you?”

“Yes.”

A slow exhale. I don't like that she looks at me with understanding.

“How?” she whispers. “Purna artifacts are...I've heard of the whispers, not much though...” She trails off.

Rare. Sacred.

Not meant to be in dark elf hands.

I don't have an answer.

Movement stirs at the edge of the encampment, a shift of bodies, a ripple of alertness.

They feel me.

Liora notices it too. Her breath quickens. “They're looking for something.”

“No.” My grip on her tightens. “They're looking for me.”

Before we can move, before we can decide anything.

The artifact's pulse explodes.

A shockwave rips through the cavern, a violent burst of energy that sends dust crashing from the ceiling, tremors rumbling through the rock.

Magic surges. Old magic.

The elves react instantly.

They turn toward us.

Recognition slams into their expressions.

My chest burns.

Liora's fingers dig into my arm. "Dain?—"

Too late.

The dark elves see us.

One of them lifts his hand toward the artifact.

I feel it move.

A snarl rips through my throat. "We run."

Liora hesitates for a fraction of a breath.

That is too long.

A voice shouts. The elves are coming.

And the mine starts to awaken.

Not just the artifact.

The ground beneath us.

Something beneath the rock stirs.

Something worse than dark elves.

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:59 am*

9

LIORA

The dark elves see us.

The energy from the artifact pulses through the air, thick and charged, making my skin itch with something wrong. My magic stirs, reacting to whatever's inside that relic, but it's different this time—not raw power, not instinct.

It hurts.

Like something pressing into me, burrowing deep, twisting.

I stagger back, clutching my chest.

Dain grabs my arm, yanking me close.

"We need to move. Now."

The elves don't hesitate.

One lifts a hand toward the artifact, whispering something sharp and cutting in their tongue.

Magic surges.

A shockwave erupts from the relic, slamming into the cavern walls, rattling loose rocks and sending the slaves into a frenzy.

Screams break through the silence. Chains clatter, feet pound against stone.

The prisoners are running.

The elves barely spare them a glance.

They're focused on us.

Dain snarls. His claws flex, wings twitching like he's fighting the urge to rip them apart.

My heart slams against my ribcage. "What do we do?"

His fingers tighten on my arm. "We fight."

The first arrow flies

He moves before I can react, shoving me behind him, his wing snapping outward, catching the projectile mid-air. The force cracks the membrane, but he doesn't flinch.

The second arrow doesn't miss.

It sinks into his shoulder.

He growls, ripping it out like it's nothing, but I see the way his muscles lock, the way his magic falters again.

The mine is interfering with him. The dark elves realize it, too.

They move in fast, closing the distance. Two wield spears, another channels magic through a curved dagger, the blade glowing sickly green.

Poison.

Dain sees it, too. He moves, too fast for their eyes to track, too strong to stop.

He closes the space in a blink, claws raking through the first elf's armor, slicing into flesh.

A scream.

Another elf lunges at me.

I barely throw myself aside, the blade whistling past my face. I stumble, unarmed, too slow, too weak.

The elf grabs my wrist, twisting hard enough to make me yelp.

Dain turns his head. His expression changes.

Something sharp snaps inside him.

He doesn't hesitate. He doesn't just attack—he demolishes.

The elf restraining me barely has time to react before Dain is on him, slamming his claws through his throat. Blood sprays hot against my face, against my hands.

The elf collapses.

Dain's eyes are still burning.

I press a hand to my chest, breath shaking. “Dain?—”

“Move.”

Another magic blast rips through the cavern. He shoves me down, taking the brunt of it. The force sends him staggering, but he doesn’t fall.

The artifact pulses again.

I feel it now.

Not just its magic, but its wrongness.

It isn’t just a relic. It’s alive. And it wants something.

Dain catches my hesitation.

His claws wrap around my waist this time, hard, possessive. “Focus.”

I try. I try.

But something inside me is pulling.

Not just the artifact.

The mine itself.

Whatever the dark elves are digging for—it’s waking.

Dain notices it at the same time I do. His wings flare.



"We have to get out of here," he says.

The dark elves regroup, closing in again.

A chant rises from one of the remaining elves, his words curling into the stone, into the walls.

Dain flinches. The artifact's magic is messing with him.

I don't hesitate this time. I grab a fallen blade from the ground. The elf chanting doesn't expect me to attack.

I slam the dagger into his heart.

His mouth gapes, eyes widening in shock.

I twist the blade and blood dribbles past his lips.

His magic shatters and the artifact falters.

Dain moves instantly, catching my wrist and yanking me toward him.

More elves are coming.

I hear it. The roar of the river.

Dain hears it, too. His gaze snaps toward the cavern's edge.

The slaves are gone.

Some fought, but most ran.

Now, only we remain.

The elves lunge one final time.

Dain doesn't let them.

He throws me into the river.

The world turns to cold.

The current grabs me, dragging me down, tossing me against sharp rocks, against churning darkness.

I can't breathe. Can't think.

A hand clamps around my arm.

Not an elf's. Dain.

His grip is iron, unrelenting, pulling me toward him.

His wings snap open beneath the water, pushing against the current, guiding us instead of letting the river take us.

His magic flickers—still unstable, still weak. But his strength is not.

He doesn't let go.

Not once.

I cling to him, choking on water, on breathless terror. His heat burns through the cold,

his presence the only thing keeping me from being swallowed whole.

10

LIORA

The sky swallows him whole.

He doesn't hesitate. Doesn't linger. Doesn't even look back.

One moment, he's standing there, his expression unreadable, his molten eyes boring into mine with something too sharp, too heavy. After that, he is gone.

Wings snap open, their sheer size casting shadows against the jagged rocks as he ascends. The wind takes him, lifts him into the storm-darkened sky, and my breath locks in my throat.

I should have expected it.

I should have known.

But it still feels like a knife in my heart, twisting. Why is that? It's not as if we're friends. I sigh, shaking my head. I need to continue moving.

The mountains stretch endlessly before me, cold, empty, merciless. The wind howls, biting into my soaked skin, rattling through the hollow space he left behind. The river rages somewhere below, still roaring from the escape that nearly killed us, but up here—I am alone.

I stare at the place where he stood, where his warmth still lingers in the air, where the imprint of his claws is etched into the damp rock.

I shudder, wrapping my arms around myself, trying to ignore the way my body still aches from the fight, from the river, from his... company even if it was for a short time only.

Fool.

I shake my head, exhaling sharply. I can't afford to waste time. Standing here, waiting for him to change his mind, would be worse than death.

I force my legs to move.

The ground beneath my feet is uneven, slick with mist. The climb down will be treacherous, but I have no other choice. There's no shelter here, no food, no fire, no warmth—nothing but stone and sky and the memory of his hands pulling me up just to leave me behind.

The descent is slow. My limbs protest every step, screaming against the exhaustion I refuse to acknowledge. I slide on loose rock more times than I care to count, my fingers scraping over jagged edges as I steady myself.

The sun is hidden behind thick clouds, casting the world in gray and silver, a land untouched by mercy. I scan the horizon, searching for anything—a path, a cave, a way forward.

I have to keep moving.

But the cold sinks in.

It starts in my fingers, creeping up my arms, digging into my ribcage. I shake, my soaked dress clinging to me like ice. My skin feels stretched too tight, my breath thin in the mountain air.

Dain had been warm. Too warm.

Even after the river, even after the cold wrapped around us both, his body had radiated heat, a furnace beneath all that stone and flesh.

Now, it is gone.

I rub my arms, pressing forward.

The sky darkens, thunder rumbling somewhere beyond the peaks.

I need to find shelter.

Something is watching me.

I feel it before I see it.

That same presence from the cavern, the one that lingered in the dark, waiting, patient, expectant.

I freeze, pulse hammering. My eyes dart across the terrain, but there's nothing—just the mountains, just the endless stretch of rock and mist.

But I am not alone.

Something is out there.

Waiting. What are you?

I move forward slowly. The wind howls through the cliffs, drowning out all other sounds, but I swear—I swear I hear breathing.

It isn't Dain.

No wings beat against the wind, no heat pulses in the air.

This is something else.

Something older.

Something worse.

I swallow hard and force my feet to keep moving. I can't stay here.

The mountain path curves, leading me lower. The air thickens, damp with the remnants of past storms, and in the distance—something flickers.

I stop.

A light.

Small, barely visible through the mist, but real.

A campfire? A village? People?

My heart pounds.

It could be danger. It could be worse than the dark elves. But standing here, freezing,

exhausted, completely alone—I don't have a choice.

I move toward it, my steps careful, every breath measured.

The wind shifts, carrying something faint, almost familiar.

Smoke. Wood burning. And something richer. Something earthy, musky, alive.

I pause, inhaling slowly.

Not human.

The realization coils in my stomach like a warning.

I hesitate.

My legs buckle, my body giving in to exhaustion, and I no longer have the strength to care.



11

DAIN

The fire crackles low, flames licking over blackened wood, casting flickering shadows across the gathered figures.

They are my kind, or what remains of them. Gargoyles, carved from stone and flesh, survivors of a world that has tried to erase us. They sit hunched around the fire, broad forms shifting, clawed hands wrapped around raw cuts of meat, their eyes glinting in the dim light, sharp, calculating.

I should feel at home here.

I don't.

The fire smells wrong. Smells like something that shouldn't be burning. Like flesh. Human flesh.

The moment she stumbles into the camp, I feel her before I see her.

My body goes still. My breath slows and my muscles lock.

Liora.

She's in the same ruined dress, soaked and tattered, clinging to her form in a way that speaks of cold and exhaustion. Her hair is a mess of tangles, filthy from the river,

from the mountain, from survival.

She doesn't belong here. Yet, she is here.

I don't understand why that sends something sharp through me, something that tastes too much like possession.

I say nothing. I do not move.

She doesn't see me. She only sees them.

The way they turn toward her. The way they notice.

One of them stands.

Rhogar.

His bulk shifts as he rises to his full height, a scar carved from his brow down to his cheekbone, one eye missing, the other gleaming molten in the firelight. He isn't as large as me, but he's close.

His gaze lands on her like a claim.

Something in me snarls. I crush it before it can surface.

She should not matter to me.

Rhogar tilts his head, stepping closer. His voice is smooth, amused. "Well, well. What do we have here?"

Liora stills, her hands curling into fists at her sides.

She doesn't cower.

Good.

But Rhogar likes that.

He circles her, his tail swaying lazily behind him. Interested. Testing.

"This is no place for a human," he murmurs.

She lifts her chin. "I don't have anywhere else to go."

I clench my jaw. Fool.

Never show weakness. Never offer yourself up like that.

Rhogar's smirk widens. He steps closer, inhaling deeply, as if scenting her.

Something burns under my skin.

I stay silent.

"I could help you," Rhogar muses, his claws grazing the ends of her tangled hair. "If you ask nicely."

She doesn't move. Her heartbeat stutters, but she doesn't yield.

Why do I feel that in my bones?

Another gargoyle chuckles. A third shifts in interest. I should stop this.

I should stand, step forward, rip Rhogar's hand away before I break it in my own.

But I don't because that would mean admitting things I don't want to acknowledge.

So I sit. And I watch.

Rhogar's fingers trail down to her jaw. He grips it, forcing her to look up at him.

"Nothing to say?" he murmurs. "Pity."

She doesn't speak. But her pulse beats like war drums, her eyes burning with that same defiance that drove me mad.

Rhogar sees it. He likes it.

No.

The word snarls through me, silent, furious.

I hate that he touches her. I hate that she lets him. I hate that this should not matter.

I should not care who looks at her. Who touches her.

She is not mine.

But deep in my gut, something ancient, something primal, twists and says, liar.

I force myself to look away, to focus on anything else.

The fire. The stench of damp stone and charred meat. The sound of the wind rattling through the mountain peaks.

The way my claws dig into my thighs, threatening to snap stone.

She shouldn't be here. I left her. I made my choice.

Then why does my body want to move, want to drag her away from them, want to put my hands on her just to remind her that I was here first?

I exhale slowly. I do not understand this.

I shouldn't have to.

I turn my attention back to the others, watching as Rhogar tilts her head back just slightly, his grip still firm.

"Tell me, human," he murmurs. "Are you lost?"

A slow breath.

Her pulse quivers.

Then she speaks.

"No," she whispers. "I was left behind."

My gut twists.

I rise.

The motion is slow, deliberate, calculated.

Rhogar notices. He does not release her.

Liora turns and our eyes meet.

For a moment, the world shrinks. The fire dims, the wind fades, the others disappear.

There is only her and the way her breath catches, just slightly.

Rhogar's head tilts. His eyes flick between us. He is not a fool. He sees.

A smirk touches his lips. "Interesting."

The fire crackles. The wind howls.

The beast inside me stirs, furious.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:59 am*

12

LIORA

D ain is here.

He is right there, sitting among the others, broad and unshaken, wings draped lazily, gaze dark and unreadable as he watches the fire.

As if he does not see me. As if he doesn't give a fuck.

The truth of it settles in my heart, sharp and ugly. He left me. He chose to walk away, to abandon me in the mountains, and now—now he acts as if I do not exist.

Something in me snarls, something raw, something I don't understand. I shouldn't care. I shouldn't.

Yet, I can't stop my eyes from flickering to him, stealing glances, searching for something, anything that betrays even the smallest reaction.

There is none.

Rhogar's fingers skim my jaw, tilting my chin up, forcing my attention back to him. To the real danger.

His smirk widens as he leans in, his heat pressing too close, too confident. "Your heart is beating too fast, little human." His claws graze the side of my throat, slow,

deliberate. “Should I take that as fear?”

I lift my chin. I refuse to let him see that he’s right.

“I don’t fear you.”

The others chuckle, deep and guttural. A few of them shift, intrigued by the exchange, but Dain does not move.

I see it in my periphery, his jaw tightens, his claws flex slightly against his thigh. But he does not intervene.

Of course, he doesn’t.

Rhogar exhales a low chuckle, his grip on my chin tightening. “Brave. I like that.” He straightens, voice carrying over the fire. “A human with no home, no weapons, no protection.” His smirk turns sharper. “No claims.”

Dain’s head tilts slightly at that, but still, he stays silent.

Rhogar releases me, but only so he can step back, arms spread in mock generosity. “You can stay.”

A kindness laced with sharp teeth.

The gathered gargoyles shift, some murmuring in interest, others looking on in amusement. This is a game to them. I am a game to them.

I force my voice to remain steady. “And what’s the cost?”

Rhogar laughs. He doesn’t even try to hide it.



“The cost,” he murmurs, “is whatever I decide it to be.”

I keep my expression blank, though everything inside me burns. I won't be caged again. Not by chains, not by hands, not by men or monsters.

I won't.

Dain is watching. I feel it, even though I refuse to look at him.

But he says nothing.

He doesn't stop this. Doesn't move, doesn't interfere, doesn't do a godsdamned thing.

Fine.

I step back, voice firm. “No.”

Rhogar's smirk vanishes. The amusement in his eyes dims, turning into something else, something hungry.

The gathered gargoyles tense.

A refusal is not what they expected.

I pivot on my heel, intending to leave, but I don't make it far.

Rhogar's claws snatch my wrist, yanking me back with brutal force. I stumble, colliding against him, his grip tightening like iron.

“No?” His voice is softer now, almost thoughtful. “Where do you think you're going, little human?”

I shove against him, but he doesn't move.

His smirk returns, sharper, darker. "You think we just let you walk away?" He leans in, his breath hot against my ear. "You should learn to be grateful."

There is no tent. No fabric walls to shield us from the wind, no fragile shelter. Gargoyles do not need such things.

Instead, Rhogar drags me toward a makeshift den, half-carved into the mountainside, jagged rock serving as the only barrier between me and the others.

The fire crackles behind us, but no one stops him.

Not even him.

Rhogar shoves me inside, pinning me between him and the rock wall. The space is too small, too dark, too close.

"Don't fight," he murmurs, claws skimming down my arm, too slow, too knowing. "You're tired. You need warmth. Protection." His fingers press against my hip. "I can give you that."

His touch burns.

Not with heat, but with filth.

I lash out, twisting violently, trying to shove him off. His grip tightens, claws biting into my skin, warning me.

Something inside me snaps and magic surges.

A pulse erupts from my core, raw and untrained, slamming into him like a violent gust of wind.

Rhogar staggers back. His eyes widen in horror.

His snarl splits the night.

“Purna!”

The word rips from his throat, raw and vicious, filled with hatred.

The entire camp goes still. Then bursts into action simultaneously.

13

DAIN

R hogar's voice splits the night.

“Purna!”

The word rips through the camp like a battle cry, like an execution order.

For a second, the world holds its breath. Then, everything erupts.

Gargoyles move, some stumbling back in disgust, others rising with dark interest. Their gazes shifts, locking onto Liora as if she has just become something more than prey.

Something to be destroyed.

Liora presses back against the rock, eyes wide, breath unsteady, her pulse hammering so loud I can hear it from across the fire. The glow from her magic still flickers faintly at her fingertips, uncontrolled, untrained. She doesn't understand what she's just done.

But they do.

Rhogar turns toward her, his face twisting into something ugly. He steps forward, claws flexing, voice low and brimming with fury. “You should be dead.”

She flinches, but she doesn't look away.

Something sharp coils in my heart.

I stand.

The motion draws attention.

Rhogar's head snaps to me, confusion flickering through his rage. "Dain," he sneers. "Step aside. Unless you suddenly have a weakness for filth."

I don't speak.

I step forward, putting myself between them.

Rhogar's expression shifts from confusion to understanding. Then to something worse.

The gathered gargoyles stiffen.

Someone mutters under their breath. Another growls low, rumbling, waiting.

Rhogar exhales a slow, dark chuckle. "I see." His molten eye gleams in the firelight, his lips curling into something cruel. "You were always good at tearing things apart, weren't you? I hear from the others." He tilts his head. "But now you defend her?"

Liora stares at me, silent, her breathing sharp, uneven.

I do not look at her.

I look at him.

“Step away,” I warn. My voice is quiet, deadly.

Rhogar laughs.

“Do you hear that?” he calls to the others, arms spreading wide. “The Stone Tyrant has found himself a pet.”

A ripple of dark amusement spreads through the gathered warriors. Some look entertained. Others look furious.

One of them moves.

A smaller gargoyle, fast, eager, too young to be careful. He lunges, claws reaching for Liora’s throat.

I strike before he touches her.

My claws tear through his chest, my body moving before my mind, instinct outweighing hesitation. Bone cracks beneath my grip, his blood hot against my skin.

He makes a choked sound, eyes wide in shock, in betrayal.

I do not let go.

I rip him apart.

The body drops, the stench of blood heavy in the cold night air.

The silence that follows is thick.

Liora trembles behind me.

Rhogar's smirk is gone. His tail lashes once, slow, calculating.

"You've made your choice," he murmurs.

I already know what comes next.

Rhogar moves first.

He closes the space between us in a heartbeat, claws slashing for my throat. I barely shift in time, his strike grazing my jaw, the sting immediate, sharp.

I counter, slamming my fist into his ribs, twisting. The impact cracks against bone, but he doesn't slow.

We collide, wings flaring, claws tearing through stone and flesh.

The others don't interfere.

They watch.

Waiting to see who bleeds first.

Rhogar fights like a war-forged beast, brutal, unrelenting, his strikes carrying more than just rage, more than just betrayal. He wants me dead.

I block one hit, but the second lands, claws raking deep into my side.

Pain flares.

Liora gasps.

I snarl, ignoring the burn, slamming my head into his, using my body to throw him off balance. He stumbles, but he doesn't fall. Not yet.

He spits blood, grinning. "All this for a Purna whore?"

The words ignite something in me.

I lunge, sinking my claws into his throat, squeezing.

His eyes widen. For a moment, the world narrows to just this.

His blood drips between my fingers, his pulse struggling beneath my grip.

The others shift, waiting.

Kill him.

I should. But Liora moves.

Her hand brushes my arm—just barely, just a whisper of contact, but it's enough.

Magic flickers. Soft, weak, but there. She's losing control. Instead of helping, she's adding to the injury!

It pulls at something inside me.

I falter.

Rhogar takes the opening.

He slams his knee into my ribs, claws tearing against my wounded side, twisting.



Agony bursts through me. My wings falter, my body sways.

Another moves, a second gargoyle, lunging, aiming for Liora.

I react without thinking.

I throw her into my arms, wings snapping wide.

The wind rushes against my skin, pulling me up, dragging us both into the night.

Below, Rhogar shouts my name like a curse.

“Betrayer!”

The others take up the cry, their roars shaking the mountains, their rage a storm of hatred and bloodlust.

I don't stop. I don't look back.

Liora's hands clutch at my shoulders, her breath uneven, her body trembling against mine.

I don't let go.

The sky swallows us whole.

14

LIORA

D ain's wings beat against the night, each stroke more strained than the last.

His breath comes sharp, ragged. The warmth of his blood seeps through my fingers where I clutch his side, the wound deeper than I first thought. He is struggling.

The wind howls past us, the mountain peaks stretching below in jagged, endless ridges. He flies, but not well.

He wobbles.

My stomach lurches as his body lists slightly to the left before he corrects it with a sharp growl. His grip on me is still iron-clad, as if he refuses to drop me even as his own strength fails.

My pulse slams against my ribs. This isn't good.

I don't even know where we're going. We're just fleeing.

Below, the world is a dark blur, shadowed valleys and twisting rock formations. No shelter. No safety. No time.

The others will come. They'll hunt us. Him.

They want me dead. But him?

A betrayer. They will make him suffer.

He fought for me. He killed for me.

I grip the fabric of his torn leathers tighter, pressing against his chest, feeling the way his muscles lock in pain.

I did this to him.

The thought nearly suffocates me. I can't just sit here, clinging to him, watching him break apart. I have to do something.

Magic.

The word echoes in my head.

I don't understand it. I never have. But it listens to me.

It reacted before. It saved me.

I close my eyes and press my forehead against his shoulder, barely breathing.

Please.

I don't speak the word aloud, but it pulses through me like a prayer.

Help him. I reach for Dain.

The magic stirs, shifting like something half-asleep, something hesitant, uncertain. It

tastes my desperation.

It moves. A slow, spreading heat flows from my chest, down my arms, into him. My hands glow faintly where I press against his ribs, the wound beneath them reacting, mending.

Dain stiffens.

His breath hitches, his whole body tensing violently beneath me.

“What are you?—”

I focus harder.

His heart thunders against mine, fast, erratic. The magic is weak, I can feel its limits. I won't be able to heal him fully, but I can keep him steady.

We fly faster.

His wings beat stronger, no longer faltering, no longer threatening to send us plummeting to the earth below. The wind cuts sharper, the world blurring as we soar through the clouds, past the edges of the known mountains.

His grip tightens on me, but this time, it is not from strain.

The flight is shorter than I expect. The moment I feel the change in his body, the slight shift in his direction, I realize he's going to land.

The ground rushes up to meet us, a rocky stretch of terrain near the base of a deep valley, surrounded by thick twisting trees and jagged cliffs.

Dain's wings flare wide, catching the wind as he slows, dropping us down onto the earth with a heavy thud.

The moment my feet touch solid ground, my knees buckle.

His don't.

But he does stumble. Just slightly.

The moment he releases me, he slumps against the nearest rock, one knee hitting the ground, a hand braced to steady himself. His breath is deep, controlled, but still uneven.

Blood still stains his side, but the wound has closed.

My magic did that.

I did that.

He stares at me, golden eyes burning, sharp with something I cannot place.

"What did you do?"

His voice is rough, low.

I swallow, my throat dry. "I—I healed you."

He doesn't react at first. Just keeps looking at me, searching, hunting. Then his lips curl slightly, not in amusement, not in relief.

But in frustration.

His head tips back slightly, exhaling as if this is the last thing he wanted to happen.

“Of course you did.”

I flinch. “You’re welcome.”

He snorts. It’s a harsh, rough sound, but his fingers twitch against his knee. I realize he is shaking.

He never shakes.

Something tightens in my chest. I almost lost him.

He pushes himself up, shoulders rolling, wings shaking off lingering tension. His movements are slower, measured, as if he’s calculating every next step.

“We can’t fly again,” he mutters, wiping his forearm over his face, smearing the leftover blood.

I frown. “Why?”

His gaze snaps to mine.

“Because they will be looking for us.”

My stomach turns cold. “You think they’re already hunting us?”

He tilts his head slightly, a movement that reminds me of a predator. “They are gargoyles. They are hunters. Of course, they are.”

The words are a low, dark warning, not just about them.

But about him.

I fold my arms over my chest, exhaling through my nose. My body is exhausted, but I ignore it. “Then what do we do?”

His eyes don’t leave mine.

“We walk.”

I stare at him. “Through the mountains?”

A slow nod.

I bite my lip, hesitation warring with reason. I don’t like it. But I don’t argue.

Not when he gazes at me like that.

Not when I still feel the warmth of his skin beneath my fingers, the echo of his pain inside me.

Not when I can still taste the moment he almost died.

I lower my gaze, inhaling deeply, steadying myself.

He steps forward, closer than I expect, towering over me, his presence heavy, unshakable.

“This is not over, Liora,” he murmurs. “Do you understand that?”

I lift my head. “I never thought it was.”

Something flickers in his gaze, unreadable.

A mystery.



15

DAIN

The mountains stretch before us like an endless graveyard, jagged stone peaks sharp against the deepening sky. We move through them in silence, the wind whistling through the crags, carrying the scent of damp rock and old storms. I prefer the silence.

Liora doesn't.

I feel her gaze flicker toward me, stealing glances, searching.

For what? An answer? An explanation? A shred of something she can hold onto?

She won't find it.

The magic lingers on my skin, an unwelcome thing, a reminder of what she did. Of what she is.

Purna.

I should resent her for it.

I do.

Yet, when I glance at her, at the way she stumbles slightly on the uneven ground,

exhaustion dragging at her limbs, her breath uneven but stubbornly silent, resentment is not the only thing that lingers.

My hands twitch at my sides, itching to grab her. To steady her.

Instead, I speak.

“You shouldn’t have done that.”

She exhales sharply, shaking her head. “I saved your life.”

I stop. She does, too.

The wind howls between us, carrying everything unspoken.

I take a step forward, closing the space between us until she has to tilt her head to meet my gaze. “You call that saving me?” My voice is low, rough. “You think I wanted that?”

Her eyes flash. “Would you rather be dead?”

I don’t answer.

Her lips part slightly, as if she already knows the answer, and it infuriates her.

She shoves past me, her shoulder brushing against my chest, warm despite the cold. “Then next time,” she mutters, “I’ll let you bleed out.”

A growl rumbles in my throat. I turn, grabbing her before she can get too far.

She gasps, whirling toward me, anger simmering beneath the surface, frustration

burning brighter than fear.

Good.

“Do not use magic again.” The words cut through the night, sharp as a blade.

She yanks herself free. “I didn’t exactly have a choice!”

I step closer. “You always have a choice.”

She laughs, bitter, disbelieving. “That’s easy for you to say.”

She turns again, marching ahead, moving with more force than her body can handle.

She is weak. She won’t last much longer without rest.

I could tell her that.

I don’t.

Instead, I follow.

Something is tracking us.

I feel it.

Not the gargoyles. They would be louder, hunting with fury and vengeance, eager for my head and her corpse.

This is different.

Patient. Waiting.

It's been following us since the cavern, since the moment we first stepped into the tunnels. I knew it then, but I said nothing. And I say nothing now.

Liora doesn't notice.

She is too busy fearing the wrong thing.

She keeps glancing behind her, scanning the ridges above, her mind still trapped in the past, still hearing Rhogar's snarl, still expecting his blade to be the one that kills her.

She thinks it's them.

It isn't.

But I don't tell her.

The sky grows darker, the cold heavier.

Liora's breathing changes. Not enough for her to notice, but I do.

She is slowing.

Her steps falter, just slightly, her fingers clenching and unclenching at her sides.

She is trying to hide it.

I don't call her out on it.

Instead, I scan the terrain, my eyes narrowing at a distant rock formation, a hollow carved into the mountain's ribs.

A cave.

I don't need it.

She does. She won't ask for it.

So I stop walking.

She does, too, blinking up at me in confusion, as if she didn't expect me to pause at all.

"What?"

I tilt my head toward the cave. "We rest."

She hesitates, her pride a tangible thing, sparking in her eyes, in the way her lips press together.

For a moment, I think she'll argue.

She exhales and nods, her shoulders easing ever so slightly.

I pretend not to notice.

Inside, the cave is cold, but dry. The walls are uneven, jagged in places, but the space is deep enough that we are hidden from the sky.

Liora sinks to the ground almost instantly, stretching her legs, rolling her shoulders,

exhaustion finally slipping past her defenses.

I remain standing, arms crossed, watching her.

She notices.

“What?” she mutters, rubbing her temples.

I don’t answer.

She shouldn’t be here. I shouldn’t have taken her.

I should have let her die with the others.

Why did I tear through my own kind to keep her breathing?

I exhale slowly. “You need rest.”

She glares at me. “You don’t?”

I don’t answer.

Her gaze lingers on me longer than it should, as if she is seeing something she shouldn’t, something she isn’t supposed to.

She looks away.

The fire between us, invisible, untouchable, burns hotter than before.

We rest. But neither of us sleep.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:59 am*

16

DAIN

Liora shifts against the cold stone, her breathing uneven, skin pale beneath the dim flicker of light in the cave. She's finally asleep, but it's not restful.

Her body burns.

Not with magic. With sickness.

She had been slowing all day, her steps faltering, her hands trembling even when she tried to hide it. Too much strain. Too little food.

Now, here she is, collapsed against me, her body shivering despite the heat rolling off her in waves.

Her fever is high.

I press my palm against her forehead, my hand dwarfing her face, skin too warm, breath too shallow. She murmurs something, too soft to make out, lips parting slightly, dry and chapped.

She is fragile.

The thought unsettles me more than it should.

I shift, adjusting her against me, pulling her closer. She doesn't fight it. Instead, she nuzzles closer, seeking warmth instinctively, her body fitting against mine in a way that makes something deep inside me twist.

Her fingers twitch against my chest, as if she is trying to grip onto something solid, something real.

"You're warm," she murmurs, voice hoarse, half-lost to sleep.

I don't respond.

She doesn't care.

"You feel good," she continues, her cheek pressing against my skin, her breath fanning over my collarbone.

A low growl rumbles in my throat, but she doesn't hear it, or maybe she does and doesn't care.

She sighs, curling slightly, fingers skimming the ridges of my chest, barely touching, barely feeling.

My body stiffens.

"Strong," she mutters, voice heavier now, slurred with fever. "So strong. So terrifying."

My jaw tightens. "Sleep."

She doesn't listen.



Instead, she tilts her face up, her nose brushing the curve of my jaw, and a part of me snaps tight.

“Terrifying,” she repeats, her lips barely moving, her lashes fluttering as if she is slipping between wakefulness and delirium.

She swallows, her body shifting against mine, legs tangling slightly, her warmth pressing against every inch of me.

I grip her waist, stilling her.

“Liora.”

She hums in response, not understanding the warning in my voice.

Then her fingers trail lower, tracing over the jagged scars along my ribs, curious, lazy, dangerous.

Something inside me burns.

I grab her wrist, firm but careful. “Behave.”

Her lips curve slightly, a shadow of a smirk, barely there.

“Why?” she breathes. “You’re so?—”

I silence her with a kiss.

Not because I mean to.

Not because I want to.

But because I lose control for half a second, and it is the longest second of my life.

Her lips are soft, warm, parted against mine in startled surprise.

She doesn't resist.

She doesn't push me away.

That makes it worse. I pray she push me away. Scream at me. Call me a monster.

My claws flex against her waist, fighting the instinct to pull her closer, to taste her properly, to take and take and take.

I stop.

I wrench myself back, breath sharp, body coiled too tight, mind screaming at me in a thousand different ways.

I can't do this.

She can't be mine. She cannot be. I need to fight this overwhelming feeling of wanting her, craving her.

Not when her blood is Purna. Not when everything in me says she should not exist.

She doesn't react.

She is already slipping back into unconsciousness, barely aware of what just happened.

Good.

Better.

I exhale sharply, forcing myself to pull away, to adjust her into a more comfortable position, to ignore the way my body still hums with something violent.

I need air. I need distance.

I need to not think about what I just did.

I rise carefully, keeping her as warm as possible in my absence. She won't last long if her fever worsens.

I scan the cave, trying to recall the herbs that once existed in this part of the world. It's been too long. My memories are fractured, half-lost to stone sleep, but I force myself to remember.

She needs it. And that is the problem, isn't it?

I am doing this for her because she is Liora.

I step into the night.

I need to find something to bring her back.

Before I lose myself completely.

17

LIORA

I wake to emptiness.

The heat that had wrapped around me through the night is gone, leaving only the cold stone beneath my body. A shiver rolls through me, sweat clinging to my skin despite the chill, the remnants of fever still weighing me down. My limbs ache, my throat dry, but it's the absence beside me that tightens my chest with something far worse than discomfort.

Dain is not here.

For a moment, I lie still, hoping, listening. Maybe he's just beyond my reach, watching from the shadows. Maybe he's waiting for me to wake before he speaks.

But the silence is thick, untouched by the sound of his breathing, his presence, his unbearable weight pressing against the cave.

I push up onto unsteady elbows, the shift sending a wave of dizziness crashing over me. My body protests, muscles stiff, head pounding, but I force myself to sit, to breathe, to focus.

He wouldn't have left.

Would he?

A bitter taste coats my tongue. Of course, he would.

I shove the thought down before it can dig too deep. He wouldn't abandon me, not like this, not when I'm still weak. He's stubborn, possessive in his own cold, ruthless way. He has no reason to keep me alive, no reason to fight for me like he has, but he does.

I don't understand why.

Shaky hands push against the cavern floor, and I drag myself upright, swallowing against the nausea curling in my stomach. My fever must be breaking, but exhaustion clings to me, clawing at my limbs as I stagger toward the mouth of the cave.

The world beyond is vast, a jagged expanse of mountains and mist curling between the ridges. Wind cuts through the stone, sharp and restless, carrying the smell of damp earth and old storms. The sky is heavy, thick clouds stretched across the horizon, pressing down like a lid on a coffin.

Dain is nowhere in sight.

Something in me tightens, and I take another step forward, eyes sweeping the landscape, searching. I don't call out for him. I don't dare.

Something else is out here.

It has been watching.

The sensation creeps along my spine, slithering beneath my skin like an unseen hand. It's not something I can hear or see, but I feel it.

It's been there since the temple. Since the mines. Since the tunnels beneath the ruins.

It lingers now, close.

The air thickens, the pressure building in a way that makes my pulse race, my hands tremble. My body reacts before my mind can make sense of it, instincts screaming at me to run, hide, disappear.

Dain had said nothing about this thing, but I know he felt it too. He must have.

I strain to listen, heart hammering in my ears, waiting for something, a whisper, a shift in the shadows, a sign that I'm not imagining this.

Nothing moves.

But the fear coils tighter.

I am not alone.

I take another step.

The wind shifts, and a low growl rumbles through the valley.

The sound is deep, primal, vibrating through the ground beneath my feet. My breath locks in my throat as I turn, eyes locking onto the source.

The beast moves from the rocks, massive and hulking, its form shifting between shadow and flesh, muscles rippling beneath dark, matted fur. Its eyes gleam, black and bottomless, hunger carved into every sharp edge of its body.

It has been waiting.

Now, it moves.

The growl builds, a deep reverberation that shakes me from the inside out, rattling my ribs. My body locks up, its gaze pinning me in place.

It lunges.

I don't think—I run.

The cliffs blur, the world narrowing into a desperate stretch of uneven ground, loose rock sliding beneath my feet. My breath comes too fast, every heartbeat a violent drumbeat in my ears. The beast follows, heavy and relentless, claws scraping against the stone as it closes in.

I push harder, the cold air burning my lungs, but it's not enough. I can hear it gaining on me.

My body is still weak, still recovering, and my limbs scream in protest.

I am not fast enough.

I try to reach for my magic, anything, anything at all, but the presence around me presses down, suffocating.

It's like something is pulling it away, feeding off my fear, stealing whatever strength I have left.

The realization hits me like a hammer.

It wants me to be afraid.

The beast doesn't kill me immediately. It could have already.

It's herding me.

Toying with me.

My foot catches on the edge of a hidden crevice, and the world spins.

Pain explodes through my body as I hit the ground, my shoulder slamming into the rock, the breath knocked from my lungs. A cry escapes my throat, raw and sharp, but there's no one to hear it.

The beast slows.

It prowls closer, its black eyes gleaming in the dim light, the stench of blood thick in the air.

I can't move.

Every limb is heavy, every inch of me screaming in pain.

I stare up at the sky, the looming clouds stretching endlessly above me.

This is it.

This is how I die.

Alone. Forgotten.

The shadows curl around me, stretching toward my skin like unseen hands, pulling, whispering, feeding off my despair.

The world cracks open.



A deafening rush of wind shatters the silence, a powerful force cutting through the valley.

The beast stiffens, growling low.

The presence that had been pressing down on me recoils.

The sound is unmistakable.

Wings.

Massive. Powerful.

A force that rips through the night, a shadow darker than any that came before.

My heart stutters, my breath frozen in my lungs.

It must be him.

18

LIORA

Pain pulses through me, a slow, relentless ache that weighs me down like chains of iron. My limbs refuse to move the way I want them to, and every breath feels sharp, raw against my ribs. I push myself up on trembling hands, fighting the blur edging my vision.

The beast is still there.

Stalking.

Waiting.

Its black eyes glimmer in the dying light, saliva dripping from jagged teeth, muscles tensing as it prowls closer. My pulse is a frantic thing, hammering against my ribs, but I can't run. I don't have the strength.

The wind shifts.

A shadow descends from the sky in a violent gust of air and dust, landing with the strength of a thunderclap.

Not Dain. A gargoyle.

The sheer size of him is overwhelming, thick obsidian skin marred with old scars, his

massive wings unfurling as he lets out a low, guttural growl. His golden eyes flick to me for only a moment before turning to the beast.

He came for me.

The realization is colder than the wind cutting through the valley.

The beast lunges first, claws slashing, teeth snapping. The gargoyle meets it head-on, grappling with the creature, their bodies crashing into the rock with enough force to shake the ground beneath me.

I try to crawl away, ignoring the searing pain in my legs, the sharp sting of open wounds against the rough ground. I just need to put some distance between us.

A deafening snarl rips through the valley as the beast clamps its jaws onto the gargoyle's shoulder, dark blood spilling onto the rocks. But the gargoyle is stronger. He wrenches free, tearing into the creature with brutal efficiency, claws raking, fangs sinking deep. The beast thrashes, shrieking, its body twisting in agony.

It falls still.

Blood pools around it, dark and steaming.

The gargoyle exhales sharply, rolling his shoulders, his golden eyes turning back to me.

His lips curl.

“Pathetic,” he mutters, stepping toward me.

I scramble back, but there's nowhere to go. My body betrays me, my limbs too weak,

my strength drained. He doesn't rush. He takes his time, his wings shifting, casting long shadows across the stone.

"Dain abandoned you, didn't he?" His voice is edged with cruel amusement. "Did you really think he would keep you?"

I glare up at him, refusing to let the fear show, even as my heart threatens to break through my ribs.

"He should have killed you when he had the chance," the gargoyle continues, crouching beside me, his clawed fingers reaching for my throat. "But don't worry. I'll correct his mistake."

The first blow splits my lip.

Pain explodes across my face, white-hot and dizzying. Blood fills my mouth, metallic and thick. I gasp, but his claws tighten in my hair, yanking my head back.

The next strike knocks me sideways, my vision flickering.

I won't beg.

The world shudders.

The shadows around us shift, warping, curling inward like smoke in reverse.

The gargoyle freezes. The wind dies.

The darkness reaches for me.

It isn't solid. It isn't real. But it is there.

A presence. A hunger. A force older than anything I have ever felt, more ancient than even the ruins that sealed Dain away.

My mind screams to move, to run, to do something, anything?—

But I can't.

It wants me.

It doesn't whisper. It doesn't speak. It doesn't have a voice. It simply consumes.

The gargoyle stumbles back, snarling, wings snapping open, but he is nothing to it.

It doesn't see him. It only sees me. This darkness that has been following Dain and me has finally taken form.

Pain erupts behind my eyes, tearing through my skull, ripping into me like unseen claws.

Memories that aren't mine crash through me in a violent rush.

A woman stands before a great, seething void, her hands raised, light spilling from her palms, sealing something in a monstrous away.

The thing shrieks.

A voice, my own? Someone else's? It screams, "No, no, NO!"

The world is shaking.

The darkness reaches for me. And then, everything breaks.

A roar cuts through the storm, a force so powerful it shatters the unnatural silence.

Wings carve through the sky in a brutal, blinding force.

Dain. He doesn't hesitate.

Doesn't land.

Doesn't waste a second.

He collides with the darkness like a living weapon, his claws raking through the formless void. Where the other gargoyle before couldn't land a single blow, Dain cuts through it.

The thing shrieks, recoiling.

How is he hurting it?

The presence writhes, retreating into the shadows, retreating into the place it came from.

Dain doesn't stop to look at what he's done.

He lands, grabbing me without a word, his hands bruising in their intensity, and then we're in the air, the wind whipping past us in a violent rush.

The sky swallows us.

The landing isn't graceful.

Dain hits the ground hard, rolling as he clutches me against his chest. My body is

battered, broken, every nerve screaming in protest, but I manage to shift, barely managing to push myself up, my vision spinning.

“Where the hell did you go?” My voice is hoarse, shaking, but I don’t care.

Dain says nothing.

His wings twitch, his breathing deep, slow, too controlled. His silence is heavy, his golden eyes burning with something I can’t decipher.

I shove against him, weak, desperate. “You left me!”

His hand snaps out, gripping my throat.

The world narrows to his hold, to his strength pressing against my pulse, to the fire in his gaze that looks more like a storm than anything else.

I clutch at his wrist, my body screaming in panic.

“Dain—”

He leans in, his voice a low, dangerous growl.

“This is because of you!”

19

DAIN

Her fingers dig into my wrist, nails pressing against my skin as she tries to fight free, but she is weak.

Too weak.

I let go.

She falls to the ground, coughing, dragging in air as if she wasn't certain she'd ever breathe again. I watch her, expression blank, ignoring the way my instincts hiss in irritation at the sight of her bruised throat, the red imprints of my claws still fresh against her pale skin.

She glares up at me, eyes sharp, defiant even in her exhaustion.

“Why did you do that? What’s with you?” she rasps, voice raw. “Not only did you choke me, you left me! Again.”

The accusation burns through the space between us.

I don't respond.

I turn my back on her, my hands curling into fists as I try to steady the storm inside me. She should not matter. She should have never mattered. But every time I try to



put distance between us, I find myself dragged back, ensnared, caged in ways I don't understand.

The silence stretches, thick with unspoken words, but she refuses to let it settle.

"You fought that thing," she says, voice quieter now, hesitant. "The gargoyle before you—he couldn't even touch it. But you did."

I exhale slowly, resisting the urge to lash out, to silence her questions before they take root.

"What was it?" she presses, shifting slightly, struggling to sit upright. "Why was it after me?"

"It doesn't matter," I growl.

"It does."

She forces herself to her feet, wobbling but standing, stubborn as ever. "When it touched me, I saw—" Her voice falters, and I can hear the confusion in it, the fear.

I should stop her.

But I don't.

"I saw a woman," she continues, swallowing hard. "She was fighting it. She was sealing it away."

The breath leaves my lungs in a slow, cold rush.

I go still.

The mountains around us are silent, the wind curling through the rocks like whispers of things long dead. She watches me carefully, eyes searching, peeling away at something I don't want her to see.

I should turn away. I should walk. I should say nothing.

But instead,

“Do not speak of her.”

Liora's brow furrows. “Who?—?”

I step closer, my body a wall of stone and heat, crowding her, forcing her back against the jagged cliff. “Do not ever speak of her.”

Her breath hitches, but she doesn't shrink away. “Who was she?”

“I said?—”

“I need to know.”

My hands snap out, caging her against the stone. “No, you do not.”

Her jaw tightens, frustration flickering across her features. “I feel connected to her.”

I bare my teeth, irritation curling through my chest like wildfire. Of course, she does.

She always had to be tangled in things best left buried.

Liora shakes her head, voice rising. “Why does that thing want me? What is it? Why does it feel?—”

“Because you’re trouble.”

The words cut through her like a sword, sharp and ruthless, meant to wound. I see the flicker of something in her eyes, something wounded, betrayed, but she masks it quickly, straightening her spine.

“Then leave me,” she says, voice cool. “If I’m such a burden, go.”

Her defiance grates against my skin like raw stone.

I wish I could walk away from her and never look back.

But something inside me is anchored to her, bound by a force I don’t understand, a force that makes me fight for her when I should let her die, that makes me claim her when I should have left her in the ruins.

I hate it.

I loathe her for it.

But not nearly as much as I should.

The silence stretches between us, thick and charged, neither of us willing to break it. Then, with a slow, measured breath, I pull away, stepping back, forcing the tension to uncoil.

She watches me warily, her fists clenched at her sides, still waiting for an answer she will never get.

I roll my shoulders, shifting my wings slightly before speaking.

“I don’t know.”

Liora blinks. “What?”

“My memories,” I grit my teeth. “They are fractured. Scattered. Some things I know by instinct alone. But that thing,” My lips curl in irritation, in something close to rage. “I do not remember it. I only know it is old. Older than even I.”

She exhales, shaking her head. “That’s not good enough.”

“It will have to be.”

She glares, but for once, she has nothing to say.

She looks exhausted, her body barely holding itself together, blood still drying on her skin, her limbs trembling with unspent energy.

She needs rest. She needs to be tended to.

I detest that I care.

I huff out a breath, turning on my heel. “Come.”

She hesitates, still waiting for something more. She won’t get it.

With a quiet curse, she follows.

I lead her into another cave just as the first drop of rain hits my skin.

A storm is coming.

20

LIORA

The cave swallows me whole, its mouth yawning wide as I step inside, trailing behind Dain with heavy, aching limbs. The deeper we go, the more the storm outside fades, its howling winds replaced by the slow, steady drip of water seeping through ancient stone. The scent of damp earth and lingering heat from his presence clings to the space, wrapping around me in a way I should not find comforting.

I don't want to be here.

Not with him and everything that happened.

But I am too weak to leave, and he is all I have.

He moves ahead of me without a sound, his massive frame cutting through the dim torchlight he must have left behind earlier. Shadows coil around him, shifting, stretching, swallowing him whole, but I don't lose sight of him. I never do.

I should hate him.

I don't.

He has tried to kill me. He has saved me. He has left me behind. He has returned. He choked me.

He has fought for me, against me, beside me. I'm utterly confused as to what he wants from me.

Now, as he leads me deeper into the cavern, I feel the pull between us tightening, coiling around my ribs like an invisible chain.

I don't understand it.

I don't want to.

The silence between us is thick, charged with everything unsaid, but I refuse to be the first to break it. I refuse to give him that power over me.

Finally, he stops.

The cave opens into a chamber, a natural spring nestled in the center, steam curling lazily over the surface. The water glows faintly, fed by some unseen force, its depths clear enough to reveal smooth, polished stones beneath. It is warm. Inviting.

I stare at it, not understanding.

Dain watches me, his expression unreadable. "You stink," he mutters.

My jaw tightens. "So do you."

His eyes flicker, something dangerous, something amused burning behind them. "Then bathe."

I fist my hands at my sides. I hate that he is right. Hate that my body aches for the heat, the cleansing touch of water to wash away the grime of blood and battle. I have not had the luxury of warmth in years. Not since,

No. I do not think of before.

Still, I hesitate. “And you?”

His lips press together, something flickering across his face—something unreadable, something controlled.

“I will be outside,” he says, voice low, reluctant. He gestures to the far corner of the cave. “You will be safe.”

I do not trust that.

But I nod anyway.

He does not move immediately.

His gaze lingers, sweeping over me, assessing, measuring, deciding.

He turns, stepping into the shadows, disappearing beyond the entrance of the chamber.

Only when I am certain he is gone do I let out a slow breath, my body sagging beneath the exhaustion.

The cave feels larger without him. Colder.

Yet, I am aware of him still.

Waiting. Watching.

Even when unseen.

The moment I sink beneath the surface, my body shudders.

Heat wraps around me, sliding against my bruised skin, melting into every aching muscle, seeping into my bones like a drug. My head tilts back, eyes closing as I let myself drift for a moment, let the water carry me, let it hold me in a way nothing else ever has.

It feels too good.

I press my hands against my face, scrubbing away the remnants of blood and filth, ignoring the way my fingers shake. My skin is too sensitive, every nerve on edge, every breath sharp and unsteady.

Not from the fight. Not from the pain.

From him.

Even now, with the water lapping at my bare skin, I feel him close.

Too close. What is this?

What is this thing between us, this pull, this tension that refuses to break, that coils tighter with every breath, every look, every word that goes unspoken?

I should not want him.

He is cruel. Unyielding. A monster.

Yet, when he is gone, something inside me aches.

I curse, pressing my forehead against the ledge, willing the thoughts away, willing



him away.

It does not work.

I do not think it ever will.

I do not stay in the water long.

The heat is soothing, but my exhaustion is worse, and I will not let myself grow weak. I scrub myself clean, washing away the filth, the blood, the sweat—but not him.

Never him.

I rise from the spring, skin flushed, hair clinging to my back, heart hammering for reasons I do not understand.

There is nothing to dry myself with, no cloth, no warmth except the fire crackling in the main cavern. I have no choice but to step forward, dripping, exposed, into the space where he waits.

He is waiting.

Seated against the far wall, his wings partially unfurled, eyes flickering in the glow of the fire. He does not react when I approach, does not speak, does not acknowledge me beyond a single slow shift of his gaze as he takes me in.

Heat creeps up my spine.

I clutch my damp clothes against me, as if that will protect me from his stare.

“Better?” he asks, voice low, almost mocking.

I swallow hard. “Yes.”

He shifts, motioning for me to sit beside him.

I hesitate.

But I do not have a choice.

The cave is too small, the fire the only source of warmth, and I will not freeze because I am too stubborn to sit near him.

I settle beside him, careful to keep a distance between us.

It does not matter.

The heat of him is suffocating, pressing into my skin, seeping into my lungs, settling into the marrow of my bones.

Silence stretches and it should be uncomfortable.

It is not.

Lightning splits the sky outside, illuminating the cavern in a brief flash of silver. Thunder rumbles a moment later, deep and rolling, shaking the earth beneath us. The storm has grown worse.

I close my eyes.

Dain exhales slowly.

“You need rest.”

“I am fine,” I mutter.

His low growl vibrates through the air, through me. I open my eyes to find him watching me, expression unreadable, gaze heavy, dark.

I try to hold it.

I fail.

The exhaustion creeps in, slow and insidious, dragging me toward sleep, toward him beside me, toward the storm raging inside me.

I fight it.

But, in the end, I lose.

## Page 21

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:59 am*

21

DAIN

S he sleeps, but I do not.

The storm outside rages, a beast tearing through the mountains, wind clawing at the entrance of the cave. The fire flickers, casting her in shadow, painting her too soft, too fragile against the harsh stone.

My hands flex at my sides, restless.

I should not be here.

I should not be watching her.

Yet, I cannot look away.

She is curled beneath the furs I threw at her earlier, her breath slow, steady, the lingering scent of the spring still clinging to her skin. There is no filth left, no trace of the blood and grime from before. Only her. Clean. Warm. Bare beneath that pathetic scrap of cloth she calls clothing.

Heat coils in my gut, sharp, unwanted.

She is human. A weakness wrapped in trembling flesh.

My hand moves, hovering just above the curve of her cheek. I should not touch her.  
But I do.

My fingers trail the edge of her jaw, a slow, lazy path that should not feel like a brand against my own skin. The warmth of her seeps into me, something treacherous, something that burrows deeper than I would like.

Her lips part slightly, a whisper of sound escaping her.

I jerk my hand back, exhaling sharply.

What am I doing?

I clench my fists, pressing them against my thighs, forcing my body into stillness, forcing my mind away from her. Away from the pull, from the thing between us that refuses to die.

She shifts in her sleep, her face softening, her body pressing deeper into the furs. I should be disgusted by the sight of her. I should want her dead.

But all I feel is reminded.

The memories come unbidden, slipping through the cracks of my mind, like blood seeping from a wound.

Another woman. Another lifetime.

A past buried beneath centuries of stone and silence.

Her face is lost to me, blurred at the edges, but the sensation remains. The way she felt beneath my hands, the way her magic thrummed through the air like a song meant

only for me. The way she gazed at me as she betrayed me.

The woman who sealed me away.

The woman I should have killed.

I should kill Liora now. This is the only way. I can't make the same mistakes.

Ending her is the best choice.

Destroy the link between past and present.

My hand curls around the hilt of my blade.

She stirs, lashes fluttering, breath catching.

I hesitate.

Something inside me snaps, recoils, resists.

What is wrong with me?

I shove away from the fire, dragging a hand through my hair, trying to breathe, trying to stop this madness before it consumes me. I need space. I need distraction.

I need the water.

Steam rises from the spring, curling through the air like whispering ghosts. The heat is nothing to me, I am always burning.

I sink into the depths, letting the warmth soak into my muscles, letting it ease the

tension coiled too tightly beneath my skin.

My mind is a battlefield.

I do not understand what is happening to me.

The memories are too fractured, the past a jagged mess of instincts and fragmented truths.

But one thing is certain.

Liora is tangled in it. I do not like it.

I drag a hand over my face, exhaling roughly, trying to purge her from my thoughts. Trying to forget how she stared at me when she begged for answers, the way her hands trembled when she touched me in her fevered state.

The way she feels like something I've lost.

A sound shatters my thoughts.

A breath.

Soft. Close.

I freeze.

Slowly, I turn my head.

She is standing at the entrance of the chamber, her hair damp, tangled, her bare feet silent against the rough ground.

She is watching me.

Her lips part slightly, wanting to speak, but she does not.

A slow, lazy smirk curls at the tip of my mouth.

“Enjoying the view?”

Her breath hitches, barely audible.

She glares, but it is weak, unconvincing. “You?—”

“Me?”

Her fingers tighten around the fabric of her dress, as if that will shield her from me.  
As if I do not already see everything.

I let my head tilt back, the water lapping against my chest, my voice dropping lower.  
“You’re staring, little one.”

She swallows hard. “I—wasn’t?—”

I laugh, low, dark, sinful.

She goes rigid, her cheeks burning, her entire body betraying her.

She wants to look.

She wants to run. And she doesn’t know which urge to listen to.

Something dangerous and satisfied coils through me at the sight.



She should be afraid.

Instead, she is tempted.

Tempted by a monster. Tempted by me.

I move without thinking.

She gasps as my hand shoots out, gripping her wrist, dragging her toward the edge.

Her pulse races beneath my fingers.

“Dain—”

I pull.

She falls and the water swallows her whole.

### LIORA

The moment I hit the water it immediately steals my breath, my thoughts, my control. Heat engulfs my body, soaking through my skin, dragging me under for a heartbeat too long. I thrash, gasping, shoving at the solid mass before me, but his grip is iron, unrelenting.

I break the surface with a strangled inhale, sputtering, water clinging to my lashes as I blink wildly, trying to make sense of what just happened. My hands lash out instinctively, shoving at his chest, but it's like pushing against a wall.

“What in the?—”

Dain's golden eyes gleam in the dim light, wicked, unrepentant. His grip shifts, sliding lower, wrapping around my waist as if he has any right to touch me like this.

I thrash harder, my legs kicking, but it only makes me more tangled in him, the motion pressing me closer against the hard, unyielding strength of his body.

“You,” I seethe, struggling to find words through my ragged breaths. “You bastard!”

His smirk is slow, dark, burning like embers in the dim cavern. “You were staring.”

My pulse slams into my ribs.

“I was not!”

He tilts his head slightly, watching me the way a predator watches a struggling thing caught in its claws. Amused. Infuriating. Inescapable.

“Liar,” he murmurs.

My stomach flips, twisting with something too dangerous, too hot. I need space, air, sanity. But his grip tightens, and I feel every inch of him against me.

It’s too much.

The heat of the water, the heat of him.

The smell of him, dark, smoky, male.

The solid weight of his body beneath my hands, his muscles shifting as he moves, as he pulls me closer instead of letting me go.

I should be fighting harder.

I should want to get away.

But my body betrays me.

My breath hitches, fingers tightening against his chest. He feels—gods, he feels like something carved from stone and heat and raw power.

I think he feels me shaking.

Because his smirk fades and his gaze drops to my mouth.

The world narrows.

It should not.

I should not want this.

But his breath is warm against my cheek, his fingers spread against the small of my back, pressing me against him like he owns me.

I am not moving away.

Neither is he.

The air between us fractures, thick with something unspoken, unwanted, undeniable.

His thumb brushes against my spine, barely a touch, but it sends a tremor down my back. Heat pools low in my belly, sharp and dangerous.

“Dain,” I whisper, but I don’t know if it’s a warning or something worse.

His lips hover too close, his breath curling over my damp skin, my jaw, my throat.

His voice drops, something rough, something raw.

“You don’t want this.”

I don’t answer.

Because I don’t know if that’s true.

His hand slides higher, fingers brushing along my ribs, exploring, learning, tracing

the edge of my collarbone, the damp strands of hair clinging to my throat.

Every touch burns.

Every inch of me is too aware.

I should tell him to stop.

His lips crash against mine.

The world shatters.

The heat consumes.

I don't think. I can't think.

His mouth is hard, demanding, devouring, and I am drowning in him.

A low growl rumbles in his chest, vibrating through me as his hand slides into my hair, tugging, tilting my head back, opening me further to him.

I shouldn't let him.

But I do.

I let him take. Let him steal the air that I breathe.

My hands clutch his shoulders, nails digging into skin and scars, my body arching toward his, caught in the storm of him, the storm of us.

I want more. Gods, I want more.

I press closer, pressing against the heat of him, curious, reckless, starving.

He lets me.

He lets me explore, lets me feel, lets me push past his restraint.

His tongue teases, demanding, conquering.

His fingers tighten in my hair, his body pressing me deeper against him, deeper into this thing neither of us can name.

It's too much, too little, not enough.

He stops.

Rips himself away like he's been burned.

I gasp, cold without him, furious, aching.

He stares at me, breathing ragged, eyes wild.

I don't understand.

What just happened?

Why did he stop?

His fingers flex, as if he is restraining himself, forcing something back.

A voice low, tight, dangerous?—

“We can’t do this.”

The words slap into me like ice.

My body shakes, my lips tingling, my mind spinning.

I am still breathless, still burning, still aching.

He dares to say that?

I want to hit him.

I want to kiss him again.

What the hell am I doing?

My hands curl into fists, pressing against my temples as if I can shove the thoughts out, shove him out.

I need to breathe.

I need to forget this ever happened.

Dain is already pulling away, his back to me, his breathing still unsteady.

Good.

Let him be the one to suffer.

Let him be the one who feels as out of control as I do.

I turn, pushing myself away from him, from this, from whatever the hell that was.

I don't look back. I can't.



23

DAIN

Her mouth keeps flashing in my mind even if I don't want to.

I don't want to think about her hands, about the way her fingers clutched at me, pulling, wanting.

Her taste lingers in my lips even if I hate it; I loathe the way she melted against me like she belonged there, the way her breath trembled as she let me take.

It meant nothing.

It should have been nothing.

But my hands still burn, my skin still feels her, and I hate it.

I need to put distance between us.

I move away, stripping the soaked remnants of my shirt, letting it drop to the cave floor. The stone is cool against my bare skin, but it does nothing to ease the heat still clawing under my flesh.

Liora watches me, arms crossed, still glaring. She is equally furious, equally shaken, and that fact alone nearly sends me over the edge.

"What the hell was that?" she demands, voice shaking.

I don't answer.

"Don't you dare ignore me!"

A muscle ticks in my jaw. I grip the nearest rock, digging my claws into it. "You started this."

Her breath hitches, just slightly. But then—defiance.

"You dragged me into the water!" she snaps.

"You were staring," I say, voice low, dangerous.

She flushes, and some twisted, primal part of me likes it.

"And you kissed me," she fires back. "You?—"

I am on her before I even register moving. Too close.

Her breath stutters, but she does not move away.

"I stopped," I growl, voice tight. "I pulled away. So what does that say about you, little human?"

She glares, but I see the conflict there. The raw, simmering heat neither of us have the luxury of entertaining.

I can't do this.

I need to move. I need to think.

A sound.

Deep. Wrong.

Liora hears it, too. Her shoulders go rigid, her eyes flicking toward the cave entrance.

My muscles coil, every instinct screaming danger.

The dark presence.

But no, it is something else.

Something inside this place.

I gesture for her to move, to stay behind me, but she's already creeping forward, stepping deeper into the cave.

Foolish girl. But I do not stop her as something inside me whispers, Follow .

The stone walls stretch ahead, narrowing into an arched corridor, leading into something bigger. After minutes of walking, we arrive at what seems to be the dead end.

A dwelling.

Old. Forgotten.

The remnants of a life once lived remain here, long-decayed furniture, discarded relics, the crumbling remnants of parchment.

This was someone's home. But whose? Why is it here, hidden deep beneath these cursed mountains?

Liora gasps.

I whirl, claws raised, only to see her holding something.

A notebook.

Tattered, its pages barely holding together.

The moment my eyes land on it, something in my gut tightens, coils, snaps.

I know this.

No. I shouldn't.

Liora's fingers tremble as she flips through the pages, her eyes scanning the script. She can read it.

Impossible.

Humans are not taught language. They are not allowed.

Yet, she understands.

"It's... magic," she murmurs. "Purna magic."

That word sends something sharp through me.

I lunge, ripping the notebook from her hands.

She stumbles back, startled by the force of it.

"I—Dain, what?—?"

My grip tightens on the book, my claws nearly tearing through the ancient pages.

This is wrong. This place.

This writing. This feeling.

My chest is too tight. My mind is a fractured thing, a broken past that refuses to fit together.

I see flashes.

Hands, ink-stained. A voice. There's laughter ringing in my ears, soft as silk and sharper than knives.

I see her. The woman.

The one who sealed me away.

The purna.

My gaze lands on the figurine at the farthest end of the room.

My stomach lurches. A small, hand-carved stone figurine, resting atop a crumbling shelf.

A gargoyle.

I know this.

I remember this.

My breath is razor-sharp, my chest tight. I step toward it, picking it up. It fits into my palm perfectly.

I've held this before. Because she made this.

My mind blurs, fractures.

Liora is still speaking, still asking questions, but I do not hear her.

I do not hear anything.

Something led us here, probably wanted us to find this place.

I hate feeling like a piece on someone else's board.

This was not coincidence. This was not fate.

Someone has been waiting. And they have led us here for a reason.

24

LIORA

The cavern bears down on us, thick with something unseen, something ancient. The very air coils tight, watching, as if the stone walls themselves breathe.

Dain is on edge. He's hiding something from me.

The way he ripped the notebook from my hands, the wildness in his eyes, it was more than anger. It was fear.

That terrifies me more than anything else.

"Dain," I press, voice sharper than I intend. "What is this place?"

His grip tightens on the notebook, claws indenting the brittle pages. He does not answer.

"What are you afraid of?" I push again, stepping closer, challenging him.

His wings shift, tension coiling in his frame like a beast about to strike. He looks at me then, his eyes flickering molten gold, but beneath that fire, there is something else.

"I told you to stop asking questions," he growls, his voice darker than I have ever heard it.

My heart pounds. "You recognized that figurine, didn't you?" I press on. "This place means something to you."

His expression hardens. A wall slams into place.

"Leave it," he says.

No. I can't.

There's something important he's hiding from me.

I can feel it in the way he moves, restless, coiled, dangerous. His steps are sharp, his claws flexing, wings half-flared, as if expecting an attack that hasn't yet come. The moment I uncovered that figurine, that notebook, something inside him fractured.

He won't say why.

He refuses to speak at all.

I grip my arms against the cold, but it's not the cold that unsettles me—it's the silence. The kind of silence that comes before something terrible.

Dain abruptly turns his head toward the cave entrance, his entire body locking up in rigid stillness. His eyes are fixed on something I can't see. A low growl rumbles from deep in his chest, reverberating through the cavern like a distant storm.

"Dain?" I whisper, because suddenly, the darkness beyond the cave feels alive.

The shadows at the threshold shift, stretching unnaturally, spilling forward like something rising from the depths of a blackened sea.



A void. Moving.

Reaching.

Dain reacts first.

His wings flare wide, claws unsheathing, and then he lunges.

The sound that follows is not of flesh meeting flesh, but of something wrong. His claws cut through the thing, but it doesn't react like a living creature. It does not bleed.

Instead, the darkness absorbs the impact, shifting like liquid, as if it is not bound to the laws of this world.

Dain snarls, pulling back. His hands flex, and suddenly the temperature shifts—heat ripples off him in waves.

Magic.

I don't understand what I'm seeing, but I can feel it.

The cavern pulses in response, and then, before my mind can catch up, the entity attacks.

It lurches toward him in tendrils of blackness, serpentine and silent, moving like a mist yet solid as steel. Dain barely dodges the first strike before another tendril whips around, slamming into his side. He grunts, staggering back, and the sound that follows is wrong.

A deep, vibrating hum, almost like laughter, but not.

Not something that should exist.

Dain crouches, breathing hard, and I notice it, uncertainty.

He's fought monsters, elves, creatures from nightmares but this thing doesn't play by the same rules.

I press myself against the walls, my pulse hammering as I scan the cavern for anything that can help. My hands skim over the edges of the carved shelves, desperate, slipping on dust-covered relics, books, broken glass?—

And then I feel it.

Cold. The moment my fingers graze it, my entire arm stiffens.

I look down.

A book.

No cover. No title.

Only blackened pages, as if burned from the inside.

A tremor runs through me as the tome shudders, its pages rippling, though there is no wind.

Something whispers, low and sweet, ancient and waiting.

I can't breathe. I should let go.

But I don't.

The book flips open on its own.

A single page, stained with something dark, like ink, like blood.

The whisper turns into a voice.

Not from the cavern. Not from Dain.

From inside me.

My lips part. And I speak.

The words spill out, alien and familiar all at once. A language that is not mine, but is.

The entity turns toward me, tendrils snapping in recognition. The whisper becomes a scream.

Magic erupts.

The cavern shudders, the walls pulsing with raw power. The entity writhes as the blast of force collides into it.

Dain shouts my name. The entity wails, but the sound is distant, muted, as if coming from somewhere far away.

I cannot stop. The words are not mine to stop.

Pain splits through me, tearing from my skull to my ribs, like claws sinking into my flesh. My eyes burn, and something wet trails down my cheeks.

I blink, but my vision blurs.

I see it—red.

Blood. I am crying blood.

The voice is inside me, screaming now, demanding something I do not understand.

The book rips from my hands, its pages bursting into shadow, swallowed by the very thing it unleashed.

My knees buckle. Everything around me seems to collapse.

The last thing I see before darkness takes me is Dain's furious, terrified face.

25

DAIN

L iora is dying in my arms.

Her body convulses violently, her breath erratic, blood leaking from her nose, from her ears, from the corners of her lips. Too much blood. Too much for a mortal to lose and survive.

I do not know how to stop it.

Her skin burns beneath my touch, her limbs seizing with every violent tremor. Whatever magic she unleashed—whatever that cursed book forced through her, it is killing her.

No.

I refuse it.

I tighten my hold, wings snapping open as I launch into the sky, driving us higher into the storm-laden winds. The night is thick with the scent of rain, of dirt, of the remnants of magic still clinging to her fragile form.

I fly hard, faster than I should with injuries still fresh in my own body, but there is no choice. She cannot die.

She will not die.

A town appears beneath me, dimly lit, quiet. A place forgotten by war, swallowed in the rolling hills and thick forests. No guards. No watchtowers. Small. Remote.

Perfect.

I land outside the outskirts, keeping to the darkness, my instincts sharp, my every muscle primed for danger. I fold my wings in tight, cradling Liora against my chest as I move through the abandoned streets.

The town is asleep, the houses lifeless, but I do not need shelter, I need seclusion.

A structure looms in the distance, its windows dark, its scent old with dust and disuse. Empty. It will do.

I push inside, kicking the rotting door shut behind me. The space is cramped, the wooden beams aged and cracked, the walls whispering with forgotten time. No one has lived here in years.

Good.

I lower Liora onto a moth-eaten rug, my claws brushing her sweat-dampened forehead. Her face is ashen, her lips parted as if gasping for a breath that does not come.

Her heartbeat is slowing.

Too slow.

Panic is a foreign thing, an emotion I have not allowed in centuries, but it claws at my

ribs now, filling my chest with an unbearable pressure.

I do not know how to save her.

I have no power to heal.

She shudders again, a broken sound tearing from her throat. Blood seeps past her lips, staining her pale skin red, red, red.

A memory strikes like an arrow.

Blood.

Fed from her hands.

Her lips.

A woman, with eyes like fire, pressing her wrist to my mouth, whispering my name, before she sealed me away.

The taste of her had burned into me, marking me in ways even stone could not erase.

I remember. I despise it.

But the truth sits there, undeniable. Her blood saved me.

Purna blood.

Liora is Purna.

If there is even a chance, even a sliver of a chance that her blood can be bound to me

the same way.

I do not hesitate.

My claws cut into my palm, slicing deep, the crimson pooling instantly. The scent of it is thick, metallic, laced with old magic.

I lift her, pressing her lips to my wound.

“Drink.”

Nothing.

She does not move, her lashes fluttering weakly.

I snarl, fingers gripping her jaw, forcing her mouth open. Forcing her to take it.

“Drink.”

The first drop touches her tongue, and the world shifts.

A ripple of heat unfurls between us, something ancient snapping into place.

The connection is instant.

Her lips part further, her body seizing with a violent shudder, and then she drinks.

A pull—deep, primal.

I feel it deep inside me, curling in my gut.



My heartbeat stutters, then syncs.

The moment stretches.

Her fingers curl, clawing at my arm, her throat swallowing, her body taking me in.

Something unfamiliar hits me.

A force I do not understand.

She gasps, suddenly lurching forward, her eyes flying open.

She looks at me.

A look that's not usual. Something that creeps through me. And she speaks.

“Dain.”

The way she says my name, as if she has known me for a thousand lifetimes.

As if it belongs to her.

My pulse thunders, my grip loosening as I shove away from her, my mind snapping into chaos.

No.

It cannot be.

It is not possible.

Liora shifts, her movements fluid, her limbs no longer weak but graceful, powerful.

She rises onto her knees, her head tilting as if seeing me for the first time. And then, she smiles.

Something in me breaks.

She moves before I can stop her, closing the space between us, pressing her hands against my chest, her eyes locked onto mine.

The scent of her is different now, thick with the remnants of blood, with the remnants of me.

Her fingers trail up my throat, slow, deliberate.

“You called to me,” she murmurs.

The words are wrong.

Not hers.

My hands clench into fists. “You do not know what you’re saying.”

Her head tilts. “Don’t I?”

I grit my teeth, rage coiling hot.

She should not move like this.

She should not speak like this.

She is Liora, but she is not.

She leans in, her breath a whisper against my lips. Too close.

I should stop her.

I do not.

Her fingers tangle into my hair, and before I can tear myself away.

She kisses me.

Fire.

Pure, consuming, damning.

The taste of her punches through me, her lips soft, insistent, taking without hesitation.

I give in.

My hands snap to her waist, dragging her against me, forcing her deeper, parting her lips with a growl.

She whimpers, and I lose the last of my reason.

There is nothing else but the press of her body, the heat between us, the pull of something ancient that I cannot fight.

I kiss her like she belongs to me.

Because she does.

The thought strikes me so violently I rip away from her, panting, my claws shaking as I push her back.

Liora blinks, dazed, confused.

I step away.

This is wrong.

This is not supposed to be happening.

She looks too much like her.

Her eyes, those damned eyes.

I do not recognize my own voice when I speak.

“Who are you?”

She does not answer, only stares.

26

LIORA

Something is wrong.

It hums beneath my skin, slow and insidious, like embers buried beneath ash, waiting for the wind to coax them into flames. My body feels too hot, too full. Like I have swallowed something ancient, something that isn't mine.

Dain stares at me, his chest moving in jagged, uneven breaths. His hands are clenched at his sides, claws digging into his own palms, muscles straining with tension that ripples down his arms.

But it's his eyes that unnerve me most.

A flicker of recognition. Of something like fear.

But Dain does not fear anything.

I shudder, my breath catching as I brace my hands against the creaking wooden floor. My body feels different. Lighter, yet stronger. As if something has been pulled loose inside me, something that was meant to be out of reach.

The taste of him lingers on my tongue.

Blood.

The moment I realize what happened, my stomach twists. My lips part, words forming and then dissolving into silence as I try to piece together what he has done. What I have become.

“You—” My voice cracks, my throat raw. I sound different.

Dain grabs me before I can speak again, his clawed hand snapping around my wrist, fingers tightening just enough to still me without pain. His touch is searing.

“Who are you?” His voice is low, barely above a growl, the words laced with something raw. Accusation.

I blink. “What?”

His hold tightens, dragging me closer. His heat seeps into my skin, into my bones, making the burning sensation inside me even worse.

“That name,” he grits out. “You said my name. As if you’ve always known it.”

I swallow hard, pulse hammering against my ribs. “I don’t?—”

“You don’t remember?” He leans in, his breath warm against my face. “Or you don’t want to admit it?”

Something fractures inside me at the words, a splinter of something familiar.

The image of a woman, shadowed, distant. Her voice, a whisper at the back of my mind, speaking in a tongue I do not understand.

The darkness shifts.

For a moment, I feel as if I am standing somewhere else. Somewhere outside my own body, outside this life.

Dain releases me, his touch vanishing as if burned.

“You’re a mistake,” he snarls.

The words slice through me like a knife. A mistake.

I recoil, my hands curling into fists. “I didn’t ask for this.”

His eyes darken, his mouth twisting into something cold. “No,” he murmurs. “But neither did I.”

Silence settles between us, thick and suffocating. Outside, the wind howls, rattling the broken shutters of the abandoned house, as if trying to shake free the tension curling in the air between us.

I breathe through the weight pressing down on me, my hands clenching at the fabric of my tattered clothes. I don’t understand what’s happening.

But I know one thing.

I am not the same.

Something inside me has changed.

Dain hates it.

His claws flex, his posture rigid, as if he is fighting himself.

I should be afraid.

I should push away the remnants of his blood inside me, pretend it never happened. Pretend that when I said his name, it did not feel like I had said it before.

But I can't.

Because the worst part is that I don't want to.

Dain exhales sharply, running a hand through his damp hair. He moves away, putting distance between us, as if my presence is a sickness he cannot afford to catch.

His jaw tightens. "We leave at dawn."

The words are final. No room for argument.

But I can't let it go.

I rise on unsteady legs, my body still too light, too full. I want to shake off the sensation, but it lingers—his magic, his blood.

"Dain."

He stills.

Something flashes across his face, so quick I nearly miss it.

Regret.

I take a slow step toward him. "Tell me what's happening to me."



He doesn't turn.

"You already know."

He's gone, slipping into the shadows, leaving me standing there, alone with the ghosts inside me.

27

DAIN

I should leave.

I should slip into the night and never look back.

Instead, I press my back against the crumbling wooden frame of the abandoned house, fists clenched so tight the knuckles crack. The wind howls through the gaps in the walls, carrying the smell of damp earth and the lingering trace of her.

Liora. She shouldn't have said my name like that. Like she knew it.

Like she had always known it.

It wasn't just the way it rolled off her tongue, unthinking, unconscious, it was the way it settled inside me. Like something falling into place, like a puzzle piece I had been missing for centuries.

Her eyes.

The moment she looked at me after drinking my blood, they were not her eyes.

They were hers.

That damned woman from my past. The Purna who sealed me away, who betrayed

me, who left me to rot in stone for gods-knows-how-long.

But it can't be. Liora is not her.

She can't be.

Yet the way she moves, the way her body reacted to the binding, the way my blood took root inside her like it had been waiting for centuries to do so...

I exhale sharply, running my tongue over my teeth. My fangs ache.

This is dangerous.

I should leave.

I should kill her.

That would be the logical choice, wouldn't it? End her now before she becomes something I can't control, before she becomes something I can't resist.

Right now, I want her.

Not just with my body, but with something deeper, something uglier.

Something that whispers mine.

That word should mean nothing. I am no longer bound to a people, to a clan, to a cause. My kind is nothing but fractured remnants, scattered in the ruins of time.

Yet, when I saw her take my blood, when I watched her accept it, absorb it, become something else entirely...

Something in me snapped.

I can still feel her presence inside me, the connection forged when she took my essence into her body. A tether that shouldn't exist.

It burns through me like a sickness, a hunger I can't sate.

My hands clench against my thighs as I tilt my head back, forcing in a deep breath. But it does nothing to calm the beast inside me.

I can still feel her in the other room, restless, confused, tossing in that broken excuse for a bed.

She should be weak from what happened. She should be resting, recovering.

But she's not.

She is awake.

She's thinking about me.

I can taste it, her pulse quickening every time she shifts beneath the thin sheets. I hear the hitch in her breath, the restless way she moves, the heat radiating from her skin as if the binding hasn't just affected me but her as well.

I should leave.

But instead, I find myself walking toward her.

The house groans beneath my weight, but she doesn't stir as I slip through the doorway.

She's on her side, her body barely covered by the tattered sheet. Her breathing is uneven, lips slightly parted, skin flushed in the dim light filtering through the cracks in the wooden walls.

The smell of her blood, laced with mine, still lingers in the room.

I swallow against the tightness in my throat.

She shouldn't look like this.

She shouldn't feel like this.

I tell myself it's the binding. That this pull is nothing but the effects of shared blood, of magic that should never have intertwined.

But it's a lie.

Because even before the blood, before the magic, before any of it... I wanted her.

The realization is like a stone dropping into my gut.

I watch her shift, her body arching slightly as she turns onto her back, exposing the delicate line of her throat, the curve of her collarbone, the slope of her waist beneath the sheets.

My claws flex.

She's clueless as to what she's done to me.

She's clueless about what she's become.

What I've made her.

I should wake her.

I should shake her until she hates me, until she understands what a mistake this is.

But instead, I reach out.

My fingers graze the side of her face, just once. Just once.

But once is never enough.

The moment I touch her, something inside me breaks.

Heat.

Pure, consuming, wildfire heat erupts in my veins, spreading through every inch of me.

She shifts beneath my touch, her breath catching.

I should pull away.

I should stop.

But she leans into me.

Suddenly, it is no longer about logic, no longer about restraint. It is about need.

Mine .

28

LIORA

Heat.

It coils inside me, thick and unbearable.

I should be exhausted. I should be sleeping.

But I can't.

Not when my skin burns like this. Not when my veins feel too full, too alive, too much.

And it's his fault.

Dain.

I feel him before I see him, his presence pressing against my senses, dark and suffocating, inescapable.

I squeeze my eyes close. I try to pretend I don't hear the shift of his weight in the doorway, don't feel the way the air itself thickens around us, don't acknowledge the pulse at the center of my body that only reacts to him.

But pretending is impossible when my heart stutters the moment he moves closer.

I don't look at him.

I won't.

But that doesn't stop my body from reacting, my breath from hitching, my fingers from gripping the sheet tighter as if it will somehow ground me against the storm that is him.

Silence stretches between us, electric and unbearable.

The bed dips.

A shudder runs through me, hot and violent.

I should turn away. I should put as much distance as possible between us.

Instead, I stay still.

My breath is too quick, my pulse too loud. I feel exposed, hyper-aware of every inch of bare skin that the thin sheet can't hide.

His fingers.

A single touch. A whisper of warmth against my cheek.

I break.

My eyes snap open, locking onto his under the glow of moonlight filtering through the broken walls.

Gods help me.



He looks like something I should be terrified of.

Golden eyes burn through the darkness, molten and unreadable. His features are sharp, carved from something more dangerous than stone, his lips slightly parted as if he's fighting something inside himself.

He wants me.

I see it. I feel it. It should terrify me.

But it doesn't.

It should make me push him away.

But I don't.

I do the opposite.

I move closer. It's reckless. Stupid. Insane.

But the second I press against him, the moment my skin brushes his, everything changes.

A sharp inhale, a sudden stillness.

Suddeny, fire.

His hand grips my waist, hard enough to bruise. His breath is hot against my jaw, his body scorching where it presses against mine.

All of a sudden. He's everywhere.

His scent invades my senses, dark and intoxicating. His body is too solid, too real, too consuming.

A low growl rumbles through his chest, vibrating against my own.

I should be afraid.

I should be thinking.

But there's no space for thought, no air between us, nothing but the crushing weight of want.

His fingers slide over my ribs, trailing fire in their wake. My breath stutters, a sound escaping me that I don't recognize, a plea, a challenge, a surrender.

His lips are on mine.

The world tilts.

I don't know who moves first.

Maybe it's him, dragging me against him, crushing me beneath his body.

Or maybe it's me, pulling him down, desperate to close the space between us.

It doesn't matter.

All that matters is that it happens. The first press of his mouth is pure destruction.

A claiming.

A battle.

It is nothing soft, nothing patient, just teeth and heat and a hunger too long denied. I gasp against him, and he takes advantage.

His tongue sweeps against mine, demanding.

My fingers dig into his back, nails scraping over muscle, over scars I don't understand, over something ancient and untamed.

He shudders.

It's worse.

He presses me down, caging me beneath him. The heat of his body melts into mine, his weight stealing my breath, stealing my sense.

I am drowning.

Not in fear. Not in magic.

In him.

His teeth graze my jaw, my throat, my pulse.

I arch beneath him, and he groans, a sound so raw and unguarded that it makes something deep inside me tighten, coil, burn.

His hands are everywhere, gripping my waist, tracing my ribs, delving lower.

I should stop him.

But I don't. I can't.

Because this isn't just a kiss.

This is something else.

Something more. Something that feels like fate.

Like a memory I can't place.

Like something I lost a long, long time ago.

It terrifies me.

Not enough to stop. Not enough to pull away.

But enough to want more.

I break the kiss first, gasping.

His lips hover over mine, breath hot, ragged, unsteady.

His grip on me tightens. I expect him to take.

To finish this.

To ruin me.

But he doesn't.

Instead, he wrenches himself away, as if touching me any longer will burn him alive.

He curses, dragging a shaking hand through his hair, refusing to meet my eyes.

I don't move.

I don't breathe as I can still feel him.

Still taste him.

Still ache for him.

I swallow hard, my lips tingling, my body on fire.

"What are you doing?" My voice is hoarse, barely more than a whisper.

He doesn't answer.

He just shakes his head, a snarl curling his lips.

"This is a mistake." His voice is rough, ragged, dangerous.

I stare at him, pulse pounding in my ears.

A mistake.

He says it like he believes it. Everytime.

Like he thinks this means nothing.

Like he isn't affected the same way I am.

I should argue. Perhaps demand answers.

But I don't because I don't trust my voice.

If I speak, I might admit the truth.

That I don't want this to be a mistake.

That I want him. That I have never wanted anything more.

But it doesn't matter because before I can say a word, before I can breathe, he turns away.

He leaves, leaving me alone with the wreckage of what we just did.

29

DAIN

The taste of her still lingers on my tongue.

It shouldn't. I should have wiped it away, should have buried it beneath fury and reason. But the way she gasped against my mouth, the way she clung to me.

Damn her. Damn myself.

I stalk away from her, putting as much space between us as the ruined house allows. I fist my hands, my claws aching to rip into something, anything that isn't her. I focus on the rage. The frustration. The suffocating heat curling in my blood like a sickness I can't purge.

This was a mistake.

It was just hunger. Just proximity. A moment of weakness that meant nothing.

But my body betrays me.

I still feel her skin burning beneath my hands, the soft press of her mouth against mine, the sharp little gasps she made.

I grit my teeth, shoving the thought away before it can take root.

The silence behind me is suffocating.

I glance back, expecting to see her just as shaken, expecting her to look away, flustered. But she isn't. Her cheeks are flushed, her lips bruised from my kiss, but her eyes burn with something far more dangerous than desire.

Rage.

"You bastard," she seethes.

I turn away. "Forget it."

"Forget it?" Her voice rises, filled with disbelief. "That's what you're going to say?" She stomps after me, reckless, furious, beautiful in her anger. "You kiss me like that and then just—forget it?"

I exhale sharply through my nose. "It was a mistake."

She laughs, but there's no humor in it, just something raw and jagged. "You coward. A coward."

My jaw tightens. "I warned you, Liora."

"Warned me about what? That you want me, but you're too much of a coward to admit it?" She shoves at my chest, and I let her. Her hands are small but forceful, shaking with fury. "You kissed me. You wanted it just as much as I did, but now you're running away like it was some terrible accident?"

I glare down at her, my patience fraying. "You mean nothing to me."

The words cut. I see it as her breath hitches, in the flicker of something in her eyes.



But then she clenches her fists and pushes back.

"You're lying," she spits. "You think I can't feel it? That pull? That thing between us?"

"It doesn't exist," I snarl.

Her lips curl. "Liar."

I exhale harshly, forcing myself to turn away. "You're a liability. A mistake. Nothing more."

She laughs again, sharp and bitter. "You keep saying that, but you keep saving me. You keep looking at me like?—"

The ground rumbles beneath us.

We both freeze. The wooden beams of the abandoned house creak under the sudden pressure, dust and debris trickling from the ceiling.

I feel it.

That same unnatural cold. That whisper of something ancient and wrong pressing against the edges of reality.

It's here.

Liora doesn't hesitate. She grabs my wrist, fingers curling tightly, and bolts toward the door. I don't resist. We crash into the open night, feet pounding against the damp earth, running.

I want to fly, take her up but my wings are too battered.

The town is dead, silent, the streets filled with abandoned homes and lingering ghosts. No one lives here anymore. No one ever should.

Liora leads this time, darting through the trees, breath ragged. I stay close behind, senses flaring, tracking the unseen force that lurks just behind us.

We don't stop running. Not even when the trees thicken, the night pressing in. Not even when my body demands I turn and fight.

Something is wrong.

This is something older. Ancient.

The forest ends.

We skid to a halt, boots scraping against stone. Before us, hidden beneath twisted vines and the decay of time, stands something ancient. A ruin. Another temple.

Liora stares up at it, wide-eyed, breathless. "What is this place?"

I swallow hard, my chest is moving too fast. The stone is wrong. I don't know how I know it, but I do. It isn't just old, it's cursed, dripping with something unnatural, something familiar.

The shadows behind us stir.

I grab Liora by the wrist, hauling her toward the entrance. "Inside. Now."

She doesn't argue.

We dive into the ruin, into the dark unknown, just as the presence descends.

This time, I know, it's not just hunting her anymore.

It's hunting me.

30

LIORA

The altar looms before me, carved from stone so old it looks fused with the ruins around it. Ancient symbols snake across its surface, whispering forgotten secrets, their meaning foreign, except it isn't.

I understand them.

The realization unsettles me, makes my skin prickle with unease. The symbols hum in my bones, call to me. The book I touched before, the one that had nearly devoured me, left something behind. A hunger, a whisper. It urges me forward, tells me this is meant to happen.

Dain doesn't share that belief.

He steps in front of me, his wings flaring slightly, broad frame casting deep shadows over the altar. His glare is sharp, warning. "Don't touch it."

I lift my chin. "Why?"

His tail lashes, his stance rigid. "Because I said so."

Heat curls in my stomach, twisting with my frustration. He always does this, pushes, demands, commands as if I belong to him. As if he decides what I can or cannot do.

I take a step around him.

He moves faster, blocking me again, his expression darkening. “I mean it, Liora. This isn’t for you.”

But the magic inside me says otherwise.

I don’t think. I don’t hesitate. My fingers press against it.

The world fractures.

A woman, standing where I stand now, her hands glowing, magic flowing from her like an unrelenting tide.

Power radiates from her, thick and suffocating. Her dark hair lashes around her face, wild like the storm she commands, eyes filled with something vast, something unyielding. The force of her will burns.

She chants, voice steady, calling forth something ancient. Her hands press against the altar, her body rigid with effort. She is sealing something away.

Suddenly, I see him.

Dain.

But not as he is now.

He is younger, wilder. Unchained. Raw magic crackles over his skin, his eyes burning bright with fury and something desperate. His wings are torn, blood streaking his arms, his chest heaving as he fights against the spell wrapping around him.

He is trapped.

The woman steps closer, murmuring something so softly, so gently, it makes my chest tighten. She reaches for him, her fingers brushing his cheek, not in cruelty, not in hate.

In sorrow.

His lips move.

A name.

“Amara.”

The memory shatters.

I stumble back, gasping, body trembling violently. A sharp, wet heat drips from my nose. Blood.

I lift a shaking hand to my face, my breath ragged. The vision lingers, branded into my mind. That woman, the Purna, was the same one I saw before. The same one who sealed away the dark presence.

She sealed Dain.

Dain.

My gaze snaps to him.

He stands as still as stone, but his expression betrays him. His hands tremble at his sides, his wings rigid, his chest moving too fast. He looks shaken.

No.

He looks terrified.

I swallow, my voice hoarse. “Who is Amara?”

His entire body locks up. His pupils slit, his lips pull back in something close to a snarl. His fear turns sharp, turns deadly.

His next words are a growl, low and vibrating with something dangerously close to rage.

“Don’t say that name.”

My heartbeat pounds against my ribs. “Why? Who is she?”

His hands clench into fists. “Don’t say it again.”

But I don’t stop.

I step closer, my body still trembling, my fingers curling around my arms as if that will stop the shaking. “She was the one who sealed you away, wasn’t she?”

Dain flinches. A barely-there reaction, but I see it. Feel it.

I press further. “What was she to you?”

Silence.

He turns away, shoulders tight, his entire body drawn like a bowstring. “This isn’t your concern.”

“The hell it isn’t,” I snap, anger and something else clawing at my throat. “She’s in my head, Dain. I see her. I feel her magic. And that thing out there—” I gesture toward the ruin’s entrance, where the shadows still pulse, where the darkness is waiting “it’s after me for a reason. I need to understand why.”

“You don’t need to understand anything. ”

His voice is too rough, too sharp. His control is fraying.

I step in front of him, forcing him to look at me. “Then tell me why the mere mention of her makes you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

His jaw locks.

The space between us is thick, suffocating. I can feel the tension in his muscles, see the war raging in his eyes.

Just when I think he might actually say something , the ruin shudders.

Dain moves instantly , shoving me back. His wings flare, his claws out as the darkness that had been lurking at the edges lunges forward.

A sound like splintering bone rips through the chamber.

The dark presence has found us.

A roar bellows through the ruins, shaking the stones beneath our feet. Shadows twist, thick and wrong, stretching from the corners like ink spilling into the air. The torches flicker, then die , leaving only the void, thick and hungry.

Dain curses , grabbing me by the arm and hauling me back.



“Run.”

The shadows leap.

I don't hesitate.

We bolt deeper into the ruins, the thing behind us screeching, clawing at the walls, the air, at us. I can feel it in my heart, pressing in, pressing through.

I hear whispers.

A voice not my own.

You were not supposed to live.

My blood freezes.

Dain yanks me forward, his grip bruising, his breath ragged. The ruins twist ahead, narrowing, spiraling down into some deeper, unknown chamber. He doesn't hesitate—he leads me down.

Something inside me screams no.

This is wrong.

This place is wrong.

But I don't get a choice.

We descend into the darkness.

31

DAIN

The chamber beneath the ruins is silent except for the ragged sounds of our breathing.

Liora stands before me, chest rising and falling, her hands clenched at her sides. The dim torchlight casts shadows over her, illuminating the fire still burning in her eyes. She doesn't look away. She never does.

She wants answers. She demands them. But I have none to give.

"You owe me the truth, Dain." Her voice is unrelenting, sharp as a dagger pressed to my throat. "Who is Amara?"

Something cold and ancient curls inside me at the name. It coils around my heart like chains, rattling memories I refuse to unearth. I turn away, my shoulders stiff, my fists curling at my sides.

Liora moves closer. The heat between us lingers, the energy crackling, dangerous and raw. "Why won't you tell me?" she presses. "You act like I don't deserve to understand any of this, like I'm not part of it."

I spin to face her. "You are not part of it." My voice is a growl, my control razor-thin. "You shouldn't be."

She flinches but recovers quickly, anger flashing across her face. "And yet, here I am."

My hands move on reflex. I grip her arms, dragging her against me. She gasps, but she doesn't pull away. My fingers tighten around her, not to hurt, never to hurt, but to make her understand.

"You want the truth?" I ask in a low, dangerous voice. "You don't know what you're asking for."

"Then show me," she breathes. "Make me understand."

The restraint I have left shatters.

My mouth crashes down on hers. It's not a kiss, it's a battle, a collision of fury and desire. Liora doesn't yield. She fights back, her hands threading through my hair, pulling, demanding. I press her against the cold stone wall, claiming every breath, every sound she makes, until I burn with her.

Her fingers claw at my skin, dragging me closer, as if she's trying to pull me inside her, as if she's drowning in this as much as I do.

She tastes like danger, like the unknown, like something I never should have touched but can't stop touching.

This is wrong. It's a mistake. A disaster.

But I don't care.

I lift her, forcing her legs around my waist, pinning her beneath me as I press into her. Her breath stutters, and her nails bite into my shoulders.

The need to claim her, to mark her, to make her mine is unbearable.

I kiss her deeper, my tongue sliding against hers, my hands gripping her as if letting go would destroy me. Her body molds to mine, soft and hot, a perfect contradiction to my own unyielding form.

I pull away, panting, my forehead pressed against hers. "Tell me to stop," I demand, voice hoarse, desperate.

Liora's response?

She kisses me harder.

I don't know if I groan or growl, but the sound rumbles from my chest as I lose myself in her completely.

Her nails rake down my back, leaving trails of molten lava in their wake, and I growl against her neck, the sound primal, possessive, "Liora... Liora..."

My cock throbs, hard and insistent, pressed against her thigh as I grind into her, the friction maddening. She arches into me, her pussy wet and aching, her hips rolling in a silent plea for more. I can feel her heat even through the thin barrier of fabric, and it's enough to drive me to the edge of sanity.

"You're driving me crazy," I growl, angry at myself but unable to stop.

"You do the same to me," she gasps, panting as she holds onto me.

I pull back just enough to look at her, to see the hunger in her eyes, the way her lips part as she breathes my name again, softer this time, breathless. My hands slide down her sides, gripping her hips, and I yank her closer, our bodies crashing together like

two storms colliding.

There's no finesse here, no patience, just raw, unrelenting need.

Her hands fumble with the clothe covering my private parts and I help her, shoving them down just enough to free my cock, the cool air a sharp contrast to the heat of her skin.

She reaches for me, her fingers wrapping around my length, and I hiss, my head falling back as she strokes me, her touch firm and sure. But I can't wait, can't let this drag on any longer. I need her, all of her.

"You're perfect," she moans.

"I need you, little human," I breathe.

I push her hand away and lift her, her legs wrapping around my waist as I carry her to the nearest surface. Her back hits the wall, and she gasps, her eyes locking with mine as I position myself at her entrance.

For a moment, I pause, my breath ragged, my body trembling with the effort to hold back. But then she whispers, "Please," and I'm lost.

I thrust into her, hard and deep, and her pussy clenches around me, so tight, so wet, it's almost unbearable.

"Dain! Fuck! Yes!" she cries out, her head falling back against the wall, and I bury myself in her again and again, each stroke driving us both closer to the edge.

Her nails dig into my stone skin, unable to leave a mark but I feel it deeply. Her moans fill the room, and I can't get enough of her, of this, of the way she feels like

she was made for me.

Her hips meet mine with every thrust, her body demanding more, and I give it to her, my cock plunging into her with a rhythm that's as relentless as the hunger burning between us. Her breath comes in short, sharp gasps, and I know she's close. I feel it as her pussy tightens around me, in the way her voice breaks as she chants my name.

"Make me come, take me!" she screams, pushing me on as I grow wilder in my movement.

"Yes!"

When she comes, it's with a cry that echoes through me, her body shuddering as she clings to me, her pussy pulsing around my cock.

"Oh, Liora!" I roar.

The sensation is too much, and I follow her over the edge, my release crashing through me like a crashing huge wave, my hips stuttering as I come in her, my name on her lips the last thing I hear before the world goes white.

32

LIORA

The first thing I notice when I wake is him. We're on the ground, and I'm unable to make heads or tails about what happened last night. I can't wrap my head around it, but it was... out of this world.

Dain's arm is slung around me, his grip possessive even in sleep. His body is warm, solid, the rise and fall of his chest too steady against my back. Too familiar. My skin tightens with awareness, memories from the night before clawing their way up my spine, his mouth on mine, the burn of his hands, the raw hunger in his eyes as he took me, consumed me, claimed me.

Heat flushes through me. I shift, testing my limbs, and ache pulses deep between my thighs. I press my lips together, swallowing down the sharp sting of satisfaction that comes with it.

I shouldn't feel this way. Not after everything. Not after he's spent every moment pushing me away, snarling at me to keep my distance, telling me I mean nothing.

Yet here he is, tangled around me like I belong to him.

A shiver rolls through me, but it isn't from cold. It's from something else. Something unfamiliar, a thrumming, electric pulse under my skin. Alive. Different. More.

I frown. That... is not normal.

I flex my fingers, expecting exhaustion, but instead, something pulses back—a warm, foreign energy that isn't mine alone. It curls inside me, stretches, tugs. My chest tightens. It's like a thread between myself and something else—someone else.

Dain stirs behind me.

The moment he wakes, his entire body stiffens. His arm retracts, peeling away from me like I burn him.

The loss is instant. And it hurts.

I turn, only to find him already on his feet, back to me, wings flaring as he rakes a hand through his hair. He doesn't look at me. Not once.

“Dain?” My voice is hoarse.

He says nothing.

I push myself upright, clutching the remnants of my torn clothes around me. “You're just going to pretend last night didn't happen?”

His breath rattles out, sharp and wrong. His shoulders are tight, coiled like a predator on the verge of striking.

“It was a mistake.”

A mistake.

My stomach twists. I expected it. Of course I did. Dain has fought me at every turn, resisted me, denied me, but to hear it out loud.



I hate how much it stings.

“You weren’t saying that when you had me pinned against the wall,” I snap, voice colder than I feel.

His head snaps to me then, eyes burning.

“Liora.” The way he says my name, low, dark, warning, sends something wicked through me.

But I don’t back down. Not this time.

“Say it, then,” I push. “Tell me you didn’t want it. Tell me you didn’t enjoy it.”

Silence.

A heavy, suffocating silence that stretches between us, thick with everything we refuse to say. His jaw clenches. His wings twitch.

He turns away again.

“I am done with this conversation.”

I laugh. It’s sharp, bitter. “Of course you are.”

We don’t talk after that.

Dain moves like he’s trying to outrun something, ripping apart the room in search of supplies, avoiding my gaze at all costs. Fine. Let him avoid me.

The air in the ruins is thick, damp, pressing against my lungs as we prepare to leave.

My body feels strange, lighter, sharper, changed. I roll my shoulders, trying to shake it off, but it lingers. An energy curling under my skin. A whisper in my bones.

I glance at Dain.

My chest tightens.

Something between us feels wrong. Not in a bad way, but in a way that is too much.

I inhale and I feel him.

Not in the way I always have, not in the way I've memorized his presence beside me.

I feel him inside me.

His power hums under my ribs. His presence threads through mine, woven into my own.

Panic claws its way up my throat.

I freeze. Dain...?

It isn't a word, it's a thought. A whisper.

Yet he hears me.

Dain stills mid-motion. Goes rigid.

When he turns, his pupils are blown wide, his breathing uneven.

He heard me.

His gaze is nothing short of murderous.

“What did you do?” His voice is low, rough, barely restrained.

I blink. “What?”

He moves. Fast.

In a blink, I’m pinned against the wall, his body towering over mine, his claws digging into my wrists. Too close. Too much. Too real.

“What. Did. You. Do?” He growls each word, his breath scalding against my cheek.

My heart pounds. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit.” His grip tightens. “I can feel you.”

Feel me?

The realization slams into me, cold and violent. We are connected.

Not just through touch. Not just through the raw hunger we shared last night. Something deeper.

His blood. My magic. The consummation.

I inhale sharply. “We?—”

Bound. The word flickers in my mind like a curse.

Dain’s expression darkens. He steps back like I disgust him.

“This is your doing.” His voice is sharp, accusing.

I shake my head, struggling to breathe. “I didn’t?—”

“You drank my blood. You used my power. And now this?” His wings flare, barely fitting in the tight space. “You bound us.”

Bound.

The word coils around my ribs, sinking into my skin like it was always meant to be there.

“No.” I shake my head. “I didn’t do this. I didn’t?—”

“Then why,” he snarls, stepping toward me again, “can I feel your every breath?”

I can’t answer as I don’t know.

But I suspect.

I suspect the bond isn’t just an accident. I suspect it was always meant to happen. I suspect the Purna in me, the magic I still don’t understand, has been waiting for this moment all along.

But I don’t tell him that.

Because if I do...

I think he might actually kill me.

33

DAIN

L iora is inside me.

Not just her body, not just her scent clinging to my skin, not just the memory of her breathless moans from the night before.

Something deeper.

I feel her. Her thoughts, her emotions, the raw pulse of her magic woven through mine.

I cannot tear it out.

My claws curl, digging into my palms as I turn away from her. If I look at her now, I will break something.

The Purna woman from my past flashes in my mind, Amara.

Her voice, her power, the way she forced herself into my soul, the way she chained me with magic I never consented to. I realized I wanted to be away from her.

She bound me in ways I never understood.

Now this.

I whirl toward Liora, my voice slicing through the tension. “What have you done?”

She flinches, but not out of fear. No, she glares at me, chin lifting, eyes sparking with defiance. “Excuse me?”

My vision darkens. “Don’t play innocent. You feel it too.”

Her lips part, but no words come. Her pulse thrums wildly beneath her skin, a stuttering, uneven rhythm I can hear, feel.

She does feel it.

I take a step closer, towering over her, forcing her back until she hits the stone wall. I cage her in, pressing my hands beside her head. “Did you do this on purpose?” My voice is barely human, barely restrained.

Liora’s eyes widen, then narrow. She is not afraid of me.

She should be.

“I didn’t do anything,” she hisses, pressing against the wall as if it will swallow her whole. “You think I wanted this?”

I snarl. “You have Purna magic. You drank my blood. And now we’re connected. That isn’t coincidence.”

She shoves at my chest, but I don’t budge. “I didn’t bind us, Dain!”

“Then why can I feel you?” I demand, my breath hot against her skin. “Why do I know what you’re thinking before you say it? Why do I feel every pulse of your damned heartbeat as if it’s my own?”

Her lips part, her breath coming in sharp bursts. Her eyes flicker, not just with fear, but something darker.

I recoil, stepping back. No. No, this isn't right.

Liora watches me, the fight draining from her face, replaced with something like... horror. "You think I did this on purpose?" she whispers.

Silence coils between us.

I cannot answer.

That is enough.

Her hands clench into fists. "You bastard."

I say nothing.

She shoves me again, this time harder. "How dare you?"

I grab her wrist, stopping her next blow. My claws tighten, just enough to warn. "Don't test me, Purna."

She jerks back like I struck her. "Don't call me that."

I shouldn't. I know I shouldn't. But the word tastes right on my tongue, and I need to remind myself, remind her, that she is not mine.

Even if every instinct in me screams otherwise.

She trembles, anger vibrating off her. Her magic pulses in time with mine.

She is changing.

Her skin hums with something I cannot name. Her eyes, Gods, her eyes.

The dark flickers inside them.

Not shadow. Not death.

Something worse.

I step away. I do not let her see how my hands shake.

The air shifts.

A low tremor rumbles beneath us, like the ruins themselves are breathing. The walls seem to whisper, a voice curling against the edge of my mind.

Liora stiffens. “Did you feel that?”

Yes.

I grip her wrist before she can step forward. “We need to leave.”

She yanks away. “Not until you tell me what’s happening to me.”

I do not know. And that terrifies me.

The tremor deepens, rolling through the cavern. Dust rains from the ceiling. Something is here.

A voice.



It does not speak in words. It does not speak at all. It slithers into my mind, into my bones, into the very essence of what I am.

It knows me.

It knows her.

It calls her name.

“Liora.”

The sound is not sound. It is a wound in reality, a gaping, bleeding thing that makes my vision darken, my body stiffen.

Liora gasps, clutching her head, eyes rolling back. She staggers, falls.

I lunge, catching her before she crumples to the floor.

She shudders in my grasp, her lips trembling as she breathes out the only word that should never be spoken.

“Amara.”

My blood turns to ice.

The ruins groan around us, shadows bleeding from the walls, curling toward us, inching closer.

No. No.

I grab her. I do not think. I do not hesitate.

I run.

34

LIORA

The darkness thickens around us, pressing against my skin like unseen hands, coiling into my bones like whispers of a past I do not remember.

The presence does not attack. It does not lunge for my throat, does not tear through my flesh as it has tried before. It does something worse. It speaks.

“Purna.”

The word curls through the stale air, curling in my lungs, settling deep. I hear it in a way that isn’t exactly sound, a name that isn’t mine but feels like it does. My fingers twitch as something cold slithers through my veins, an unease I cannot place, cannot explain.

Dain stiffens beside me. His breath comes sharp and jagged, his entire frame rigid, poised, ready for something.

The voice speaks again.

“Amara.”

A tremor runs through me, deep and violent. The name slams into my ribs like a blade, slicing through something I did not even know existed. A wall. A dam.

Memories that are not mine press against my skull. I see flashes, fingers tracing ancient symbols, magic burning in the air, a voice chanting something I cannot grasp. A woman stands before me in the haze, but I cannot see her face.

The stone beneath my feet turns unsteady.

My hand flies to my chest, clutching at the frantic hammering of my heart. My pulse is too fast, too wild, as if my body is trying to tear itself apart from the inside.

“No,” I rasp. “That’s not my name.”

A slow, insidious laugh fills the space around us, a sound that carries across the cavern walls with something that has waited too long.

“Oh, but it is.” The dark presence slithers closer. Its voice presses against my skin, threading through my thoughts, weaving doubt into my very being. “You are Amara.”

The world tilts.

I stumble, my legs weak, my breath ragged. My head shakes too hard, too fast. I force my voice through the rawness of my throat. “No, you’re lying.”

But even as I say it, I feel the wrongness in my own words.

Why does my skin crawl with something familiar?

Why does my blood thrum as if it has always known?

I turn to Dain, desperate for an anchor. I expect to see fury, or maybe disbelief.

Instead, I see horror.

His golden eyes are locked onto me as if I am something monstrous, something he cannot unsee. His breath is uneven, sharp, his chest moves too fast, too erratic. The hard lines of his face are carved from something close to panic.

He stares at me like he knows exactly what this means.

Like this is something he never wanted to hear.

My mouth goes dry.

“You recognize that name,” I say, my voice thin, barely steady. “You—” I hesitate, the words heavy on my tongue. “I’ve been asking you about it. You knew her, didn’t you?”

Dain’s jaw tightens.

The flickering torchlight catches on the sharp edge of his fangs as he exhales, slow and controlled, the kind of restraint that looks like it might snap at any second.

He doesn’t answer.

He doesn’t have to.

His silence says everything.

I step toward him, reaching for his arm, for anything that will ground me. “Who was she?”

Dain flinches before I even touch him. His wings twitch as if resisting the urge to pull away.

“Tell me,” I press, my pulse erratic.

Nothing.

He says nothing.

The dark presence fills the silence for him.

“Oh, he knows, little one.” The words slither between us like a knife’s edge, slow and deliberate. “But he will not tell you. He does not need to.”

A sharp pulse strikes through my skull.

I clutch my temples as the air around us thickens, pressing against me. Something ancient stirs beneath my skin, clawing its way up.

Memories that do not belong to me.

A woman standing on the cliffs, magic circling her hands, chanting words that make the very world tremble. The sound of stone cracking. The roar of something winged, furious. A promise spoken in a language I cannot name.

My vision blurs.

I stumble back, shaking my head, gasping, drowning in something I cannot understand.

Dain moves without thinking, his hands gripping my shoulders, steadying me. I collapse against him, panting, the vision still pressing down.

“Liora.” His voice is raw, his breath hot against my ear.

I look up at him, searching his face for something, anything to make sense of what is happening to me.

But when I meet his gaze, my stomach drops.

He is no longer looking like I'm Liora.

He is staring at me as if I am someone else. Something he was meant to destroy.

My throat tightens, my hands shaking as I push him back.

"I am not Amara," I rasp.

Dain does not respond.

He only stares, silent, unreadable.

I swallow against the panic rising in my heart. "Say something."

His claws flex.

His wings shift, his entire body coiled in restraint.

He takes a step back.

A sharp ache lodges itself in my heart.

My pulse skips, my breath catching as he pulls away from me like I am something tainted.

"No." My voice shakes. "You don't believe this, do you?"

His fingers twitch at his sides, his expression locked in something dark, unreadable. His eyes flicker with something vicious, torn, lost.

His voice breaks.

“What are you? Who the hell are you?”

A tremor racks through me.

“I’m me,” I whisper. “I’m Liora.”

His gaze darkens.

A muscle jumps in his jaw. His fangs glint in the torchlight, his wings spreading just slightly, as if preparing for something.

A warning. A threat.

My breath comes too fast, too sharp. “You don’t mean that.”

He does not move.

He does not speak.

He bares his fangs at me.

The dark presence laughs, but I do not hear it. I hear only the ragged, broken sound of my own heartbeat.

Dain steps forward, slow, deliberate. His claws flex, his gaze burning into mine.



I stumble back, my body screaming at me to run.

But I don't.

I stare at him, and I understand.

This is not Dain, the monster who saved me.

This is Dain, the monster who was meant to kill me.

35

DAIN

L iora stands before me, defiant, trembling, alive when she should not be.

The truth has splintered through my mind like a jagged blade, cutting through every lie I've told myself. I had thought, hoped, she was something else. Someone else. But the dark presence has spoken her name, and the moment it did, I felt it.

Amara.

The syllables are a curse, a wound, a chain tightening around my throat.

Liora shouts something, denial, anger, I barely hear it. My thoughts are drowning in old memories, in rage I've held for centuries. I see her standing there, but it is not her.

It is her.

The woman who sealed me away. Who whispered my name with devotion even as she betrayed me. The one who kissed me, loved me, and then destroyed me.

How? How can she be here? How can she look at me with those eyes and not remember?

"I am not Amara!" she screams. Her voice trembles, but her stance does not waver. She grips her fists at her sides, her chest rising and falling rapidly.

Lies.

She is standing there, wearing the face of my past, standing in the shell of another body. Reincarnated. Cursed. Sent back to haunt me in another lifetime.

"You don't even know what you are," I growl, stepping forward. The look in her eyes flickers between rage and fear. "You speak as if you have a choice in this, but you don't. You were not supposed to exist. "

Her breath hitches. I want her to hurt. I want her to feel the way I do, to feel like something is tearing through her mind, rewriting reality, unmaking everything she thought was real.

She shoves me. Shoves me.

I almost laugh at the absurdity of it, but there is nothing funny about this.

"You think I chose this?" she spits, voice shaking. "You think I want this? Whatever this sick fate is, I didn't ask for it. But here's what I do know," she steps forward, chin high, meeting my glare with fire in her veins. "I am not Amara. And I never will be."

Her words snap something deep inside me.

I lunge.

My claws extend before I can think. Every ounce of logic, every shred of restraint, gone.

I will end this.

I will carve the past from the present, sever this twisted fate before it can consume me.

Liora gasps and stumbles back, her hands lifting too late.

But I don't make it to her.

Pain erupts through me.

My body locks.

It's like invisible chains snap around my limbs, clamping down so tight my wings fold against my back, my muscles straining against a force that is nowhere and everywhere at once. Magic.

No, her magic.

It thrums through the air, wild and frantic, a defense that is not deliberate but instinctual.

I know this magic.

I remember it.

It's the same power that once sealed me away.

I roar, but my body does not obey me. My claws are frozen mid-air, inches from her throat.

Liora is panting, her eyes wide, uncomprehending of what she has done. She stares at me with shock rather than control, her magic thrashing against itself like it barely

listens to her.

She doesn't know.

She doesn't even understand what she is.

Rage coils through me, twisting with something else, something deeper. I want to break free, to shake her, to demand she tell me why she is here, why she has returned.

But she doesn't wait to hear my words.

She runs.

The moment she moves, the magic falters. The invisible grip on my body weakens.

The second I am free, I drop to my knees.

I dig my claws into the ground, heaving air into my lungs as the remnants of the spell ripple through me. My vision flickers between the present and the past, the lines blurring.

She's gone.

She ran.

The dark presence watches. It does not chase her.

I can still hear it laughing.

36

LIORA

The ruins close behind me, swallowed by shadows, by what just happened. I run—not because I want to, but because I have to.

Dain meant to kill me.

His claws were inches from my throat.

My breath comes in ragged gasps as I stumble over uneven stone, my limbs heavy with exhaustion, my body aching from magic I don't understand. My hands shake, my vision blurs, but I don't stop. I can't.

Something inside me, something old, something primal, has woken, and it is tearing me apart.

I don't know what's worse, the fear of Dain hunting me, or the thing lurking just beyond my senses, watching, waiting.

The dark presence is still here.

It doesn't chase me. It doesn't strike. It waits.

I feel it stirring beneath the surface of reality, coiling around my thoughts, whispering in a voice I should not recognize but do.

"Purna."

The name slithers through my skull, curling against my ribs like a brand. It pulses through my bones, trying to drag me back into something I refuse to remember.

"Come to me."

"Come home."

I shove my hands over my ears as if that will help, as if I can silence something that speaks from within me.

"Remember."

The word shatters something inside me. Images rise, flickering, broken—firelight on stone, hands outstretched, lips moving in a chant I don't understand but somehow do.

Dain is there, younger, wilder, his face twisted in rage, in betrayal, in something I don't have the words for.

I stumble, gasping, my body revolting against the vision. I grip the closest surface, fingers scraping against tree bark, forcing myself to stay in the present.

"Liora."

The voice changes.

It is no longer the dark thing whispering.

It is Dain.

But he is not here.

The connection between us thrums in my skull, stronger than before, thick with fury, with confusion, with the instinct to hunt.

I feel him searching for me.

He will come.

I don't know what he'll do when he finds me.

I push forward, deeper into the trees, my muscles burning, my vision swimming. The night presses against me, cold and wet with mist, the air thick with something ancient and wrong.

There's nowhere to go, no true escape, but my body keeps moving, keeps fighting.

Leaves whip against my face as I break into a clearing, my boots sinking into soft, damp earth. I collapse to my knees, shaking, panting, breaking.

I press my palms to the ground, grounding myself, feeling the earth beneath me instead of the memories clawing at my mind.

Dain's rage lingers in my head, but he is not the only one watching me.

The dark presence hums just beyond my vision.

Waiting.

It has not attacked me.



Why?

It could have killed me already. It could have swallowed me whole, devoured whatever fragile life I have left.

Instead, it speaks to me.

It wants me to remember.

"Purna."

I scream.

I don't recognize my own voice. I don't recognize myself.

The trees tremble around me, or maybe it's just me shaking.

I will everything away, forcing my eyes close.

I don't want this.

I don't want to be whoever I was.

I am Liora.

I will always be Liora.

But even as I repeat the words over and over in my mind, the name Amara lingers on the edge of my thoughts, like a blade poised at my throat.

And the presence, whatever it is, whatever it wants, laughs.

I force myself to my feet, staggering deeper into the forest.

I am not safe here.

Not from Dain. Not from it.

Not from myself.

The only thing I can do is run.

But the moment my feet move, the world shifts beneath me. My legs falter, the exhaustion hitting all at once, sudden, brutal.

I make it only a few steps before my body gives out.

I crash into the roots of an ancient tree, curling in on myself, my chest heaving, my skin slick with cold sweat.

I cannot run anymore.

I cannot fight this.

Not tonight.

The forest is silent.

The dark presence does not speak again.

But I know it is still there.

Watching. Waiting.

So is Dain.

37

DAIN

The night stretches before me, vast and endless, but she is the only thing I see. The only thing I chase.

The moment she fled, something inside me twisted, sharp and wrong, like a blade turned inward. The rage that should have burned hot and wild has cooled into something worse, a hunger, a need, a compulsion.

I should let her go.

But I can't.

Not when I feel her. Not when she is still inside me.

Her presence thrums in my blood, woven through the magic that binds us. It tugs at me, relentless, a chain I never asked for and cannot sever. She is too far, and yet I sense her—her heartbeat thudding unevenly, her breath hitching, her body weakening as she stumbles through the wilderness.

She's running on fear and desperation, but it won't be enough.

She cannot outrun me.

I move with purpose, each step cutting through the dense undergrowth, branches

snapping beneath my weight. My senses narrow, locked onto the pulse of her presence in the distance. The forest bends to my will, yielding as I press forward, unrelenting.

She's slowing.

She's weakening.

The bond between us makes it impossible to ignore.

My jaw tightens, fury spiking through me at the reality of it. She should not have this power over me. And yet, every nerve in my body is on fire, my mind snarling against the way it craves her. The longer I go without seeing her, the more I want her.

The more I need to claim what is mine.

I track her through the smell of her blood, faint but unmistakable, a whisper against the night air. The wounds she carries are slowing her down, and though I should take satisfaction in it, I don't. I only feel restless, agitated. My muscles coil tight, my wings twitching with the instinct to close the distance.

She is close.

I slip through the trees, their canopies a hollow shelter against the moonlit sky. The land shifts, slopes downward, the smell of water and stone thick in the air.

I see her.

She stands at the edge of the cliff, the wind tearing at her hair, her dress clinging to the slender shape of her frame. She is still, the tension in her shoulders unreadable.

My breath halts in my chest, though I don't understand why.

She is waiting.

She must sense me.

As if hearing the unspoken demand in my mind, she turns.

The instant her eyes meet mine, something sharpens, fractures, a moment stretched unbearably thin.

She is crying.

The sight of it knocks the air from my lungs, but the emotion that follows is nothing but raw, blinding rage.

Why is she crying?

She ran. She did this. She betrayed me.

Yet, when she looks at me, it is not with fear.

It is with relief.

A soft, broken sort of peace settles across her face, and I feel it like a wound. Like a betrayal.

She does not get to look at me like that.

She does not deserve peace.

"Don't."

The word rips from my throat, the command instinctive, absolute.

But she smiles. A faint, wistful thing.

She steps backward.

Lets herself fall.

The world collapses in on itself, and something inside me changes, vicious and unforgiving.

"No!"

I lunge forward, wings flaring open, body plummeting after her before thought can even form. The wind howls around me, the cold biting against my skin as I tear through the night, chasing her into the void.

She does not get to leave me.

I will catch her.

I have to.

Because if I don't and I lose her?—

I will burn the world to the ground.

38

LIORA

The wind tears at me as I fall. Cold and brutal, it whistles past my ears, howling like a beast savoring its next kill.

The world spins, weightless yet crushing, the pull of gravity relentless. I should be afraid. I should be screaming. But all I hear are whispers. They slither through my mind like silk and venom, a language both foreign and familiar.

You were not supposed to exist.

My heart lurches. A vision unfurls, flickering in and out of clarity, a woman standing in the same space I once stood, dressed in flowing white, her golden hair catching the light of an unseen sun. Her lips move, murmuring incantations I do not understand yet feel in my bones. The edges of my vision darken. The whispers tighten around me.

Amara.

My stomach clenches at the name. My chest seizes with a pain that does not belong to me.

The river below rushes closer, jagged rocks lining the shore, waiting to break me. The icy grip of reality shatters the vision as my body braces for impact?—



But I don't hit the water.

Something catches me.

Not something, someone.

Dain's arms clamp around me like iron, the force of his grip nearly knocking my breath away. His wings beat furiously against the wind, fighting against my momentum, but it isn't enough.

We plummet together.

The river slams into us with merciless force. The cold is a dagger to my ribs, shocking the air from my lungs in a violent burst. The current is a living thing, a monster dragging me under, coiling around me, determined to pull me into its depths.

I thrash. My limbs burn, my lungs scream, my mind begs.

Hands, unyielding, punishing, it seize me.

Dain.

He drags me up, breaking the surface in a desperate gasp. My chest convulses, coughing, retching water from my lungs. The sky is blackened with storm clouds, the night air thick with rain and rage. The river fights to reclaim me, but Dain's grip doesn't falter. He hauls me toward the jagged riverbank, his strength tearing me from the water's grip, forcing me onto the cold, uneven rocks.

I collapse, heaving, trembling, my body raw from the impact.

Silence stretches between us, heavy, suffocating. Water drips from my hair, seeping

into my clothes, making the cold worse. My pulse hammers in my ears, but it's nothing compared to the heat of Dain's gaze.

He stands over me, soaking wet, his wings shaking, his chest moves up and down in sharp, furious breaths.

He moves.

His hand snaps to my throat, not squeezing, but holding, warning.

"Why did you stop me?" My voice is hoarse, barely audible over the river's roar. My body shakes, but not from the cold. I push at his chest, weak but insistent. "Why couldn't you let me go?"

Dain doesn't answer right away. His expression is unreadable, but his hold on me is crushing, a grip meant for restraint, not comfort.

His lips curl, and his voice is dark, vicious. "You don't get to choose when this ends."

The words slam into me harder than the river. My breath comes out ragged, my pulse spiking.

"You—!" I shove at him again, useless against his weight, but the frustration surges out of me in unstoppable waves. "You have no right to decide that for me!"

His grip tightens, not enough to hurt, but enough to remind me that he could.

"I have every right."

The words coil between us like a threat, like a vow. His face is too close, his expression wild, anger, desperation, something darker swirling beneath the surface.

"Let me go," I whisper.

His jaw tenses.

Finally, he releases me.

I shove away from him, gasping, shaking. My body feels unsteady, the bond between us burning like a fresh wound. My pulse refuses to slow, my chest heaving with emotions I can't begin to untangle. Rage. Confusion. Fear. Something else.

Dain watches me, unreadable, his chest still rising and falling in sharp breaths. His wings flex, the tension in his body lethal, like a predator barely holding back.

"Why did you jump?" His voice is quieter now, but no less intense.

I don't answer.

I can't.

I don't have an answer that will satisfy him.

Because deep down, I don't understand it either.

Everything crashes into me at once. The whispers, the visions, the name Amara. The feeling that I am not just myself, that something else stirs inside me, something ancient and wrong.

I lift my gaze to Dain's, and freeze.

Something shifts behind him.

The shadows move.

A chill rakes down my spine, the hairs on my arms standing on end. The very air around us thickens, heavy with something unseen but felt in the deepest part me.

Dain goes rigid.

His claws flex, the sharp glint of his fangs bared before he even turns to face it.

We are not alone.

A low, guttural sound rumbles through the air, a voice without words, an entity without form.

It followed us.

Dain moves before I can react. His wings flare, shielding me, his entire stance shifting into something lethal.

The shadows pulse. The presence is closer than ever. Watching. Waiting.

It whispers my name.

Not Liora.

"Amara."

39

DAIN

The moment the air shifts, I know.

It's here.

The stench of rot and ruin slides over my skin like oil, thick and cloying. The trees tremble, their branches twisting in unnatural angles. The shadows lengthen, creeping toward us with a hunger that isn't just felt, it's alive.

I shove Liora behind me.

"Stay close," I order, my voice rough, raw.

She barely reacts. Her body is stiff, her breath ragged. I don't need to turn around to see her wide eyes, her hands clutched at her temples. The thing is speaking to her. Whispering in that language.

"Amara."

Her gasp cuts through me like a blade.

My stomach drops.

I whip around, gripping her arms. "Don't listen to it."

She shudders, shaking her head, but something in her cracks open. The magic in her veins, I feel it surge, flickering between us like a tether being pulled too tight.

The presence presses in.

Shadows erupt, clawing through the air. I react on instinct, lunging, slicing through the darkness.

It splits apart. But it does not die.

It never dies.

Liora screams.

Not from pain. From something worse.

Her body jerks violently, her limbs trembling as her mind is dragged under. I feel it. The pull, the invasion, the suffocating force of memories that don't belong to her.

Or maybe they do.

Because I see them too.

The past clashes into me like a war hammer to the chest.

The temple. The runes. The golden light flickering across stone.

My own voice, raw with betrayal, roaring through the hall.

A woman—standing before me, hands shaking, magic coiling around her fingers.

"Forgive me."

"I never wanted this."

"But you ? —"

Liora sobs.

The vision shatters.

I stagger, the force of it knocking me back. My heart thunders against my ribs, my claws aching from how hard I'm flexing them.

No.

No, no, no.

This is not Amara.

This is not then.

But the dark presence laughs.

Liora's body bows forward. The shadows coil tighter, digging into her skin, her very essence. I lunge to rip her free.

She speaks.

A name.

A name that should have been buried. A spell.

"Vellrith."

My blood turns to ice.

The presence recoils.

The name strikes it like a hammer, the very air trembling under its weight. The shadows contort, writhing in agony, screeching so violently that my ears ring.

Liora collapses.

Blood spills from her nose. From her mouth. From her eyes.

"No."

I catch her before she hits the ground. Her body is limp, her breathing too shallow.

"Liora!"

She doesn't respond.

Her pulse is weak, so gods-damned weak.

The presence shrieks once more, retreating into the abyss, vanishing into the trees. But I don't care.

She isn't breathing. She's slipping away from me. Again.

I shake her, hard. My claws press against her chest, searching for her heartbeat, my own pulse hammering out of control.



"No, no, no ? —"

The bond between us still exists.

But it is faint. Flickering. Like a dying ember.

"Liora, wake up!"

Her fingers twitch.

A choked gasp escapes her lips.

My head snaps down. Her lashes flutter. The smallest, weakest breath leaves her mouth.

I nearly collapse on top of her.

She's alive.

But just barely.

Her body shudders against mine. My wings fold around her, shielding her from the cold, from everything.

She whispers.

Not a name. Not a plea.

Just one, broken word.

"Dain."

A crack splits through me.

A wound that will never heal.

I don't move. I just hold her.

Despite everything, despite my rage, my confusion, my need to destroy whatever magic binds us.

I cannot let her go.

Not now. Not in forever.

40

LIORA

The cave is dark, damp, and eerily silent except for the faint crackle of firelight licking the stone walls. The scent of rain lingers, soaked into the earth from the storm outside. My body aches in places I can't even begin to count, a dull, throbbing pain reminding me that I survived... but just barely.

I shift slightly, the cold stone biting against my skin as I force myself to sit up. My limbs feel wrong, like they aren't entirely my own. A deep exhaustion lingers in my bones, heavier than anything I've ever felt. My pulse beats harder, and for a second, I struggle to remember where I am. Then, it all comes rushing back—the presence, the magic, the name whispered in the dark.

Dain.

My gaze lands on him instantly. He's there, on the other side of the fire, his massive form half-shrouded in shadow. He's watching me, still, unmoving, like a predator assessing whether his prey is still worth the chase.

Something about him is different.

I feel it—this strange, unbearable pull that wasn't there before. The bond has deepened. It's no longer just a tether between us; it's something more, something that shouldn't exist. I sense his emotions flickering beneath his guarded exterior—anger, conflict, restraint.

But he won't touch me.

I swallow, feeling my throat burn. He doesn't say anything. He just stares.

"Say something." My voice is hoarse, weaker than I intended.

His jaw tenses. He doesn't answer.

I try again, pushing myself up further. "Dain."

Nothing.

The silence stretches thick between us, pressing down on my chest like a weight I can't shake off. I don't understand. Why is he acting like this? He saved me. He stopped me from falling. He fought for me.

Now, he gazes at me like he wishes he hadn't.

I push through the soreness to stand, gritting my teeth. My legs tremble beneath me, but I force them to hold steady. There's a humming, a strange warmth curling inside me. My magic. It feels wrong. Stronger. Pulsing like a living thing beneath my veins.

I stretch out my hand and let it flicker to life, a faint glow of blue-white energy, curling like mist around my fingers.

The moment it appears, Dain moves.

Faster than I can react, he slams my wrist against the wall. His grip is iron, pressing against my bones, forcing my magic to flicker out. His breathing is uneven, but his eyes, those golden, fire-lit eyes, burn with something cold.

“What the hell are you doing?” he growls, his voice low and razor-sharp.

I flinch but glare up at him, my breath shaky. “I was just?—”

“You were being reckless. Stupid.” His fingers tighten for a moment before he releases me like I burned him. “You think you can just use that magic freely? It’s evil. It will consume you.”

I stare at him, stunned. The words cut deeper than I expect. “You—” I shake my head. “You don’t understand.”

“No. You don’t.” His voice hardens, his eyes blazing with fury. “You don’t get to play with magic you don’t comprehend. That thing inside you, it’s not yours. It never was.”

A sharp sting settles in my chest. “Is that what you think?” My voice wavers despite my attempt to sound strong. “That I’m just some... some thing?”

Dain exhales sharply, stepping back, raking a hand through his damp hair. He won’t meet my eyes. And that tells me everything.

My throat tightens. I step away from him before the ache in my chest worsens. “I need air.”

I don’t wait for his response. I turn on my heel and walk out of the cave, the cold night air hitting me like a slap.

The rain has stopped, but the sky is still heavy, the clouds casting everything in an eerie gray glow. The forest around me is too still. No birds. No insects. Just silence.

I close my eyes, trying to breathe through the chaos inside me.

The bond. The magic. Dain's hatred.

None of it makes sense. I feel wrong. Like I don't belong in my own skin.

A whisper.

Soft. Familiar.

I open my eyes and she's there.

A woman stands a few feet ahead, bathed in silver light. She is beautiful, her dark curls cascading down her back, her eyes endless pools of blue. She looks like me. No, I look like her.

Amara.

The name sits on my tongue like a foreign thing. I don't want to say it.

She smiles, soft, sad. "You're afraid."

I step back. "You're not real."

"Aren't I?" Amara tilts her head. "Or is it that you don't want me to be?"

Her voice is kind. Gentle. Nothing like the monster Dain described.

But she ruined him, didn't she? She betrayed him.

"Dain hates you," I whisper.

Amara's expression doesn't change. She nods as if she already knew that. "He did.

He still does.”

I swallow hard, my pulse roaring in my ears. “What did you do to him?”

Her eyes darken just slightly, but the sorrow in them remains. “I did what I had to.”

“That’s not an answer.”

Amara reaches for me. I can’t move. I should step back, but my feet won’t obey.

Her fingers brush against my cheek. She’s warm. Real.

“You will understand soon,” she murmurs, her lips curling into a faint, wistful smile.

“You don’t have much time.”

I jolt.

The forest flickers and she’s gone.

Vanished like smoke.

I stand there, trembling, my breathing uneven.

What the hell is happening to me?

I stumble back into the cave, feeling as if I’ve just walked out of a nightmare. My limbs shake, my mind spinning.

Dain’s gaze snaps to me the moment I enter. His expression darkens, his eyes flickering with suspicion. “What happened?”

I hesitate.

I don't tell him.

I can't.

If I do, he'll look at me even worse than now.



41

DAIN

The cave is silent.

Liora sits near the fire, her back turned to me, her body tense. She hasn't spoken since she returned. Her breathing is too slow, too measured, as if she's trying to convince herself she's in control. But I can feel it, something is wrong.

The bond between us thrums with agitation, a pulse of energy coursing in my veins that isn't my own. It's hers. Or at least, it should be hers.

I watch her from the shadows, my claws flexing against the rock. "What did you see out there?"

She doesn't turn.

A slow exhale escapes me, sharp with impatience. "Liora."

She flinches at the sound of her name. Not much. Just a twitch of her fingers. Barely noticeable, but I see it.

I push off the wall, stalking toward her. "What. Did. You. See."

This time, she moves. Just slightly, her head tilting to the side, but she still won't look at me. Won't answer. The fire crackles between us, sending flickering light across her

face.

The silence is unbearable.

“You’re avoiding the question,” I growl. “And I don’t like it.”

Her fingers tighten in her lap. I don’t miss how pale her knuckles have become, how her breathing has subtly shifted. She’s trying to hide something from me, and it’s not working.

The bond pulses again. The longer she refuses to answer, the worse it gets. It feels like she’s sinking inside me, pressing into me from the inside out.

A whisper.

Not spoken aloud. Not from her lips. But I hear it. In my head.

Dain.

I freeze.

She still hasn’t looked at me. Still hasn’t moved.

Another whisper. Closer. More insistent.

Dain.

My jaw clenches, my wings tensing behind me. This isn’t possible. She isn’t speaking, but I can hear her.

I move toward her. “Liora,” I say carefully, low and dangerous.

Her shoulders rise. “I—” She stops herself, exhaling roughly. “I don’t know.”

Liar.

I don’t need the bond to tell me that. The way she grips her arms, like she’s holding herself together, she’s unraveling.

“I don’t believe you.”

She turns on me then, finally. Her eyes flash in the firelight, and I feel it again, that flicker of something that doesn’t belong to her. Something old. Something wrong.

Something that makes my instincts scream.

I reach for her wrist. She jerks away. “Don’t touch me,” she hisses.

I snarl. “What the hell is happening to you?”

She presses her hands to her temples, breathing too fast now. “I don’t know,” she grits out, voice shaking. “I—It’s like—” She groans, shutting her eyes, her whole body shuddering.

The whispers change.

They’re not just in my head anymore. They’re in the cave. Around us.

They’re not hers.

My wings flare as the temperature drops. The fire flickers, shrinking as a heavy presence slithers between us.

I whirl, searching the shadows, but nothing is there. Just an emptiness that wasn't there before.

I hear it.

A language I don't understand. Ancient. Twisting. Wrong.

I snap my gaze back to her.

She's standing now. But she's not looking at me.

She's looking past me. At nothing. At something.

She's speaking. But they are not her words.

The sound curdles in my ears, like a song played in reverse, like a prayer meant for something unholy. My claws dig into my palms as I take a step closer.

"Liora."

She doesn't hear me.

Another step.

The world tilts. Not the cave. Not reality.

My mind.

A vision slams into me with the force of a thousand lifetimes.

Darkness. A cold floor. Chains biting into my wrists.

I can't move.

A woman stands before me. Cloaked in light, but her face is hidden.

A voice, familiar and foreign at the same time.

"Forgive me," she whispers. "You were never meant for this."

Pain explodes through me. Magic surges over my skin, into my bones, through my soul.

I roar. I fight.

But she doesn't stop.

She binds me. Seals me.

I realize this isn't the first time she's done it.

This is the second.

The third.

The hundredth.

I slam back into the present, gasping. My knees hit the ground, my claws gouging into stone. My lungs heave for air, but my body feels wrong.

Like something was just taken from me.

Or worse, returned.

“Dain?”

Her voice is soft. Too soft.

I snap my head up and freeze.

She stands over me.

Eyes glowing.

Not hers. Not Liora’s.

Amara’s.

My breath catches, the past and present overlapping, colliding, tearing me apart.

I reach for my dagger. I don’t think. I react.

A snarl rips from my throat. “What are you? What do you think your doing?”

Liora gasps, just for a moment. Then she blinks.

The glow is gone.

She staggers back, shaking her head, touching her face as if she, too, felt it.

Her lips part, but nothing comes out.

I rise slowly, my every muscle coiled and trembling, my claws aching with the need to strike. To end whatever this is before it’s too late.

But I don't.

Because as I stare at her, at the way she stares back at me with fear and something else.

I realize something.

She's terrified too.

If she's afraid, then she doesn't understand it either.

Which means whatever is happening to her, is happening to us both.

I have no idea how to stop it.

42

LIOR

I wake to the sound of my own ragged breathing, my body tangled in damp furs, my skin burning cold. The cave is too still. The fire has long since burned down to embers, casting little light.

But I am not alone.

I feel her.

Not Dain.

Her.

The presence coils at the edges of my consciousness, brushing up against my thoughts like a whisper I can't quite grasp. At first, I think it's the dark presence again, lurking, waiting. But the warmth curling through me is different. Familiar.

Liora.

I jolt upright, pressing a hand to my temple as a voice that is not mine threads through my skull. The sound is softer than I expect, filled with sorrow and longing. It is the first time I have heard her clearly, not just fragments of a memory, not an echo of the past, but her.



Amara.

The name sends a cold shiver racing down my spine.

Flashes of something I should not remember flicker behind my eyes, half-formed moments slipping through my grasp.

Dain's face, younger, untouched by hatred.

Fingers twining with mine. Lips brushing my forehead. A whisper of devotion, soft as silk.

Pain. Betrayal. Magic that burns and chains.

A curse spoken in blood.

I close my eyes forcefully, my breath sharp and uneven. My hands tremble as I dig my nails into my palms, trying to ground myself in the present. This isn't real. These memories, these feelings, they are not mine.

Are they?

A rustle of movement pulls me back.

I don't need to turn to know that Dain is awake. He's watching me. He always is.

I steel myself, forcing my expression into something neutral before glancing his way. But the moment our eyes meet, my stomach clenches.

He knows.

I see it in the rigid line of his shoulders, the quiet fury simmering behind his gaze. He doesn't say a word, doesn't demand answers, he doesn't need to. He sees the change in me.

He hates it.

I swallow hard, shifting against the furs, trying to shake the lingering pull of Amara's voice from my mind. "I—I just needed some air."

A lie. A weak one.

His expression doesn't change, but something inside him tenses further. "What did you see?"

I hesitate. I could tell him the truth. I could tell him that I felt her, that I saw things that didn't belong to me. That for the briefest, most terrifying second, I wasn't sure if I was Liora at all.

But I don't.

I can't because if I admit it, if I say it out loud, it's real.

"I don't know," I murmur instead, shaking my head.

His eyes narrow, golden and piercing. "Liar."

The accusation cuts deeper than I expect. I flinch, my fingers curling into the furs. "What do you want me to say?"

"The truth." His voice is quiet, dangerous. "What did you see, Liora?"

The way he says my name makes my chest ache.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” I disagree.

He moves faster than I can react. In an instant, he’s on me, his hands gripping my shoulders, his body caging mine against the cave wall.

His touch is firm, but not painful. Not yet.

The bond between us thrums in protest, a sharp pulse of heat curling beneath my ribs. I try to shove him back, but his grip only tightens. His wings flare behind him, his breath warm and ragged against my face.

I don’t fight him, not really. Not like I should.

For a terrifying moment, I can’t focus on anything except the heat of his body pressed against mine, the scent of rain and earth clinging to his skin.

His golden eyes bore into me. “Tell me.”

Something in my chest cracks open, raw and desperate.

Without thinking, the truth spills from my lips.

“I saw her.”

His entire body goes still.

A muscle in his jaw tics. “Who?”

I swallow hard. My heart pounds. “Amara.”

His grip tightens, just slightly. His breath comes in sharp, controlled bursts. “What did she say to you?”

I pull at my hair. “It wasn’t like that. It wasn’t a vision. I—I felt her. Inside me.”

Dain doesn’t speak. Doesn’t move.

I notice the fear.

Not rage. Not hatred.

Fear.

It’s gone as quickly as it comes, buried beneath layers of fury and resentment, but I felt it.

Dain isn’t just angry. He’s terrified.

Of me.

The realization shatters something inside me.

I open my mouth to say something, anything, but when I speak, it’s not my voice.

“Dain.”

His entire body locks.

Amara’s calling him again through me. I dislike it. I loathe that she’s using my body.

The voice that slips from my lips is not mine. It is soft and aching, filled with a sadness I don't understand.

But he does.

His claws dig into my skin as a growl rumbles deep in his chest. "Stop."

I gasp, my own voice returning as I clutch at my throat. "I?—"

He snarls. "Don't say her name."

I deny it frantically. "It wasn't me?—"

But it doesn't matter. He sees what he wants to see.

The flicker of recognition in my eyes. The way my voice wavered with something that wasn't me.

Dain lunges.

I barely have time to react before his hands seize my wrists, pinning them above my head. His breath is ragged, his entire body vibrating with restrained violence.

His lips brush my ear as he speaks, voice laced with something dark, something broken.

"I won't let you do this to me again."

Terror claws up my spine. "Dain, I'm not?—"

But he isn't listening. He's lost in the past. In her.

I finally understand.

He doesn't see Liora.

He sees Amara. And he is going to kill me.

Panic surges through me.

I have no choice.

I push.

Magic rips from me in a wave of dark energy, slamming into Dain's chest. He's thrown backward, wings snapping out to catch himself before he can hit the ground.

But the damage is done.

I don't wait for him to recover.

I run.

The bond between us burns as I flee, twisting, pulling at me like a chain wrapped around my ribs.

But I don't stop. I can't let him kill me.

More than that, I can't let myself hurt him.

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:59 am*

43

DAIN

She ran.

Again.

The bond between us screams, the phantom pull of her magic lashing at me like a whip. It's weaker than before, fraying at the edges, unraveling with every step she takes.

She's trying to break it.

The thought ignites something dark inside me.

She doesn't understand what she's doing. What she is.

But I do.

The bond was not to be severed, never to be touched. It is something ancient, something tied to blood and fate. If she breaks it, if she severs what binds us, she will destroy herself in the process.

I won't let her.

My wings cut through the wind, propelling me forward as I hunt her through the

endless stretch of the forest. Her scent is everywhere, rain and fire, magic and blood. It's inside me, burned into my skin, rooted in my very bones.

She cannot escape.

She belongs to me.

I find her at the edge of a ruined shrine.

The structure is old, older than both of us. Carved stone columns rise like skeletal remains, their surfaces etched with sigils I don't recognize. The air is thick with magic, humming with an unnatural pulse. A place of power.

There she is.

Liora stands in the center of it all, her body trembling, arms raised as she speaks words that no longer sound like her own.

The magic swirls around her, dark and frenzied, wrapping around her body like phantom chains. The ritual is incomplete, the energy unstable. I can see it in the way her fingers shake, in the sweat beading along her brow.

My fury explodes.

I move before I can stop myself, storming into the circle, reaching for her.

“Liora!”

She startles, her concentration snapping as I grab her wrist. The moment my fingers close around her, the magic reacts.



A pulse of power erupts between us, violent and searing, knocking my breath from me.

The world tilts, no. It fractures.

Everything shatters around me in a storm of color and sound, pulling me under, dragging me through time itself.

I see it.

The vision is not gentle.

It tears into me, rips me apart.

I see myself, not as I am now, but as I was.

A prisoner.

Chained, bound, broken.

Magic coils around my wrists, scorching through my veins, locking me in place. I struggle, muscles straining against invisible bonds, but they don't break. They never break.

Footsteps echo in the darkness.

She appears.

Amara.

She steps into the dim glow of candlelight, her violet robes whispering against the

stone, her hands trembling as she approaches me.

I hate her. I love her.

The emotions war inside me, clashing like a violent storm.

This is the moment it all changed.

This is the moment I was betrayed.

Her voice is quiet. "Dain... please."

I snarl at her. "You have no right to say my name."

She flinches, but her resolve does not break. She lifts her hands, magic gathering at her fingertips. I feel it snake toward me, curling around my body like a promise, like a curse.

"Don't do this, Amara." My voice is ragged, torn between rage and something else, something I won't name.

Her eyes glisten with unshed tears, her fingers trembling as she presses them to my chest. The spell burns.

"I have no choice," she whispers. "I have to stop you."

The pain is unbearable. It sears through my soul.

The magic wraps around me, burrowing deep, chaining me in ways I cannot fight.

She presses her lips to mine.

The memory stabs into me like a dagger to the gut. A kiss. A final kiss.

She seals me away.

The vision ends with a violent snap.

I gasp, choking on air as I lurch back into the present. The shrine's ruins come back into focus, the towering stones, the swirling magic, the shattered ritual.

And Liora.

She collapses against me, her body shaking, her breathing uneven. I catch her before she hits the ground, my hands curling around her shoulders, anchoring her to me.

Her eyes meet mine. And I notice it.

Not just Liora.

Not just Amara.

Both.

The truth crashes into me, vicious and undeniable.

Liora was never just a girl. She was always Amara.

A fractured soul, reborn and bound to me by a fate neither of us can escape.

I shake my head, my grip tightening on her as my own breathing turns ragged. "What have you done?"

She doesn't answer.

She doesn't have to.

I already know and nothing will ever be the same again.

44

LIORA

The vision rips through me like a blade, carving through flesh, through time. I see the past unraveling before me, each thread woven into a story I wasn't supposed to remember.

Dain was never the villain of this tale.

Amara never betrayed him.

She saved him.

The truth slams into me, vicious and unforgiving. I see Amara standing before a council of dark elves, her hands bound in shackles of enchanted iron. She pleads, her voice raw, but they do not listen. They will not listen.

They have already made their decision.

The artifact pulses in their grasp, a relic forged from the tormented souls of the countless beings Dain had slain in his reign of power. It was an aberration. It should have never been created.

But the dark elves had other plans.

They were the ones who cursed him. They took his strength, his mind, his very

essence, twisting it into a prison of suffering. The artifact is alive, feeding on him, fueled by his rage, his agony.

It wants more.

Amara could not destroy it.

She could only weaken it.

So she did the unthinkable, she sealed Dain away.

Not to imprison him. To save him.

The bond, the curse, the cycle, it was never her doing. It was never supposed to be this way.

I stagger backward, gasping, my vision blurring as I rip free from the memory. My hands tremble as I clutch my chest, my heartbeat wild, erratic.

Dain is beside me, breathing hard, his body rigid with the implications of what we've seen. He is still locked in the remnants of the vision, still seeing the truth shatter everything he has believed for centuries.

His hands shake.

His claws twitch at his sides.

I reach for him.

He does not move.

“Dain—”

A voice echoes through the cavern, smooth as silk, dripping with malice.

“Now you see.”

The darkness shifts, the presence slithering closer. The entity that has hunted us, whispered to me in my dreams, stands just beyond the flickering light of the shrine’s torches.

It laughs.

“Now you understand.”

Dain is still frozen, his breathing ragged.

The voice slithers around us, into us, curling through the depths of our minds.

“You can’t escape this.”

The laughter is slow, deep, filled with centuries of amusement and hatred.

“And she will betray you again.”

I barely register the words before Dain moves.

One second, he is stone, frozen in the realization of the past. The next, he is fire.

His roar tears through the shrine, his wings snapping open as his power surges in a violent wave. His body trembles, his golden eyes flickering between rage and devastation.

He turns on me.

His hand slams against my chest, shoving me backward.

I stumble, gasping, the impact sending a sharp pain through my ribs.

He looks at me like I am a disease. A curse.

Like I have destroyed him.

Again.

“You did this to me.” His voice is hoarse, broken.

I wildly deny it, stepping forward. “Dain, no. I didn’t?—”

His wings snap open, his entire body taut with barely restrained fury.

“Stay away from me.”

The words lash across my skin worse than any wound.

I reach for him again, pleading. “You saw what happened. It wasn’t?—”

He snarls, flinching away from my touch.

“I don’t care what I saw.” His eyes blaze with torment, his claws curling into his palms. “I don’t care what the truth is.”

His voice drops, dark and merciless.



“You are still her.”

The air is sucked from my lungs.

My throat constricts as I say, “I’m not. I’m Liora.”

He steps closer, looming over me, his breath ragged, his chest moves, up and down, with barely contained fury.

“No.” His voice is nothing more than a whisper, but it is lethal.

“You were never Liora.”

I choke back a sob. “That’s not true.”

He leans in, his eyes burning into mine, something unhinged clawing through his expression.

“Then prove it.”

His challenge hangs between us like a blade.

The dark presence laughs again, relishing the destruction, the agony.

Dain trembles, his body shaking as if it is taking every ounce of his will not to tear me apart. His wings flex, his muscles coiling.

He turns away.

My breath catches. “Dain?—”

He flies.

A gust of wind tears through the cavern as he shoots into the air, vanishing into the night, leaving me behind.

Alone.

45

LIORA

The ruins stretch around me, lifeless and empty. There is no warmth here, no sound but the ragged draw of my breath and the faint rustle of wind through the broken stone. Dain is gone. He left me.

The truth is a blade inside me.

I press a trembling hand to my chest, feeling for the bond that should still be there, the invisible tether that has bound me to him since I first drank his blood. It's weaker now, slipping, fraying. He's pulling away, forcing it to break.

A sharp, searing pain shoots through me, an ache that isn't in my body and everything to do with my soul. He's actually doing it. He's tearing me out of himself, piece by piece, as if I never mattered.

I stumble forward, my knees hitting the jagged stone, my breath hitching as the realization crashes over me like a storm. He doesn't want me. He never did.

"He will never come back to you."

The whisper slithers through my mind, thick and suffocating. The dark presence is closer now, its voice a curling thread of silk and poison.

"He's already made his choice, little Purna. You are nothing to him. But you could be

something to me."

I squeeze my eyes shut, pressing my palms against my ears. "Leave me alone," I rasp, my voice hoarse, cracked from too many screams.

"You are breaking, Liora. You feel it, don't you? The bond unraveling? The pain will only grow worse. But I can make it stop."

I lift my head. The ruins waver in front of me, my vision blurring. My heartbeat is uneven, my body cold. Dain's rejection is a weight pressing down on me, suffocating, crushing.

"All you have to do is sever it completely," the voice purrs.

A sharp wind cuts through the ruins, whipping my hair across my face. My fingers tremble as I clutch my arms, digging my nails into my skin to ground myself, to stop myself from considering it.

"Cut him from you, and you will be free. No more pain. No more bond. No more love."

The offer slams into me like a wave. Freedom. From him. From the ache of his absence. From the unbearable knowledge that I will never be enough for him.

My chest tightens. The temptation burns.

Wouldn't it be easier to let go? To stop this agony? If he can sever the bond, why shouldn't I? Why should I keep chasing after something that was never mine to begin with?

The pain throbs through me, sharper now. I can feel him pulling harder, like a hand

wrenching a chain, twisting it until it snaps.

He's almost succeeded.

I could finish it. Right now.

All I have to do is let go.

The dark presence pulses around me, sensing my hesitation. The air grows thick, charged with something ancient and hungry.

"That's it," the voice croons. "Sever it. Say his name one last time, and it will all be over."

My lips part.

Dain.

His name is a phantom on my tongue, a ghost in my chest, a brand in my soul.

A new whisper slithers through the air. Softer. Desperate.

"No, don't listen."

I freeze.

The voice isn't the dark presence. It's her.

Amara.

My head snaps up. I stagger to my feet, my pulse hammering as a shiver rakes down

my spine. The ruins shift. The air warps, heat rippling around me as the past bleeds into the present.

A vision flickers to life before my eyes.

A woman stands before a massive stone altar, her hands shaking as golden light pulses from her palms. Magic crackles around her, coiling like living fire.

I know her face.

She is me.

No. She is Amara.

Her lips part, but her voice doesn't belong to her alone. It belongs to me, too.

"Please, don't listen to him. Don't make the same mistake I did."

I stumble back, my heel catching on loose stone. The ruins blur around me. The magic in my veins surges, pulsing with something wrong.

"I never wanted this for you."

"Shut up," I whisper, pressing my hands to my temples, squeezing my eyes shut.

"You're not real."

"I am. And if you let go of him now, it will be too late."

The darkness surges. The presence snarls, its voice twisting into something sharp, vicious.

"She lies. She always has. Do not trust her."

I can't breathe. The ruins are spinning, my body trembling under it all.

Dain is leaving me. The bond is snapping. The dark presence is waiting.

And Amara is begging me not to make the same mistake she did.

Tears burn my eyes. My chest tightens, my body shaking as the choice crushes me.

What am I supposed to do?

The wind howls through the ruins, and in the distance, I feel something shifting.

Something awakening.

Deep inside, I know whatever happens next, there is no turning back.

46

DAIN

The wind cuts against my face as I fly through the darkened sky, wings stretched wide, slicing through the storm-heavy clouds. The weight in my chest, the unbearable pull of the bond, gnaws at me like an open wound, but I refuse to give in to it.

Liora is behind me. Far away. And that is where she should stay.

I tell myself that I don't care. That I left her for a reason. That I will never see her again.

It's a lie.

The bond between us should be severed by now, but it isn't. It's weak, strained, but still there. A tether not yet broken. I want to destroy it, but I can't fully destroy it.

And worse, I still feel her. Flickers of pain, the pulse of her indecision, the dark presence slithering closer to her.

I try to shut it out, focus on the flight, but the phantom echoes of her suffering keep slipping through the cracks in my mind.

I curse under my breath and push myself harder.

I tell myself I'm flying toward my people. Toward the dark elves. Toward the noble



stronghold where all of this began.

The landscape changes beneath me. Stone gives way to tangled forests, to jagged cliffs, to sprawling ruins buried in darkness. And finally to the stronghold.

The noble mansion sits atop a crumbling plateau, its obsidian spires cutting into the sky like jagged teeth. The banners of the dark elves still hang, tattered and swaying in the wind. But something is wrong.

The torches that should light the perimeter are dark. The walls that should be teeming with guards are empty. The gates, once towering and fortified, are slightly ajar.

My muscles coil tight as I land in the courtyard, wings folding behind me.

No sound.

No movement.

Only the thick stench of decay and something else, magic. Old. Ancient. Hungry.

I push the gates open, stepping inside.

What I find makes my blood run cold.

Bodies.

Scattered like discarded dolls across the marble floors. Noble dark elves, their robes soaked in blood, their throats torn open. The walls are blackened, scorched by magic—not fire, but something worse.

The artifact is waking up. The presence.

I step forward, careful to avoid the blood pooling beneath my boots. The deeper I go, the worse it gets.

Servants, soldiers, councilmen, all dead. Their eyes wide, frozen in terror, their bodies twisted in unnatural shapes.

Some were trying to claw their own throats out.

A cold realization slithers through me.

This was not a battle.

This was a purge.

Something killed them from the inside out.

A deep, guttural rumble shudders through the stronghold.

The air thickens and the shadows move.

Suddenly, at the heart of the massacre, I see it.

The artifact is no longer dormant.

It floats in the center of the grand hall, suspended in air, black veins of energy writhing around it like living shadows.

It is not just a relic.

It is a living thing.

And it is awake.

A force slams into my chest, sending me skidding backward. The magic is suffocating, thick and pulsing, alive with a malevolent will. The whispers in my head are deafening now, a chorus of ancient voices screeching in a language older than time.

The artifact isn't satisfied with this level of destruction, of me.

It wanted her. It always wanted Amara.

Now, it wants Liora.

My wings flare, my fangs lengthen, my claws curl into my palms as rage ignites in me.

I was a fool.

I thought I could walk away. Imagined I could let her go.

I must stop this or it will consume her.

A pulse of magic slams into me again, forcing me back. The shadows coil tighter around the artifact, their form shifting, twisting—taking shape.

A voice slithers through the air, deep and ancient, filled with something worse than hatred.

"She belongs to me."

I lunge forward, slicing my claws through the darkness, but it reforms instantly,

laughing.

"You will never break free of this, Dain. And neither will she."

I bare my fangs. My magic surges through me, raw and violent.

"Then I will destroy you first," I snarl.

But I already know the truth.

The artifact cannot be destroyed. Not without sealing it again.

There is only one way to do that. I have to kill Liora. I must end the cycle.

I freeze.

The thought shreds through me.

No.

No, there has to be another way.

But deep inside, I already know the answer.

If I don't kill her, the artifact will take her. And if it takes her, it will never let her go.

I clench my fists, breathing heavily. My heart pounds, my wings twitch, my fangs ache with the choice before me.

I have two options.

Find another way to end this or end her before the darkness can take her.

A gust of wind slams through the stronghold, and in the distance, I feel her.

Liora.

She is calling me.

The bond, though weak, flickers back to life, a desperate pulse against my chest.

She is still fighting.

I take one last look at the ruined stronghold, the bodies, the artifact writhing with hunger.

After that, I move.

I fly.

I will come to her and end this.

47

LIORA

The air in the ruins is overflowing with something unseen, pressing against my skin, suffocating. I wrap my arms around myself, trying to steady my breath, trying to ignore the way my hands tremble.

The whispers are louder now, curling around my skull, seeping into my veins.

It's time, Liora. Time to choose.

Amara stands before me, or perhaps it's only an illusion, a remnant of something that once was. Her form flickers, barely solid, and yet when she speaks, it feels as though her voice is inside me, wrapping around my ribs like a cage.

"Tell me the truth," I demand, my voice hoarse, raw. "No more riddles. No more lies. What did you do? What did you sacrifice?"

Amara's gaze softens, her lips parting as if she wants to reach for me, to comfort me. But she doesn't. She never does.

"The artifact did not just bind Dain," she says. "It bound me, too."

My chest tightens.

She takes a step closer, the edges of her figure fraying like tattered silk. "I did not

reincarnate naturally, Liora. My soul was trapped. Torn apart over and over.” Her expression twists, something pained flickering behind her eyes. “And each time I returned, the seal weakened.”

I shake my head, refusing to accept it.

“The artifact doesn’t just seek power,” Amara continues. “It seeks me. It needs me to surrender, to give in so that it can fully possess me.” Her voice wavers. “And if I die, it will finally be able to release all of its power.”

A violent shudder wracks through me. My stomach churns. “So I shouldn’t have been born,” I whisper, the words bitter on my tongue. “I was just a?—”

“A consequence,” Amara finishes for me. “You’re me at the same time, not me.”

Something inside me shatters.

The dark presence laughs.

I press my hands against my temples, my breathing shallow, uneven. My mind feels like it’s splitting apart. The artifact’s hunger curls against my skin, taunting, coaxing.

I should break the bond.

I should let Dain go.

If I do, I will be defenseless.

But if I don’t...

I will always be the thing standing between him and his freedom.

A choice.

One last, final choice.

The decision falls into place.

A weight lifts from my chest. The pain dulls.

I will unbind myself from Dain.

To free him.

To let him live.

To love him enough to let him go.

The darkness shifts. The whispers grow eager. Amara smiles sadly.

"Perhaps," she murmurs, "this is the right choice."

A different path. Another possibility.

Her image fades, swallowed by shadow.

Suddenly, Dain is there.

He crashes into the space like a storm, wings unfurled, golden eyes blazing. The rage on his face is terrifying, lethal.

"Liora," he snarls. "Don't you dare."



The sheer fury in his voice almost makes me falter, but I can't.

I have already decided.

I step toward the center of the cave, toward the sigils carved into the stone, toward the magic thrumming beneath my skin.

"I'm breaking the bond, Dain."

His growl rips through the air. "You won't live long enough to do it."

I smile. A soft, bitter thing.

He doesn't understand.

Of course, he doesn't.

I meet his gaze and say it.

"It doesn't matter if I'm Amara or if I'm Liora." My voice shakes, but I do not waver.  
"Because no matter who I am, I will always love you."

Something breaks in his eyes.

I lift my arms.

The magic erupts.

Dain lunges toward me, roaring, but it's too late.

The power surges through my veins, a blinding force splitting through my skin.

The sigils beneath me ignite.

The world fractures around me.

I hear his scream, my name ripped from his throat in a way I have never heard before, raw, desperate, pleading.

Agony.

I feel my soul tear.

The bond snaps.

The pain is indescribable.

Blood gushes from my mouth, from my eyes, from my skin. My body crumbles, every muscle seizing, every nerve shattering.

The cave trembles. The darkness shrieks.

Dain catches me just before I hit the ground.

His arms are warm. His voice desperate.

"Liora," he growls, shaking me. "No. NO."

His grip is so tight, his claws digging into my flesh as if he can force me to stay.

But I'm already slipping.

I blink up at him, vision fading. The warmth is leaving me.

I smile one last time.

Everything goes dark.

48

DAIN

Liora's body is limp in my arms, fragile as something already lost. The bond, the thing that had tied us together, that had let me feel her, hear her, breathe through her—is gone. There is nothing but silence in my head where her presence used to be.

The air around us shudders, thick with a presence that should not exist. A cruel, mocking laughter slithers through the ruins, curling around me like the whisper of death itself.

"She played right into my hands."

The voice seeps through the cracks in reality, ancient and gloating.

"You were always so blind, Dain. Did you think she would ever be anything but a curse?"

I can't move. My claws dig into her skin, desperate, furious. Liora. Damn it, Liora. She should have fought harder. She should have stayed. She should have never made that choice.

A thin trickle of blood slips from the corner of her mouth, her lips parted like she had been whispering something at the moment she severed herself from me.

"She severed you, but not me."

The voice twists with satisfaction.

"Without your bond, she has no protection. She is open to me. I will take her. I will finish what I began with Amara."

Rage claws through me, cold and unbearable.

I should let her go.

I should let fate claim her, let the artifact finish its work. The cycle will end. She will be gone. And I will finally be free.

But the second that thought crosses my mind, something splinters inside me.

The silence. The emptiness. The void where she should be.

I can't.

I can't let her go.

The realization hits like a blade between my ribs.

I spent so many lifetimes hating Amara. So many centuries holding onto that hatred like it was the only thing keeping me alive. And yet here I am, willing to burn everything down to pull Liora back.

It doesn't matter what Amara did.

It doesn't matter that Liora is her reincarnation.

It doesn't matter what curses run through her blood or what darkness lives inside her.

She is mine.

I will not let her go.

The laughter falters. It knows.

"You're a fool, Dain. If you go after her, you will never escape me."

A part of me agrees.

A part of me doesn't care.

If she's trapped in the abyss, then I will go after her.

I lift Liora's lifeless body, my arms locking around her. My wings unfurl, and I push off the ground, rising into the broken sky but I land back, my strength faltering. I grit my teeth.

I don't care where the artifact has her.

I will tear my way through whatever hell it has made for her.

"You were never meant to have her."

The dark presence coils around us, slithering through the sky like the unseen chains that have haunted me for lifetimes.

"She was always mine."

It laughs, cruel and knowing. The ruins below tremble, and I feel it, not just the whispers, not just the corruption. The artifact awakens further, feeding off what she's

done.

"She thought she was saving you. How tragic."

I grit my teeth, tightening my hold around her.

The power beneath us shudders, tearing through the air like a monstrous heartbeat. The very fabric of reality warps, something is dragging her down.

"You should let her go, Dain."

The laughter shifts, taunting.

"Isn't this what you wanted? No more Amara. No more pain. No more curse."

I feel it then. The pull.

Liora is being ripped away from me.

I see the moment her soul starts slipping beyond my reach.

Her breath shudders, barely there. Her fingers twitch once, then go still.

I lose it.

With a snarl, I dive, straight into the abyss. Straight into the void behind the artifact.

The world shatters around me.

Darkness rushes up, swallowing me whole.

I land in nothingness.

There is no sky, no ground, no sense of where one ends and another begins. A void stretches around me—empty, yet filled with whispers.

Shadows coil like living things, stretching, breathing.

Then I hear it.

A voice that is hers, yet not.

"Dain..."

I turn.

Liora stands in the distance, but she isn't Liora.

She is everything she has ever been, Liora, Amara, something more.

Her eyes glow, burning with unnatural power, her form flickering between lives. One moment, she is the woman I have come to know, the woman who infuriates me, tempts me, refuses to bow. The next, she is Amara, the woman I once loved, the woman who betrayed me, the woman who swore she did it to save me.

"You shouldn't be here."

Her voice is raw, as if she's breaking apart just speaking.

"You can't save me, Dain."

A growl rips through me.



"The hell I can't."

I take a step closer to her, but the abyss shifts.

A force slams into me, trying to shove me back, rejecting me from this place. The darkness is sentient, clawing at my skin, whispering in my ears.

"She made her choice. Let her go."

"She is not yours anymore."

"Leave, and be free."

I roar, baring my fangs.

"You think I'll just let you have her?"

The void laughs, but Liora's expression changes.

The glow in her eyes falters.

She stares at me as if she wasn't expecting this, wasn't expecting me to come for her.

As if no one ever has.

"You don't understand, Dain." Her voice wavers. "The artifact... it won't let me go. It's feeding on me. I can't ? —"

"Bullshit." I take another step forward, my claws curling. "You think I came all this way just to hear you give up?"

The darkness rips at me, but I push forward.

"You wanted to save me? Then let me return the damn favor."

Liora shakes her head, tears slipping down her cheeks.

"I don't want you to die for me."

"Then stop making me chase you into the depths of hell."

She lets out a broken laugh, but I see the flicker of hope.

The darkness recoils, shrieking.

It's afraid.

Because it knows.

I will not leave here without her.

I will destroy anything that tries to keep her from me.

The void trembles, Liora reaches for me.

Her fingers brush mine.

I drag her back to me.

49

DAIN

The abyss is alive.

It breathes. It writhes. It watches.

The darkness coils like a living thing, reaching for us with spectral claws, its presence pressing into my bones. The void is thick, suffocating, endless—stretching beyond my sight, beyond my understanding. There is no sky, no ground, no boundary. Just an expanse of emptiness, broken only by the sickly glow of the artifact's power, pulsing like a dying heartbeat.

And in the center of it all, Liora. I reach for her, dragging her back to me. Her form flickers again.

She flickers between forms, her shape shifting like a mirage. One moment, she is the woman who infuriates me, tempts me, defies me, the woman who chose me.

Next, she is Amara, the woman who betrayed me, the woman who swore she did it to save me.

Both are her. Neither are her.

I snarl, my grip tightening around her. The void ripples in response, shuddering like it can feel my defiance.

"You shouldn't be here." Her voice is fragile, threaded with something ancient, something breaking.

"There's no saving me, Dain."

I growl, stepping toward her, ignoring the darkness trying to tear me away.

"The hell I can't."

Something hits me. A force, unseen and merciless, hurls me backward. I barely keep my footing, claws dragging through the nothingness as I struggle against the force trying to reject me. Shadows coil, twisting into a grotesque shape, a mouth, a face, an endless void staring back at me.

"She made her choice."

The words come from nowhere and everywhere, curling around me like chains.

"Let her go."

"She is not yours anymore."

I roar, baring my fangs.

"You think I'll just let you have her?"

The darkness laughs.

Liora trembles in my arms, her fingers clutching at me, but she is fading. Her warmth is dimming, her pulse weakening. The magic, her magic is unraveling, the severed bond draining what little strength she has left.

And I feel it, the moment her soul starts slipping beyond my reach.

"She thought she was saving you." The voice is mocking, cruel.

"How tragic."

The rage inside me explodes.

"Shut up."

The abyss shudders.

I tighten my grip, dragging Liora closer, my wings curling around her in a shield. Her breathing is shallow, her skin pale. Her lips part, like she wants to say something, but no sound comes out.

The void claws at us, relentless, a thousand unseen hands trying to rip her away from me. The darkness is screaming, a chorus of fury and triumph. It thinks it's won.

It thinks I will let her die.

It does not understand who I am.

I don't let go.

With a snarl, I plant my feet, digging in. My wings snap open, the force of my power tearing through the abyss, sending shockwaves through the shadows.

Liora's eyes flutter open, hazy, unfocused. Her body shudders against me.

"Dain..."

"I've got you."

The abyss wails.

It knows.

I will not leave without her.

I tighten my hold, my claws sinking into her arms, my breath ragged. The artifact's magic is still inside her, threading through her veins like a poison, feeding on what remains of her soul.

I won't allow it.

"She was always mine."

The voice is angry now, desperate. The ground beneath us splits open, the fabric of this nightmare fracturing, revealing a churning mass of pure darkness below.

The abyss is trying to consume her whole.

I won't allow it.

I bend my head, pressing my forehead to hers, letting the raw fire of my fury burn through the emptiness.

"You wanted to save me?" My voice is low, dangerous.

"Then let me return the damn favor."

Her breath hitches.

The void shrieks, realizing its mistake.

Liora's eyes widen, glowing with something new, something old, something hers.

She reaches for me.

The moment our fingers brush, light explodes.

The darkness splinters, cracking like shattered glass.

The abyss screams, twisting, writhing, breaking.

And we fall.

The real world hits me like a hammer.

I crash into the stone ruins, my wings snapping open just in time to slow our descent.  
The impact sends a violent shockwave through the ground, dust and debris exploding into the air.

Liora is still in my arms, her body weak but alive. Her pulse is there, flickering, fragile.

I won.

But the moment relief begins to sink in, she opens her eyes.

And everything changes.

The glow in them is wrong.

Not Liora. Not Amara.

Something else.

Her lips part, but when she speaks, the voice that leaves them is not hers.

"It's not over, Dain."



50

LIORA

The world is wrong.

I feel it in every fiber of my being, in my blood, in the way the earth trembles beneath me as if the land itself is suffocating under something monstrous.

The presence, no, the thing that has haunted us, whispered in my mind, slithered through Dain's rage and my fear—has taken form. And it is horrifying.

It rises from the ruins, from the shadows, from me.

The artifact has fed on everything, on Dain's hatred, on my soul, on the cursed history entwining us both. It knows us. It remembers us. It has shaped itself into something that should never have existed, and now it stands before us, pulsing with unnatural life, made of writhing darkness, of hunger.

Its form shifts, flickers, constantly becoming, as if the world itself refuses to accept what it is. A god that was never meant to be.

It speaks with my voice.

"I am inevitable."

I freeze. My own voice warped, echoing from something wrong, slicing me like a

blade. It is speaking with me, through me, as if I have always belonged to it.

Dain's grip tightens around me, claws digging into my waist, as if he's afraid I'll slip through his fingers again. His breath is ragged against my temple, his body braced like a shield between me and the entity before us.

"Get out of her," he snarls, fangs bared.

But the creature only laughs.

I feel it move inside me.

A sickening pull twists deep in my core, an invisible chain yanking me forward. My body is not my own. It is calling me.

The artifact wants me.

"You were always mine, Amara."

The name punches me in the gut, and suddenly, memories are unraveling like a flood. Past lives. Past deaths. I see myself over and over, falling, burning, screaming, every version of me being ripped apart, reforged, thrown back into existence just to suffer again.

This thing has been feeding on me for lifetimes. It has always been waiting.

My knees buckle.

I feel Dain react before I can even think, his arms catching me, his snarl vibrating through me. But even as he holds me, I can feel his body stiffen. He doesn't know what to do.

He doesn't know how to stop it.

"Don't listen to it," he growls, voice sharp as steel. "Fight it, Liora."

But I can't.

Not when it's inside me. Not when it's tearing through my soul, threading itself into every piece of me, whispering.

"You were made for this."

The words slither into my mind, seductive and patient. It doesn't need to kill me. It just needs me to give in. To accept.

To surrender.

"Just let go," it croons. "Dain will be free. You will finally rest. No more pain. No more running. Just peace."

It's a lie.

I know it's a lie.

Gods help me—I want to believe it.

I tremble in Dain's arms, my hands gripping his shoulders hard enough to leave marks. My body wants to step forward, to submit, to let this thing take me so it can finally end.

But Dain won't let me go.

He feels it, the moment I start to slip.

He reacts the only way he knows how.

He kisses me.

His lips crash against mine, furious, desperate, unyielding. His claws bury into my waist, dragging me against him as if his body alone can keep me from breaking apart. He is not gentle. He is not kind.

He is claiming me back.

The entity screams in rage.

Pain explodes through me as it tries to pull me away, as the magic anchoring me to it shreds apart. The artifact cannot take what Dain is willing to destroy for me.

Heat flares between us. Not fire. Not magic.

Something older. Deeper.

The bond.

Not the one I severed.

A new one.

Something stronger. Something forged by choice, not by fate. Not forced.

I gasp into him, my fingers twisting into his hair, and the abyss howls in fury.

"No!"

The ground cracks. The sky ripples. The creature lunges.

Dain rips me away just as a tendril of darkness slashes between us, barely missing my chest. He moves fast, wings flaring wide as he shields me, snarling like a beast, his hands glowing with raw power.

"We end this," he says, his voice thick with a promise.

The artifact screeches.

The presence unleashes itself in a tidal wave of shadows, reaching for me, for Dain, for everything.

Dain lunges, not away from it. But toward it.

His power collides with the darkness, a violent clash that shakes the ruins, sends fissures tearing through the earth.

I stumble back, heart hammering, watching him fight, watching him throw himself into battle without hesitation.

Something in me snaps.

I won't let him do this alone. I won't be a curse anymore.

I plant my feet, summoning everything—every past life, every pain, every power I never wanted. The magic answers.

It rises from within me, raw and untamed, and this time—this time, I don't run from

it.

I embrace it.

A surge of golden light ignites around me, burning through the shadows, forcing them back. The creature recoils, screeching as I step forward, power crackling through my veins.

Dain turns, and his eyes widen at the sight of me.

I lift my hands, feeling the magic course through me, and for what feels like centuries, I speak the words Amara once spoke to protect him.

"I seal thee."

Light erupts.

The entity shrieks, convulsing as my magic, our magic lashes around it, binding it. Chaining it. Dragging it back to the void where it belongs.

The artifact fractures, cracks racing along its surface.

I see it then, the moment Dain understands.

The only way to end this.

His gaze locks onto mine, fierce and terrifyingly gentle.

"Liora—"

I don't let him finish.

I pour everything into the final spell, into the seal, into the only thing that will keep the darkness from ever coming back.

The artifact shatters.

The presence lets out one last, agonized wail and then it is gone.

Silence crashes over the ruins.

Dain is on his knees, panting, his body covered in bruises and claw marks. The magic still hums between us, alive, whole, but different now. No longer a curse.

Just ours.

I take a step toward him. He looks up at me, something unreadable in his expression.

He reaches for me.

His hand curls around my wrist, and he tugs me forward, his forehead pressing against mine.

"Liora," he breathes.

I close my eyes.

It's over.

But we are not.

51

DAIN

The world has finally stopped trembling.

The ruins are silent, bathed in the moonlight overhead. The battle is over. The artifact is gone. The presence, the thing that has haunted me for centuries, whispered in my mind, turned my hate into something sharp and endless—is nothing but ash and echoes.

But my hands still shake.

Liora stands before me, alive, whole, her magic no longer a force tearing her apart but something that has become hers. Not Amara's. Not the artifact's. Just hers.

I can barely breathe.

I should say something. I should tell her that she was reckless, that she was stupid for nearly dying in front of me again. That I shouldn't have had to drag her back from the abyss because she should have never thrown herself into it in the first place.

But I don't.

Because all I can think about is the way she looked at me in the final moment before she shattered the artifact—like she had already chosen me. Like she had always chosen me.



I don't deserve it.

I want to tell her that too. That she should hate me for every cruel thing I said, for every time I almost killed her, for every time I let my rage consume me instead of reaching for her.

But she doesn't give me the chance.

She moves toward me, slow, deliberate, her bare feet silent on the cracked stone. I expect her to stop, to hesitate, to give me time to put my walls back up.

She doesn't.

She crashes into me.

Her hands grip my jaw, fingers digging into my skin like she's afraid I'll disappear if she doesn't hold on tight enough. She pulls me down, and her lips slam into mine—no hesitation, no waiting.

Just need.

I don't think. I break.

I grab her, hard, bruising, my fingers tangling into her hair as I crush her against me. Her gasp is swallowed by my mouth, her body pressed to mine, and there's nothing gentle about the way I take her lips, devouring, claiming, demanding.

This isn't like before.

This isn't rage.

It's us, without the chains of the past, without the curses, without the war between us keeping us apart.

Liora is shaking as she fists what remains of the clothing covering me, pulling me closer, deeper, her breath ragged, her body fever-hot against mine. Her magic hums between us, a raw, electric thing, and my own power answers it, twisting around her, threading into her like it belongs there.

I growl against her lips, because it does.

She belongs to me.

Not as a curse. Not as a mistake.

She is mine.

I lift her without thinking, gripping her thighs, forcing her legs around my waist. She gasps, her nails scraping against my shoulders as I slam her against the nearest stone wall. Her breath hitches, her back arching, pressing into me, and I feel her through the thin scraps of fabric still clinging to our bodies.

"Say it," I breathe against her throat, my lips trailing fire along her skin.

Her fingers tangle into my hair, tugging me back to her lips, her eyes blazing as she pants against me.

"I'm yours," she whispers.

Something inside me snaps.

I drag my fangs along her jaw, down to her throat, my breath hot against her pulse.

"Say it again."

Her hips shift against mine, and I nearly lose it.

"I. Am. Yours," she gasps.

And then I tear her clothes apart.

She lets out a ragged moan as I drag my mouth down her throat, over her collarbone, my hands mapping every inch of her bare skin. She is warmth, and fire, and life, and gods, I need her.

She yanks at the fabric covering me, frustrated, desperate, and I let her rip it from my body, her hands roaming over my chest, my shoulders, like she needs to memorize me.

"You're too clothed," she mutters breathlessly.

My hands are rough as they tear away the last barriers between us, her pussy slick and ready, my cock hard and straining against my thigh.

She arches into me, a desperate whimper escaping her lips as I claim her mouth, biting and sucking until she's breathless.

"Dain! Oh... Dain," she writhes in my arms, moving as if she wants me to fuck her hard.

I kiss her lips, silencing her moans. My fingers dig into her hips as I yank her closer, aligning us just right before I thrust into her, hard and unrelenting. She cries out, her nails scraping down my back, but I don't stop. I can't.

My mind's way wired, way too charged and eaten by carnal desire that all I think about is fucking her and making her mine.

“Liora... finally!” I groan, pounding inside her.

Her pussy clenches around me, hot and tight, and I groan, my cock throbbing as I push deeper, harder. She's writhing beneath me, her moans music to my ears.

“Gods!” I groan, my back arching as I try to hit deeper. Her screams resonate with my moans as I fuck her harder. “Yes!”

I pull out just enough to flip her onto her stomach, her ass in the air, and she doesn't resist. Liora knows what's coming.

I almost fly off the ground as I raise her, my wings opening wide as I brace harder.

“Oh, goodness!” Liora screams, magic swirling around her, helping her take my everything. My power. My hardness. All of me.

My cock slams into her again, hitting the spot that makes her convulse and orgasm. “Dain!”

I watch her face contort in pleasure and her honey gush out of her like a river. My hips even more faster, each thrust is brutal, all consuming, and she takes it all, her cries growing louder, more desperate.

Her pussy's dripping, and her eyes roll back. She's so close to the zenith again.

But I'm not letting her come. Not again.

I slow my pace, just enough to drive her mad, and she whimpers, her body trembling.

"Please," she begs, and I kiss, leaning down to whisper in her ear.

"Come with me, Liora."

She moans, nodding, and I finally give in, my hand reaching around to stroke her clit in time with my thrusts. It doesn't take long. She screams as she comes again, her pussy clamping down on me, and I follow her over the edge, my cock pulsing as I fill her.

When it's over, she collapses beneath me, breathless and spent. I pull her close, my lips brushing her ear once more.

"I love you," I say.

She gazes at me, full of devotion and love I can't possibly comprehend. My heart aches for what Liora did for me.

I make her mine, over and over again, until the only name she can remember is mine.

Until the past doesn't matter. Until there is no Amara, no artifact, no prophecy or war—just Liora and me.

She is here.

She is alive.

I will never let her go.

52

LIORA

My life has changed, my whole world.

Not in the way the universe shifts when war ends, or when rulers fall, or when new gods rise. No, this change is quieter, softer, a shift measured in breaths, in touches, in the way Dain and I wake up wrapped around each other with no enemies left to fight.

Two weeks have passed since we burned everything down and built something new from the ashes.

Our home is deep in the forest, nestled between the bones of an ancient ruin overtaken by nature. Towering trees weave a protective canopy overhead, their leaves whispering secrets to the wind. The walls of our home are stone, reinforced with wood Dain cut himself, shaped by his claws, his strength. I wove magic through the foundation, not as a weapon, but as protection, a warding spell to keep us hidden from those who would call us abominations.

A Purna and a Gargoyle.

Neither of us belong to our people anymore. Neither of us care.

I step outside onto the worn wooden steps, letting the sun bathe my skin in warmth. The scent of damp earth and fresh pine lingers in the air, mingling with the faint, smoky remnants of last night's fire. Somewhere in the distance, a river rushes over

smooth stones, feeding into the small pool we sometimes bathe in together.

My lips curve. That memory is a dangerous one.

I look down at my hands, at the faint glow beneath my skin. My magic no longer feels like a cage, no longer sings with the voices of the past. The artifact is gone, its grip severed. I am free.

A rustle of wings, a shift in the wind.

He's there.

Dain lands beside me, his massive wings stirring the dust, his presence an anchor, a force, something I could never outrun even if I tried.

I never want to again.

His golden eyes lock onto me, slow and deliberate, like he's memorizing me all over again. He does that often, just stares, as if he's trying to make sense of the fact that we survived, that we're here, that we aren't fighting anymore.

Or maybe he is fighting. Fighting the need to devour me every time we're in the same space.

I smirk. "Are you just going to watch me all morning, or?—?"

He's in front of me before I can finish, his clawed hands caging me in, gripping the wooden post behind me. Trapping me.

My breath hitches, my pulse hammering.

His voice is a low, dangerous growl. “Do you have a problem with the way I look at you, Purna?”

His breath is warm against my skin, his lips a whisper away from my throat. He’s teasing me. He’s baiting me.

I let him.

I trail my fingers over the ridges of his chest, tracing the scars, the battle wounds, the lines of a body built for war but softened by me. He shudders, his wings twitching at the contact.

“I like it,” I murmur. “I like it when you watch me.”

A deep, rumbling sound escapes him, something between approval and hunger.

“I should’ve marked you the moment you returned to me,” he breathes, his lips grazing my jaw. “I should’ve claimed you so that every creature in this cursed world knew exactly who you belong to.”

Heat pulses low in my stomach.

“You already did,” I whisper.

He freezes.

Slowly, he pulls back.

Dain doesn’t often hesitate. He is a creature of instinct, of violence and desire, a being who acts before he thinks. But now...



Now, he's thinking.

A storm brews in his gaze, something weighty, something final, and I realize whatever he is about to say, it matters.

He releases a slow breath, tilting his head, studying me like he's about to jump off a ledge and isn't sure if I'll follow.

"Be my mate."

I blink, my lips parting. My heart stops, stumbles, races.

Dain's jaw clenches, but his eyes burn with certainty, with possession. Not just any possession. Ours. A choice, a claim, a bond that can never be severed again.

"We're already bonded," I whisper, searching his expression.

"Yes." His voice is gravel, raw edges and quiet devotion. "But I want you to choose it." He tightens his grip around my wrist, rubbing his thumb against my pulse point. Steady. Strong. "I want to bind you to me in the old ways, not just by fate, not just by magic—but by choice."

The ritual.

It's more than a bond. More than a vow. It's forever. It's a promise written into blood, sealed in spirit, eternal.

A mate in the truest sense.

My chest tightens.

Not with fear. Not with uncertainty.

But with something deeper.

I step closer, pressing my palm against his heart, feeling the way it hammers beneath my touch. “You’re sure?” I whisper.

His golden eyes darken, his hand curling around the nape of my neck, tilting my face up to his. “There has never been anything in my life I’ve been more certain of.”

Something inside me breaks apart, reforms, becomes something new.

I have spent so many lifetimes running, breaking, shattering beneath what I was supposed to be. And yet, here he is, standing before me, offering me something no one ever has.

A choice.

A home.

A future.

A mate.

A slow, trembling smile spreads across my lips.

“Yes,” I whisper.

His expression shifts, not shock, not surprise, but relief, a deep, growling satisfaction that rumbles through his chest as he grips my face in both hands and devours me whole.

His lips crash into mine, desperate, hungry, full of a promise that will never break.

I will be his. For all eternity.

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 3:59 am*

The night is silent, the kind of silence that hums with power, thick with something ancient and unchanging. The forest breathes around us, the trees bending slightly under the wind, bearing witness to what we are about to do. Above us, the moon hangs full, casting a glow over the clearing, making the world feel smaller, intimate, only ours.

This is it.

Dain stands before me, his golden eyes molten under the silver light, his wings slightly flared. He is bare, stripped of his armor, his weapons, his defenses. But he is not vulnerable. No—he is more. More than a warrior, more than a king of ruin, more than the vengeful creature I once feared.

He is mine.

Just as I am his.

Neither of us speak for a long moment, the ritual pressing against our skin, thick in the air, in the magic between us.

This bond isn't fate. It isn't destiny forcing our hands.

This is our choice.

He lifts a clawed hand, his fingers grazing my jaw, tilting my face up. His touch is gentle, reverent, but there's something wild in his gaze, something possessive, consuming, raw.

I swallow hard, my pulse thrumming beneath my skin.

“Do you know the words?” His voice is low, husky, filled with something dark and reverent.

I nod.

The words are etched in my soul, just as they are in his.

We stand close, so close our breaths mingle, the heat between us nearly unbearable.

Slowly, I speak first.

“I take you, Dain, as my mate. Bound in blood, bound in spirit, bound in eternity.” My voice doesn’t waver, even as the magic starts to stir, wrapping around us like invisible chains, sinking into our skin.

His eyes darken, his claws flexing, his chest rising and falling with slow, measured breaths.

His turn.

“I take you, Liora, as my mate. Bound in blood, bound in spirit, bound in eternity.”

The air shudders.

The magic around us tightens, holding us in place, branding the words onto our very beings. The bond ignites, no longer severed, no longer forced, no longer bound by fate but by choice.

I feel it thread through me, sinking into my marrows, into the very breath I take. It isn’t suffocating, isn’t a cage, it’s comfort, strength, the certainty that I will never be

alone again.

Dain exhales sharply, his forehead pressing against mine. His hands grip my waist, trembling, and I can feel it, the control he's barely holding onto, the wildfire beneath his skin, waiting to consume.

"Forever," he breathes, his lips brushing against my cheek, my jaw, my throat. "Say it."

I shudder, my fingers curling into his shoulders, dragging my nails over his skin, marking him as he has always marked me.

"Forever," I whisper.

His restraint snaps.

Dain takes me to the ground, pinning me beneath him, his body heat and muscle and need, his hands sliding up my thighs, parting them, his mouth claiming mine in a kiss that is more than hunger, more than desperation, it's a vow.

His lips sear me, his teeth scrape along my bottom lip, his tongue demanding entry, demanding submission.

I give it.

His cock presses against my slick entrance, the tip teasing my pussy, already throbbing with need. I whimper, my hips lifting instinctively, begging for him to fill me, to take me completely.

"Please, my mate..." I beg, wanting him to give his everything to me.

Dain doesn't make me wait. With a single, deliberate thrust, he sheathes himself

inside me, stretching me, claiming me in one swift motion. I cry out, the sensation overwhelming, a perfect blend of pleasure and pain, of fullness and fire.

“Oh, gods!” he moans, his body arching as he gazes into my eyes.

His growl vibrates through me, a feral sound that sends shivers down my spine. He pulls back slowly, almost entirely, before slamming into me again, harder this time, deeper.

“Yes!” I scream, my legs shaking from the impact, and my nerves fraying at the edges.

My pussy clenches around him, desperate to keep him close, to feel every inch of him as he moves. His rhythm is relentless, each thrust driving me further into the earth, each stroke igniting something primal within me.

“Liora,” he snarls, his voice rough, possessive, as his fangs graze the curve of my neck. His claws dig into my hip, holding me in place as he fucks me with a ferocity that leaves me breathless.

I can feel the bond between us burning brighter, hotter, as if his every movement is searing his mark into my very soul.

My magic flares, and I connect deeper into him, sealing the bond further. Oh. It’s beautiful as colors and emotions explode around me.

My hands claw at his back, my nails leaving trails of red as I cling to him, my body trembling with the force of his passion. His lips find mine, silencing my moans with a kiss that’s as demanding as his cock, as consuming as the fire building low in my belly. I can feel it—the tension coiling tighter, tighter, until I’m certain I’ll shatter.

“Dain, please,” I beg, my voice breaking as I teeter on the edge. He growls again, his

pace quickening, his cock hitting that spot inside me that makes my vision blur.

“You feel so good,” he groans, licking my nipples and fondling my breasts lovingly.

“Let’s come together.”

I choke an ascent, my throat too sore to answer.

My pussy tightens around him, my climax crashing over me like a wave, pulling me under, drowning me in pleasure. He follows me over the edge, his release hot and deep, his roar echoing in my ears as he spills himself inside me.

“My Liora,” he murmurs again, his voice softer now, but no less certain.

Without a doubt, I am too.

We’re bound.

Whole. Forever.

When it’s over, when I am spent and he is sated, when the night is quiet again and the magic has settled, I lay in his arms, my body a living brand of his touch, his claim, his love.

His hand rests over my stomach, fingers tracing lazy, possessive circles.

I turn my head, finding his gaze. “It’s done,” I whisper.

His lips curve into something dark, something satisfied, something utterly unrepentant.

“It only just begun.”



I laugh, breathless, exhausted, content.

Dain leans in, brushing his lips over mine, slow and tender, a promise of forever.

And in his arms, I am home.