



Monster's Pretty Bride

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Category: Fantasy

Description: They offered me a bride. But I know a trap when I see one.

Eryss is beautiful, defiant... and sworn to end me.

But every time she looks at me, something fractures.

And for the first time in centuries

I hesitate to kill.

She should fear me.

Instead, she challenges me.

She pushes her limits and waits for me to snap.

But when I finally do

It wont be to kill.

It will be to claim.

A war is coming.

A choice needs to be made.

Are we each others ruin?

Or our only salvation?

Read on for a heart stopping enemies to lovers arranged marriage dark fantasy romance between a true monster and the witch that will free him with love. HEA guaranteed!

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ERYSS

The white fabric clings to my skin like a death shroud, whisper-light, deceptively fragile. It pools around my feet in a mockery of purity, a silk-and-lace noose cinched at my waist. The purna call it a bridal gown. I call it a funeral dress. Mine, or his? That's yet to be decided.

The heavy weight of the dark elves' stares presses against me, their slitted eyes glittering with amusement, hunger. They stand in perfect, rigid formation, draped in their obsidian leathers, silvered armor glinting under the dying sun. Watching. Waiting. As if this moment, this exchange, is nothing more than a business deal.

Which, of course, it is.

A peace offering. A gift wrapped in satin, delivered straight into the hands of a beast.

I keep my spine straight, my chin high, even as the ground beneath me radiates unnatural heat. Protheka's cursed veins pulsing with magic too ancient, too deep, for mortals to touch without consequence. Sweat beads at the base of my throat, slipping between my collarbones, slow, insidious. The purna priest beside me murmurs words of devotion, of unity, of bonds forged in peace, but the lies slither from his lips like poison, thick with the weight of treachery.

I'm not here for unity.

I am here to kill a monster.

A hush spreads through the assembly, rippling outward like a blade slicing through silk.

They are coming.

The first thing I hear is the scrape of talons against stone, sharp and deliberate. The rhythmic beat of massive wings follows, sending gusts of wind laced with crushed rock and charred earth spiraling through the air. Then, the smell of something metallic, electric, raw power coiled, waiting to be unleashed.

The gargoyles land in unison, their hulking forms casting monstrous shadows against the cliffs. Towering figures carved from obsidian and fire, their eyes glowing like smoldering embers. But one stands apart, his presence swallowing the space between us, bending the air around him.

Naranus.

Even without looking, I feel him, an ancient thing, wrong and terrifying, molded from stone and sin.

He steps forward, slow, predatory. He moves like a king who has never been forced to bow, like a warlord whose enemies have long since turned to dust beneath his feet. The air around him crackles, laced with power that doesn't sit right, as if it's constantly trying to reshape itself. His skin is like dark slate, ridged with jagged fractures, seems to shift in the dying light, flickering between flesh and something harder. Something unbreakable.

His eyes settle on me.

Molten gold, wicked and knowing.

A chill slips down my spine, sharp as a dagger's edge. Not from fear. No, fear would be too easy. This is something far more dangerous.

Recognition.

As if he's seen me before. As if he already knows exactly what I am, what I've come here to do.

I grip the folds of my dress tighter, forcing my shoulders back, forcing my expression into something unreadable. He can't suspect.

Naranus halts mere steps away, the heat rolling off him in waves. Up close, the details sharpen, the rough texture of his skin where stone battles flesh, the faint glow of his pulse beneath the fractures of his collarbones. His wings flex slightly before settling, massive and jagged, like living obsidian poised to strike.

The priest begins speaking again, droning on about the sacred duty of the peace bride, the unity between our people, the great sacrifice of our leaders to ensure stability between the purna, the dark elves, and the gargoyles. Lies.

Naranus lets him speak.

When the final words echo into silence, he does something unexpected.

He laughs.

A slow, deliberate sound, rich with something I can't figure out. It slithers over my skin, molten, wicked.

His gaze sweeps over me, slow, unhurried, proprietary. Measuring.

“You expect me to believe this is an offering of peace?” His voice is a low growl, rasping against my bones like stone grating over stone. His talons twitch at his sides, a flicker of something dark, restless. “A fragile little thing in white, sent to my gates like a lamb to the slaughter?”

The purna priest stiffens. “She is Eryss, your bride, Lord Naranus. A token of our devotion to?—”

“Devotion?” His wings shift, restless. “Do not insult my intelligence.” His focus never wavers, locked onto me, burning through me. “Tell me, bride. Do you tremble behind those wide eyes? Do you pray for salvation?”

I meet his stare and do something that makes the priest beside me gasp.

I smile.

“No,” I say, voice smooth as polished steel. “I do not pray. And I do not tremble.”

Something shifts in his expression. Just a flicker. A pulse of intrigue, wicked and lingering. Then, in a single breath, he moves.

One second he stands before me, the next, his hand grips my chin, tilting my face up toward his. Claws scrape against my jaw, light, teasing. Dangerous.

My heart slams against my ribcage. The moment stretches, taut as a drawn bowstring.

His breath fans against my skin, carrying the smell of charred embers and something headier, something dark. “A liar,” he murmurs, thumb pressing just beneath my lips. “Or a fool.”

The priest starts to object, but Naranus lifts his other hand, and the dark elves stiffen, weapons tightening at their sides. A silent warning.

I hold my ground. “And what does that make you?”

His lips curl. “Curious.”

Before I can react, his grip shifts, sliding lower, wrapping around the base of my throat. Not tight, not yet. Just enough to remind me who holds the leash.

But I don’t falter. I let the moment stretch. Let him look. Let him search for the fear he expects to find.

He won’t find it.

Naranus’s expression darkens, molten eyes flickering. His grip tightens, just slightly. “A purna with no fear. Strange.”

I breathe slow, measured. “A gargoyle with no mercy. Expected.”

His claws flex, and for one sharp second, I wonder if he will squeeze. If he will crush me and end this farce before it begins.

But instead, he releases me. Steps back. And without looking away, he speaks.

“The deal is struck.”

The words settle like a death sentence.

The priest exhales, relieved. The dark elves shift, eager to leave.

And Naranus watches me as if I am a puzzle he intends to take apart, piece by piece.

I breathe in deeply, ignoring the way my pulse thrums, the way the ghost of his grip lingers against my skin.

This is only the beginning.

One day, I will slit his throat and end him.

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NARANUS

She follows.

Her steps are measured, steady, though the ground beneath her feet was not made for creatures like her. The stone bridge twists up the cliffs, jagged and unforgiving, the path barely wide enough to allow the dark elves' entourage to trail behind. But she doesn't falter, doesn't glance back at them for assurance. She moves as if she belongs here. As if she isn't walking into the lion's den with a lamb's throat.

I watch her from above, wings tucked tight against my back. My soldiers flank the cliffs, silent shadows perched along the edges, waiting. Waiting for her to misstep. Waiting for the deception to slip from that carefully held face.

But the woman in white does not stumble. What was she called again? Eryss?

The wind howls through the gorge below, carrying the stench of sulfur and old magic. The fortress rises behind me, a monolith carved from the core of the earth, its stone ridges worn smooth by time and war. The bastion of my people. The last stronghold of the cursed.

This slip of a creature is to be its queen?

The thought stirs something close to amusement.

I step forward as she crests the bridge, and the priest trailing her stiffens. His thin, reedy voice quivers through the dead heat. “The peace bride, as promised, Lord Naranus.”

He is careful not to meet my eyes. Cowards always are.

She, however, is not. She stared at me earlier, as well. I like it.

Storm-colored irises lift to meet mine, cool as a dagger’s kiss. They do not tremble. Do not waver. The same defiant fire from the exchange ground still simmers there, barely contained beneath the veil of her expression.

Good.

A lamb would not last long in my house.

My gaze drifts lower, past the delicate curve of her collarbones to where the dress clings indecently to her form. The heat of the desert has dampened the fabric, sweat pooling between the valley of her breasts, glistening along the line of her throat.

The dark elves dress their offerings like whores.

I drag my focus back to her face. “Remove the dress.”

The priest jolts as if I’ve struck him.

A muscle shifts in her jaw.

“No.”

The word hums between us, tension strung taut as a bowstring.

The priest sputters, “L-Lord Naranus, this is a?—”

I lift a hand, silencing him. “Did I ask you?”

His mouth clamps shut.

She remains unmoving, shoulders drawn back, chin tilted. A soldier trained to withstand intimidation.

Or a woman who has nothing left to fear.

I take a single step closer, lowering my voice. “You walk into my domain as my bride, yet you refuse my command?”

Her breath is steady. “A command meant to humiliate is not one worth obeying.”

A flicker of heat licks through my chest, curling tight in my gut.

Defiant little thing.

The priest dares another step forward. “Lord Naranus, please. The peace?—”

I snarl, baring my fangs. “There is no peace.”

He stumbles back, clutching his ceremonial staff.

The truth is an iron weight between us. There was never peace, never a union forged in sincerity. This woman stands before me because the purna and the dark elves wish to see my throat slit open while my own kin, fractured and desperate, watch from the shadows, waiting for their chance to strike.

The woman at the center of it all stares at me like she already knows this.

Not yet an enemy. Not yet an ally.

I turn without another word, the movement sending a shift of heat through my wings.
“Follow.”

She hesitates only a moment before stepping into the stronghold behind me.

The stone halls are dark, cool, a stark contrast to the brutal sun outside. Faint lines of molten light trace along the walls, illuminating the ancient sigils that pulse with my people’s magic. The fortress was built for creatures like me, towering ceilings, vast chambers, jagged edges carved into every doorway to ward against intruders. To humans, it must seem like the throat of a beast waiting to swallow them whole.

She does not ask where I’m taking her.

A test.

She passes.

The guards that line the halls do not bow as I pass. They stand like statues, eyes forward, hands gripping their weapons. Their silence speaks louder than words. The bride’s arrival will not be celebrated.

She will find no allies here.

I stop before a heavy stone archway, the doors flanked by twin braziers burning low with charred embers. I gesture inside.

She does not move.

“This is your chamber,” I tell her.

Eryss tilts her head slightly. “Not yours?”

A slow, indulgent smirk pulls at my mouth. “Disappointed?”

Her gaze flickers down my chest, past the ridged stone fractures cutting through my skin. She meets my eyes again, unfazed. “No.”

I chuckle, low and rough. “Liar.”

The doors swing open, revealing a vast room draped in deep black and crimson, the furs and silks stark against the dark stone. A bed fit for a king looms at the center, its heavy wooden posts carved with ancient sigils meant to bind, to claim. The smell of embers lingers in the air, woven with something darker.

I watch her take it all in, gaze lingering on the runes carved into the headboard. She does not ask what they mean.

Another test.

Another pass.

“You will remain here,” I tell her. “You will not leave without my permission.”

She lifts her chin. “A prisoner, then.”

The word curls through the space between us, rich with challenge.

I step forward, watching the way her breath hitches ever so slightly, the way her fingers tighten at her sides. “You are whatever I decide you to be.”

A flash of something dark flickers in those storm-colored eyes. Not fear.

Amusement.

“You mistake me for a woman who bends easily,” she murmurs.

I exhale a slow, dangerous breath. “You mistake me for a man who has patience.”

Her lips press together, but I catch it, the briefest flicker of a smirk.

Defiant little thing.

I move, close enough so she can feel the heat radiating from my skin. Closer so she can see the faint glow of molten cracks splintering along my chest. “Rest, bride. You’ll need your strength.”

She doesn’t ask what for.

She passed again.

I turn, striding from the room, the heavy doors slamming shut behind me.

She will fight.

She will resist.

I want her to.

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ERYSS

The walls breathe.

Not in the way flesh does, not with lungs or warmth, but with something deeper, an exhalation of stone, an ancient pulse that thrums beneath my bare feet. The fortress isn't dead, nor is it truly alive. It exists somewhere between, its bones fused with the lingering magic of its cursed inhabitants.

Now, I am caged within it.

The door slammed shut behind Naranus hours ago, but I still feel the finality of it rattling in my chest. The silence left in his wake stretches long, coiling around me like a beast waiting to sink its teeth into my throat.

I drag my fingertips along the jagged carvings lining the chamber's walls, tracing the unreadable symbols cut deep into the stone. The language of his kind. The sigils hum beneath my touch, faint and electric, like a whisper beneath my skin.

Magic.

Not mine.

I exhale through my teeth and step away, surveying the space. The chamber is vast, built to house something larger than a human body. The bed, monstrous in size,

sprawls in the center, draped in dark furs that hold the faintest metallic tang of something primal. A balcony juts out past a set of heavy doors, its arched entrance framed with gnarled obsidian columns. The wind howls through it, carrying the stench of scorched rock and the distant smolder of the forge below.

I tilt my head.

Chains dangle from the ceiling, thick as my wrist, anchored into the stone beams like relics of an uglier history. The metal gleams dully in the low light, worn smooth by time and use.

I trace their length with my gaze, following the path of their descent, the way they drape across the walls, the bedposts, the bolted rings in the floor. The king size bed.

A message, silent and damning.

This room was made for something other than comfort.

A chill brushes my skin, and I force myself to move, to take stock of the exits. The doors leading into the hall remain sealed, locked from the outside. The balcony is too high, the drop unforgiving. And even if I could scale the wall, I'd never make it past the sentries perched along the ridges.

Not without my magic.

I swallow back frustration and turn my focus elsewhere. My hand trails along the heavy wooden dresser, finding no weapons, no tools. Just cloth, thick, soft garments folded with meticulous precision. The realization prickles at something unwelcome.

This room is meant to keep me. Not break me.

I shake the thought loose and move toward the balcony, shoving the doors open. The wind rushes past, tangling in my hair, licking cool against my fevered skin. My pulse steadies. Below, the stronghold sprawls wide, its structures forged from the cliffs themselves, as if the land had swallowed a city and spat it back out as something terrible and unyielding.

I grip the railing, watching.

Gargoyles move through the stone walkways, their bodies shifting between flesh and rock, their wings flicking in agitation as they speak in hushed tones. No laughter, no idle conversations. Only watchful eyes, hunched shoulders, and the occasional scrape of claws against the ground.

Unease thickens in my chest.

These creatures do not revel in victory. They do not celebrate their supposed triumph in securing a bride for their lord.

They do not look like conquerors.

They look like men waiting for the blade to drop.

I press my lips together.

The purna told us the gargoyles were monstrous. Brutal. Bloodthirsty. That Naranus ruled them through fear and strength alone, that they would sooner tear out their own throats than submit to another's rule.

But this?

This looks like a kingdom on the brink of collapse.

Movement catches my eye.

I shift my gaze toward the western ledge, where a figure stands near the boundary of a crumbling terrace. Taller than the others. Sharper. Firelight from the forge below flickers across his skin, illuminating the jagged fractures cutting across his back, his wings half-furled, shifting against the wind.

Naranus.

I go still.

He hasn't moved in minutes, hasn't acknowledged the soldiers who pass him by with cautious glances. He stands rigid, hands braced on the stone railing, his focus locked on something unseen in the distance.

The tension in his body isn't the easy, deliberate kind of a predator waiting to strike.

It's something else.

Something brittle.

His claws dig into the stone, cracking the surface. A slow inhale flares his nostrils, his wings twitching before settling again.

The sight roots me in place, breath held tight in my throat. He does not turn. Does not sense me watching.

He is alone.

The realization unsettles me more than it should.

I shift away from the railing, retreating back into the chamber, closing the balcony doors behind me. My pulse is an uneven rhythm, a sharp counter to the silence pressing in around me.

I pace.

Studying him will be difficult. He is not predictable in the way the purna described. There is no clear weakness, no single fault to exploit. He is not merely cruel or power-hungry.

He is something worse.

Unstable.

A creature unraveling at the edges, barely held together by whatever magic still thrums beneath his skin.

My fingers twitch at my sides.

This will require patience. Precision. I will have to stay close, wait for the cracks to widen, for the right moment to strike.

A breath shudders through my lungs, and I force my hands to still.

He is not the only one who can wait.

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NARANUS

The sun hangs low, bleeding against the horizon, casting deep gashes of crimson and gold across the training grounds. The sand beneath my feet is hot, scorched by the lingering heat of the day, the smell of charred earth clinging to the wind.

Eryss stands in the center of the arena, her gown stripped away, replaced by a fitted tunic and tight leathers meant for warriors, not brides.

Good.

The circle of my kin watches in silence, their hulking forms perched along the jagged edges of the stone ledges. Their expressions unreadable, their judgment sharp. They are waiting. Expecting weakness. Expecting the purna to crumble beneath my hand.

I have given them little reason to think otherwise.

But the woman before me is no lamb.

She lifts her chin as I prowl forward, the tilt of her head a silent challenge. No fear lingers in those storm-gray eyes, no hesitation in the way her stance settles into something firm, balanced.

She will break before she bows.

The thought rakes through me, unsettling in a way I do not care to name.

I roll my shoulders, letting my wings shift and flex before settling. “You claim to be more than a prisoner,” I murmur, circling her slowly. The heat between us thickens, tension winding tight, coiling sharp. “Prove it.”

She does not speak.

Does not flinch.

The blade at my hip hums as I draw it, the curved steel whispering against the sheath, the weight of it familiar in my grip. I toss it at her feet, watching as she glances down, as her fingers curl instinctively.

A moment. A hesitation.

She is unarmed.

She is trained.

But her magic remains locked beneath purna chains, sealed by the hands of those who sent her here to die.

I step back, folding my arms. “Pick it up.”

Her gaze flicks to mine, calculating. Searching for the trap.

She finds none.

Slowly, she crouches, fingers wrapping around the hilt. The blade is too large for her, a weapon made for something stronger, heavier. But she does not waver beneath its

weight. She tests the balance, the sharpness, the shift of it in her grip.

She has held a blade before.

A smirk tugs at the corner of my mouth. “Try not to embarrass yourself.”

The words are still leaving my lips when she lunges.

She moves fast. Faster than I expected.

The steel arcs toward me, a silver blur in the dying light. I sidestep, angling my body just out of reach, watching the way she adjusts, recalibrates. Her footwork is light, practiced. She pivots smoothly, dragging the blade in a sweeping strike meant to force me back.

I let her have the movement.

Let her think she has control. So I can strike

The moment she commits to the swing, I step into her guard, gripping her wrist. She gasps, jerking against me, but I twist sharply, forcing the blade from her grasp. It clatters against the sand.

I expect her to retreat. To falter.

She does neither.

Instead, she uses the shift of momentum to kick out, aiming for my ribs.

The impact is solid. Not strong enough to break, but enough to make me react. My grip on her wrist loosens, and she wrenches herself free, staggering back, chest rising

and falling with sharp, measured breaths.

The arena is silent.

I straighten, rolling my jaw, letting the sting settle where her boot connected.

Interesting.

I swipe a thumb along my bottom lip. “Not bad.”

She exhales sharply. “Not finished.”

Something dark and hungry curls low in my gut.

She lunges again.

I let her come. Let her reach for the weapon at my side.

But this time, I do not allow her to land a strike.

I move before she can react, my arm shooting out, catching her mid-motion. She chokes as I pull her in, slamming her against my chest, wings flaring wide, casting us in shadow. My hand fists in her hair, yanking her head back, exposing her throat.

Her pulse thrums wildly beneath my grip.

Heat radiates from her skin, her breath warm against my jaw.

I lean in enough that she can feel the way my chest rises against hers, the way my fingers tighten against her scalp. “If you had your magic,” I murmur, low, dangerous, “you would have burned me alive by now, wouldn’t you?”

She says nothing.

But the answer is there, written in the sharpness of her breath, the way her body goes rigid beneath my hold.

A slow, indulgent smirk curls across my lips.

Good.

I release her abruptly, shoving her back. She stumbles, catching herself, eyes blazing with something sharp-edged and wild.

Before she can speak, a tremor rakes through me, sudden and brutal.

I snarl, staggering back, my hands flying to my chest as the fractures beneath my skin split wider, molten heat flaring along my ribs. A curse tears from my throat as my body betrays me, the magic snarling in protest, fighting to unmake me from the inside out.

Not in front of them.

The stone cracks further, creeping up my throat, across my jaw. The whispers in my bones grow louder, the curse shifting, unraveling.

Eryss steps forward, hesitation flickering across her features.

I force myself back. “Stay.”

The word is guttural, barely understandable.

I turn sharply, striding away from the arena, away from the watchful gazes that will

only see weakness in the cracks beneath my skin.

Behind me, the woman watches.

She does not follow.

She does not kneel.

Damn me, but I think I almost respect her for it.

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ERYSS

The stronghold breathes around me.

Not the way a living thing does, not with lungs and heartbeat, but with stone shifting, with the hum of something ancient curling through the walls. The fortress pulses with magic buried so deep in its bones that even now, creeping through its corridors with the enchanted dagger pressed against my thigh, I feel it pressing against my skin.

I shouldn't be here.

The thought is useless.

I am already moving, bare feet silent against the cold floor, my body pressed to the shadows. My pulse thrums, each measured step keeping time with the flickering torches that line the hallway. The entrance to Naranus's chambers looms ahead, massive iron doors marked with sigils I don't recognize. The runes glow faintly, a deep embered red, as if carved from molten rock.

A warning. Or a challenge.

I exhale through my nose and press forward.

Two guards stand at the threshold, their enormous, stone-blooded bodies cast in sharp relief by the firelight. Their wings are folded tight against their backs, tails flicking

with restless energy. They don't speak. They barely move. But their presence is a barricade, a reminder that no one enters the chambers of their warlord without consequence.

My hold on the dagger's hilt tightens, and I lower myself into a crouch, pressing my back against the cold stone.

I wait.

A flicker of movement, one of the guards shifts, cracking his neck, muttering something under his breath. The other exhales sharply, wings twitching. They are growing restless.

Good.

I reach into the band at my hip and retrieve the vial tucked against my waist. The liquid inside swirls, dark and thick as ink, its smell sharp even through the glass. It's not a weapon, not in the traditional sense. But it's useful.

I hurl it against the wall behind them.

The vial shatters. The contents splatter.

The effect is instant.

The smell of burning resin floods the hallway, curling in thick, acrid waves. The guards react immediately, snapping their heads toward the noise, their bodies tensing. One lets out a guttural curse, his face twisting. "What in the?—"

I move before he can finish.

I slip past them, into the chamber beyond, my body a streak of shadow against the threshold.

The doors shut behind me, cutting off the sound of their confusion.

Silence.

The room stretches before me, vast and cavernous, the walls lined with ancient stone carvings, the ceiling lost in darkness. The space is designed for something larger than human comfort. Tapestries hang in thick swathes of crimson and black, their woven sigils stitched in the same script I have yet to decipher. The air is thick, warm and laced with something electric.

At the far end of the chamber, he sleeps.

Or at least, he appears to.

Naranus lies across the massive bed, half turned away, his broad back exposed to the firelight. His wings are partially unfurled, twitching slightly as if some unseen force pulls at them. The lines of his body are rigid even in rest, every muscle carved from tension, his fingers half-curved as though he's prepared to strike even in sleep.

The fractures along his skin glow faintly.

Thin, molten cracks spread along his shoulders, his spine, his arms, pulsing with the same unraveled energy I saw before. The effect is both grotesque and mesmerizing, his flesh fighting itself, caught between stone and something more fragile.

My grip on the dagger tightens.

This is my moment.

He is vulnerable.

This close, I can see the fine edges of his fangs resting against his lower lip, the curve of his throat where the pulse of his life beats slow, steady. I just have to move. Just have to press the blade deep enough to make it count.

A single breath.

A single strike.

My fingers tremble.

The dagger does not move.

I watch as his brows furrow, his jaw tightening as though pain drags him under, even in sleep. A sharp inhale shudders through his chest, his claws flexing against the sheets before curling again.

A sound escapes him.

Low. Rough. Not a growl.

A wince.

Something inside my stomach twists.

This is not how he was meant to look.

I was told he was a monster. A warlord wrapped in blood and cruelty, a creature who would tear through flesh without hesitation, who would revel in the suffering of my kind.

But this thing before me, this ruined god of molten wounds and restless sleep is something else entirely.

Something... broken.

The realization digs its teeth into my chest, violent and unwelcome.

I should strike.

I should slit his throat before my resolve slips further.

Instead, my feet remain planted.

A crack splinters along his shoulder, light spilling through the wound like fire through shattered stone. A hiss curls between his lips, his breathing growing heavier. His body shifts, his wings twitching, his tail flicking against the bed.

His eyes snap open.

Molten gold.

Burning. Watching.

I react instantly, jerking back, my dagger still clutched tight, but he moves faster.

One second, he's lying prone.

The next, I'm slammed against the nearest wall, the impact knocking me out of breath, his clawed hand wrapped tight around my wrist. My dagger clatters to the floor.

His body presses against mine, hot and solid, trapping me with ease. His free hand grips my throat, not squeezing, not yet, but holding, his fingers pressing against my pulse. His breath skates across my jaw, heavy, rough.

I struggle, my nails digging into his wrist, but he doesn't budge.

His voice is a slow, dark rasp. "Trying to kill me in my sleep, little bride?"

My teeth clench.

He lets out a humorless chuckle, the sound curling against my skin, sharp with something unreadable. "And here I thought you had more patience than that."

I shift, my muscles straining against his hold. "Let me go."

His grip tightens just slightly.

His gaze drags over my face, searching. Reading. His fingers twitch against my pulse. "You hesitated."

I go still.

His smirk deepens.

"You had the chance to kill me," he murmurs, voice dropping lower, rough with something I don't want to recognize. "And yet, here we are."

Heat pools in my stomach, wretched and electric. My chest heaves against his. The smell of him, dark, molten, rich with something unearthly, presses against me like an unseen weight.

His eyes darken, something flickering beneath their surface.

Abruptly, he releases me.

I stumble forward, breath ragged, heart hammering.

He steps back, watching, his smirk lingering.

The door creaks open behind me, the soft sound of approaching guards filtering in.

His voice is smooth, indulgent. “Take the bride back to her chamber.”

I stiffen.

The guards move forward, gripping my arms, their hold firm but not cruel.

Naranus watches as I’m pulled away, amusement curling at the edges of his expression.

I bite the inside of my cheek, swallowing the venom rising up my throat.

This was my moment. I wasted it.

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NARANUS

The flames flicker low, casting jagged shadows against the carved walls of the war chamber. The embers shift, glowing deep within the stone brazier, but the fire's warmth does nothing to quell the cold knot coiled inside me.

She tried to kill me. And she hesitated.

I press my palm against the long fissure carved into my chest, tracing the place where my body fought to break apart only hours ago. The fractures are still raw, the glow of molten stone fading beneath my skin, but it is not the pain that lingers, it's the moment just before I woke.

The hesitation in her grip. The way her breath stilled, her dagger poised, yet unmoving.

She should have taken the opportunity.

I should have crushed her throat the second she was within reach.

Instead, I let her go.

I exhale sharply and turn away from the fire, letting my wings settle against my back. The war chamber is empty aside from me, the walls carved with the sigils of a kingdom that once stood unchallenged. Now, the gargoyles whisper in my halls,

doubting the strength of their warlord. The dark elves grin behind their masks, waiting for my ruin.

The purna, their bride still breathes.

The door groans as it swings open behind me. Heavy footsteps. A shift of movement, controlled but deliberate.

I don't turn.

"That was a bold attempt," I murmur, running a clawed hand along the curved edge of the obsidian table. "Though you should have been smarter about it. My guards are not so easy to slip past."

Silence.

Then, the measured click of boots across the stone. "Your guards were distracted," she says smoothly. "You should be concerned."

A slow, wicked smirk graces his lips. "Perhaps I should be impressed instead."

I face her, letting the shadows of the brazier frame her in flickering gold.

Eryss stands tall, unbowed, her hands bound in front of her with iron manacles. The guards did not harm her, though I have no doubt they wanted to. Her tunic is still intact, her leather-clad legs braced firmly apart, her chin lifted with that same quiet defiance.

A lesser creature would cower.

She only looks at me.

"Why did you hesitate?" I ask.

Her gaze sharpens. "Hesitate?"

I step forward, slow, deliberate, watching the way her shoulders remain rigid, her breathing measured.

"With the blade," I continue. "I felt your presence before I opened my eyes. You were close. Close enough to press the dagger to my throat, and yet you didn't."

I stop mere inches from her, the heat of my body coiling between us, the smell of steel and damp stone clinging to her skin.

Eryss lifts her chin. "Would you rather I had?"

The pulse in my neck beats heavier. The gall of her. The audacity.

"I'd rather not be woken from my sleep by an incompetent assassin," I murmur, letting my voice dip lower, rasping against the space between us. "If you're going to try and kill me, little bride, do it properly."

Her lips part, her hands twitch against the iron chains, but she doesn't lower her gaze. "Maybe I will."

I chuckle, dark and slow. "You missed your chance."

She doesn't flinch. "Then I'll make another."

The sheer boldness of it is almost amusing. Almost.

I reach for her, wrapping my fingers around the manacles, dragging her wrists up

between us. The iron is cold, heavier than it needs to be, and yet she doesn't pull back.

"If you had magic," I muse, running my thumb along the delicate ridges of the chains, "you would have melted through these bindings already."

Her throat moves as she swallows. "Is that why you haven't killed me?"

I don't answer immediately. I let the question settle, let it burn into the silence between us.

I hold the manacles tightly and yank her forward. She stumbles into me, the full length of her body pressing against mine, the soft inhale that escapes her barely audible over the crackling embers.

Her pulse thrums against my chest.

I lower my mouth to her ear, letting my breath skate across her jaw. "No, little bride. I haven't killed you because I enjoy watching you fight."

She exhales sharply, but she doesn't shove me away.

Instead, her fingers tighten against the chains, her body rigid against my hold.

"You're playing a dangerous game, warlord," she murmurs, her voice steady despite the sharp edge of tension strung between us.

My claws flex against the iron. "And you're foolish enough to play it with me."

Another silence.

Then, she leans up, just slightly, just enough that the movement feels like a challenge.

"I was taught you were nothing more than a beast," she says. "A mindless monster cursed by my kind, doomed to die by my hand."

I release her wrists, stepping back just enough to look down at her fully. "And yet?"

She studies me, gaze tracing the fractures still healing along my arms, the lines of my jaw, the molten glow that still flickers beneath my skin.

"And yet, you're still here."

The words linger, softer than I expect, laced with something sharp.

I turn away before I let them sink deeper.

She will fight me. She will try again.

But she will not break. I find it more to my taste.

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7

ERYSS

The stronghold is restless.

I hear it in the corridors, shifting bodies, muttered curses, the scrape of claws against the walls. Something unsettles the gargoyles, a tension coiling thick in the walls, pressing against my skin like the static before a storm.

It is not because of me.

But I'm certainly a part of it.

I press my back against the cool stone of my chamber, eyes on the heavy door that seals me inside. The manacles are gone, but the cage remains. Even unchained, I am watched.

Even unbound, I am not free.

The thought simmers, slow and hot, as I pace the length of my chamber. I press my palms against the cool stone of the balcony railing, staring down at the fortress below.

The few gargoyle sentries that remain perched along the ridges are watchful, their bodies carved from both flesh and stone, their eyes trained on the horizon.

They are waiting for something.

An attack? Enemies? I'm not sure but there's a shift in power in the atmosphere.

I inhale sharply, the taste of the storm thick on the wind. The tension that lingers in this place is not one of triumph. They are not celebrating their victory, their warlord's dominance over his captive bride. They are bracing for something worse.

I press my hands harder against the railing, the stone unyielding beneath my grip. The realization cuts deeper than I expect.

The enemy I was taught to fear is fighting a war of his own.

And the ones who sent me here never intended for me to leave.

A flicker of movement draws my attention below. The courtyard remains dark, the torches lining the walls burning low, casting enough light to reveal the figures moving toward the training grounds.

Naranus.

I stiffen.

He moves differently than he did earlier. Less controlled. His steps are sharp, his shoulders coiled with a tension that ripples through his wings as they flex and fold against his back. The molten fractures along his arms flicker brighter, a silent warning of magic straining against his will.

He is unraveling.

I need to see how far the damage spreads.

I push away from the railing and slip out the side entrance of my chamber, pressing

into the shadows as I make my way down the winding stone corridors. The halls are mostly empty, the gargoyles who usually stand guard absent. Strange.

The warlord's absence from the stronghold must be intentional.

Something is happening.

I reach the boundary of the training grounds and press myself against the archway, taking in the sight before me.

Naranus stands in the middle of the arena, facing off against another gargoyle, one nearly as large as him, his dark wings half-flared, his stance braced for combat. His challenger's tail flicks once, slow and deliberate. The movement is not one of submission.

This is not a sparring match.

This is a test.

A challenge.

A warning.

The gathered onlookers stand at the edges of the arena, their silence suffocating, their expressions unreadable. They are waiting for blood.

Naranus rolls his shoulders, his head tilting slightly as he regards the challenger before him.

"You doubt me."

The words carry through the stillness, laced with something quiet. Dangerous.

The other gargoyle shifts, his claws flexing. “You have become reckless,” he says. “We all see it. You let a purna slip a blade into your chamber.”

The tension in the air thickens.

A slow smirk pulls at the corner of Naranus’s mouth. “She failed.”

The challenger steps forward. “You let her live.”

Naranus remains motionless, his golden gaze burning, the cracks along his forearms pulsing brighter. “You question my rule.”

A breath of hesitation. “I question whether you are still fit to lead.”

The silence that follows is deadly.

In a single movement, Naranus moves.

He doesn’t lunge, he doesn’t need to. He steps forward, smooth and unhurried, like a predator closing in on prey that already knows it is doomed. His claws extend slightly, his wings shifting just enough to make the challenger brace himself, anticipating an attack that has yet to come.

He stops.

“You challenge me in front of my kin,” he murmurs. “You challenge me because you think I am weak.”

The challenger does not flinch.

Naranus exhales slowly, shaking his head. “You have no idea what weakness looks like.”

Before the other gargoyle can react, Naranus strikes.

The motion is brutal, effortless, his claws lash across the challenger’s chest, stone and flesh splitting open in the same breath. The force of the impact sends the gargoyle skidding back, wings flaring as he struggles to regain his balance. Blood spills onto the sand, dark and thick.

Naranus does not give him time to recover.

He closes the distance again, this time wrapping his hand around the challenger’s throat and slamming him against the stone wall of the arena. The impact cracks through the silence, a sharp exhale of pain escaping his opponent’s lips.

Naranus leans in.

“I let her live,” he murmurs, voice a low rasp, “because she is mine to destroy. Not yours.”

The words sink like a blade in my core.

Mine to destroy.

I swallow, pressing further into the shadows.

The crowd does not cheer. There is no applause, no celebration.

Only silence.

Only the sound of Naranus releasing the broken gargoyle, his body slumping against the stone.

Only the slow, deliberate turn of his head—toward me.

My pulse spikes.

His golden gaze burns into the darkness, unblinking, his lips parting slightly.

He sees me.

He feels me.

My breathing steadies.

I do not step back.

I do not turn away.

I hold his gaze, unflinching, as the rest of the gargoyles shift, their attention dragging toward the hidden alcove where I stand.

Naranus tilts his head, something unreadable flickering behind his molten eyes.

Slowly, deliberately, he turns back to the gathered crowd.

“The next one to question my rule,” he says, his voice even, measured, deadly, “will not walk away from this arena.”

Silence reigns.

Without another word, he steps past the broken gargoyle at his feet, wings unfurling slightly as he strides from the arena, the tension rippling through the gathered ranks in his wake.

He does not look back.

But I feel his challenge in my bones.

He has given me permission to try again.

I will. Somehow, this makes my blood boil, igniting an ember in me.

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8

NARANUS

Something is brewing in the stronghold.

I feel it in the walls, the heavy silence of my kin, the unseen glances pressing against my back as I stalk through the stone corridors. Whispers curl through the dark, hushed voices carrying across the cavernous halls, but none dare to meet my gaze as I pass.

They watched. They saw.

They felt the shift.

They will not speak it aloud, but the truth gnaws at them, the same way it gnaws at me.

She was there.

Watching.

The thought clenches in my chest like a vice. The purna's presence was not accidental. She had followed, crept through my halls, pressed herself into the dark corners of my world, and she did not look away.

Even after I crushed my challenger into the dust.

Even after I made it clear that she is mine to ruin.

The truth slithers beneath my skin, uncomfortable, unwelcome. She should be afraid. She should have recoiled from the violence, from the raw display of dominance. Any sane creature would have.

Instead, she had held my gaze.

Unflinching.

Unbowed.

Now, the embers of something unpredictable smolder between us. There's something about her that makes her undefinable.

I reach my chamber, shoving open the heavy doors, the smell of stone and old magic thick in the air. The flames in the brazier flicker as I enter, casting wild shadows against the walls. The heat of my earlier fight still lingers in my veins, coiled tight in my ribs, but it is not the battle that haunts me now.

It is her.

Her defiance.

Her patience.

The way she watches me, not with fear, but with purpose.

She is waiting.

For another chance to strike.

For another moment of weakness.

A sharp exhale forces its way through my chest, but the sensation that follows is worse. My hands twitch as the fractures along my arms pulse again, the glow seeping through my skin, aching from the inside out.

Unraveling. Splintering.

I drag a clawed hand through my hair, pacing. I should send for the healer. The cracks are deeper than before, spreading along my ribs, creeping toward my throat. The magic does not heal as it once did. It lingers, burns slow, like a beast gnawing its way through my bones.

It is getting worse.

And she saw.

I inhale sharply, pushing the thought aside. I need to focus. The dark elves are watching, the rogue gargoyle factions are waiting for the right moment to move against me, and my own kind doubts my strength. The purna's presence here was never meant to be an offering. She is a blade sent to cut me down.

Yet, the longer she lingers, the less she resembles a weapon and the more she becomes a question.

A knock echoes against the chamber doors.

I turn, my wings shifting, irritation flickering at the edges of my fraying temper.

“Enter.”

The door creaks open, and she steps through.

Not a guard.

Not a messenger.

Her.

I go still.

She's wearing leather and dark fabric that moves with her body, hugging the sharp lines of her frame, and I can't help but run my eyes all over her. Her bare arms are lean with muscle, her shoulders set in that same defiant way, as if daring me to command her to kneel.

The silence stretches, thick and charged, neither of us willing to break it.

I exhale. "You should not be here."

Eryss tilts her head. "No guards stopped me."

I smirk. "That does not mean you are welcome."

A flicker of amusement crosses her features. Or maybe it is something else. Something sharper.

"I watched you tonight." Her voice is smooth, measured, but I hear the edge beneath it. "I watched as you nearly ripped your own man apart."

I arch a brow. "Did it disappoint you?"

Her fingers flex at her sides, but she does not step back. “No.”

I chuckle, low and slow. “And why did you follow me, little bride? Hoping to see me bleed? Or did you come to finish what you started?”

Her expression does not change. “Would you let me?”

I move.

One second I am still, the next, I am on her, slamming her against the stone wall, my claws curling around her throat. Not tight enough to harm. Not tight enough to break.

Just enough to remind her what she stands against.

Her breath shudders out, but she does not struggle.

Instead, her eyes burn into mine, unafraid.

I should squeeze. I should crush.

But I don't.

My grip shifts, dragging lower, along the side of her throat, her collarbone, pressing against the pulse thrumming beneath her skin.

“You think you understand me,” I murmur, voice rough with something I refuse to name. “But you don't.”

Her fingers twitch at her sides. “And you think you understand me?”

A low, dangerous chuckle rumbles through my chest. “I understand enough.”

Her lips part, a slow inhale dragging between us. The smell of her fills my lungs, something wild beneath the surface, something restrained only because she forces it to be.

I lean in, my mouth a breath away from her ear.

“You hesitate, little bride,” I whisper. “And that will be your undoing.”

I release her.

Eryss remains pressed against the wall, but she does not look away.

Does not run.

I exhale, stepping back, my body still coiled with restless energy. “Go,” I command. “Before I decide whether you’re worth keeping alive.”

A muscle ticks in her jaw, but she listens.

She turns, striding toward the doors, but just before she crosses the threshold, she pauses.

Without looking back, she murmurs, “You hesitate too.”

I watch the empty space where she stood, my chest still tight, my skin still thrumming where her pulse had raced beneath my fingertips.

She is right. And that is the problem.

9

ERYSS

The world rips apart before I can grasp what's happening.

I'm yanked from the bed, limbs tangled in the sheets, my skull cracking against the hard stone as rough hands seize me. The force of it steals my breath, a strangled sound escaping my lips as I thrash.

Clawed fingers dig into my arms, hauling me upright.

Disoriented. Disarmed.

My body rebels, muscles screaming as I twist, kicking out blindly. My foot connects with something solid, a grunt of irritation, not pain, answers me. A second set of hands clamps around my waist, pinning my arms behind my back as I'm dragged toward the open door.

A growl spills from my throat. "Let go of me, you bastards!"

I throw my weight forward, then back, trying to break their hold. It doesn't work. The gargoyles don't budge.

Stronger than stone.

One of them grips my hair, yanking my head back, forcing me to see the smirk

curling his jagged lips. "Still got fight in you, little bride?"

I snap at him, teeth bared like an animal. "Come closer and find out."

He chuckles, but there's no real amusement in it.

They drag me past the threshold, out into the courtyard, where the sun glares down like a molten blade. The shift from shadow to light is blinding. My feet skid against the sand, every muscle bracing as I'm shoved forward into the open arena.

I freeze.

The courtyard is full.

Gargoyles line the perimeter, their massive bodies positioned in a loose semicircle, wings flicking restlessly. Not guards. Not sentries. Warriors.

Training.

My stomach twists, cold realization curling down my spine as my gaze snaps to the center.

Naranus stands among them, arms crossed, golden eyes unreadable as he watches my struggle. He's not surprised to see me like this.

He planned this.

A slow, deliberate smirk tugs at his lips.

"Take a weapon," he commands.

Silence slams into the arena.

The gargoyles shift, their stances tightening. The way they look at me, it's not curiosity. It's hunger.

I straighten, my breath coming hard through my nose. My pulse thrums, heavy and hot, but I force my chin high, refusing to let them see the way my heart slams against my ribs.

The silence stretches.

One of them steps forward. A smaller one.

If you could call any of them small.

His body is leaner, his frame built for speed rather than brute force. His wings tuck in tight, his tail flicking once before stilling. The barest hint of a smirk plays at the edges of his mouth, but his golden eyes gleam with something sharper.

This isn't a test.

It's an execution.

I shift my attention back to Naranus, my fingers curling into fists.

"You did this," I breathe. "This is on you."

His expression doesn't change. "Take a weapon."

The bastard isn't going to let me back out. If I refuse, I will lose before I even begin.

Fine.

I snatch the dagger from the weapons rack, testing its balance in my grip. It's heavier than what I'm used to, the hilt fitted for someone with claws rather than fingers. But it will do.

The smirk on the smaller gargoyle's lips widens.

Then he lunges.

I barely sidestep in time, the rush of wind trailing behind his movement. He's fast. Too fast. The moment I regain my footing, he pivots, sweeping my legs from under me.

The ground slams into my back.

Pain splinters through my skull. I grit my teeth, twisting before he can pin me, bringing the dagger up in a desperate strike.

He catches my wrist.

Catches it. And laughs.

The sound is sharp, mocking, meant to humiliate.

The crowd roars its approval, voices rising like a pack scenting blood. "Beat her down!" one of them snarls. "Break her!"

Rage blisters through me.

I twist, using his hold against him, kicking out hard enough that his grip falters. The

moment his fingers slacken, I drive my elbow into his throat.

He stumbles. Just a fraction. Just enough.

I don't hesitate. I slam the dagger into his side.

The roar that rips from his throat is not one of pain.

It's pleasure.

He's enjoying this.

His tail whips around, striking me across the ribs with enough force to send me sprawling. The impact knocks the wind from my lungs, black spots dancing at the edges of my vision.

The sand is warm beneath me. Too warm.

I roll to my knees, gasping, fighting, refusing to bow.

The voices around us rise.

"She's still up!"

"Make her stay down!"

I brace myself, gripping the dagger tighter, but the moment I push up, a fist slams into my temple. The world shatters.

Pain detonates behind my eyes, my knees buckling before I can stop them. The sand rushes up to meet me, but I never feel the impact.

The last thing I see is him.

Naranus.

Standing above me. Watching.

His gaze unreadable.

Darkness envelops me before I can even curse him.

10

NARANUS

“Take her back to her chamber.”

The command leaves my lips without hesitation, sharp and final.

The crowd is still thrumming with the high of the fight, their voices ringing in my ears as I watch two of my warriors lift her unconscious body from the sand. Eryss sags between them, her limbs limp, her hair spilling like ink over her bruised shoulders.

Blood stains the corners of her temple where the final strike landed, trailing in a slow, sluggish curve down her cheek.

She fought well.

She lost.

She should have stayed down.

I turn away, ignoring the way my skin pulls tight, the way my claws twitch at my sides. This was necessary. They needed to see her break. Needed proof that their warlord did not favor a purna, that she was not an equal, that she was nothing more than a tool meant to serve her purpose and be discarded.

Why does my jaw lock as I watch them drag her away?

Why does my pulse hammer harder with every step I take in the opposite direction?

I exhale, forcing the thoughts down. This is nothing. A moment of weakness. She deserved the pain—earned it with her defiance, her stubbornness. It should not matter to me if she suffered.

It should not matter if she,

The thought frays before it can fully form.

I curse and pivot sharply on my heel.

I take the back corridors, the ones the sentries do not guard, the ones only I use. My wings drag at my sides, restless as I move, my claws flexing as the tension coils tight in my ribs.

This is not about her.

This is about control.

I will not lose control.

Her chamber is dark when I enter.

The bed is untouched. The furs have been thrown back, the stone floors smeared with streaks of blood from where the warriors left her.

She hasn't moved.

Her breathing is slow, shallow. One arm is curled against her ribs, her bruises stark against the golden hue of her skin. The wound at her temple has already begun to clot, but it is ugly, a swollen mark that taunts me more than it should.

I exhale sharply.

“Fix her.”

The healer flinches at the command but does not hesitate, kneeling at her side. He does not question why he was summoned here in secret, why his warlord ordered the purna to be healed rather than left to rot. He knows better than to ask.

I stand at the corner of the room, arms crossed, watching as the healer works. His hands move with practiced ease, grinding herbs into a thick, pungent paste, spreading it carefully over the worst of her wounds. A soft glow pulses from his palms, sealing the cuts along her skin, knitting the bruised flesh together.

She shifts, a slow inhale passing her lips, but she does not wake.

Good.

The healer finishes quickly, the tension in his shoulders evident as he steps back. He bows once before retreating without a word, the heavy door closing behind him.

The chamber is silent.

I should leave.

There is no reason to linger.

My feet do not move.

I stare at her, at the curve of her cheek, at the way her lashes cast shadows against her bruised skin. The tension in my chest coils tighter.

I force myself forward, sinking onto the bed.

She should be nothing. She is nothing.

Yet, my hand lifts before I can stop it.

The backs of my claws skim along her jaw, tracing the line of her cheekbone. She is warm beneath my touch, her pulse steady.

My fingers trail lower, ghosting over the hollow of her throat, the place where I had wrapped my hand around her earlier, where I could have squeezed, could have ended this entire game before it truly began.

But I didn't.

I forced her to fight to prove that I did not care for her.

But here I am. Watching. Waiting. Wanting.

Her lips part slightly, her breath fanning soft against my wrist. A flicker of something unfamiliar stirs in my chest. I yank my hand away, clenching it into a fist.

This is not weakness.

This is not anything.

She is mine to break, mine to destroy.

I cannot seem to let her go.

11

NARANUS

She refuses to eat.

The tray of food sits untouched on the table beside the bed, steam curling into the cold air, the aroma of roasted meat and fresh bread thick enough to make even my patience fray.

She stares at the opposite wall, jaw tight, body wrapped in tense silence.

Defiance, still clinging to her even after she bled for it.

I exhale slowly, flexing my claws, pacing the length of her chamber, every step deliberate.

If she thinks she can starve herself as a final act of control, she is mistaken.

My patience is not infinite.

"Eat." The command is quiet, but it fills the space between us, sinking into the stone like a blade pressed to skin.

She doesn't move.

Not a flinch.

Not a breath of acknowledgment.

My wings flick, slow and calculated, my tail curling against the floor. I should leave. I should let her waste away in her stubbornness, let her body betray her before her mind ever will.

But the memory of last night lingers, of her bruises, her too-slow breathing, the way my fingers had traced the curve of her throat despite every instinct telling me to walk away.

I exhale sharply.

"You're acting like a child," I murmur.

She scoffs, the first reaction she's given me since I entered. "And you're acting like you give a damn."

Something tightens in my chest.

A slow, dangerous smirk curves my lips. "You think I brought you back from that fight just to let you rot?"

She finally looks at me, turning her head just enough for our gazes to lock. Storm-gray eyes burning, unwavering.

She's daring me to do something about it.

Fine. I will.

In a single step, I cross the distance between us, grabbing the tray with one hand and sinking onto the bed beside her with the other. Before she can react, I pin her down,

one massive palm braced against her thigh, my other arm caging her against the mattress.

Her sharp inhale breaks the silence.

Not fear.

Not surprise.

Something else. Something darker.

Something twisting.

I scoop up a piece of the meat with my claws, slow and deliberate. "Open your mouth."

She presses her lips into a firm, unyielding line.

I let out a slow chuckle, lowering myself just enough that my breath skates along her jaw. "You're playing a dangerous game, little bride."

She glares. "And what? You're going to force me?"

A growl rumbles deep in my throat. My free hand tightens on her thigh, pressing down. Not cruel. Not quite. Just enough to feel the tension coil in her muscles, the fight still alive under my grip.

"You're mine to break," I murmur. "Mine to keep breathing. Mine to keep standing."

She doesn't answer. But her pulse betrays her, hammering at the base of her throat.

I bring the food closer, dragging it against her bottom lip, smearing the juice along her mouth. Her throat flexes, a small, barely perceptible swallow, but I see it.

I feel it.

"Eat," I say again, voice thick with something I can't name.

She glares harder. But this time, she parts her lips.

I push the food inside, watching the way she takes it. Watching the way she obeys.

The sight does something violent to me.

She chews slowly, deliberately, refusing to look away, her throat moving as she swallows. Her lips are slick from where the juice smeared, a tiny drop of it clinging to the corner of her mouth.

I lift my thumb, swiping it away.

Her body tenses. And I should stop.

But I don't.

I trace lower, along the curve of her jaw, down the column of her throat. My claws barely graze her skin, slow, deliberate. I can feel her pulse hammering beneath my touch.

"See?" I murmur, lowering my mouth just enough that our noses almost brush. "That wasn't so hard, was it?"

She exhales, her breath warm, her fingers flexing against the sheets as if she wants to

claw me away.

Or pull me closer.

She swallows again, and the motion sends something dark and burning curling through my gut.

She doesn't break the silence. Neither do I.

I don't move. Neither does she.

But I feel it.

The hunger. Not for food.

Not for power. For something else.

Something neither of us should want.

But it's something we can't stop.

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12

ERYSS

N aranus thinks he has me.

Thinks that because I let him feed me, because I lay limp beneath his hands, because I met his golden gaze with something less than fire, I have given up.

Good.

I let him believe it.

Let him believe I am too broken to fight back. But I am not broken.

I am waiting.

Waiting for my chance to strike. But first, I need my dagger.

I push away from the bed, wincing as the movement sends a slow throb of pain down my ribs. The fight may be over, but my body still bears the proof of it. The reminder.

The cost. I reach the door and press my palm against it, testing. Locked.

Of course.

Naranus wouldn't be careless enough to let me just walk out.

But he forgot something.

The balcony.

I step toward it, my bare feet silent against the cold stone. The night wind rushes in, whipping against my skin, licking against my wounds like a cruel reminder.

Below, the fortress stretches wide and unforgiving, the torches burning low, their glow flickering against the jagged stone.

The training grounds lie beyond. That's where they would have taken it.

That's where my dagger will be. Hopefully, they didn't sense the magic in it.

I grip the corner of the balcony and swing one leg over. Then the other.

The drop is steep. The wall slick with ancient wear, the grooves of stone carved more for clawed hands than human fingers.

Still, I move.

Slow. Precise.

The moment I shift my weight downward, the ledge beneath my foot crumbles.

Shit.

I slip, my stomach lurching, my arms scrambling for purchase as my nails scrape against the wall. My muscles scream from the strain, the ground rushing toward me.

I catch myself.

Barely.

My fingers dig into a jagged crack, my legs swinging before I slam my body against the wall, forcing stillness into my limbs.

My breath races in my chest, but I ignore it. Too close. Too fucking close.

I exhale sharply and push forward.

When my feet finally touch solid ground, my knees tremble, but I don't stop. I slip into the shadows, silent, invisible, moving toward the training grounds.

Two sentries guard the entrance, their wings twitching, their claws scraping lazily against the stone.

They aren't paying attention.

Good.

I slip past them, pressing my back to the wall, heart pounding.

The stench of sweat, metal, and scorched earth thickens as I move deeper into the arena, my eyes scanning the weapon racks.

The armory.

That's where they would have...

There.

Half-hidden behind the larger blades, its hilt glinting faintly in the firelight.

My dagger.

I move fast, heart hammering, fingers itching to close around the grip, to feel the pulse of magic waiting beneath the steel.

I reach out. Almost.

“You’re either desperate or stupid.”

The voice slithers from the shadows.

I freeze.

Slowly, I turn.

A gargoyle steps forward from the darkened alcove, his eyes gleaming with faint amusement.

Not Naranus. Someone else.

Leaner than the others, but fast, his wings tucked in tight, his tail flicking lazily.

He blocks my path.

I say nothing. Just watch.

Gauge.

He tilts his head, his fangs glinting in the low light. “What do you think you’re doing, purna?”

I force my body to relax. “Just admiring your weapons.”

He laughs, a sharp, rasping sound. “Is that what we’re calling it?”

I offer him a small smile, stepping closer, letting my fingers brush against the wooden rack. “Do you blame me?” I let my voice dip, smooth, unbothered. “I was given nothing but dull blades to fight with. You didn’t expect me to win with those, did you?”

His gaze flicks lower, tracking my movements.

I shift my stance, letting my hip just barely brush against the weapons. Close enough.

He hums, considering me. “You lost because you’re weak.”

I tilt my head. “Weak? Or unarmed?”

His wings twitch, his stance shifting. He’s thinking about it.

I let my fingers glide over the hilts, trailing along the tip of a dagger before wrapping around the one I came for.

The moment my grip tightens, he moves.

He’s on me in an instant, grabbing my wrist, twisting sharply.

The dagger clatters against the stone. Fuck.

His grip tightens. “Oh.” His breath skates across my jaw, hot and amused. “Stealing from your husband’s armory?”

My lip curls. “Let. Go.”

He chuckles, sharp and low. “Or what?”

I jerk forward, slamming my forehead into his nose. The crack is sickening.

He stumbles back, cursing, his claws releasing me.

I snatch the dagger, spinning just as he lunges.

His claws graze my arm, not deep, but enough to sting.

I slash out, my dagger kissing the air between us, forcing him back another step.

He bares his fangs, his tail lashing.

“Shouldn’t have done that, purna.”

I grin, sharp and wild. “Try and stop me.”

And I run.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:34 pm

13

ERYSS

The roar behind me is like thunder splitting the sky.

"Run all you want, purna. You're still mine to punish!"

I don't look back.

I can hear him closing the distance, the scratching of claws against stone, the heavy thud of steps pounding after me. Wings beat behind me. He's flying.

Unfair!

The dagger is slick in my grip, my heartbeat hammering against my ribs like a trapped thing.

If I stop, I die. Simple as that.

I push harder, weaving between the stone pillars of the stronghold, my body screaming from the effort. Every bruise from the fight earlier protests, every aching limb begs me to stop.

I won't.

The corridors open into the larger courtyard, the expanse of the training grounds

stretching before me. Several gargoyles linger near the edges, their golden eyes flicking toward me as I sprint past.

"Mine!" The gargoyle chasing me snarls. "She's mine!"

The others don't move.

They watch.

They let it happen.

"Damn it!" I push harder, my feet barely skimming the ground. If I can make it to another building, maybe I can.

A shadow swoops over me.

Too late.

A solid wall of muscle and fury slams into my back, knocking me breathless. I hit the ground hard, my dagger ripping from my grasp, spinning uselessly across the dirt.

My skull rings.

I twist, lashing out, but the gargoyle is already on me, pinning me down with a knee to my gut, claws digging into my shoulders.

He grins down at me, all fangs and hunger.

"Not so fast, purna."

I snarl, bucking against him, trying to kick, trying to do something, but he's too

strong.

His fingers wrap around my throat, squeezing just enough to make my pulse jump against his palm.

"You don't belong here," he murmurs, his grip tightening. "And I think it's time we show everyone what happens when a purna forgets her place."

I see it in his eyes.

The way he wants to drag this out.

Make it slow. Make it hurt.

"You're nothing," he continues, pressing his weight into me. "Nothing but a little human plaything. Our warlord might enjoy breaking you slow, but me?" He leans in, his breath brushing my ear. "I like seeing things shatter fast."

I spit in his face.

His eyes darken.

The next thing I feel is pain, sharp and exploding down my ribs as he slams his knee into my side.

I choke on the impact, my vision flaring white. The gargoyles watching laugh.

"Throw her off!" one of them calls.

"Make her beg!" another sneers.

My attacker grins.

"You heard them," he murmurs, dragging me upright. His claws bite into my arm, pulling me toward the boundary of the cliff at the side.

I thrash, trying to dig my heels into the stone, but he's stronger, his wings flaring wide as he lifts me, shoving me against the ledge.

"Beg."

My breath rips through my chest.

I glance down.

The drop is endless.

The jagged stone below waits like a gaping maw, eager to swallow me whole.

"Go on," the gargoyle breathes. "Say it. Say you're weak. Say you're sorry. Maybe I'll be kind."

I meet his eyes and I smile.

"Drop dead."

His expression shifts. The amusement drains. The thrill of the hunt turns to something colder.

"Fine," he murmurs and he throws me.

The world vanishes and the wind screams against my skin, my body plummeting,

weightless and helpless.

My magic.

Do something. The instinct kicks in, the power buried inside me roaring to life.

I reach for it.

I command it.

Nothing.

The ground rushes closer, the jagged rocks like teeth waiting to tear me apart.

I close my eyes.

The impact never comes.

A shockwave of heat and fury slams through the air, something massive barreling into me mid-fall, arms wrapping around my waist, wings snapping open.

The smell of fire, stone, and rage fills my lungs.

The world spins and then we stop.

I am no longer falling.

I am no longer dying.

I am in his arms.

Naranus.

His chest rumbles, golden eyes burning with something beyond rage.

Beyond control.

He lands with a force that shakes the ground, his claws dig into my skin and his breath seething.

The gathered gargoyles fall silent.

The one who threw me?

He steps back, something like fear flickering in his gaze.

Naranus lets me go. He drops me onto the ground, breathless, shaking.

He turns.

And he destroys him.

Naranus moves like a storm, his claws slicing through flesh, tearing, breaking, obliterating. The gargoyle who dared to touch me never even stands a chance.

By the time Naranus is finished, the challenger lays broken at his feet, his body twitching, his breath barely there.

Naranus does not look down.

He lifts his gaze, burning over the gathered gargoyles.

"She is mine. Mine in every sense of the word."

The words ring through the courtyard, final, absolute.

He turns to me then, his expression dark, wild, unreadable.

I stare at him, chest heaving.

Shocked. Not by the violence.

Not by the way he punished his own.

But because he saved me. And I don't understand why.

What game is he playing?

14

NARANUS

The silence in the stronghold is suffocating, thick with unspoken words, the tension humming in the bones of every gargoyle present. They don't dare challenge me. Not after what I did.

Eryss still lies where I left her, her breath ragged, her body battered from the fight and the fall that almost ended her. She should be dead.

I should have let her die.

Instead, I saved her.

Now my kin watch me, eyes flickering with confusion, with something bordering on doubt, as if they're questioning whether I still rule them with the same ruthless certainty.

I can feel their stares burrowing into my back as I turn, my wings shifting, my shoulders taut. I meet the gaze of the crowd, let my molten eyes cut through the silence.

"She is mine," I repeat, voice like rolling stone, weighty with command. "If any of you touch her again without my permission, I will tear the wings from your back and leave you broken at my feet."

A few flinch. Others look away.

But they understand.

Their loyalty does not come from love, nor does it need to. Fear is enough.

I shift my attention back to Eryss. Her breathing is steady, but her body remains tense, as if she is still processing what just happened. The fact that she is alive because I willed it.

I crouch beside her, watching as her gaze flickers up to mine, her silver eyes unreadable. She doesn't ask why I saved her. She doesn't thank me. Instead, she wipes the blood from her mouth with her hand, slow and deliberate, before tilting her chin.

"You enjoyed that, didn't you?" Her voice is raw, scraped from pain but lined with something sharper, resentment.

I let my lips curl. "If I did, then at least one of us had fun."

Her fingers tighten around the dagger still clutched in her grip, knuckles pale from the effort. "You let him do this," she mutters. "You let me be hunted like an animal."

"You are an animal," I murmur, voice deep, taunting. "A caged one, but an animal nonetheless."

She snaps.

With a sudden burst of strength, she swings the dagger upward, the tip aiming straight for my throat.

I catch her wrist mid-strike.

The impact stings, but not as much as the frustration burning behind her eyes. I don't loosen my grip. Instead, I tighten it, feeling the fine bones of her wrist press against my palm.

Her chest heaves, her breath sharp, but she does not yield.

"Kill me, then," she bites out. "If that's what you want. If that's what this whole damn game is about."

I lean in, my nose brushing against her jaw, just enough for her to feel the heat radiating from me. She doesn't flinch.

She should.

I could kill her.

I should.

Instead, I press my mouth close to her ear, my voice smooth, dangerous. "Where would be the fun in that?"

Her pulse jumps beneath my fingers, and for a moment, I wonder if she hates me more for this, the way I refuse to let her have the control she so desperately craves.

"Let go," she grits out.

I do.

She stumbles back but doesn't move to strike again.

Smart.

She won't win this fight.

I straighten, towering over her. "You should rest," I say, motioning to the wound along her temple, the blood still drying at her hair. "If you drop dead before I break you myself, I'll be very disappointed."

She laughs, but there is no humor in it.

"You think you can break me?" She tilts her head, silver eyes gleaming with something close to madness. "You think what you did tonight is enough? Naranus, you are going to have to try harder than that."

She is pushing me, tempting something violent, and I don't know whether it's from sheer desperation or if she truly does not fear me anymore.

I step forward, crowding her, forcing her to feel the heat of me, the sheer size of me. She does not back away.

"You want harder?" I murmur, voice low. "Careful what you wish for, little bride."

Her breath hitches, but she masks it quickly, shifting her stance.

"You don't scare me," she whispers.

She's lying, but she says it anyway, because she wants me to believe it.

I lift my hand. She tenses, expecting violence.

Instead, I drag my thumb along her jaw, tracing her throat, pressing just enough to

feel her pulse beneath my touch.

Steady. Strong. Alive.

My chest tightens.

I let my fingers slip lower, grazing over the bruises that litter her collarbone, reminders of what she just survived.

I did this.

Not with my hands, but with my orders. I didn't tell them to kill her though, nor let them hurt her. I ordered my kin to "capture" her if she tries to escape.

Still, she fights.

Still, she glares at me like she is waiting for the chance to slit my throat.

I exhale, dropping my hand, turning away before I let this thing between us fester into something I do not recognize.

She is mine.

But why does it feel like I am the one being pulled under?

I step away, my voice sharp as I give my final command for the night.

"Get some sleep, Eryss."

I leave, because if I don't, I may not stop myself from finding out how deep this defiance of hers truly runs.

15

ERYSS

I wake to the sensation of something heavy and warm curling around my wrist.

My breath tightens as I open my eyes, finding Naranus standing by my bed, his massive form casting a deep shadow over me. His golden eyes flicker in the dim morning light, his claws gently wrapped around my wrist. Not tight. Not painful. But unmovable.

“You’re coming with me,” he states. Not a question. A command.

I yank my arm back. His grip doesn’t budge.

“And if I refuse?” My voice is hoarse from sleep, but the defiance laces through every word.

His lips curl into something close to amusement. "Then I carry you."

I scowl, shoving off the blankets. “Where?”

The smirk vanishes. His expression hardens, unreadable. “Outside the stronghold.”

I stiffen. "Why?"

He cocks his head. "Curious, little bride?"

I grind my teeth, jerking my arm again. This time, he lets go.

"You give orders as if I'm supposed to listen," I snap. "I'm not your obedient pet."

His eyes flare, the molten gold pulsing as if he finds my defiance entertaining. "No. You're not. Pet and prisoner are different. "

I glare at him, unable to come up with words.

His wings shift, the blackened stone-like texture of them gleaming as he exhales slowly. "Dress yourself. We leave soon." He doesn't wait for my response, turning toward the door with an air of finality that makes my hands twitch to throw something at his head.

"Why should I come with you?" I press.

His gaze flicks back. "You want to leave the stronghold, don't you?"

I narrow my eyes. "You think taking me out changes anything?"

He shrugs. "I think you'll come regardless."

I hate that he's right.

I don't trust this.

Not the way he's acting. Not the way he wordlessly lifts me into his arms, talons curling beneath my legs and back as if I weigh nothing.

The world drops beneath us as his wings beat once, then twice, and suddenly, we are in the sky, soaring over the jagged cliffs of the stronghold.

The wind lashes against my skin, whipping my hair into my face, but I barely feel the cold because fuck, we're flying.

Not levitating. Not gliding like a controlled descent. Truly flying.

My arms tighten around his shoulders instinctively as my stomach churns, the sight of the endless land below making my pulse race.

He chuckles, the sound vibrating against my ribs. "Scared, little bride?"

I scowl, gripping tighter. "Let me go, then."

His grip around me tightens. "If I did, would you still be so eager to pretend you have control?"

Bastard.

The sky stretches endlessly above us, the clouds like streaks of ink against the gray horizon. The wind rushes past, carrying scents of damp earth, old magic, and the faint, distant trace of human fires.

We descend before I can argue further, his wings cutting through the air with a lethal kind of grace. The ground rushes up too fast, my stomach flipping before he finally lands, boots hitting dirt with the softest impact.

I blink, heart still hammering from the flight, taking in our surroundings.

We are not in a gargoyle stronghold. Not even close.

A human settlement lies before us, tucked between the rocky outcroppings and sprawling grasslands. Simple wooden homes, a few scattered carts, smoke curling

from chimneys. And there are people.

They stare at us, not with terror, as I expect, but with something closer to awe.

A child, no older than seven, suddenly bolts from a doorway, her feet bare against the dirt as she rushes toward Naranus.

He does not flinch.

He does not move away.

The girl stops just inches from him, her round face tilting up, grinning.

“You’re back,” she says simply.

I blink.

What?

An older man steps forward next, his beard streaked with silver, his frame wiry but strong. “We didn’t expect you so soon, Warlord.” His gaze flickers toward me. “And with company.”

The way he speaks to Naranus is not fearful.

Not hesitant.

Not like a man addressing a monster.

“Had a need for trade,” Naranus says, tone casual. “You have what I need?”

The man nods, already motioning toward a cart nearby, filled with bundles of dried herbs and vials of medicinal tinctures. "Everything you usually take, plus extra for the wounds you surely refuse to let heal properly."

Naranus grunts, but there's something oddly familiar about the exchange, as if this is routine.

I cross my arms, watching as Naranus drops a heavy leather sack at the man's feet.

The older human kneels, untying it, revealing the contents, freshly hunted beasts, skinned and gutted, cleaned of rot, still glistening in the morning light.

A trade.

I glance between them, my mind working to piece this together.

This isn't raiding. This is bartering.

The man looks up, shaking his head. "You bring too much again."

Naranus shrugs. "Your people are smaller. You eat less. That's not my problem."

The girl laughs, looking up at him with bright eyes. She is not afraid of him.

None of them are.

The realization hits like a sharp kick to the ribs.

They call him warlord, but they don't see him as a monster.

A woman nearby steps forward, offering a package wrapped in cloth. "You don't

have to give us more. You could take what you need.”

Naranus tilts his head. “I could.”

Eryss shakes her head, and whispers because she can’t help herself, “Then why don’t you?”

The corner of his mouth lifts. “Because I take nothing that isn’t worth the price.”

I stare at him.

At the way the humans speak to him. At the way they offer him respect, not fear.

This isn’t how things should be.

He is a beast.

A gargoyle warlord.

He should be just as vile and merciless as the stories say.

A child tugs on his wing.

He shifts, turning slightly, humoring her as she giggles.

The humans look at him as though he is their protector, not their executioner.

He is nothing like I expected.

My heart knots, confusion blooming into something unsteady.

I have spent my entire life hating his kind.

So why, then, does this feel more like a lie than the truth I was taught?

Maybe it's only Naranus. Somehow, the thought is even more absurd... and terrifying to me.

16

ERYSS

The return to the stronghold should be easy.

Naranus is silent, his expression unreadable as he flies low over the jagged cliffs, his wings slicing through the air with controlled precision. His arms are locked around me, his grip firm but impersonal, like he's already buried whatever strange shift had settled between us back in the human village.

I try not to think about it.

I try not to dwell on the way they spoke to him, the way they looked at him like a guardian rather than a beast. It doesn't make sense.

None of this makes sense.

I push away the thoughts, keeping my focus ahead, counting the ridges of stone below as they race past beneath us. We should reach the stronghold soon. We should be safe.

A shift in the air.

The wind thickens, no longer smooth but choked with something heavier, more charged.

Naranus curses, his arms tightening around me as his head snaps to the side.

The first arrow strikes.

He jerks, the force of it ripping through the membrane of his wing, embedding itself in the flesh just near his shoulder.

His snarl is like breaking stone.

The sky around us erupts.

Figures emerge from the cliffs, hidden within the jagged crevices, their dark wings folding open like specters against the sky. At least six of them, moving fast, moving with intent.

Rogue gargoyles.

Naranus doesn't hesitate.

He tilts mid-air, his massive body twisting as another arrow whistles past his head, narrowly missing us. He banks left, trying to outrun them, but they're already too close.

Another arrow flies.

Another strike to his wing.

This time, the damage is worse.

His balance wavers, his breath rough against my ear, but he keeps flying, his body fighting against the wound like it's nothing more than an inconvenience.

I can't do anything.

I have no magic. No power.

I can't even pull a damn dagger without risking him losing control mid-air.

I twist in his hold, trying to catch a glimpse of the attackers. The leader is the closest, his wings beating hard, his eyes locked on Naranus like a predator with a kill in sight.

"You should have stayed in your crumbling stronghold, Alpha," the gargoyle snarls. "You're not fit to lead anymore."

"Then come take my throne, coward," Naranus growls back, voice ripping through the wind like a blade.

The rogue lunges but Naranus is faster.

His wings snap inward, cutting through the air like a missile, diving lower, forcing them to chase us through the maze of stone.

I feel the strain in his muscles, the tremor in his grip. He's bleeding too much.

He won't make it back.

Another rogue dives from above.

I barely have time to react before claws rake across Naranus's back, tearing into flesh. His body jerks.

We drop.

The world tilts, my stomach flipping violently as the sky falls away.

Naranus tries to catch himself, his wings flaring in desperate resistance, but he can't.

He's losing control.

We're falling.

I hear him snarl in frustration, his hold on me tightening, his body twisting mid-air to shield me as we crash into the rocky terrain below.

The impact shatters through me.

We hit hard, rolling over jagged stone and loose gravel, Naranus taking the worst of it, his massive form bracing me from the worst of the fall. The moment we stop moving, I shove up onto my elbows, my head spinning.

He's already moving.

Already forcing himself to his feet, blood slicking his back, his wing torn.

"We need to go," he rasps, eyes wild, breath heavy. "They'll be on us soon."

I push myself up, legs shaking, trying to steady my balance. "You can't fly," I say, stating the obvious, my heart hammering.

His golden eyes lock onto mine. "Then we run."

A shadow passes over us.

They're still hunting.

Still searching.

Naranus grabs my wrist, dragging me toward the rocky outcroppings beyond. He's injured, but he doesn't hesitate, doesn't falter, moving as if the pain is nothing but a minor inconvenience.

I struggle to keep up, my breath ragged, my body aching, but I push forward, matching his pace.

We run.

Through the twisting caverns of stone, through the winding trails that lead further away from the stronghold.

Further from safety.

But there's no other option.

Behind us, I can hear the wingbeats of the rogues, their low snarls of frustration as they search.

They can't see us.

Not yet.

Naranus drags me into a narrow crevice, pressing his back against the stone, his chest rising and falling with sharp, controlled breaths. I flatten against the opposite wall, trying to steady my own racing pulse.

The voices of the rogues drift closer.

“She has to be dead.”

“If she was, we’d see her body.”

"Then find them."

I grip the stone beneath my fingers, my nails digging in.

Silence stretches between us, thick, charged. I glance up at Naranus, his molten gaze locked onto me. His face is unreadable, his body rigid, his mind already calculating our next move.

We are too far.

Too lost.

I don’t know how we’ll get back.

ERYSS

The air sits thick between the rocks, the stench of stone, blood, and something wretched coiling in the narrow space where Naranus and I press against the jagged walls. His wings twitch, fractured and useless, his molten eyes watching the shadows stretch, waiting for the rogues to either find us or move on.

They don't move on.

Footsteps scrape against loose gravel, slow, calculating. Their leader's voice cuts through the silence, sharp with arrogance. "You're just delaying the inevitable, Alpha. You can't fly, you're bleeding out, and you're trapped out here with a Purna bitch who's more liability than weapon."

Naranus' fingers tighten into fists, claws flexing at his sides. He doesn't react otherwise. Doesn't even breathe too loud. I press my spine harder against the rock, eyes locked on him, waiting for some kind of plan.

I have no magic. No blade. No way to fight on my own. I'm as useless as they think I am, and I hate it.

The footsteps pause. Then the voice comes again, edged with amusement. "Maybe we let her go."

My muscles lock.

“Maybe we give her back to her kind, see if they even want her.”

My heartbeat slams against my ribs.

“I hear the Purna don't tolerate failure," the rogue continues, letting the words roll lazily. “She was supposed to kill you, wasn't she? She failed that. She's failing now. She's not even worth the effort of a clean kill. They probably want her dead, too because they sent her to you.”

Naranus' head tilts, slow and deliberate, like a beast preparing to strike. His voice rumbles low, barely above a whisper, but the threat within it is absolute. “You talk too much.”

He moves.

Faster than my mind or eyes can track, faster than the rogue expects.

The gargoyle barely has time to react before Naranus is on him, claws ripping through his gut, his other hand catching him by the throat, slamming him into the rock wall with a sickening crunch.

The rogue gurgles, choking on his own blood.

Naranus' eyes gleam, cold and unrelenting, his wings trembling under their uselessness. “You think you can touch what's mine?” His claws tighten, bone snapping beneath his grip. “You think you can speak about her in my presence?”

The rogue doesn't answer.

He can't.

Because Naranus tears out his throat.

Blood splatters across the stone, warm against my skin.

I swallow hard, my pulse thrumming, my mind trying to process the sheer brutality of it. I have seen death. I have caused death. But there is something about his way of killing, raw, instinctive, effortless—that rattles deep in my bones.

The other rogues react immediately.

I throw myself back as one lunges, claws swiping through empty space where my throat was just seconds before. Naranus catches him mid-attack, flipping his weight, his knee slamming into the rogue's gut before he drives his elbow into the back of his skull.

Another one moves in, but I see it too late.

Pain explodes through my ribs, my body slamming into the rock wall, my lungs struggling for breath.

Naranus turns sharply, his face twisting into something beyond rage. He doesn't hesitate. He rips the attacker away from me, slamming him to the ground, pinning him with one massive clawed foot.

His gaze snaps to me.

“You're slowing me down.”

I glare up at him, pressing a hand to my side where pain still throbs sharp and relentless. “Then leave me behind.”

He snarls, something dark flashing in his gaze. "No."

He grabs my wrist, pulling me up before I can argue, before I can catch my breath, before I can even pretend I don't need his help.

The other rogues are already recovering, regrouping. We won't survive another fight.

"We need to keep moving," I force out, voice strained. "You're already bleeding too much."

Naranus doesn't respond, his grip firm, unyielding as he drags me forward, pushing through the winding terrain.

We stumble over loose stone, down narrow paths that lead further from the stronghold, further into unfamiliar land. The rogues don't chase immediately. They know he's wounded. They know he can't fly.

They're waiting us out.

Hunting us slowly.

We are not safe.

We are not even close.

After what feels like hours, Naranus finally stops, his body heaving with exhaustion, his hand braced against the rock wall for support. His wings hang limply behind him, blood still dripping from the wounds carved into his back.

I inhale deeply, trying to steady my own breath, trying not to think about how much worse this could have gone.

"We need to stop the bleeding," I say, stepping toward him, reaching for his arm.

He snaps his head toward me, his gaze fierce, warning.

"I don't need your help."

I scoff. "That's not what your body says."

His jaw clenches, but he doesn't stop me when I grab the tattered remains of his tunic and rip a strip of fabric free, pressing it against the wound at his ribs. He flinches, muscles tensing beneath my touch, but he lets me.

That unsettles me.

He is a warlord, a monster, someone who does not accept aid. Yet he stands here and allows my hands on him, allows me to patch him up like he is something fragile.

Like he trusts me.

I focus on wrapping the wound, my fingers careful, but the silence between us twists into something I can't name.

When I finally look up, his gaze is already locked onto mine. Molten. Intense. Studying me in a way that makes my stomach tighten.

I should speak.

Say something cutting.

Something cruel.

Instead, my mouth parts and nothing comes out.

His fingers brush against my wrist, only for a moment, only long enough to make my pulse trip violently.

His voice comes low, rough. "This isn't over."

I swallow hard. "The fight or whatever the hell this is between us?"

His lips curl slightly, almost like he's amused, despite the pain still carving through him.

"Both."

I exhale sharply, stepping back, needing space, needing air that doesn't feel thick with whatever this tension is becoming.

He watches me.

Still bleeding. Still standing.

Still looking at me like I am something worth keeping.

I have no idea what should I feel about that.

18

NARANUS

The rain comes fast.

Thick, relentless sheets of cold water crash against the trees, drenching the already treacherous terrain. Thunder rumbles in the distance, a warning that the worst has yet to come. I tighten my hold on Eryss's wrist, dragging her forward as she stumbles over uneven ground.

She's struggling to keep up.

I should keep going, push through the exhaustion, push through the pain in my shredded wing and bleeding side, but I catch the way she's shaking. She hasn't said a word in the last mile.

That isn't a good sign.

I grit my teeth, scanning the area. There has to be something, a cave, some kind of cover, anything to get us out of this. The longer we're exposed, the easier it is for the rogues to track us.

I see it. Half-hidden by the surrounding trees, a small structure stands alone in the woods, dark and silent against the backdrop of rain.

It doesn't look abandoned.

Not entirely.

My wings twitch instinctively, but the searing pain reminds me of my limits. Useless. They're useless right now.

I glance at Eryss. She's barely holding herself together, her skin pale, lips tinged blue. She lifts her gaze to the cabin, and something flickers in her silver eyes, relief.

"Move," I order, shoving her toward it.

She doesn't argue.

The wooden door groans under my grip as I push it open. The interior is dimly lit, the remnants of past fires still staining the stone hearth. There's furniture. A cot shoved into the corner, a table, a few scattered supplies that suggest someone still comes here.

Who the hell lives in a place like this?

Hunters, maybe.

Or fools.

It doesn't matter. It's shelter.

Eryss steps past me, running trembling fingers along the wall, her body still shaking violently.

I turn to her, my chest tightening in annoyance. "You're freezing."

She scoffs, wrapping her arms around herself. "No shit."

I ignore her attitude, already moving toward the hearth. There's wood stacked nearby, a blessing I don't question. I kneel, dragging my claws over the kindling before sparking the fire to life. Flames crackle instantly, warmth creeping through the room.

Eryss hovers nearby, close enough to steal the heat, but she's still shivering. Her body is running on nothing but pride at this point.

"Sit," I command.

She hesitates.

Then, as if finally giving in to her exhaustion, she sinks to the floor in front of the fire, pulling her knees up to her chest.

Her silence is unnatural.

I watch her out of the corner of my eye as I strip out of my ruined tunic, wincing as I check the damage to my wing. The wound is ugly, the muscle shredded where the arrow struck. It won't heal quickly.

I clench my jaw.

I hate this.

Hate feeling grounded.

Hate the vulnerability of being unable to take to the skies and rip the throats out of the bastards who did this.

The wood creaks as Eryss shifts, dragging herself closer to the fire. Her wet clothes cling to her skin, her hair darkened from the rain, loose curls framing her face.

She looks fragile.

I've seen her fight, watched her endure far worse than this. But right now, she looks like she could break.

I don't like it.

I push to my feet, moving toward her. She doesn't look up, but I see the way her shoulders tense when I step too close.

She's waiting for me to push her.

To mock her.

To remind her that she is weak.

I don't.

Instead, I crouch beside her, watching as she rubs her hands together, her fingers still trembling.

"You're too cold," I say, my voice low.

She snorts. "I'll be fine."

I exhale sharply, annoyed by her stubbornness. "If you freeze to death, I'll have no one to torment."

She finally looks at me, silver eyes glinting in the firelight. "You'd miss me, then?"

I let my lips curl, but there's no humor behind it. "No. I'd just be bored."

She huffs, shaking her head, but the tremor in her hands is getting worse.

She won't last like this.

I don't give her time to react before I pull her into my lap, dragging her against me, wrapping my arms around her before she can protest.

She stiffens, her whole body going rigid.

"What the hell are you doing?" Her voice catches, her breath uneven.

"Keeping you alive," I answer, shifting my hold, making sure her icy limbs press against my warmth.

Her hands push against my chest, weakly at first, then more forcefully. "I don't need your help."

I let out a low, rumbling growl. "Stop fighting me, little bride."

She freezes.

I feel her pulse against my skin, rapid, unsteady.

Her breath quivers, but she doesn't push me away again.

"Fine," she mutters, voice barely audible. "But if you try anything, I'll?—"

I cut her off with a quiet, amused sound. "I'm not the one who climbed into whose bed last time."

She sputters, pulling back slightly to glare at me. "That was?—"

“Desperate?” I supply. “Reckless? Pathetic?”

She grits her teeth. “It was a mistake. An assassination attempt if you forget.”

I watch her, my claws tracing absently over her back, over the bruises still healing along her spine. “You’re still alive. I’d say that’s a success.”

She doesn’t reply.

For a long moment, we sit in silence, the only sound the crackling fire and the storm outside.

Her body gradually stops trembling, the warmth seeping into her skin. She exhales slowly, pressing her forehead against my collarbone.

She shouldn’t be this comfortable with me.

I shouldn’t let her be. Neither of us move.

Neither of us letting go.

19

ERYSS

Sleep comes easily.

I don't expect it to. My body is a bruised wreck, aching with exhaustion, but I expect my mind to resist, to keep me awake, to keep the tension in my limbs locked tight.

But Naranus is warm.

The heat of him seeps into my bones, steady and unyielding, keeping the cold from taking root in the hollows of my skin. The steady rhythm of his breathing grounds me, his arms around me an anchor I shouldn't accept.

But I do.

I hate that I do.

I drift before I can fight it, my fingers curled slightly against his chest, his heartbeat deep and slow beneath my palm.

The fire has burned low by the time I wake.

I shift slightly, blinking past the dim, flickering glow, adjusting to the thick silence of the room. My head is clearer now, my body no longer wracked with shivers.

I realize that I'm still in his arms.

Still tucked against the broad plane of his chest, still wrapped in the heat of his body like a protective cocoon.

I go still, listening to his breath. It's even, deep, slow.

He's asleep.

I don't think I've ever seen him sleep before.

Naranus exists in perpetual control, a beast that never lets his guard down, that watches, waits, anticipates the next threat before it comes.

Yet here he is. Vulnerable. Exposed.

I could kill him.

The thought slithers through me like an old whisper, the mission buried in the back of my mind rearing its head.

This is the moment.

The perfect moment.

End him.

I carefully pull my arm back, fingers hovering just inches from his throat, from the vulnerable column of his neck where a single press would mean his end. He's already injured, I don't need the enchanted dagger to end him.

He wouldn't even feel it.

But I don't move.

My fingers curl away instead of closing in. My breath hitches, my stomach twisting as I force myself to think.

This isn't how it's supposed to go.

I shouldn't hesitate.

I shouldn't be questioning this.

But his warmth lingers on my skin. His body bleeds protection even in sleep, even after everything, even after he's thrown me to the wolves and forced me into the fire.

He's saved me.

Over and over again.

My chest tightens, hard and unbearable.

Why? Why does he do this?

He speaks to me with sharp-edged cruelty, taunting and mocking, reminding me of my place beneath him. But then he turns around and catches me before I fall. Holds me close when I am barely holding on myself.

Why is he like this?

I exhale sharply, shaking my head. I can't get lost in this. I won't.

Instead, I shift carefully, pulling away without waking him, ignoring the way my body misses the warmth the second it's gone.

I sit up, rubbing at my arms, glancing around the cabin for the first time with clear eyes.

Something isn't right.

I didn't pay attention last night. I was too cold, too exhausted, too caught up in the way my body screamed for relief. But now that I'm awake, now that I see it, this place doesn't feel abandoned.

The air is still. Too still. Like something is watching.

I stand slowly, moving carefully through the cabin, my fingers dragging along the rough wooden shelves, the scattered objects. Hunting knives, dried herbs. Old bowls still dusted with remnants of whatever was eaten last.

I see something, a notebook.

Tucked deep in the corner, almost hidden beneath a pile of old cloth. I frown, reaching for it, my fingers trembling slightly as I flip open the cover.

Purna script.

My stomach drops.

I flip through the pages, my breath shallow, sharp. The writing is familiar, the looping, elegant script the same form I was raised reading.

A Purna lived here.

Maybe still does.

Shit.

I flip another page, my pulse pounding in my ears. Spells. Incantations. Personal thoughts scrawled along the margins. This wasn't left behind by accident.

We need to leave.

I snap the book shut, shoving it back where I found it. My hands are cold again, and not from the rain.

Magic lingers here.

Something doesn't feel right.

I turn back toward Naranus, already reaching to wake him.

Suddenly, I hear it.

Movement.

Outside.

My blood runs ice cold.

I freeze, my muscles locking tight as I strain my ears. The wind howls through the trees, but beneath it, beneath the storm still raging beyond, I hear it.

Footsteps.

Slow. Deliberate.

Circling.

Hunting.

I swallow hard, my fingers tightening at my sides.

Perhaps it's too late to run away. Whoever's out there, knows we're in here.

20

NARANUS

I wake to the weight of her absence.

The warmth she left behind still lingers on my skin, a phantom sensation that shouldn't mean anything, but it does. I'm already on edge before my eyes even open.

I hear something, a sound that doesn't belong.

Soft, deliberate movement just beyond the cabin walls.

My body tenses, muscles locking as instinct takes over. The fire has burned low, casting the room in deep, shifting shadows. Eryss is standing near the far wall, rigid, her posture sharp with the same tension clawing up my spine.

She hears it too.

Whoever is outside isn't trying to mask their approach.

They are waiting.

Hunting.

My mind moves through possibilities, but none of them are good. Rogues wouldn't have waited this long to strike. A lone traveler wouldn't move like this, circling slow,

testing the perimeter.

Whoever it is knows we are here.

I shift, careful not to make noise as I rise to my full height. My wings ache, battered and useless, but my claws curl, sharp and ready. Eryss's eyes flick toward me, her breathing controlled, but fast.

I motion for her to stay still.

She glares at me like I've suggested something offensive.

I step closer, my voice low and sharp. "Let me handle this."

She scoffs under her breath. "Like you handled almost getting us killed yesterday?"

I suppress a growl, unwilling to waste time arguing with her. She's reckless. Always looking for an opening to prove something. Always pressing back, even when the smarter choice is to stand down.

I see what she's holding.

A notebook.

One that wasn't there when we arrived.

"Where did you get that?" I ask, my voice too quiet, too controlled.

She doesn't answer immediately. Her grip on the book tightens, her jaw twitching.

Her silver eyes meet mine.

“There’s a Purna here.”

The words dig under my skin, an immediate, violent realization hitting me all at once.

Purna. Not was. Is.

Whoever is outside isn’t just passing through.

They’ve been waiting for us to wake up.

They’ve been waiting for her. For me.

A sudden rustling outside sends me moving before I think. I shove Eryss back against the wall, shielding her with my body, one hand braced beside her head, the other already reaching for a weapon that isn’t there.

She gasps, startled by the sudden movement. “What the hell are you doing?”

I bare my teeth. “You led us straight into a trap, little bride.”

Her glare sharpens. “I didn’t lead us anywhere. You were the one who?”

A sound cuts through her words.

A voice. A whisper.

Low. Chanting.

Magic.

Every muscle in my body tightens violently.

The Purna outside is casting something, their power seeping through the cracks in the walls, the ground itself shifting with unnatural energy.

Fuck.

I move before I can think.

I grab Eryss's wrist, dragging her away from the door. "We're leaving."

She yanks back. "Are you serious? We don't even know who?—"

"I don't care." My voice is rough, edged with the sharp undercurrent of a warning. "Whoever they are, they aren't here to help."

She hesitates, her gaze flicking toward the notebook still clutched in her hand.

She's thinking too hard.

Trying to rationalize something that doesn't need logic.

My grip on her wrist tightens, akin to shackles. "Move, Eryss."

The front door bursts open.

The storm outside sends a rush of wind slamming through the room, scattering ash from the dead fire, the smell of damp earth and something older, heavier, twisting in the air.

A figure steps inside, hooded, draped in shadows.

I feel it immediately.

Power. Thick. Ancient. Twisting through the room like a second heartbeat.

They lift their head, and I see the flash of golden markings along their skin.

A Purna mage.

Eryss stiffens beside me.

The figure steps forward, the wooden floor creaking beneath their weight. They are calm. Too calm. Their lips curl slightly, like they already know something we don't.

Their voice is soft, smooth. Too smooth.

“I was wondering when you'd wake up.”

I don't give them a chance to say anything else.

I move to kill.

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21

ERYSS

The room explodes.

One second, Naranus is standing beside me, poised like a storm waiting to break. The next, he's lunging forward, claws drawn, ready to tear the intruder apart.

No. The voice is too familiar, and their figures, despite being covered, are something I won't forget. I need to confirm!

I throw myself between them, hands raised, screaming his name. "Stop!"

He's mid-swing when my voice cuts through him.

His momentum halts, but barely. His claws graze my shoulder, the heat of his fury pulsing against my skin. His golden eyes burn, wild, flickering between me and the shadowed figure before us.

The figure moves.

Two figures. Two women.

The light shifts, and I see them clearly.

My chest clenches.

“Eryss?”

I barely hear the whispered name before I stumble forward.

Amelia and Catalina.

They’re my sisters.

Not by blood, but by bond. By the sisterhood forged in the cages of our youth, in the whispered rebellions beneath the moon, in the shared secrets and silent vows to never let the world break us apart.

They found me.

My pulse hammers in disbelief as Amelia steps forward, her dark curls half-wild, eyes scanning me from head to toe, looking for injuries, looking for proof that I’m still whole. Catalina, the quieter one, stands beside her, her gaze sharp, calculating.

“What—” My voice is raw, strangled. “What are you doing here?”

“We’ve been searching for you,” Amelia breathes, her hands gripping my arms. “You vanished from the stronghold. No word. No signs. Catalina’s been...” She hesitates, glancing at the woman beside her. “She’s been worried.”

I turn to Catalina, whose silver-blue eyes hold something unreadable. Unlike Amelia, she doesn’t rush to touch me.

She watches.

She always watches first.

Her voice comes, quiet but firm. “Do you need us?”

I freeze.

It’s a question loaded with meaning. Do I need them to help me finish what I started?
To do what I haven’t been able to do myself?

To kill him?

My stomach twists violently.

The weight of their expectations, the purpose I was sent here for, the promise I made to our people, all of it is a chain wrapped around my throat.

He saved me.

Again and again, he saved me.

Naranus doesn’t speak.

But I feel his stare cutting through me, waiting for my answer, waiting for my betrayal.

Catalina’s fingers twitch near her side, where her dagger is hidden beneath the folds of her cloak.

She’s ready.

She’s waiting for my signal.

Amelia watches me carefully, waiting too. But her eyes are softer, her expression less

certain. She sees something that Catalina does not.

I hate that she does.

“No.”

The word leaves me before I can stop it.

Catalina’s expression hardens instantly. “Eryss?—”

“I said no,” I repeat, this time louder.

Naranus shifts behind me. He’s tense, his body still braced for a fight, his molten gold gaze glued to the two women in front of him.

“You can’t kill him,” I say, turning to Catalina, my voice sharper now. “He saved my life. Time and time again. I won’t let you?—”

Catalina’s lip curls. “Then you will.”

Silence crashes through the room.

My heart stutters painfully.

I should.

I should say yes. I should take the dagger from her and finish what I was sent here to do.

But I don’t.

Her stare sharpens, realization flickering across her features. “You won’t.”

Something inside me twists. “I?—”

“No,” she cuts me off, stepping closer, voice dropping. “You had the chance. You’ve had the chance more than once. And you didn’t take it.” Her gaze flicks to Naranus, then back to me, disbelief hardening into something colder. “What has he done to you?”

Nothing. Everything.

I say nothing.

Her fingers tighten around her blade.

Amelia, sensing the tension breaking at the seams, reaches for Catalina’s arm. “Enough,” she murmurs, voice softer than usual. “She’s not our enemy.”

“She’s not acting like our ally,” Catalina snaps.

Amelia doesn’t argue. But she watches me. Sees too much. Feels too much.

After a long breath, she says, “We should at least heal them before we decide what to do.”

Naranus snarls immediately.

“You won’t touch me.”

Catalina lifts her chin. “Then you can rot in that body of yours.”

Amelia sighs, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Enough. He’s still a beast, Catalina, but right now, he’s her beast.” Her gaze flicks toward me, expectant. “Isn’t he?”

My lungs seize.

I don’t answer.

Amelia watches me for a long moment, then sighs again. “Fine. We’ll leave him be.”

Naranus doesn’t relax.

Not an inch.

The hostility still rolls off of him, his claws still unsheathed, his gaze drilling into mine.

I feel his rage, his betrayal still simmering beneath the surface, still waiting for a chance to consume me whole.

Yet, when I step toward him, placing myself firmly between him and them...

He doesn’t move away.

22

NARANUS

I should have killed them both.

Even now, with the tension in the room thick enough to choke on, my claws twitch with the desire to tear into their throats, to rip through flesh and bone and end the threat standing in front of me.

Because make no mistake, they are a threat.

Not just to me. To her.

Eryss is standing too close to them, her body still angled toward me, but her loyalty tethered somewhere between. I feel it like a blade pressed against my core, like a rope pulling taut, stretching the space between us.

Her silence is the worst part.

Not an argument, not a plea, not even an explanation, just silence.

I glare at the Purna woman closest to her, the one called Catalina. Her hand is still near her weapon, and the challenge in her gaze makes my rage pulse sharper, hotter.

"Say the word, Eryss," Catalina murmurs. "And I'll finish it."

I take a step forward.

Eryss reacts immediately, her palm pressing against my chest.

“Don’t.”

The touch burns more than it should. Not because it’s painful. Because it isn’t.

I don’t want her to pull away.

She doesn’t look at me. Her gaze stays locked on Catalina, silver eyes steady, unwavering. “I already told you, he’s mine to deal with.”

A sharp, slow inhale.

A barely concealed shift in the room.

Catalina's fingers twitch, but she doesn't draw the blade. Instead, she studies Eryss carefully, her eyes narrowing.

"You hesitate."

Eryss doesn’t deny it.

Neither does Amelia. The other Purna woman, the quieter one, the one who has been watching more than speaking, she sees it too.

I hate it.

I loathe that these witches look at her and see something I can’t control. Something I can’t hold in my hands and bend to my will.

Something I can't predict.

"You don't need to protect him," Catalina presses, her voice low, edged with a different kind of warning. "You came here to kill him. You still can."

Eryss tenses, but she doesn't step away from me.

Her voice, when it comes, is too even. Too calculated.

"He saved my life," she says again, but softer this time.

Catalina scoffs. "For what? To keep you as his captive?"

I expect Eryss to snap back. To argue.

But she doesn't.

She just stands there, her breathing too controlled, her fingers still resting against my chest, as if she needs to keep herself steady.

The rage in my gut shifts, turns into something heavier, something dangerously close to possession.

"You think you have a choice in this?" I snarl, turning my full attention on Catalina.

She doesn't back down. Neither does Amelia.

But Eryss stiffens.

Before I can react, she pulls away and faces me fully.

"You don't get to tell me what choices I have."

The fire in her voice sends something sharp through me, something I should ignore but don't.

"You gave up your choice the moment you stepped into my stronghold," I growl.

Her eyes burn silver in the dim light.

"And yet, here we are."

The words are a challenge, a battle she wants me to step into.

I do.

In one movement, I close the space between us, my fingers wrapping around her wrist before she moves away completely.

Her pulse hammers beneath my touch.

"Say it, then," I murmur, voice low, dangerous. "Say you don't want me dead."

The room stills.

Even the Purna women are silent now.

Eryss stares up at me, unflinching, her lips parting just slightly.

I feel the war in her bones, the fight between what she was sent to do and what she actually wants.

It should be simple.

It should be instinct.

But it isn't.

Her hesitation is enough.

More than enough.

I release her, my fingers slow to let go.

I don't miss the way her breath catches, how her skin flushes in the low light, how her pupils dilate.

She hates this.

Hates that her body betrays her the same way mine does.

"You're wounded," Amelia finally speaks, her voice steady but not unkind. "Let us help you."

I snarl immediately.

"You won't touch me."

Amelia lifts a brow, unimpressed. "You're bleeding."

"So?"

Eryss steps back, breathing out roughly, her expression tense. "Just let them help

you."

I glare at her, muscles coiled tight. "I don't need their magic."

She tilts her chin up, defiant. "Then bleed out."

I step closer, forcing her back against the tip of the wooden table behind her, my body towering over hers. "Would that please you, little bride?"

Her chest rises sharply, silver eyes burning.

"Not as much as seeing you humbled."

The words should make me laugh.

Instead, they make my pulse slam harder.

I can't stop, so I move closer to feel the warmth of her breath, to see the pulse in her throat quicken.

"Careful what you wish for, Eryss," I murmur. "You might get more than you can handle."

Her breath stutters, but she doesn't push me away.

Doesn't run.

Neither of us moves.

Neither of us blinks.

The room, the tension, the two Purna witches still watching, none of it matters.

For this moment, it's just us.

I detest how much I don't want to let go.

ERYSS

A melia's hands hover over my side, her magic seeping into my skin in slow, steady pulses. It's warm. Soothing. Yet, all I can focus on is the gargoyle pacing like a caged beast nearby, spitting out insults like venom.

"Careful," Naranus sneers, arms crossed over his hard chest, molten gold eyes locked onto Amelia's hands as though she might rip me apart instead of healing me. "Wouldn't want to corrupt her with your filth."

Amelia exhales through her nose, patience thinning. "I'm healing her, you ungrateful?—"

"Keep your sorcery off me." His tail flicks, muscles flexing beneath his cracked skin, his stance brimming with restrained violence. "I don't trust your kind."

"They're trying to help us!" I snap, flinching when Amelia presses harder into my side, forcing the healing faster.

Naranus glares at me like I've personally offended him. "Help?" His voice is sharp, dripping with disbelief. "You really think they're here out of kindness? They're only here because they need you alive to finish your mission."

The words hit too hard.

I swallow. "And what would you know about my mission?"

He leans in, wings shifting, making the small space feel even smaller. "I know a sacrifice when I see one, little bride."

My breath shudders.

"You don't think it's strange?" He tilts his head, watching me with unsettling intensity. "That they offered you up so willingly? That they sent you, alone into my stronghold with nothing but a blade and a name? Tell me, Eryss. Did it ever occur to you that they never expected you to succeed?"

I grit my teeth. "Shut up."

"They sent you to die."

"Shut up!"

The magic falters around me as Amelia pulls back, eyes flicking between the two of us, but I barely register it. My heartbeat pounds too loudly in my ears. Because he's right.

I don't want him to be.

But something deep, dark, and familiar whispers that he is. Of course, I've known all along. I just don't want to admit it to him. Even Catalina and Amelia looks at me with pity, and they're trying to hide it.

I force the thought down, clawing for something solid to hold onto. "It's my mission," I say, hating how unsteady my voice sounds. "I chose this."

"You keep saying that." His lips curl, something vicious and knowing in his expression. "As if you believe it."

I hate him.

I hate how easily he sees through me.

"Enough," Catalina cuts in, her tone sharp. She's standing by the window, body tense. "We can't waste time on this."

Amelia frowns. "What is it?"

Catalina's silver-blue eyes darken. "There are gargoyles coming."

The room turns ice-cold.

Naranus stiffens. "How many?"

"More than five," Catalina murmurs, pressing closer to the window, watching the tree line. "They're moving fast."

I force my body up, ignoring the sharp ache in my ribs. "They're following us," I whisper. "They must've picked up our trail after we left the village."

Amelia's gaze sharpens. "We need to leave. Now."

Naranus exhales through his teeth, jaw locking. "Agreed."

It's strange, hearing him agree with them. With us.

We move quickly. Catalina throws out the fire, casting the cabin in shadow. Amelia

helps me steady my footing before we slip out the back, the cool early morning air thick with the smell of damp earth and impending danger.

Naranus takes the lead, his movements predatory, cautious. His tail flicks behind him as he listens to the wind, as he tilts his head slightly to track the approaching enemies. Catalina and Amelia flank me, their hands ready to summon magic if needed.

But magic won't help if they catch us before we're ready.

The trees loom overhead, our only cover. We move fast, our footsteps muffled against the damp leaves.

The wings come closer.

A dark rush of sound, the sharp snap of branches overhead.

A shadow streaks across the air.

My stomach lurches.

They've found us.

NARANUS

The morning air is overflowing with the scent of battle. The trees groan under the winged shadows that hunt us, and the wind howls like a beast ready to sink its teeth into flesh. We are being hunted. The relentless flapping of wings above us is a drumbeat of pursuit, and I know what comes next.

Eryss skids to a stop, turning back toward her Purna kin. "Leave! Get out of here!"

But they don't.

Catalina's silver-blue gaze burns like ice in the darkness. "We're not leaving you."

Eryss steps toward them, her movements frantic, her chest heaving. "You'll die! They don't care about you, they only want me!"

Amelia's hands are already glowing, the telltale shimmer of power coiling around her fingers. "We're not leaving, Eryss. We can fight."

I snarl, stepping between them and the incoming threat.

"Your kind doesn't protect anything but your own ambitions." I bare my teeth, my claws flexing as I widen my stance, wings flaring.

Eryss turns on me, fury flashing in her gaze. "And yours are any better? Your kind

doesn't protect anything but your own pride."

I don't answer. Because she's right.

But she also doesn't understand.

Before I can snap back, before I can make her see that her so-called sisters are only here to use her, the first attack strikes.

A gargoyle drops from the canopy, a massive beast, his wings tearing through the wind like a razor. He moves fast, but I'm faster.

I twist, shoving Eryss aside as claws swipe through the space she had been standing in. My forearm takes the brunt of the blow, stone cracking beneath the impact.

The force sends me skidding, but I catch myself before I hit the dirt. I pivot, just as another enemy lands with a thunderous impact.

Magic explodes.

A blast of silver power tears through the air, sending shockwaves through the ground. Trees bend and snap, the force uprooting loose earth. Amelia and Catalina are fighting, their magic clashing against the dark gargoyles in vicious, blinding bursts.

I reach for Eryss, gripping her arm and yanking her behind me.

"Stay behind me!" I snarl, my voice rough with command.

But her damn Purnas don't listen. They move beside her, not behind, placing themselves between her and the growing tide of enemies.

I should let them die.

Let them be torn apart.

But the way Eryss looks at them, like they are something more than just tools of betrayal—it keeps me from abandoning them.

The battle surges forward.

More gargoyles descend, the impact of their landings shaking the earth. Claws rake through stone, splitting trees apart as they attack. I strike hard and fast, grabbing a smaller one by the throat and twisting until bones snap.

Another rushes me.

I pivot, slamming my tail into his ribs, sending him flying into a tree. More magic erupts behind me.

"Shit!" Catalina curses, her power crackling out of control.

I turn just in time to see her magic arc wildly.

A misfire.

A spiraling whip of power, a bolt of unstable energy that rockets toward Eryss.

"Move!" I roar, but she doesn't.

The blast collides, not with her, but with the ground beneath her feet.

The earth shatters.

The cliff crumbles.

Eryss' silver eyes widen. Her arms flail as she tries to catch herself, but the ground is gone.

She's falling.

A scream rips from her lips, her body tumbling toward the dark abyss below.

"No!"

I don't think. I don't hesitate.

I jump.

The wind roars in my ears, my body cutting through the atmosphere as I chase her down.

She's reaching for me, her fingers barely outstretched, but I can't catch her fast enough.

The river below rises like an open mouth, waiting to swallow us whole.

I wrap my wings tight, bracing for impact.

The water is ice and agony, slamming into me with the force of a stone wall. It drags me down, pulling me under.

Eryss is lost beneath the churning depths.

But I will not let anyone or anything take her away.

25

ERYSS

The water is a beast, its claws sinking into my flesh, dragging me down, down, down.

The impact had stolen the breath from my lungs, left me weightless, suspended in the abyss, caught between life and death. Cold lashes at me, an unforgiving bite seeping into my bones, deeper than flesh, deeper than marrow. Deeper than fear.

I kick hard, but the current grips me tighter. The river is wild, ravenous, swallowing light, swallowing air. Swallowing me entirely.

Panic claws at my chest, sharp and ruthless. My limbs tangle in the churning blackness, my lungs screaming for breath I cannot find. The world above is lost. There is only the endless, crushing dark.

Suddenly, there are hands.

Huge, unrelenting hands, strong as stone, unyielding as fate. They clamp onto my waist, my ribs, locking me against a chest that feels as unmovable as the mountains. The current fights to steal me away, but the grip tightens, pulling me against an immovable force.

Naranus.

His body is fire against the consuming cold, but I can't react before we are torn through the depths together.

He moves with brutal efficiency, each kick, each thrust of his massive legs cutting through the water, fighting against the current with inhuman strength. I cling to him, but my body is numb, weakening, slipping further into the dark.

The river does not let us go easily. It rips and tears, drags and suffocates. My fingers dig into his arm, barely able to feel the scorching heat of his skin, but I hold on. If I let go, I die.

I barely register the moment he surges upwards.

Light bursts through the suffocating dark, blinding me. Air. A desperate, choking gasp tears from my throat, but it is not enough.

Not enough.

The river crashes into us again, pulling us under, tumbling our bodies through the chaos of thrashing currents. My head smashes into something, a rock? Pain explodes, but there's no time, no air, no breath.

The surface explodes around us.

Naranus roars, his voice ripping through the night as he drags me from the river's jaws. He fights the current, forces his way toward the banks, his wings limp, useless in the water, but his strength is inhuman.

I cough violently, choking, my body convulsing against him. He holds me tighter.

"Breathe," he snarls, voice dark and guttural, raw with command. "Damn you, Eryss,

breathe.”

My body obeys. A ragged, gasping inhale. Then another.

The second we break onto the shallows, he hauls me into his arms. My vision is blurred, my body weak, but I am aware of every place our skin touches. The burning heat of him, the tremor in his grip.

He is shaking.

Naranus. The unbreakable.

He trembles.

He collapses onto the damp stones of the riverbank, cradling me in his lap, his hands gripping me too tightly. His breath isn't steady, isn't calm. It's ragged, wild. Like a beast on the edge of losing control.

I force my eyes open, my body still too weak, but I need to see him.

Golden eyes burn into me.

There is fury in them.

Fury like an inferno, searing and scorching, all-consuming. But beneath it, deeper, buried under layers of rage and control, is something else. Something we don't want to delve into.

His fingers tighten on my skin, claws pricking, but I don't flinch. I can't. I feel everything. The raw power of him, the sheer dominance of his presence. And the way his grip does not waver.

I swallow, my throat raw. “You?—”

“Never do that again.” His voice is low, dark, vibrating with something primal. “Never. If you fall, you scream for me. Do you understand, Eryss?”

I shake my head, my voice hoarse. “You can’t always?—”

He growls.

Deep, guttural.

The sound reverberates through my bones, into my chest, down into my stomach. His grip on me shifts, tightens, possessive.

"You think I can't?" His golden eyes gleam, predatory, molten. His wings twitch, useless and broken, but he cages me against him with just his body. "You think I won't? If you die, it will be by my hands. Not theirs."

The words shouldn’t send heat curling low in my belly. They shouldn’t make my chest tighten, my breath falter.

But his voice is like gravel and fire, rough with unspoken things. Things I do not want to think.

I glare at him, swallowing down the madness twisting in my chest. “Let go.”

He doesn’t.

Instead, his fingers trace my throat.

Slow. Deliberate.

I shudder. It's not gentle. Not soft. There is nothing soft about him. The touch is a warning.

"You almost died." His voice is gravel, deep enough to shake the ground. "You would have been torn apart. Your body crushed. You think I would let that happen?"

A chill races down my spine, but it isn't fear.

I should push him away. I should fight.

His fingers brush lower, over my collarbone, down my arm, tracing the bruises forming from his grip.

"No one can you away from me, Eryss," he murmurs, a whisper of something feral. "They'll have to break me to pieces first, destroy my body, and even then, I'll haunt them every moment of their life and the lifetimes to come."

My heart pounds, my pulse hammering beneath his fingers.

I have spent my entire life fearing him. Hating him.

But this?

This is not hate.

This is not fear.

This is beyond anything I thought I will ever feel.

26

NARANUS

The taste of death is still in my mouth. The ghost of it lingers on my skin, seeps into my bones. I almost lost her.

I stare at the woman cradled in my arms, her breath shuddering, her body trembling against mine. She is alive. But I don't believe it. It's not enough that I'm holding her.

My hands tighten around her, claws digging into soft, bruised flesh. Proof. I need proof that she's here. That she is real. That the raging torrent didn't rip her away, didn't shatter her fragile body against the jagged river rocks.

Her lashes flicker, damp from the water, dark strands of her hair clinging to her face, her neck, her lips. Those lips, parted slightly, lips that have defied me, cursed me, threatened me. Lips that are still warm.

I should let go.

I should force distance between us, keep that damnable chasm of control between what I am and what she is.

But I can't.

Something inside me is unleashed. The thing I have kept buried beneath layers of brutality, of restraint, of relentless, iron-fisted self-control.

She almost died. I went feral.

My thumb brushes her cheek, over the purpling mark forming there, the wound where she struck the rocks. She could have died. I see it again, the way she fell, the soil crumbling beneath her feet, her expression caught in that single, heart-wrenching second of terror before she vanished into the abyss.

I see her falling, over and over.

I hear the ragged scream I tore from my own throat.

She doesn't look away from me now. Her hands press weakly against my chest, not pushing, not resisting, just there. Just touching.

"Say it," I growl. My voice is guttural, ripped raw from my chest. "Say you almost died."

Her throat moves in a swallow, her pulse fluttering, frantic beneath my fingers.

"Eryss." I murmur her name like a curse, like a prayer, like a thing I want to own. "Say it."

She parts her lips, but no words come.

I bare my teeth, low and dangerous. "Coward."

Her eyes blaze, igniting like embers catching fire.

"There you are." I murmur the words as I tilt her chin higher, forcing her to meet my gaze. She isn't broken. Even with the bruises, the exhaustion, the remnants of near-death still clinging to her skin, she is still her.

I want her. I have always wanted her.

From the moment she stepped into my stronghold, spine straight, eyes burning with fury, hands shackled, I have wanted to shatter her. Break her down, watch her struggle, watch her fight me.

I never wanted her to fall.

Her fingers tighten against me. “You’re hurting me.”

I don’t let go.

I pull her closer. Close enough to feel every tremor rippling through her body, the way her pulse races against my skin, the way her breath stutters, just once.

She glares. And it does something to me.

“You’re hurting me,” she says again, slower this time, deliberate.

I release her wrist, but not her. I never let go of her. My hand slides up, over her throat, to her jaw.

“Good,” I whisper, low and dark. “Maybe you’ll finally learn.”

Her eyes flash. She hates that I speak to her like this. That I touch her like this. That she responds to me like this.

But she does.

Her breath catches. Not in fear.

In anticipation.

I don't let myself think. I don't let myself hesitate. Hesitation is weakness. And I will not be weak with her.

I crush my mouth to hers.

Eryss gasps or maybe it's me. Maybe it's the both of us, the collision of two forces that should never meet.

The taste of her is fire, defiance, survival. She is alive beneath me, against me, with me. My hands tighten in her hair, pulling her head back, forcing her to take the kiss I give her.

She responds with rage.

Her fingers clutch my shoulders, nails digging into flesh, dragging, pulling. Her body molds against mine, heat and fury, tension and resistance.

She doesn't surrender.

She fights.

It makes me hungry.

The kiss turns vicious. Tongues tangling, breath stolen, bodies pressed so damn close I could consume her.

She shoves me back.

I let her.

Barely.

We break apart, both breathing hard.

She stares at me, stunned, wild, shaking.

I bare my teeth, voice a dark snarl. “You almost died, Eryss.”

Her chest rises and falls, lips swollen, breath ragged.

I take her jaw again, tilting her chin, forcing her eyes to stay locked on mine.

“If you ever fall again,” I murmur, my voice like a blade sliding through flesh, “I don’t know what I’ll do.”

Her breath is a shudder against my lips.

She kisses me back.

This time, it is inevitable.

27

ERYSS

The river rages. Wild and relentless. It carves through the land, just as he carves through me, unyielding, untamable, too much.

The storm of what just happened still pulses between us. The chaos. The near loss. The kiss. My head's still reeling from the intensity of it.

His arms are locked around me like chains, his breath fierce against my ear. I don't fight him. I should. I want to. But there's something in the way he holds me, like he's seconds from unraveling. Like if he lets go, he'll lose something vital.

My chest rises and falls against his, too fast, too sharp. Water drips from my hair, clings to my skin. I should be shivering from the cold, but I'm burning. Inside. Out. Everywhere he touches.

I tilt my head up, meeting his gaze in the flickering silver moonlight. Molten gold eyes trap me, searing, demanding, furious. His grip tightens on my waist, talons scraping lightly, a reminder of what he is. What he could do.

I arch an eyebrow. "Are you going to kill me, then?" My voice is silk over steel.

His lips curl, not quite a smirk. Not quite anything soft. "You think I'd save you just to spill your blood a moment later?"

“You’re unpredictable.”

“And you’re reckless.”

A challenge. A warning. A mistake.

I should pull away. Instead, I press my palms to his chest, feeling the unsteady thrum beneath thick muscle. He’s still breathing hard. Not from the fight. Not from exhaustion.

From me.

His fingers flex on my waist, his restraint a living, trembling thing.

“This shouldn’t have happened.” I whisper the lie between us.

He leans in, the dangerous heat of him coiling around me like another kind of shackle. “Then why are you still here?”

My nails dig into him, daring him to close the distance. “I don’t have anywhere else to be.”

Lightning crackles through the sky. The water rushes over the rocks, roaring with its own untamed fury, mirroring the madness in my veins.

Then he does the one thing he shouldn’t. The one thing I never thought he would.

He kisses me. Again.

It isn’t gentle. It isn’t slow. It’s destruction wrapped in silk and teeth, a war fought between lips and tongues. He devours me, punishes me, lays claim to every single

breath I have left.

I don't fight him.

I kiss him back with everything I have.

A clash of need. A violent surrender.

My fingers grab onto his almost stone back, sharp tugs that pull a growl from his throat. His hands, massive and rough, roam over my soaked dress, tearing fabric, seeking skin. My back presses against the slick rocks, the heat of his body pinning me there, the cool stone a sharp contrast to the fire he ignites inside me.

A gasp catches in my throat as his mouth trails down my jaw, my throat. His fangs scrape lightly, a warning. My pulse stutters beneath them. He lingers. A moment too long. A hesitation.

"Do it," I whisper.

His body shudders, a beast warring with itself.

"Eryss—"

I dig my nails into his shoulders, eyes burning into his. "You want me? Then take me."

Something snaps.

The air between us is electric, charged with a raw, primal energy that threatens to consume us both.

His molten gold eyes darken, the storm within them swirling with a hunger that matches my own. His breath hitches, and for a moment, I think he might pull away, might retreat into the shadows of his restraint.

But then his lips crash into mine again, harder, fiercer, as if he's trying to erase every doubt, every boundary that stands between us.

His hands, rough and calloused, slide down my sides, gripping my hips with a possessiveness that sends a shiver down my spine. The thin fabric of my dress clings to my skin, soaked and nearly transparent, offering no barrier between us.

He tears at it with a growl, the sound vibrating through my chest, and I feel the cool night air kiss my exposed flesh. His mouth follows, hot and demanding, leaving a trail of lava in its wake.

"Oh, Naranus," I moan as I cling to him, his skin warm.

I arch into him, my body betraying every rational thought, every ounce of resistance I should have. My hands roam over the hard planes of his back, feeling the tension coiled in his muscles, the power that lies just beneath his skin.

He's a force of nature, untamed and wild, and I'm caught in his storm, unable, no, unwilling to escape.

His lips find the curve of my neck, and I gasp as his teeth graze my skin, sending a jolt of pleasure through me.

His tongue soothes the sting, and I can feel the rumble of his growl against my throat. "You're playing with fire, Eryss," he murmurs, his voice low and dangerous.

"Then burn me," I breathe, my voice trembling with need.

His hands slide lower, gripping the back of my thighs, and he lifts me effortlessly, pressing me against the rough surface of the rocks. My legs wrap around his waist instinctively, pulling him closer, feeling the hard length of his cock pressing against me through the fabric that's covering his privates.

The sensation is maddening, and I grind against him, desperate for more.

"Eryss," he moans as if on reproach but his hold on my tightens, almost bruising in its intensity.

He groans, a deep, guttural sound that sends a thrill through me. "I might not die under your dagger, little bride but in between your legs," he growls, his hands tightening on my hips.

"Then let me be your ruin," I whisper, my voice a challenge, a plea.

His eyes lock onto mine, and for a moment, the world stands still. The river rages beside us, the storm rages above us, but all I can see is him. All I can feel is him. And then, with a growl that shakes me to my core, he claims me.

"Damn it all," he curses before claiming me and I shudder.

His cock slides into me with a force that steals my breath, filling me completely, stretching me in ways I didn't know I could be stretched.

I cry out, my nails digging into his shoulders as he begins to move, each thrust driving me closer to the edge. He's relentless, his pace punishing, and I meet him thrust for thrust, my body writhing against his.

"Naranus!" I scream, my voice hoarse as I shake in need and ecstasy.

The pleasure builds, a coil tightening deep within me, and I can feel myself unraveling, piece by piece. His lips find mine again, swallowing my moans, his tongue tangling with mine in a dance as fierce and wild as the raging waters around us.

His hands grip my hips, guiding me, controlling me, and I let him, surrendering completely to the chaos he brings.

“Naranus, Naranus!” I jolt as my eyes roll back.

“Come with me,” he roars, holding onto the rock behind me and shattering it with force like how he shatters my mind into smithereens with his final, brutal thrust.

My body convulses around him, waves of pleasure crashing over me, pulling me under. He follows me to the zenith, his roar muffled against my skin as he comes inside me, his body trembling with the force of his release.

There is no tenderness. Only need. Desperation.

A battle.

A surrender.

I don’t know where I end and he begins.

The river rages beside us, but its storm is nothing compared to this.

The world settles. The night hums with life, the rush of the river steady, grounding. His body is still half-draped over mine, heavy, solid, real. His breathing slows, but his hands stay on me, like he’s not quite willing to let go.

I stare up at the stars peeking through the canopy, trying to catch my breath, trying to pretend I don't feel, everything.

Regret? No.

Fear? Maybe.

This changes everything.

I shift slightly, muscles protesting, the cool night air licking against my overheated skin. His grip tightens, and I glance at him. His eyes are half-lidded, unreadable, but there's something dark in them, something possessive.

I hate that it thrills me.

I swallow hard. "This doesn't mean anything."

His golden gaze flickers, unreadable. "No. It doesn't."

Liar.

But I don't call him on it.

Because I'm a liar, too.

28

NARANUS

The scent of rain and earth clings to us as we trudge through the thick underbrush, the night pressing against my back like a second skin. The stronghold is close. I can taste it, home, familiar ground, a place where I can keep her safe .

The fall from the cliff actually helped us to come back to the stronghold faster.

If she would just stop fighting me every damn step of the way.

Eryss walks beside me, her expression hard as flint, her shoulders stiff, her silence a blade pressing against my ribs. She hasn't said much since the fall, since I pulled her from the river's grip and warmed her body with mine. But it's not silence from shock or exhaustion. No, this is a storm brewing, a hurricane ready to break.

Fine. Let it come. I welcome the fight.

"You need to open your damn eyes, purna," I say, breaking the silence. "Your sisters if that's what they are—are playing a game you don't see."

Her head snaps toward me, eyes burning with a fire that should have died in the cold waters. "Stop. Sowing. Discord." Each word is razor-sharp, dripping with warning. "They saved me. They came for me. That is all that matters."

I laugh, sharp and humorless. "Oh, you think that's all that matters? That Catalina

didn't misfire that magic on purpose?"

She stops walking. Dead in her tracks.

I turn to face her, crossing my arms, waiting.

"You will not stand here," she hisses, stepping closer, her voice barely contained, "and throw suspicion on my family."

"They're not your blood."

"They are my everything ."

I tilt my head, studying her. Her jaw is clenched, her hands curled into fists, her chest rising and falling too fast. Beautiful, enraged, wrong .

"You think you mean the same to them?" I step into her space, forcing her to lift her chin. "You think they won't betray you? Or have they already?"

The moment stretches, thick and heady, the tension between us no longer just anger.

It's something darker.

Something worse .

She shoves me. Hard. "You don't get to say that to me. Not after everything. Not when you don't understand what it's like to be alone."

I catch her wrist before she can retreat, yanking her against me. She gasps, her body colliding with mine. The impact is a shock, a burst of heat where there should be nothing but fury.

“I understand everything , Eryss,” I murmur, pressing her back against the rough bark of a tree. “I understand that you are blind to what’s right in front of you.”

She glares at me, breath hitching as my grip tightens. “Let me go.”

My claws curl lightly against her skin, not enough to hurt. Just enough to remind her, I hold her now . Just like I have since the moment she stepped into my world, since she tried to kill me, since she nearly died .

“Say you trust them.”

“I do.”

I lean in, my lips a whisper from her ear. “Say it again.”

Her breathing turns erratic, fingers twitching against my chest as if she wants to push me away but can’t quite force herself to move.

I inhale her scent, rich and deep, magic lying dormant beneath her skin, taunting me with its absence.

I press my forehead against hers. “Say it and mean it.”

Her hands tremble. Her pulse is erratic. She is losing this fight, the truth bleeding out from the cracks.

“ You bastard ,” she breathes.

My lips brush her jaw, teasing, not quite kissing. Just enough to make her feel the weight of my control.

“Say it, Eryss.”

Before she can respond, the sky trembles with the sound of wings.

I release her instantly, my body twisting toward the sound, my claws extending. Eryss barely has time to catch her breath before I push her behind me, my wings flaring despite the ache in my muscles.

Shadows descend through the trees, massive shapes cutting through the canopy, fast and precise. My body coils, prepared to fight, but then.

“ Lord Naranus! ”

Relief barrels through me like a battering ram.

I lower my stance as the figure lands a few feet away, his large frame bowing slightly, his wings tucking in. A familiar face. A trusted warrior.

Thryx. He’s back from his mission.

The tension in my spine unknots slightly, but I don’t lower my guard completely.

The warrior steps forward, his sharp eyes flicking between me and Eryss, taking in our soaked clothes, our ragged forms. Then his lips twitch. “You look like shit.”

I grunt, rubbing a hand over my jaw. “Feel worse.”

Thryx snorts, shaking his head before turning his attention fully to Eryss. His gaze sharpens. Curious. He knows what she is, what she was meant to do, and yet he says nothing about it. Smart male.

“You were reported dead,” he tells me.

I arch a brow. “And you thought you’d find my corpse here?”

He smirks, crossing his arms. “Figured you were too damn stubborn to die.”

I roll my shoulders, exhaustion creeping in. “How bad is it back home?”

His expression darkens, amusement bleeding away. “Bad.”

I had hoped the mess we left behind would still be contained, that my warriors could hold the stronghold. But if Thryx came looking for me, it means things are unraveling faster than I thought.

Thryx gestures toward the trees. “We need to go. There are still rogue factions moving through the area, searching for you. If they find you with her—” He cuts himself off, his gaze flicking to Eryss again.

I stiffen.

“If they find her,” I say, my voice steel, “they won’t leave alive .”

Thryx nods once. “Then we move.”

I glance back at Eryss. She’s watching us, shoulders squared, expression unreadable. But something flickers in her eyes, something almost hesitant.

I don’t like it.

I dislike that she still doesn’t fully understand that the only people she can trust are the ones standing beside her right now.

I don't like that Catalina's magic was the last thing she felt before she fell.

I hate that the thought of her betraying me, killing me, no longer makes me angry.

It makes me desperate .

We need to get back. Because I need answers.

I need her alive long enough to get them.

I motion for Thryx to take the lead, stepping in beside Eryss, close enough that when I speak, only she can hear me.

“This conversation isn't over.”

She exhales slowly, her voice quiet but firm. “I didn't think it would be.”

Good.

When this is over, when we make it back, I'm going to rip the truth from her.

One way or another. I'm going to make her see.

NARANUS

The stronghold is bleeding.

Smoke curls through the sky, thick and cloying, carrying the scent of scorched stone and flesh. The gates, torn from their hinges, lie in twisted, broken pieces, the massive slabs of black rock shattered as if by a god's wrath. The walls, once unyielding, now bear jagged wounds, their once-impenetrable defense crumbling under the force of an enemy that dared to strike my domain.

Thryx lands first, his wings flaring as his feet strike the rubble-strewn ground. His body tenses, his nostrils flaring as he takes in the devastation. Eryss stiffens beside me, her breath shallow, fingers twitching toward her nonexistent weapons. The absence of her magic is a weight pressing between us. A vulnerability. One I have no time to fix.

My own feet hit the ground, pain radiating through my injured wings, but I barely register it. I move forward, stepping over debris, my claws curling into my palms as fury rises, hot and undeniable.

“Who did this?” The growl rumbles deep, vibrating through my ribs. I ask even if I have an idea who. The moment they attacked me, I knew they set their sights here.

Thryx strides ahead, his jaw clenched. “Rogues. Traitors. They came in the night, used dark magics, tore through our defenses like they had help from the inside.” His

gaze flicks to Eryss for the briefest of moments before snapping back to me.

Heat surges in my chest, molten rage licking up my spine. “How many dead?”

“Too many.”

The words slam into me harder than any blade.

A guttural snarl escapes my throat as I stalk toward what remains of the courtyard. Bodies litter the ground, my warriors, my kin, felled in brutal fashion. Some were torn apart, others burnt beyond recognition. The taste of their loss is bitter on my tongue, the weight of it settling in my chest like a brand.

Eryss hesitates beside me. Her face is unreadable, but her shoulders are rigid, her breath shaky.

I turn to Thryx. “Where are the survivors?”

“In the inner chambers,” he says, eyes shadowed. “Some tried to fight back, but the attack was too fast. Too precise.” He hesitates. “They weren’t just looking to destroy. They were looking for you.”

My claws flex. “They failed.”

Thryx exhales sharply. “Barely. If we hadn’t gotten the younger inside in time, if the barriers hadn’t held long enough...” His voice trails off, but I hear the words he doesn’t say.

This could have been worse.

It doesn’t matter. The fact that it happened at all is enough.

I pivot, my gaze cutting to Eryss. She stands at the edge of the destruction, her arms wrapped around herself, her expression carefully blank. But her eyes—those damn eyes—are filled with too many warring emotions.

“You don’t seem surprised,” I murmur.

She meets my gaze, chin tilting up, fire snapping in her irises. “I am. I just don’t waste time reacting to what’s already happened.”

A low, humorless chuckle leaves me. “You mean you expected this.”

She stays silent.

“Your sisters,” I say, stepping closer, voice dropping. “You think they weren’t involved?”

Her eyes narrow. “Stop.”

I don’t. I grip her chin, tilting her face up. “One of them let you fall . And then we come back to this? You don’t see the pattern, purna?”

Her lips part, but no sound comes out.

Something cracks in her mask, just for a breath of a second, before she jerks her head free. “I trust them.”

I lean in, my breath hot against her ear. “Then you’re a fool.”

Her entire body tenses, and the air crackles. It’s dangerous. This need to fight her, to shake her, to force her to see.

Worse, the need to kiss her again just to shut her up.

But before either of us can push further, a gargoyle limps toward us, blood dripping from his mouth.

“ My lord, ” he rasps, sinking to one knee. “The traitor...he escaped.”

Ice knifes through my veins.

I whip toward him. “Who?”

The gargoyle coughs, spitting blood onto the stones. “ Drenir. ”

The name slams into me, a wound that hasn't healed ripping wide open.

Drenir. My second-in-command. My most trusted warrior .

The one who betrayed me.

I exhale slowly, forcing my fury into something lethal, something I can use . “Where did he go?”

The soldier shakes his head. “Vanished. His magic...darkened. He had help .”

I glance at Eryss.

She stiffens, lips parting in disbelief. “ Don't. ”

My jaw flexes. “You don't get to tell me what to believe. Not when your kind helped make this happen.”

“Don’t lump my kind with whatever enemies you have.”

I advance on her, slow and deliberate. “Enemies? Tell me, purna, when do you start seeing things for what they are? When you’re buried under the rubble with my kin? When the magic that’s shackled inside you finally cracks open and turns against me?”

Her nostrils flare. “You’re paranoid .”

“And you’re blind .”

Her fists clench, and she steps closer, her fire meeting mine, our breaths mingling.

“You think I can still kill you after you save me again and again?” she asks, voice rough, raw. She goes rigid and pale, as if the thought of it goes against every fiber of her being.

I don’t answer. I can’t . Because the truth is, I don’t believe it.

But I need to.

If I don’t, then I have to admit something far worse.

That if she did betray me, I would let her.

I would let her go, and I would still burn for her.

Thryx clears his throat. “We need to move inside. This isn’t over.”

I grit my teeth and pull back from Eryss. “No. It’s just the beginning.”

Now I have a traitor to hunt.

A purna I'm still not sure if I should protect ...or destroy .

30

ERYSS

I am going to kill him.

The heavy door slams shut, the deep clank of metal seals locking me in. The arrogant, insufferable, domineering bastard locked me in his chambers. His bedroom. I whirl, throwing my weight against the door, pounding my fists on the unyielding stone.

“You son of a— LET ME OUT!”

My screams go unanswered. No footsteps. No growling threats. Not even a mocking retort from the guards who I know are stationed outside. I shove my shoulder against the door, testing the hinges. The powerful wards woven into the walls shimmer faintly in response, their presence pressing against my skin, as if the room itself is watching me.

I am trapped.

Again.

My breaths come hard, sharp. Rage coils through my gut, hot and unwieldy. He caged me once in his fortress, let his warriors throw me to the ground, let them beat me just to test my mettle. Then he let me roam. He let me fight beside him. And now, after everything, I’m back to being his prisoner.

I storm to the window, fingers gripping the iron lattice, testing its strength. Solid. Immovable. The way out is sealed, every shadow in this cursed room laced with his control.

That bastard. That overbearing gargoyle bastard.

Time passes. I pace. I plot. I seethe.

When the door finally creaks open, I lunge before I can stop myself, ready to sink my nails into his throat, but it isn't Naranus who steps through.

Thryx stands there, his usually smug face drawn tight, his arm supporting a massive, staggering form.

Naranus.

I freeze.

He looks wrecked.

Blood, fresh and dark, seeps from his shoulder, staining the leather of his armor, his normally imposing stance off-balance. His wings hang limp, tattered from battle, his jaw clenched against what must be searing pain.

Thryx exhales hard. "He needs a healer. The stronghold's is injured." His sharp gaze lands on me. "You will help."

The demand ignites my fury all over again. "You want me to help the gargoyle who just locked me up like some fragile little?—"

"Eryss, human," Thryx snaps, his voice cutting through my rage like a blade. "He

fought Drenir.”

Something in my chest tightens.

Naranus shifts, head tilted back against the wall, as if staying upright is a struggle. His molten eyes find mine, and despite his state, bleeding, wounded, half-broken, he smirks .

“Still trapped , purna?” His voice is a gravel-dipped rasp, deep and rough. “Pacing like a caged beast?”

I want to slap him. I want to shake him for getting himself into this state. Instead, I grind my teeth and jerk my gaze to Thryx.

“What do you need?”

Thryx hands me a satchel filled with healing herbs and poultices. “Apply the paste to his wounds. Stop the bleeding. That’s all. ” His look sharpens. “Unless you’d rather let him die .”

I glare at him. “Don’t tempt me.”

But I step forward, my fingers curling around the satchel. I kneel beside the massive, bleeding idiot who still has the gall to smirk at me despite the gashes in his skin.

Carefully, I dip my fingers into the herbal paste, the sharp scent of crushed roots and moss filling my senses. I press it against the deepest wound, his shoulder. His body tenses, his abs flexing under my hand, but he makes no sound.

I try not to notice the way his heat sears into me. The way his chest rises and falls beneath my fingertips. The way his scent, dark, rich, laced with something untamed,

lingers too close to my skin.

His voice is low, rough. “You’re gentle , purna.”

I scowl. “Shut up.”

His lips twitch, but he doesn’t fight me.

I work in silence, pressing the salve into every wound, each slow pass of my fingers revealing the extent of his injuries. And that’s when I see it.

The cracks .

They’ve spread.

Not just from battle wounds. Not just the bruises and slashes marking his body. No, these are something worse .

They glow faintly beneath the surface of his skin, fractured lines of light running along his forearms, curling over his ribs. As if his body is breaking . As if something inside him is tearing apart, piece by piece.

I swallow hard. “This...this is the curse, right?”

His eyes flicker open, molten gold locking onto me. He watches me, unreadable, his gaze tracking my movements, my careful touch.

I hadn’t even realized I was being careful.

Before I can pull away, his hand snaps up, fingers locking around my wrist.

I suck in a sharp breath.

“Stay,” he rasps.

I shake my head. “I?—”

He tugs, and I lose my balance, toppling onto his chest with a muffled curse.

Heat pours from him, his body solid and unyielding beneath mine, his grip still tight on my wrist. I struggle, trying to push up, but he’s too strong , even injured.

“Let. Me. Go,” I hiss.

He doesn’t. Instead, his head tilts, his nose brushing along my throat, inhaling deep. My breath stops .

His voice is hoarse. “You smell like fire.”

My entire body shudders.

He shifts beneath me, his legs trapping mine, his arm curling around my waist, locking me against him. Caging me.

I shove at his chest, but my strength is useless against his sheer mass . “Naranus.”

His response is a low, guttural sound of contentment.

“Stop. I?—”

“Stay.” His grip tightens, his words a command that rumbles through my bones.

I should fight him. I should shove my dagger into his side, break his hold, remind him who I am .

But I don't.

I freeze .

Slowly, far too slowly, my body betrays me.

The heat of him, the steady rhythm of his chest, the strength beneath my fingertips, it lulls me. Encloses me in warmth I haven't felt in so long.

My breathing evens out. My muscles loosen.

His grip doesn't falter. His warmth doesn't fade.

Before I can think about it, before I can fight , my eyes slip shut.

I fall asleep, on top of my captor .

31

NARANUS

There's something warm on my chest. Something soft .

I wake with Eryss in my arms.

Her breath feathers against my collarbone, her delicate weight pressing into my chest.
Dangerous.

Every instinct screams at me to push her away, to remind her, remind myself , that she is the enemy. That I should not crave the shape of her against me, the way her fingers are curled into the hard lines of my torso as if she belongs there.

But I don't move.

I don't push her away.

Instead, I breathe her in.

The fire that burns in her magicless body is still there, trapped beneath flesh and bone, smoldering. A wild thing leashed. She doesn't trust me, and she shouldn't. But gods help me , my grip tightens anyway. I can feel the steady drum of her heartbeat, the faintest shift of her hips against my thigh. She is warm, alive, despite everything trying to take her from me.

I shut my eyes for just a moment. Just one moment more.

The door slams open.

My body moves before my mind catches up.

Eryss is wrenched from me as I snarl, rolling us both off the bed. My wings flare, my body still sluggish from my injuries, but my claws are up, bared, ready to rip whoever dared enter.

Thryx.

He stands there, unflinching. “Warriors are inside the stronghold.”

I freeze.

Eryss stiffens in my grip, her fingers curling against my chest as she tries to twist free. My pulse spikes, not because of the fight waiting beyond these walls, but because of her.

I release her.

She steps back, breathing uneven, but she doesn’t run. Not this time.

Thryx’s golden gaze flickers to her before returning to me. “Drenir’s men broke through the southern watch.” He tosses me a set of clean armor. “They came looking for you.”

Of course they did.

I grit my teeth and force myself to stand, ignoring the stiff pull of barely-healed

wounds. “How many?”

“Dozens. Maybe more.” Thryx’s jaw ticks. “And they’re not alone.”

That has my full attention. “What else?”

He hesitates.

I hate hesitation.

Thryx exhales sharply, as if already anticipating my wrath. “They brought something new . Magic, strong magic.” He glances at Eryss. “It’s Purna magic.”

The world slows.

I turn to Eryss, watching the way her face locks up .

She knew.

I step toward her, rage licking up my spine. “You knew about this.”

Her jaw tightens, but she doesn’t retreat. “I didn’t.”

“Liar.” My voice is deadly soft. “Your sisters are working with them. Aren’t they?”

“I don’t know ?—”

Another lie.

She wants to believe they wouldn’t betray her, but deep down, she already suspects. I see it in her hesitation, in the way her throat moves as she swallows.

I stalk forward. “You think I’m just going to let you waltz out there with your precious little kin and whisper your way into my enemies’ ears?”

She snarls up at me. “If you think I’d ever betray you—” She clamps her mouth shut.

There it is.

She doesn’t even realize she just admitted it.

The implication of that admission slams into me like a stone wall.

Thryx shifts at the door. “We must not waste time.”

No, we don’t.

I yank my armor over my head, wincing as it grates against my raw skin. My body protests, but I don’t have the luxury of weakness. Not today.

Eryss watches me, her breathing a little too quick, her hands clenched at her sides. She’s trying to decide something, trying to understand what’s happening inside me, inside us.

I don’t give her the chance.

I step closer, leaning down until my mouth is level with her ear. “You stay behind me.”

Her fingers twitch. “I don’t take orders from you.”

“You will if you want to live.”

Thryx clears his throat. “I hate to interrupt this touching moment, but we really need to?—”

The entire stronghold shakes.

Stone splinters, deep booms echoing through the halls.

I shove Eryss toward Thryx. “ Get her out of here. ”

Her rage is instant. “ You are not locking me up again ? — ”

But then we hear it.

The sound that stills us both.

The sharp, hollowed-out whistle of something unnatural, a scream woven into the air itself.

Eryss pales. “That’s?—”

Magic.

Purna magic.

I slam open the door and step into the chaos.

The halls are lined with battle . Gargoyles are locked in combat, my warriors clashing against a force that shouldn’t be here .

At the center?

Catalina.

My eyes burn, my lips curling into a snarl.

The Purna stands among the wreckage, magic coiling around her fingertips, a halo of eerie white light shimmering against the soot-stained air. She sees me. Sees Eryss.

And smiles.

She lifts her hand and the magic erupts .

It slams through the stronghold, splitting stone, sending my warriors flying .

I move , snatching Eryss and pulling her behind me, wings wrapping around her as debris rains from above.

Her breath shudders against my back. I feel her heartbeat spike.

She wants to believe Catalina would never.

But she knows better now.

The stronghold rumbles again.

I drag Eryss forward, shoving her toward Thryx. “Get her to safety.”

“No—”

I ignore her protests. “Thryx, if you let her get caught in this?—”

Thryx swears but nods. “I won’t .”

Eryss thrashes against my grip. “Naranus?—”

I yank her close, my face inches from hers. “I’ll deal with your sister. You deal with your conscience .”

Before she can argue, I shove her toward Thryx.

I turn to Catalina.

And let the beast out.

32

ERYSS

Something is wrong .

I feel it twisting through the air, coiling around Catalina like an invisible chain, binding her will, tainting her magic.

Her attacks are precise, too precise, as if guided by an unseen hand. Magic surges from her fingertips, an unnatural, corrupted white fire splitting through the battlefield. She isn't fighting like her . Catalina's magic is pure , wild, yes, but never tainted . This? This reeks of something else . Something else .

Naranus doesn't hesitate. He charges through the wreckage, claws unsheathed, fangs bared in lethal determination. His molten eyes lock onto Catalina, and I fear what he'll do.

He won't stop.

Thryx tightens his grip around my waist, his powerful wings beating hard against the smoky air as he lifts me from the ground.

"Let me go!" I thrash against him, my fingers clawing at his arms, my legs kicking against empty space. "Thryx, I need to stop them!"

His grip tightens. "Naranus ordered me to get you out of here, and I'm not disobeying

him.”

“Then you’re an idiot! ” I snap, throwing my head back. The crown of my skull cracks against his jaw. He curses, momentarily losing his grip, just enough for me to twist .

I grab onto his wings, yanking him sideways. We spin in the air, and my momentum sends us both plummeting back to the earth.

Thryx roars as we hit the ground. He twists mid-fall, using his massive frame to cushion the impact, his body slamming into the rubble. A sharp crunch echoes as his arm takes most of the damage.

I roll off him, breathless, my pulse hammering.

Thryx groans, shifting, trying to push himself up.

“Damn it, Eryss?—”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, then bolt.

I run , dodging through the chaos, weaving past gargoyle warriors, skidding over broken stone, the scent of scorched air thick in my lungs.

Catalina.

I have to stop her.

She stands in the center of the battlefield, her body rigid, her eyes glowing . Her fingers twitch, and another wave of violent magic erupts from her hands.

Naranus dodges, his wings snapping open as he rolls mid-air, the blast of energy barely missing him. His claws scrape against the ground as he lands, eyes burning, tracking her movements, preparing to strike.

“No— STOP! ”

I throw myself between them.

Naranus halts , his claws inches from my throat.

Catalina staggers.

“Eryss,” she breathes, her voice raw, distant, wrong .

I whip toward her. “ This isn’t you! ”

She shudders, her body trembling, magic still writhing around her fingers.

“You have to fight it!” I plead, stepping closer. “ Something is controlling you! ”

Her lips part. “I... I don’t...” Her face contorts in agony , hands flying to her head as if something is burrowing into her skull.

A cold whisper slithers through the battlefield.

Oh, but she belongs to me now.

The voice is like ice, like poison curling through the wind.

It isn’t Catalina’s voice.

Naranus growls low, his body stiffening. His wings snap out, shielding me instinctively.

Catalina screams.

Magic explodes from her, and suddenly, I see it.

Not just her , but the thing behind her.

A presence. A shadow clinging to her magic, twisting it, threading its will into hers. A puppet master , its tendrils buried inside my sister's mind, forcing her hands to move, her lips to part, her magic to destroy .

I lunge forward.

Catalina's eyes lock onto me .

Something flashes in them. A flicker of recognition.

“Catalina,” I say, my voice steady. “You are stronger than this.”

Her breathing is ragged . Her hands tremble.

“I can't ,” she chokes. “It won't let me?—”

“Yes, you can ,” I press, stepping closer.

Naranus growls behind me, but he doesn't stop me.

“Catalina.” My voice lowers . “I am here. I am real. ”

Her hands shake violently.

“Feel me . Not it. ”

The magic around her flickers.

The shadow writhes, as if sensing its hold slipping.

It lashes out .

A whip of energy snaps toward me.

Catalina blocks it .

The magic collides into her instead. She screams in agony, her body convulsing as the thing inside her fights back .

“No— fight it! ” I grab her wrists.

Tears streak down her cheeks. “It’s inside me.”

“Then push it out! ”

She trembles violently.

Then she screams .

Magic shatters around us, the force of it knocking me back .

A wave of white-hot energy erupts from her body, the ground splitting beneath us.
The shadow screeches.

And suddenly, it's gone .

Catalina collapses.

I lunge , catching her before she hits the ground.

Her body is limp , her breathing shallow, her face pale as death.

“Catalina,” I whisper. “Stay with me.”

She stirs weakly. Her lashes flutter open, her gaze clear .

“Eryss...” A weak smile. “I... I heard you.”

A choked breath leaves me.

I clutch her tighter, my heart slamming against my ribs.

Behind me, I hear Naranus move, his presence radiating heat .

“She's safe,” I whisper, my throat tight. “She's free.”

But where is Amelia ?

And who —or what —was controlling my sister?

I barely have time to process it before the sound of beating wings fills the air.

More enemies are coming.

NARANUS

The battlefield reeks of blood and magic, a heady mix of smoke and death. I should have never let her stay. Should have dragged her away kicking and screaming if necessary. And now, she's here again, standing in the wreckage, fragile, vulnerable, yet looking at me like I'm the one who needs saving.

I could wring her delicate little neck.

But there's no time to argue.

The sound of wings fills the air. Heavy, powerful beats. The enemy is coming.

Thryx crashes onto the ground beside me, wings torn, blood trailing from a deep gash across his chest. His breathing is ragged, but his eyes are sharp. "We need to move," he growls, wiping blood from his mouth. "I'll cover the escape."

"No," I snarl. "We go together."

Thryx's lips curl in a wry, bloody smile. "You always were a stubborn bastard."

I turn to Eryss, already anticipating the argument brewing in her expression. Her lips are parted, her breathing sharp and uneven, her eyes flickering between me and Catalina's unconscious body.

She knows what I'm going to say.

She won't accept it.

"No." She shakes her head, stepping closer. "I'm not leaving her behind."

I clench my jaw. "She's a liability. "

Eryss's face twists in fury. "She is my sister ?—"

"She's the reason you almost died ."

Her hands tremble at her sides, but she refuses to back down. "That wasn't her fault! You saw it! She was controlled! "

More wing beats.

Closer.

The enemy is swarming .

Thryx is still standing, barely, but the way his body sways tells me he won't be for much longer.

"We can't carry dead weight," I grind out, my voice like gravel. "We need to go now."

Eryss clenches her fists. "Then leave me behind too."

My entire body locks up.

I snarl , stepping into her space, fists curling around her arms. “Don’t— test me, purna.”

Her eyes are wild, desperate , lips trembling.

She breaks .

Tears spill down her cheeks.

Not loud. Not a sob. Just silent .

She hasn’t cried once since I took her. Not when she was chained. Not when she was beaten in the training grounds. Not when she was thrown off a cliff .

But now, with her sister helpless at our feet, she breaks .

Something inside me cracks.

It shouldn’t matter.

But it does.

Before I can think better of it, I shove Catalina’s limp body into another warrior’s arms. “Take her.”

Eryss gasps, a small, broken sound.

Thryx scowls. “You’re seriously ?—”

“ GO! ” I bellow. “Move, now!”

The ground shakes as our enemies descend .

I grab Eryss, hauling her against my chest. “Hold on .”

She grips me tightly, arms wrapping around my neck as I launch into the sky.

Thryx follows along with the remaining gargoyles. One of them is holding Catalina limp in his arms, along with two other surviving warriors.

We take to the night , the wind tearing at our wounds, the scent of blood thick.

I look back only once .

Thryx is covering our escape. He’s alone , standing atop the crumbling stronghold, his stance firm, his massive wings spread wide as he roars a challenge at the approaching army.

My brother . My warrior .

Suddenly, an explosion .

The entire stronghold erupts in a blast of fire and stone, a monstrous cloud of debris swallowing Thryx and everything in its wake.

“THRYX!”

I roar , my body twisting midair, lunging toward the flames.

But Eryss screams , her fingers digging into my shoulders.

“ Naranus, stop! ”

I freeze, wings shuddering against the wind.

The fire consumes everything .

No one, nothing , could have survived that.

Thryx is gone .

The enemy? Gone with him.

It was his plan all along.

My chest burns . My vision blurs, red-rimmed, rage boiling in my blood.

He gave us a chance.

I had to leave him.

I don't even realize I'm shaking until Eryss presses a trembling hand to my cheek.

"Naranus," she whispers, her voice so soft . "I'm... I'm so sorry."

My heart shatters in my chest.

But I don't let it show.

I lock my jaw, swallow the grief, and look ahead.

We're almost to the sanctuary .

A place prepared for times like this, hidden in the mountains, protected by magic. A

place where I can regroup. Plan. Revenge.

I will not let Thryx's sacrifice be in vain.

The war isn't over.

It has just begun.

34

ERYSS

The walls of the sanctuary feel suffocating . Thick, impenetrable stone carved deep into the mountain, layered with magic to keep the outside world out . I should feel safe here. I should feel grateful .

Instead, I feel trapped .

Catalina still hasn't woken up. Her breathing is steady, her body still warm, but she doesn't stir . It's like she's locked somewhere deep inside herself, tangled in invisible chains, and I can't break them, feeling helpless.

I sit by her bedside, fingers trembling as I brush damp strands of hair from her forehead.

"She's not waking up because she doesn't want to."

I snap my head up, heart pounding, and glare at the towering figure in the doorway.

Naranus stands there, his figure towering and his golden eyes dark with knowing .

I rise to my feet, squaring my shoulders. "That's not true."

He cocks his head. "Isn't it?"

I shake my head, refusing to entertain his pessimism . “She was controlled, Naranus. Someone took her mind and used her against us. She wouldn’t?—”

“It was Amelia ,” he interrupts, his voice cutting through the silence like a blade.

The words knocks me sideways.

I stare at him. “You don’t know that.”

His eyes narrow. “She’s the only one who had access to Catalina’s mind. The only one strong enough to wield magic like that without leaving a trace.”

I clench my fists, shaking my head. “No. No, that’s not true. Amelia would never?—”

“She knew where to find us,” he pushes, stepping closer, towering over me like a storm ready to break . “She knew about the mission. She knew you were meant to die. What makes you think she wasn’t ensuring it happened?”

I lunge at him, shoving hard against his chest.

He doesn’t move .

“Shut up,” I breathe. “Just shut up .”

But he doesn’t. “You’re lying to yourself.”

My chest caves in. My throat tightens .

I can’t do this.

Without another word, I turn on my heel and storm out of the chamber, his voice

ringing in my skull.

It was Amelia.

No. No.

She was my sister . My family . She wouldn't.

I shove open the door to the sanctuary, stepping into the frigid night air. The wind bites at my skin, howling through the cliffs, whispering the doubts I'm trying so desperately to silence.

I pace, heart slamming against my ribs, my mind a whirlwind of memories. Amelia's smile. Her laughter. The way she always protected me.

She wouldn't betray me.

Would she?

A rustling noise pulls me from my spiraling thoughts.

My body locks up .

Something, someone , is here.

I turn sharply, eyes scanning the tree line beyond the shimmering magic barrier.

A figure stumbles forward.

Bloodied. Weak.

Amelia.

My stomach plummets .

She looks wrecked , hair tangled, skin pale, dark bruises marring her arms. She clutches her side, panting, her steps uneven as she drags herself toward the shielded entrance of the sanctuary.

“Eryss,” she gasps , eyes wild, desperate. “Please... please help me.”

I take an instinctive step forward, my heart twisting. “Amelia...”

“Let me in.” Her hands press against the barrier, her voice breaking. “I—I barely escaped. They’re coming. We don’t have much time.”

I freeze .

Something is... wrong .

Her magic, her presence , it feels different.

Too thin . Too shaky .

The bond between us, the tether of sisterhood and magic, frays under the weight of doubt .

I swallow hard. “How did you find this place?”

She flinches. “I?—”

“You shouldn’t know where this is.” My voice hardens , suspicion curling in my gut.

“ No one should.”

Amelia stares at me and she laughs.

The sound of it, sharp, cruel, nothing like my sister, and it sends ice through my veins.

I take a step back .

“Eryss, Eryss, Eryss,” she purrs, wiping her bloodied mouth with her thumb. “You always were so slow, weren’t you?”

My stomach drops .

I shake my head. “No?—”

“Yes,” she hisses , stepping closer, eyes gleaming with something dark . “You really thought they sent you on this mission because you were the best? The most capable?”

Her lips twist .

“I told them to send you.”

The words crush me.

My lungs constrict. My hands tremble .

She, no, she’s lying .

She has to be.

“No,” I whisper.

Her grin widens.

“Oh, sweet sister.” She tilts her head. “You were in the way .”

A sharp gasp tears from my throat.

She scoffs , rolling her eyes. “The elders love you. Too much. They’d never let me ascend while you were still around, standing there like a fucking saint , so good at everything, so damn special .”

Tears burn my eyes.

My own sister ...

“You planned this,” I choke out.

Her expression softens mockingly. “Oh, Eryss.” She presses a hand to the barrier, smiling. “Don’t look so shattered .”

I lunge for her, rage burning through me, magic igniting in my blood.

Only to slam against the invisible barrier.

I can go out .

She can’t come in .

But if I step through , if I leave the sanctuary, I’ll be vulnerable .

She knows it .

She wants me to step outside.

She leans in, voice a whisper. “Come on, sister. Kill me. You want to.”

I do .

I do .

My hands shake as I press against the barrier, my nails biting into my palms. I could end this. Right here. Right now .

A strong arm wraps around my waist, yanking me back .

A growl rumbles against my ear.

“ Enough. ”

My body collides with solid heat.

Naranus.

His grip tightens, yanking me away from the threshold.

Amelia’s smirk widens as she takes a mocking step back. “Oh, look at that. Your pet monster cares .”

Naranus snarls , fangs bared .

Amelia just laughs , retreating into the darkness. “See you soon, dear sister.”

And she's gone .

I break .

A raw, shaking sob tears from my throat, my knees buckling .

Naranus catches me, his arms crushing me to his chest.

“Eryss—”

I shake my head, chest heaving , the pain unbearable.

“ She betrayed me. ” My voice breaks .

“Eryss—”

I can't calm down.

“She betrayed me,” I gasp, choking on my own tears. I'm losing my shit.

Suddenly, his mouth crashes down onto mine.

Heat. Fire. Possession.

I let him take me under .

35

NARANUS

The taste of her still lingers on my tongue, a maddening addiction I hadn't realized I'd succumbed to.

Eryss trembles beneath me, her breath sharp against my lips, her pulse wild under my palm where I hold her pinned against the cold, ancient wall of the sanctuary. She fights me, not to escape, but to feel something other than pain. And damn it, I give it to her, pressing into her, branding her with every stroke of my lips, every scrape of my fangs, every growl vibrating in my chest.

Her fingers curl into my shoulders, nails digging deep, but I don't stop. Won't stop. She needs to forget.

Forget Amelia's betrayal.

Forget that the people she trusted have used her as a pawn, just as mine have used me.

I swallow her anger, coax her to give me more, to let go of the agony and fury burning in her. I take everything, my tongue sliding against hers, my claws tightening their grip, my body pressing harder, until her desperation is a palpable thing, her every breath a surrender to this moment.

A sharp, grating cough from the entrance slams us back to reality.

I tear away with a savage snarl, my body still primed for more, my need a searing ache that only she could sate.

One of my soldiers stands at the entrance, looking thoroughly uncomfortable yet smug at the same time. “Uh—hate to interrupt whatever... that was,” he says, shifting on his feet. “But you’re going to want to see this. The purna inside is awake.”

Eryss pushes me off with more strength than necessary, her chest heaving, her lips swollen from my kiss, her eyes burning with something unreadable. She doesn’t look at me as she storms past, but her body is still shaking.

From rage. From want. From something neither of us dares name.

I wipe my mouth with my palm, exhaling roughly before following her into the sanctuary’s inner chamber.

Catalina sits propped against a bundle of furs, her skin ghostly pale, her expression pinched with pain. Her hands tremble in her lap, and when she looks up and sees Eryss, her lips part in a sharp breath. “Eryss,” she whispers, her voice raw.

Eryss moves toward her, but I block her path, my arm snapping out to halt her advance. “Stay back.”

She glares at me. “Move.”

“No.”

Catalina’s magic nearly got Eryss killed. I don’t trust her, not after what happened on the cliff, and certainly not after Amelia’s betrayal.

Catalina’s gaze flicks between us. Then, slowly, she exhales. “I understand why

you're wary, Naranus. But I swear on my blood, I was not in control. Amelia... she—" Her voice breaks, and her fingers clench around the blankets draped over her lap. "She did something to me. To my mind. And I let her." She closes her eyes, agony flickering across her face. "I should have known. I should have fought harder."

Eryss hesitates, and I watch her, see the way her face twists in conflicting emotions. She wants to believe Catalina.

I don't.

She shifts on her feet, looking between us. "How did you find out?"

"When I saw you fall," Catalina murmurs. "Something... snapped in my head." Her voice is quiet, haunted. "I realized he has been trying to control me subtly in my head, guiding my thoughts. I knew then and there, she's a traitor. She and I fought after that, but she was stronger. She's been practicing forbidden magic, magic no Purna should ever wield."

"She's always been ambitious," Eryss mutters, shaking her head. "I should have seen it."

Catalina's jaw tightens. "She's beyond ambition now. She wants to be the next matriarch. And she wanted you out of the way."

Eryss sways as if struck.

I step closer to her, ready to steady her if she falters, but she squares her shoulders, refusing to show weakness.

My little bride. My stubborn, reckless warrior.

Catalina shifts, looking straight at me, her dark eyes unreadable. “I owe you a debt,” she says. “For saving her.”

I narrow my gaze. “I didn’t do it for you.”

“No,” she agrees, bowing her head slightly. “But you did it. And for that, I thank you.”

Eryss’ lips part slightly, as if she wasn’t expecting Catalina to submit, even in gratitude.

I say nothing.

I don't trust her. But I'll let Eryss believe what she wants for now.

“There’s something else,” Catalina says after a moment, exhaling slowly. “I may be able to unbind some of your magic.”

Eryss straightens. “What?”

“It won’t be permanent,” Catalina clarifies. “It’ll be unstable and fleeting, but it’ll help for now.”

Eryss lets out a shaky breath. “Then do it.”

Catalina hesitates, and then—she meets my gaze. “But you must understand something, Eryss. The only way to completely unbind your magic—” she swallows “—is to finish your mission.”

Silence blankets the room, thick and suffocating.

Eryss goes still beside me, her hands curling into fists. Her lips part as if she's about to speak but no words come out.

Catalina holds her gaze, unflinching. "You have to kill him."

Eryss flinches. As if the words physically cut her.

Slowly, my eyes slide to her. My beautiful, conflicted, dangerous little bride.

So it's come to this.

It was always going to come to this.

I smirk. "Is that all?"

Eryss looks up at me, and there's something shattered in her expression, something raw.

She doesn't say a word.

We both know the truth.

She doesn't want to kill me anymore.

Yet if she doesn't, she'll never be free.

I chuckle, the sound bitter, empty, hollow. I turn on my heel and stride away before she can see what's cracking inside me. Before she can see the fractures running through my chest, through my mind, through my very soul.

I don't go far.

Just enough to be out of sight.

Just enough to clutch my chest and feel the way my body splinters from the inside out.

My time is already running out.

Magic flickers along my skin, the fractures in my body pulsing with an unholy glow. Every day, the corruption spreads, tightening its grip on my bones, my blood, my very essence.

This is inevitable.

I'll die.

Either by the curse eating me from within.

Or by her hand.

And if I must die... then let it be by her.

Let it be the one thing I give her, the one thing I offer without taking anything in return.

Let my death give her what she needs.

Let it give her power. Let it make her free.

I'd rather she kill me with her own hands than let another take her away from me.

I exhale, closing my eyes.

Damn it all.

I never wanted to care. Never wanted to feel this, this consuming need to exist in her presence, to breathe her, to fight for her.

But it's too late.

When the time comes, I'll let her drive the dagger into my heart.

36

ERYSS

The magic coils around my fingertips, soft tendrils of power that whisper against my skin, teasing me with what could be.

It's not enough. Not even close.

A single strand of thread when I need a blade. A flicker of flame when I need an inferno. The tiniest glimpse of what was stolen from me.

The only way to truly reclaim it is to kill him.

I pace my chambers, the sanctuary's ancient walls pressing in on me. How the hell am I supposed to do that? How?

Naranus saved me. Over and over again. And despite everything, despite knowing he was my mission, my enemy, I can't look at him without remembering the way he leapt after me, the way his arms locked around me as we crashed into the river, the way he shattered every instinct I had, making me question who the real enemy is.

I press my palm to my forehead, willing myself to think.

This isn't just about me. It never has been.

I think of Catalina, still weak but recovering. I think of the gargoyles who have

nothing left, whose leader is fighting tooth and nail. I think of Amelia, her cruel, taunting smile as she revealed just how deep her betrayal ran.

Naranus needs me. Whether he wants to or not.

Decision made, I storm out of the chambers, weaving through the winding corridors of the sanctuary until I reach the war chamber.

He's standing in the center, his massive form radiating power despite his obvious exhaustion. His warriors are gathered around a crude stone table, studying a map of the region.

More have arrived. More survivors. Some barely alive, their wings torn, their bodies bandaged. But their eyes... they blaze with the kind of fury that only comes from loss.

They see me and stiffen.

Naranus speaks first. "Leave us."

The warriors hesitate, exchanging wary glances. He doesn't repeat himself. They clear out.

He doesn't look at me until the last one is gone, the door slamming shut behind them.

His gaze locks onto mine. "Did you come to kill me?"

I steel my spine. "No."

His jaw tightens. His wings flare slightly, the veins along his forearms pulsing. "Wrong answer."

A growl rumbles deep in his chest, and before I can move, he's on me.

His claws wrap around my arms, dragging me close. His heat surrounds me, his scent, smoky, dark, dangerous, a lure and a warning.

"You should kill me," he grits out, his voice low, dark. "You should have killed me the moment you had the chance."

I try to wrench free. His grip tightens. "Let me go."

"Make me."

I snarl and shove against him with everything I have. It does nothing.

He shakes me, his frustration a tangible thing, his claws pressing into my skin just enough to make me feel it. "You're supposed to end me, Eryss. That's why you're here."

I glare at him. "I. Won't."

"Then you're a coward."

I see red. My hand flies up, slamming into his chest with a jolt of magic. The pulse of energy rocks through him, enough to make him stumble.

His lips pull back, exposing the sharp gleam of his fangs. "There it is."

I clutch my wrist, the residual magic humming in my veins. His eyes track the movement, narrowing. "Your power is returning."

I exhale, forcing myself to calm down. "Catalina unbound some of it."

A sharp exhale. A slow nod. “But not all.”

I hesitate. “No.”

“And the only way to free the rest?” His voice turns into a whisper. A dare.

I swallow hard.

I don’t have to answer. He already knows.

His laugh is bitter. “Then do it.”

I snap. “Why do you want to die so damn badly?!”

He stills.

The silence is thick, suffocating.

Quietly, “Because I don’t have much time left.”

A chill crawls down my spine. “What are you talking about?”

He exhales roughly, his hand rising to brush his own chest. His claws scrape against the cracks in his skin.

Not just battle wounds. Something deeper. Something worse.

I step closer, the pieces clicking into place.

“The curse,” I whisper.

His lips press together.

I stare at him. “You’re dying.”

He tilts his head, unreadable. “And you’re only figuring that out now?”

A hollow laugh escapes me. “You’re an ass.”

One brow arches. “And?”

I shove him. Hard. “You should have told me!”

“What difference would it have made?” His voice is low, dangerous. Exhausted. “You’d still have to kill me.”

“No.” I shake my head violently, stepping away, my heartbeat pounding against my ribs. “I won’t. There has to be another way?—”

“There isn’t.”

I refuse to accept that.

I can’t.

“You’re lying,” I breathe. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

His eyes darken. “Does it matter?”

“Yes!”

The word slams into the space between us, sharp and raw.

Because it does. It matters.

I hate him.

I don't.

He's my enemy.

He isn't.

I should kill him but I can't.

His gaze locks onto mine, his breathing uneven, his muscles coiled with something unspoken.

I don't understand this. I don't understand him.

But the thought of him dying, of losing him, is a fist closing around my heart.

I can't stop it.

How do I let him go?

37

NARANUS

Her lips crash into mine as if she's burning alive, and I'm the only thing that can quench the fire.

It's not a slow kiss, not hesitant or questioning. It's brutal. Desperate. Starved. Her hands grab onto my arm, pulling me down, closer, as if she needs to consume me to breathe. And damnation take me, I let her.

I wrap my arms around her, lifting her easily, pressing her against me so tightly it should be painful. Maybe it is. Maybe I want it to be. My claws dig into the soft curve of her waist, holding her in place, my fangs scraping over her bottom lip as I devour her, tasting everything she offers.

She shudders against me, her body trembling, whether from exhaustion, desire, or grief, I don't care. I don't stop. I refuse to. If she wants to kiss me like this, as if her very existence depends on it, then I'll take every last shred of it. Because I need it, too.

Her small hands are restless, roaming over my chest, nails scraping over my battle-worn skin. I catch a scent that is unmistakably hers, dark, rich, intoxicating. My control is fraying at the edges, slipping through my claws, and I don't fight to hold on.

Not this time.

I spin her, pressing her against the cold, unyielding surface of the war chamber's stone table. Maps and battle plans scatter to the floor, parchment crumpling beneath us, but I don't care. There is no battle plan that matters more than this. Than her . Than us .

She gasps, her fingers gripping my shoulders, nails biting into my flesh as I cage her there. Her violet eyes are wide, her lips parted, breath heaving. She's trembling still, but I see something in her eyes, resolve. A decision made. A storm brewing.

She wants this. Wants me.

"Are you trying to distract me from killing you?" she breathes, her voice wrecked, her words laced with something sharp and broken.

I smirk, because I can. Because my body is on fire, because this moment is real and raw, and I'll take every last drop of it before it slips through my fingers. "Is it working?"

She glares, but it's ruined by the way her breath shudders as I press my lips against the sensitive spot just beneath her jaw. My fangs trace over her pulse, feeling it pound against my lips. I could take her throat between my teeth right now, claim her the way my instincts demand.

She should be fighting me. Should be pushing me away. She doesn't.

"I hate you," she whispers.

"Lie." I bite down, just hard enough to make her gasp. Just hard enough to feel the way her body arches against mine. "If you hated me, you wouldn't have kissed me first."

She swears, tries to push me away, but I grab her wrists, pinning them against the cold surface beneath her.

“Why did you come here, Eryss?” I ask, voice rough, laced with heat and something deeper. Something more dangerous.

Her breath stutters, her chest rising and falling fast. “I—I had something to tell you?—”

She doesn’t finish. I don’t let her. Because the war is outside these walls, and she came here to me. And I’m selfish enough to take every last second with her. To make her feel everything I feel.

Her body is pliant beneath mine, her legs parting as I settle between them, grinding against her. I can feel every inch of her, her curves fitting against me as if she were made for this.

She shivers, her eyes slipping closed for half a heartbeat before snapping open. “Naranus...”

I kiss her again, swallowing her words, drinking in her sounds. My name on her lips is a curse, a plea, a battle cry.

I run my hands down her sides, feeling the shape of her beneath my palms, memorizing every shudder, every gasp.

This is mine. She is mine.

Yet, I am hers.

She has unraveled me from the inside out, turned my world to ruin, and I don’t even

care .

If this is the last time I touch her, if this is the last time I breathe her in, I will make her feel it. Feel me.

I grip her thighs, hoisting her up onto the table, her back arching against the cool stone as my mouth traces a path lower. I need to taste every inch of her, to mark her, to ruin her for anyone else. Because there can be no one else.

Her fingers sink into my hair, her voice breathless. “Naranus?—”

“Say my name again,” I command against her skin.

She gasps, but she does .

I grin, dragging my fangs over her collarbone, watching the way she writhes beneath me.

The world outside these walls doesn’t exist. The war, the blood, the impossible choices waiting for us... none of it exists.

Only this. Only her.

Her breath is ragged, her body trembling against mine. I drag my mouth back up, capturing her lips again, kissing her until she breaks. Until she gives in.

Her breath hitches as my lips trail lower, leaving a searing path down her neck, over the swell of her breasts. My claws catch on the fabric of her tunic, tearing it away with a single, sharp motion.

The sound of ripping cloth is drowned out by her gasp, her nipples hardening under

the cool air of the chamber. I don't hesitate. My mouth closes over one taut peak, my tongue swirling around it, teasing, tasting. She arches into me, a low moan escaping her lips as her fingers tighten in my hair, pulling me closer.

"Naranus," she breathes, her voice trembling, her body writhing beneath me. "You're—ah—you're impossible."

I chuckle darkly against her skin, my fangs grazing her nipple before I move to the other, giving it the same attention. Her hips buck against mine, seeking friction, seeking more. I feel the heat of her pussy through the thin barrier of her clothes, and it drives me wild.

My cock throbs, straining against the confines of my own covering, demanding release. But not yet. Not until she's begging for it.

I release her nipple with a final, lingering lick, my hands sliding down her body to grip her hips. My claws dig into her flesh, just enough to make her gasp, and I pull her closer, grinding against her. The friction is electric, her pussy pressing against my cock, and I growl low in my throat, the sound primal, possessive.

"Tell me what you want, Eryss," I demand, my voice rough, my breath hot against her ear. "Tell me, or I'll stop."

Her eyes flash, a mix of defiance and desperation. "You wouldn't dare."

I smirk, pulling back slightly, my hands leaving her hips. "Try me."

She glares at me, but it's short-lived. Her hands reach for me, pulling me back, her nails scraping down my chest. "Don't you dare stop," she hisses, her voice trembling with need. "I want you. All of you."

That's all I need to hear. My hands are on her clothes, tearing them away with the same urgency as before. Her pussy is bare to me, glistening, inviting.

I groan at the sight, my cock twitching in anticipation. I lean down, my tongue tracing a slow, torturous path up her inner thigh, savoring the way she shudders beneath me.

"Naranus," she moans, her hips lifting, seeking more. "Please. Take me."

I don't make her wait. My mouth finds her pussy, my tongue delving into her folds, tasting her, devouring her. She cries out, her hands fisting in my hair as I lick and suck, driving her closer to a protheke-shattering orgasm. Her thighs tremble around my head, her breath coming in ragged gasps, and I can feel her tightening, her body coiling like a spring.

But I pull back, ignoring her whimper of protest, and stand, shedding my own covering in quick, impatient movements.

"You're beautiful, Eryss," I moan, my head tilting back as I squeeze my balls.

My cock springs free, hard and aching, and her eyes widen as she takes me in. I can see the hunger in her gaze, the way her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and it's almost enough to undo me.

I step between her legs, my hands gripping her hips as I position myself at her entrance. "Look at me," I command, my voice low, rough. Her eyes meet mine, and I see the storm there, the desire, the need.

"This is mine," I growl, thrusting into her in one swift, deep motion.

She cries out, her nails digging into my hard shoulders as I fill her, her pussy clenching around my cock like a vice. I groan, my head falling forward as I savor the

feel of her, the heat, the tightness. She's perfect, and she's mine.

"Eryss, Eryss..." I moan her name repeatedly like a prayer and my salvation.

I pull back, then thrust again, setting a relentless pace. Her moans fill the room, her body arching to meet mine, and I can feel her unraveling beneath me. Her pussy grips me tighter, her nails leaving marks on my skin, and I know she's close.

"Come for me, Eryss," I growl, my voice rough, my hips slamming into hers. "Let go."

She does, her body shuddering as she cries out, her pussy pulsing around my cock. "Naranus!"

I follow her over the precipice, my own release crashing over me as I bury myself deep inside her, claiming her, marking her as mine.

For a moment, there is nothing but the sound of our ragged breathing, the feel of her body beneath mine. Then, slowly, I pull back, my hands gentle as I brush the hair from her face. Her eyes meet mine, and I see the storm there, the emotions she can't hide.

"I hate you," she whispers again, but there's no heat in her words. Only truth.

I smirk, leaning down to kiss her softly. "Lie," I murmur against her lips.

38

ERYSS

I wake up in the stillness of dawn, my body tangled in sheets that still hold his warmth. I don't remember him bringing me back to his room from the war chambers.

My fingers clutch at the fabric as if I can summon him back, as if I can rewind time and stop myself from giving in to him so completely.

But he's gone.

A sharp pang stabs through my chest. Coward. I force myself to sit up, biting back the emotions that threaten to overwhelm me. My lips are swollen, my skin still thrums with the imprint of his touch. Every inch of me feels marked, branded by him. I fist my hands into my hair.

What the hell did we do?

I was supposed to kill him, not let him worship me, not let him make me feel as if I were something precious. Damn him. Damn myself.

The memory of last night flickers behind my eyes, the way he held me, whispered my name like it meant something more, the way he kissed me with desperation and... resignation.

My stomach twists. He wanted me to remember him.

My breath stutters as realization takes root. He wasn't just losing control. He was saying goodbye.

No. No. No.

I shove myself out of bed, barely registering my state of undress as I grab a robe and storm toward the door. I need to find him. He can't do this. He can't just disappear after that, after us.

But before I can even yank open the heavy doors, Catalina steps inside, her movements slow, careful. She looks at me and stops. A moment stretches between us, her expression sharpening as she studies me, taking in my tangled hair, the flushed look of my skin, the bruises from Naranus' grip on my hips.

"Did you do it?" she asks quietly.

I flinch.

The mission. She means the mission. Did I kill him? Did I finally fulfill my duty, strike him down as I was meant to?

I force my face into neutrality, but the hesitation, that damn hesitation is enough.

Catalina knows.

Her mouth tightens, and I see something strange flicker in her gaze. Something dark, something unreadable.

"You're being watched," she says, closing the door behind her, voice pitched low.
"You realize that, don't you?"

My pulse spikes. “What?”

“The Purna Elders,” she says, stepping closer. “They’re waiting. If you don’t do it, they’ll send someone else. They’ll kill him and you.”

I suck in a breath. “No. They wouldn’t?—”

“They already have,” she cuts in. “Amelia sent them before she disappeared. A kill squad. They’re coming, Eryss.”

My chest locks.

I stumble back, pressing my hand to the cool stone wall. They were never going to let me decide.

Catalina reaches for me, but then she stiffens. A violent tremor runs through her. Her hands shake, her breathing turns ragged. Her veins darken, pulse with something unnatural.

I grab her arm. “Catalina?—”

She yanks away. Her eyes dart around the room like she’s searching for something unseen. Her lips open, but no words come out.

A cold prickle dances down my spine. Is she still under Amelia’s influence? Is she fighting it?

I exhale slowly. “Catalina, are you?—”

“Where’s Naranus?” she interrupts, gripping my wrist with bruising strength. “Where is he?”

I freeze.

He's gone. The thought slams into me like a blow. He left. After last night, he left.

A new kind of dread takes hold.

Where is he? What is he planning?

I storm down the halls of the sanctuary, my heart hammering. Think. If Naranus left, he had a reason. He wouldn't run, not unless.

My steps are slow. A terrible thought curls through me.

He's looking for a way to end this himself.

A strangled sound escapes me. No.

I don't even realize I've stopped moving until Catalina grabs my arm again. "Eryss," she rasps. "If we don't stop them... If we don't kill them first..."

I yank away, spinning to face her. "Who is controlling you?"

Catalina flinches, her body taut with tension.

Her lips part, hesitation in her gaze. And then, too quickly, she schools her features into a mask of cold indifference.

"Find Naranus," she says instead, voice clipped. "You don't have much time."

Something slithers in my gut. A warning. A shadow of doubt.

But I shove it aside. There's no time for this.

I push past her, forcing my body into motion. I need to find him.

Before the curse kills him. Before they do.

39

NARANUS

The sky is still bruised with the colors of night when I leave the sanctuary. The world is quiet, hushed in a way that feels unnatural, as if the very land is holding its breath, waiting.

I don't say goodbye.

I can't.

Not when her scent is still on my skin, still woven into the fabric of my being. Not when every part of me wants to stay, to hold onto the impossible thing we created last night.

Weak.

The word slithers through me like a curse, an accusation.

I let her in. I let her touch something inside me I swore would never be touched.

But I can't allow her to change my course. She refuses to kill me, so I will find another way. If she won't be my executioner, war will. It will be the same outcome, right? My death, regardless of how it happened, will free her magic.

I force my body forward, each step sending a sharp lance of pain through my limbs.

The curse is accelerating, spreading like wildfire beneath my stone skin. My body is cracking apart, magic fraying at the edges.

And still, I move.

I find more of them in the ruins of an old outpost, a fraction of what remains of my warriors. Some of my warriors follow me, once that reached the sanctuary. They're ready to go to war.

They are wounded, broken, but standing.

Their eyes flick toward me as I approach, their gazes filled with grim understanding. They can see it, the curse eating away at me, just as it is to them.

"We thought you were dead," Rhyzek, a broad-shouldered warrior with cracked wings, says. His voice is hoarse, as if he hasn't spoken in days. "The stronghold fell."

"I don't die that easily," I rasp, stepping into the ruined structure. "And neither do you."

Another gargoyle, younger, more fragile, shudders where he stands. "Not for long. We can't fight like this, Lord Naranus. We're weakening. Our magic is unstable because of the purnas. We?—"

"You will fight," I cut him off, voice sharp enough to draw blood. "You will stand, even if it's the last damn thing you do. I did not crawl out of the wreckage of our home to hear defeat."

The words are cruel. Necessary.

Rhyzek grits his teeth, nodding once.

A third warrior steps forward, his stance wary. “We’ve gathered intel.”

I lift my chin, motioning for him to speak.

“The Purna Elders have declared you a Target of Elimination,” he says grimly. “They won’t wait for Eryss to act.”

The world narrows.

“Explain.”

“They sent an elite faction of Purna Assassins after you.” His voice is flat, emotionless, but there’s a shadow of concern in his gaze. “If they reach you first, there will be no saving Eryss. They’ll kill her for failing her mission.”

Something inside me fractures.

I exhale slowly, rolling my shoulders, locking away the rage that surges up like a beast from the abyss.

Eryss.

They’ll kill her for sparing me.

I force the words through clenched teeth. “How long before they arrive?”

The warrior shakes his head. “Hours. Maybe less.”

A slow, sharp smile curves my lips. “Then we will greet them properly.”

The outpost is barely standing, but there’s something left behind. Something that

wasn't here before.

Carved into the ruins, written in streaks of dark, dried blood, is a message.

THE STONE BEAST WILL DIE BY HER HAND OR OURS.

The words claw into me, hook deep beneath my ribs.

I stare at them, something dark and simmering curling in my gut.

My warriors shift behind me, uneasy.

"It's a warning," Rhyzek mutters. "They want her to do it. Or they'll do it for her."

I let out a slow breath, turning away. The words shouldn't affect me. I've always expected this ending. I was never meant to survive. None of us were.

But something does affect me. The idea of her being forced to choose.

She was supposed to be my executioner, and yet she refuses. Again and again.

Now, she's in danger because of it.

I curl my hands into fists. She will not die because of me.

If I end this now, I save her.

I glance toward my warriors, the few that remain. They deserve to know.

But what can I tell them? That the war is already lost? That they are doomed to fall because of something none of us could control?

No.

I will not tell them anything.

I will not let them see my bones fracturing, my skin splitting apart, my magic slipping through the cracks.

Instead, I turn, voice firm. “We leave. Now.”

As we move, a strange sense of finality settles into my bones.

There is no avoiding what comes next.

I will fight. I will bleed.

I will end this.

But the curse is eating away at me, magic slipping between the cracks of my form. The pain is dull now, a background ache that never truly leaves.

It won't be long before my body gives out entirely.

It's inevitable.

My warriors march beside me, silent, each lost in their own thoughts. Each knows what's coming.

Yet, they follow me.

Loyalty. Honor. Duty. These things have kept us alive.

And they will see us to our end.

I glance at the sky, at the stars that still burn despite the coming war.

The next time I see her, it will be for the last time.

40

ERYSS

The sanctuary's protective magic hums against my skin as I press a hand to the barrier, preparing to slip through. The ancient spell is thick, a pulse of old energy resisting my passage. I don't have much magic, but I have enough. The runes sizzle under my touch before the protective shell parts just enough for me to slip into the darkened forest beyond.

I have to find him.

The thought pounds against my ribs like a war drum, violent and unrelenting.

He left me. Again. I let him.

My fingers curl into fists, nails digging into my palms. He's convinced himself this is his burden alone, that his death is some sort of inevitable sacrifice that will save me. Save everyone.

But I won't let him die.

The night is too quiet. Not even the insects dare to sing. A whisper of unease slides down my spine, a warning I don't have time to heed.

Footsteps.

I pivot, magic coiling in my fingertips. Catalina emerges from the shadows, face pale, lips pressed into a thin line. “You’re going after him,” she says, voice laced with accusation.

I don’t answer.

Her shoulders sag, eyes dark with something I can’t name. “Eryss, please. This is a trap. You’re being watched.”

I stiffen.

She shakes her head, jaw tightening.

The elders. Even if she doesn’t say it, I know.

A sound, a rustle of movement, too precise to be the wind has both of us snapping to attention. Catalina steps closer, her voice dropping to a whisper. “We need to go back. Now.”

I don’t get the chance to argue.

Because the shadows move.

They don’t waste time with words.

Blades flash, cutting through the air. A dozen of them. Maybe more. They move like ghosts, their enchanted robes shifting like liquid shadows.

Catalina shouts a warning, magic flaring around her as she throws up a shield. The first strike bounces off, but the impact sends her staggering backward.

The fight erupts.

They're too fast. Too coordinated. I barely manage to weave through the onslaught, dodging a strike aimed at my ribs. My magic flares, instinctively responding, a burst of energy knocking one assassin off balance.

I go for another, only to see Catalina fall.

A blade buries itself in her shoulder.

Her cry of pain is sharp, raw, but she grits her teeth, twisting to blast the assassin away with a pulse of dark violet energy.

Rage flares through me.

I let my magic surge.

A column of force slams into one of the assassins, sending them crashing into a tree. But the moment of triumph is short-lived.

A dagger presses against my throat.

A cold, whispered voice in my ear: "Make a choice."

I still, breathing hard.

The assassin behind me tightens their grip. "Kill him." The words are a command, sharp and absolute. "And return as a hero."

The blade bites into my skin.

My stomach twists.

Or die as a traitor.

I chuckle, and fearlessly say, “Lie. Whether I kill him or not, I’m dead already.”

The air shifts.

A storm of magic crashes through the trees, a violent surge of power that sends the assassins flying back. The one holding me staggers, their blade slipping.

I hear him.

A roar of pure rage.

I turn, just in time to see Naranus.

He’s covered in blood, his body fractured, but his eyes burn with murderous fury.

The assassins descend on him, their weapons flashing, but he doesn’t stop moving. He rips through them, claws slashing, wings snapping open despite the pain it must cause.

They try to pin him down. They fail.

One moment, they’re attacking.

The next, they’re burning alive.

A pulse of raw, cursed magic explodes from Naranus’ body, a shockwave of unrestrained darkness and stone energy obliterating everything in its path.

The ground splits. The trees shatter.

The assassins scream.

There goes silence.

Naranus collapses.

I lurch forward, catching him before he fully hits the ground. His body is shaking, cracks spreading over his stone-like flesh, his breathing too shallow.

“No, no, no,” I whisper, pressing my hands against his chest. “Naranus—don’t you dare?—”

His lips curl, but it’s not a smirk. It’s pain. “Guess I... went a little overboard.”

I want to shake him. “You—stupid?—”

A wet cough cuts off whatever insult I was about to scream at him.

Catalina groans somewhere behind me. She’s still alive, but she’s badly wounded.

The assassins? Gone. For now.

But the damage is done.

I grip his shoulders, shaking him gently. “Stay with me. We’ll fix this.”

His fingers brush my arm, his grip weak. “Not much time,” he mutters. “You... have to?—”

“Shut up.” I refuse to hear the end of that sentence.

Catalina’s voice is hoarse as she forces herself up. “Eryss.”

I look at her, and immediately regret it.

Because there’s something in her eyes.

Something haunted.

Something terrible.

“There’s a way to break the curse,” she says weakly. “But it requires a sacrifice.”

I freeze.

A sacrifice.

Her words sink in, slow and suffocating.

My stomach twists. “What kind of sacrifice?”

41

NARANUS

We retreat back into the sanctuary, Eryss and Catalina dragging me inside. Catalina speaks, talking about the sacrifice. I can't process it.

Catalina's words hang in the air like a curse of their own, choking the life from me. Two ways.

Kill me, sever the magic, end the curse. Or offer another willing soul of equal power.

I can feel Eryss trembling beside me, though whether it's from rage or something else, I can't tell.

Doesn't matter.

I won't let her make that choice.

My jaw tightens as I force my breath to steady, though my body screams in protest. I don't have time to waste. Not for arguments. Not for hope.

"You already know the answer," I growl, stepping forward. "Do it."

Eryss recoils as if I struck her. "What?"

"Kill me," I say again, harsher this time. "Before the Elders send someone who won't

hesitate.”

She shakes her head, violently. “No.”

I snarl, grabbing her arm. “Do it, damn you!”

She shoves me off with enough force that I stumble back a step, my balance slipping from my body’s growing weakness.

“You think I’m just going to stab you in the chest?” Her voice shakes, but her anger cuts through it like a blade. “That I’m going to stand over your body like some glorious executioner?”

Her hands tremble at her sides. I catch the flicker of magic curling around her fingers. A warning. A threat. A refusal.

I press forward anyway.

“You think the Elders will let you refuse?” I snarl. “They’ll send another assassin. Maybe a dozen. And when they kill me, they’ll take you back to the coven in chains.”

“Then I’ll fight them!” she screams.

She moves before I do. Her palm cracks against my cheek. Hard enough that my head jerks to the side.

The sting barely registers. The shock does.

My fingers brush my jaw as I slowly turn my head back to her.

Her chest heaves, her eyes burning with something I can’t decipher. Grief. Rage.

Desperation.

“I won’t let you die,” she chokes. “Not for them. Not for me. Not for anything.”

The words slam into me like a warhammer to the ribs.

Suddenly, I’m drowning in all of it.

The way she looks at me. The way she feels pressed against me in battle, against my lips when she kisses me like I’m the only thing anchoring her to this world.

The way she defies me, over and over, refusing to be my executioner even when everything in her life tells her she should be.

I grab her by the shoulders, shaking her once, forcing her to see me.

“Then what the hell do you want me to do?” I demand. “Wait here while I rot? Pretend I don’t feel myself breaking apart?” I lift my arm between us, let her see the cracks running through my skin, growing wider with every breath. “This isn’t something you can fight. This isn’t something you can fix.”

Her fingers curl into my tunic, clinging to me like I’m slipping from her grasp. “There has to be a way. There has to be?—”

“There’s not.”

Her breath shudders, and her fingers go still against me.

Catalina shifts beside us, watching. Always watching.

I turn toward her, my body seething with frustration, helplessness. “Say it, Catalina.

Say what you're thinking."

Her expression is guarded. "I think you should listen to her."

I snarl. "You think I want her to watch me die? You think I'll let her suffer that? You think it's my choice?"

Catalina's gaze flicks between us, and I see the way something shifts in her eyes. Something calculating. Something understanding.

She flinches.

Not from me. Not from Eryss.

From something outside.

A warning hum of magic prickles against my skin.

Eryss stiffens. "What was that?"

Catalina curses under her breath. "Something's coming. They're here, and even the barrier can't stop them"

Eryss whirls toward me, her panic immediate. "We're not done talking about this."

I grit my teeth.

The conversation isn't finished. But the war is coming for us as it waits for no one.

42

ERYSS

The air thickens, the magic crackling through the sanctuary's shield, as if the ancient barrier itself senses what's coming.

A tremor runs through my body, the weight of my choices pressing down like a noose tightening around my throat. Naranus stands beside me, a wall of silent rage and exhaustion. Catalina lingers a step behind, her breaths shallow from the battle before.

The world shudders.

A great pressure slams against the sanctuary's shield, sending sparks of resistance rippling through the air.

It breaks. We step out of the building, staring at the uninvited guests.

A tidal wave of power crashes over us, cold and wrong.

Figures step through the shattered magic, the cloaked forms of the Purna Elders.

They come in numbers, flanked by other purnas, their robes moving like liquid darkness. Their shadows stretch long against the forest floor, unnatural and shifting like living things.

Behind them, twisted creatures crawl from the night, warped beasts of flesh and bone,

grotesque mutations.

But my stomach turns to stone when I see the rogue gargoyles at their side. Creatures who should have been our enemies, now marching beneath Purna control. What the hell are they doing?

In the middle, Amelia.

Alive. Changed. Drenched in power that should not be hers.

Her once elegant features are sharper, her skin too pale, as though she has bled out every part of herself that was ever human. Her robes shimmer with deep, corrupted energy, her eyes the color of raw void.

Now, with certainty, I can say that our covenant is over. Darkness has overtaken my covenant. What did they do? What did Amelia start?

She steps forward, her lips curving into something that might have once been a smile. "Ah, sister," she purrs, voice silky and soaked in amusement. "You're still clinging to him, I see."

The ground feels unsteady beneath me.

I meet her gaze, searching for the woman I once loved like blood. She is not there.

My throat tightens. "What did you do, Amelia?"

She tilts her head, dark amusement flickering over her expression. "I was reborn." She lifts her hands, and the unnatural creatures beside her shudder, their bones snapping as if responding to her very breath. "And now, dear Eryss, we will finally fulfill the purpose you were meant for."

Naranus stiffens beside me.

I see it then, the way his hand twitches toward his weapon, the way his cracked body pulses with restrained power.

A slow smirk pulls at Amelia's lips. "You were supposed to kill him, sister," she muses, eyes glittering with something vicious. "But now?" Her fingers flick, a whisper of command.

The warriors move.

"You'll watch as we do it for you."

The world erupts into chaos.

The Purna warriors surge forward, their magic clashing against Catalina's shields.

The rogue gargoyles launch themselves at Naranus, forcing him to fight despite his splintering body.

The twisted creatures skitter forward, lunging with snapping teeth and twisted limbs.

I throw up my hands, magic flaring bright, shoving back the first wave of attackers. My breath shudders from the force of it, my body still not accustomed to the power barely unbound inside me.

Catalina moves beside me, deflecting attacks, but she's struggling, weakened from her wounds, her magic unstable.

Naranus rips through the enemies, but he's faltering. Each use of his power deepens the cracks, his movements slower, heavier.

We can't win this. Not like this.

A laugh slithers through the battlefield.

Amelia doesn't move. She watches.

She waits.

She knows.

This is her game.

A sharp cry rings through the battlefield.

Catalina jerks forward, her body twisting unnaturally.

A blade of dark energy buries itself into her side.

My heart stops.

I whirl in horror as Amelia's hand remains outstretched, her expression bored, as though stabbing Catalina was nothing more than an afterthought.

Catalina stumbles, her hands pressed against the wound, her blood pooling between her fingers.

A cold, merciless smile spreads over Amelia's lips. "I never liked you."

Catalina collapses. A scream tears from my throat.

I race toward her, but hands grab me, forcing me down.

My magic flares wild but I'm too late, the Elders are there, surrounding me.

Amelia steps closer, tilting my chin up with a finger.

"Now, little sister," she whispers. "It's time for you to choose."

The magic tightens around me.

Their voices echo in my mind, forcing me to my knees.

Kill Naranus now and be free.

Defy us and die alongside him.

I gasp, choking. My body thrashes against invisible binds, my soul screaming under their influence.

Naranus roars my name, trying to reach me, but he's forced back, his body breaking further, his cursed power spiraling.

I meet his gaze, desperate, wild, terrified.

They're killing him.

And if I don't choose?

They'll kill me too.

43

CATALINA

The world spins around me, the edges blurring in a haze of blood and fading magic. My body is failing, my breath coming in short, painful bursts. But none of it matters. Not anymore.

Because I see her.

Eryss.

My little sister.

She kneels beside me, hands pressing desperately against my wound, her magic flickering weakly against my skin, trying to hold me here. Trying to keep me.

She doesn't understand. She can't.

"N-no," she gasps, shaking her head wildly, eyes glassy with panic. "I won't let you die."

I smile, or I try to. The pain makes it hard. "Eryss?—"

"Shut up," she snaps, voice breaking. "You're not allowed to talk like that."

Her fingers clutch at me, trembling, drenched in my blood. My vision dims, but I can

still see the sheer desperation in her eyes. She isn't ready to lose me.

Yet, she will.

Because I have already decided.

"I know a way," I whisper. The words slip through cracked lips, barely a breath of sound, but they shatter her.

Eryss freezes.

Her pulse jumps beneath my touch. "What do you mean?"

Naranus shifts nearby, his presence a force of solid heat. He should be dead already, but somehow, he still stands. Still fights. The cracks in his stone flesh deepen with each second, the cursed magic devouring him from the inside out.

He's out of time.

So am I.

Eryss demands answers, her hands tightening on me as if she can anchor me to this world. "Catalina—what way?"

I exhale slowly, letting the truth settle over me like a weighted blanket. "A third way."

She flinches.

"The curse," I continue, voice shaking, "is bound to the balance of power. It requires one of two things: His death or a willing soul of equal power to take his place."

The moment the words leave my lips, Naranus reacts.

“No.” His voice is like stone cracking, rough, raw. Final. “You will not do this.”

Eryss stiffens, shaking her head, already rejecting what I haven’t even spoken aloud. “That’s not—no. No.”

I ignore them both. This is my choice.

Not theirs.

“There’s a cost,” I murmur. “A sacrifice. But it must be done willingly. It must be done out of love. And—” my voice catches, the weight of it pressing down on me, “—it must be a soul with enough power.”

The truth strikes like a blade.

Naranus grows still. His dark eyes burn into me, emotion swirling like a storm just beneath the surface. “You think that makes it right?”

Eryss is already shaking her head, tears streaking her dirt-stained face. “No. No.”

I smile. It’s small, weak. But genuine.

“Eryss,” I whisper. “I tried to kill you once.” My fingers twitch against her wrist. “Now, I can save you.”

Her sob is sharp, unrestrained. “I don’t want you to save me. I want?—”

“You want us all to live,” I say softly. “But you can’t have that.”

She breaks. I see it in the way her shoulders shake, the way her lips tremble. But I cannot stop now.

If I don't do this, Naranus will die.

Eryss will lose everything.

Naranus suddenly moves, dropping to his knees beside me as his men fight the enemies desperately, his hands fisting in my torn cloak. "I won't allow this," he growls, voice low and dangerous, his breath uneven. "I refuse."

I laugh, the sound brittle. "You don't get a say."

His fingers tighten. "Like hell I don't."

I lift a hand, weak but steady, and place it against his chest.

This is the only way. I am ready.

"Let me do this," I whisper. "Please. Take care of my little sister, gargoyle."

Eryss screams, hands clawing at me, trying to stop what must happen. "No! NO!"

Tears streak her face, mixing with blood and sweat. She fights me, resists me, her magic sparking wildly as she tries to undo the inevitable.

But I don't let her.

I can't.

I begin the ritual.

The moment my magic ignites, the world shifts.

The symbols I etch into the ground glow with deep violet energy, an ancient incantation spilling from my lips. My voice shakes, but my conviction does not.

The air thrums with energy. The curse inside Naranus responds, sensing the change, sensing the trade.

It fights.

It flares.

Naranus shouts, his body jerking as the magic wraps around him, trying to resist the pull.

His claws dig into my wrist. “Catalina, stop?—”

I keep going.

The power surges through me, raw and unforgiving, a burning brand that seeps deep into my soul, binding me to the curse. The cracks on his body begin to close.

The curse leaves him.

And takes me instead.

My scream rips through the night, the agony splintering through my bones as the magic devours me whole.

Eryss wails, her magic slamming against the ritual, trying to tear me away.

Too late. The process is already sealed.

A heartbeat later, the curse is gone from him.

Inside me. I feel it. Creeping through my veins. Eating me alive.

But I smile.

Because Eryss is safe.

Naranus will live.

I have finally done something right.

Eryss collapses beside me, sobbing, her hands gripping my face, her entire body shaking in denial.

I cup her cheek, my fingers barely solid, my form crumbling, fading.

“Shh,” I murmur. “You always were... my little sister.”

Her sob shatters me.

She shakes her head wildly, refusing to let go. “No. No.”

With my last remaining strength, I stare at our enemies. At the darkness that destroyed my coven.

I take a deep breath, releasing every power my soul has. I become pure magic to eliminate the darkness.

I burst into light, melting and becoming one with magic.

“Sister!” I hear Eryss wail, and I embrace her within the light.

“I’ll always be here. Now, become free. Use your magic. Feel it.”

My last gift to her is unlocking her magic, destroying the bindings preventing her from using it.

I disappear with a sad smile on my face.

But a satisfied heart knowing I did something right.

I gave my sister a chance at life. A shot at happiness.

Now, it’s up to her and Naranus.

44

ERYSS

The world as I know it crumbles.

My sister is gone.

Her last words, her last touch, vanished into nothing but light and warmth, into magic so ancient, so powerful, it crackled in the air like an untamed storm.

I scream, an agonized, wretched sound that rips through my throat, splintering into the battlefield like a blade against glass. My hands, still outstretched, reach for ashes, for something, anything, that isn't fading light and empty air.

But there is nothing. Catalina's sacrifice is final.

Inside me, something snaps.

Magic erupts, surging like an uncontrollable force, wild and feral. The barriers that once bound me, that choked my power into dormancy, are obliterated.

I feel it.

Every thread of power that was stolen from me. Every inch of magic that had been bound, shackled, hidden away, Catalina's final gift to me.

It bursts free.

Lightning races over my skin, my hair lifting in an unseen breeze. The ground trembles beneath my feet, energy radiating outward in waves, churning the earth beneath us.

The enemies surrounding us, those who stood in the wake of Catalina's sacrifice halt.

Amelia.

The Elders.

The traitorous gargoyles who had allied with darkness.

They feel it.

The change.

The power.

Their faces twist in shock, in realization. I am no longer weak.

I am no longer bound.

I am power itself.

Amelia's lips part, her confidence wavering since she revealed her betrayal. She stares, watching as the magic swirls around me, forming radiant tendrils of energy that crackle and lash like the storm of the gods themselves.

Now, I see it, fear in her eyes.

I step forward, slow, deliberate. The weight of my magic is crushing, pressing against me from every angle, as if the very world is bending under its force.

“Eryss...” Amelia’s voice falters, hesitant, cautious. “This is?—”

I don’t let her finish.

With a flick of my wrist, the air explodes around her, sending her slamming into the ground with bone-rattling force. A crater forms where she lands, dust rising in thick clouds.

Gasps fill the battlefield.

The Elders stagger back, their golden robes fluttering in the storm I have unleashed.

But I don’t care. My gaze locks onto Amelia, who coughs, her hands clawing at the earth as she tries to rise.

She looks up at me, her dark magic swirling, but weaker now. Because I have become what she feared most.

I am no longer a pawn.

I am the storm.

“You took everything from me,” I say, voice cold, echoing with power. The wind howls around me, my magic pressing outward like a force of nature itself.

Amelia’s lips curl into a sneer despite the blood dripping from her mouth. “You don’t understand, sister,” she spits. “This was never about you.”

Something inside me flares, rage, pain, loss. And yet, through it all, Naranus is there.

Standing beside me, silent, watching.

His body should be broken, his magic depleted. He should have collapsed the moment Catalina took his curse.

But he doesn't.

He stands, towering, unmoving, the golden glow of my power reflecting in his dark, intense gaze.

Watching me.

I am not the same woman he once held in chains. Because I have become something more.

And even though I am filled with a storm of magic, of vengeance, of loss so deep I feel like I will never breathe again, he is there.

Grounding me.

I inhale sharply, my hand trembling as I lift it, the magic around me coiling, seeking release.

One spell.

One strike.

I could end Amelia.

Destroy her for everything she's done.

For manipulating me. For controlling Catalina. For forcing my sister to die in my place.

Through the roar of my newfound power, through the agony twisting inside me, I hear Catalina's voice.

Soft. Fading.

"You always were my little sister."

Something inside me fractures. Amelia was my sister, too. Maybe... I don't have to kill her.

I lower my hand.

Naranus exhales beside me, like he can sense my decision before I even make it.

But Amelia moves.

She lunges, a dagger flashing in her hand, a spell forming on her lips, her eyes dark with murderous intent.

I don't hesitate as my heart breaks. Kindness has no place in war. Narinus looks at me with approval.

My power erupts.

The force of it slams into Amelia, sending her flying backward, her body hitting the remains of a broken pillar.

She doesn't get up. Silence falls.

The battlefield is still.

Suddenly, the Elders run.

The ones who had sided with Amelia, the ones who had conspired to bind me, to use me, to sacrifice me for their cause, they flee.

Cowards. I could chase them.

I could kill them all.

But I don't because I have already lost too much tonight.

Instead, I turn, my magic fading just slightly, my limbs suddenly heavy with the weight of everything that's happened.

Naranus is there. He reaches for me, his hands steady, his touch warm, despite the cold magic still swirling between us.

My body trembles. My knees threaten to give out.

His arms catch me before I fall.

Our gazes lock, and he whispers, "Sleep tight, my little bride. Tomorrow will come with a brighter sun."

He kisses my forehead, giving me the reprieve that I so need.

Sweet oblivion takes me under.

45

NARANU

The silence is thick, settling over the ruins like a heavy shroud.

The battlefield, once alive with the roar of war, the clash of blades, the screams of the dying, now lies in complete stillness. The acrid scent of scorched earth lingers, mingling with the bitter tang of blood. Stone and ash crumble beneath my boots as I take in the devastation.

Everything is gone.

My people. My warriors. The stronghold that had stood for centuries, built upon the backs of my ancestors, obliterated.

I am the last.

The only survivor of my clan.

A low breath shudders from my chest, though I keep my expression blank, my spine rigid. I will not break. Not here. Not now.

The wind shifts, and behind me, Eryss trembles.

Her magic hums in the air, raw and aching, still charged from the moment she shattered every chain that had bound her. But this isn't the triumphant kind of power.

This is grief.

She stands amidst the wreckage, her arms wrapped around herself, her skin pale beneath the fading glow of the moon. She won the battle, saved me, but the cost...

I step toward her, brushing my fingers against the curve of her shoulder, and she flinches before melting into me. Her arms circle my waist, her body pressing against mine like she's trying to anchor herself.

Like she's afraid she'll fall apart if she lets go.

I tighten my hold, crushing her against me, letting her feel every inch of my presence, my warmth, my strength.

"It's going to be alright," I murmur, the words thick, almost foreign on my tongue.

She shakes her head, her fingers gripping the fabric of my ruined tunic. "Don't lie to me."

I pull back, just enough to tip her chin up, forcing her to meet my gaze. Her eyes glisten, glassy with unshed tears. She's breaking, and it guts me.

"I will never leave you," I swear. My voice is iron, unyielding. "No matter what happens, no matter where we go—you are not alone."

Her lips part, a strangled sound slipping from her throat. "Promise me."

I cup her cheek, brushing my thumb along her skin, wiping away the streak of dirt and dried blood. "I promise."

A broken sound escapes her, and before I can say anything else, she crashes into me,

claiming my lips in a desperate kiss.

She kisses me like she's drowning, like I'm the only thing keeping her afloat. And gods help me, I kiss her back just as fiercely.

Her hands curl into my hair, tugging, pulling me closer, until there's nothing between us but heat and emotion, until I can taste the sorrow and longing on her tongue.

I back her against the remnants of a fallen column, my hands spanning her waist, gripping tight like she might disappear if I don't hold on. She's here. I'm here. And we're alive.

She shudders into me, her breaths uneven, her fingers curling around my wrist.

We stand there, wrapped in each other, as the ruins smolder behind us.

A movement.

A sound.

A rustling in the distance.

My instincts flare, and I snap my head up, fangs bared. Eryss stiffens against me, her magic already crackling at her fingertips.

The trees shift in the distance, the undergrowth disturbed. We are not alone.

I snarl, already preparing for another fight. Another attack. Another loss.

Suddenly, there's a voice.

Tentative. Hopeful.

“Warlord?”

I freeze.

More voices rise, hushed whispers rippling through the shadows. Then, slowly, figures step forward from the treeline.

Humans.

At least a dozen of them, some clutching crude weapons, others holding nothing but each other.

Eryss grips my arm. "Who...?"

The oldest among them, a grizzled man with silver threading through his dark beard, steps forward. His eyes sweep over the ruins, over me, over us, before he falls to his knees.

"The gods have heard our prayers," he breathes, pressing his forehead to the dirt.
“The Warlord lives.”

The others follow, dropping into low bows, murmuring their gratitude.

Eryss inhales sharply, her grip on me tightening. "They... they prayed for you?"

My own voice falters, something inside me twisting.

"We... stayed away during the war," the older man explains, lifting his gaze to mine.
"We saw the fires. Heard the battle. But we are simple people, Warlord. We had no

warriors to send. So we prayed. And we waited."

I exhale, my claws flexing. I never expected this.

Another villager, a woman this time, steps forward, clutching the hand of a young boy. "Come back with us," she says softly. "To the village. You are injured. You need rest."

Her eyes flick to Eryss, kind, knowing.

"You both do."

Eryss and I stare at each other, the weight of everything crashing down.

We are alone.

Yet—maybe, we aren't.

She bites her lip, nodding once.

I wrap an arm around her, pulling her to my side, as I look to the villagers, to my people.

"Lead the way," I say, my voice steady.

And as we follow them, I allow myself, to hope for a bright future.

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46

ERYSS

Three months.

Three months since the war ended.

Three months since Naranus and I walked into the village, weary, battered, but alive. Since we chose to stay, to build something new from the ruins of our past.

And now?

Life is...different.

Not easy. But good.

Humans and gargoyles. Purna and warriors. Living together. Protecting each other. Who would have thought? Certainly not me.

I never imagined a life outside of my coven, away from the relentless grip of the Elders. I never thought I'd find solace among mortals, nor that Naranus, the warlord, the cursed warrior, the monster of legends, would become their guardian.

The village hums with life.

Children laugh as they weave between the market stalls, sticky fingers stealing pieces

of fruit while their mothers scold them half-heartedly. Hunters return from the deep woods, dragging fresh game behind them. The forge clangs, iron striking iron, while the scent of fresh bread and herbs lingers in the air.

In the midst of it all, him.

Naranus stands near the training grounds, watching as a group of villagers spar under his instruction. He doesn't bark orders like a tyrant, doesn't command them with brute strength, he teaches, guides.

The humans trust him. Revere him.

Warlord, they still call him, though I suspect it's different now. Not a title born of fear, but of respect.

My chest tightens as I watch him. He belongs here. We both do.

I exhale slowly, shaking my head as I return my focus to the festival preparations.

Tonight is the Harvest Celebration, the first since the war ended, and the villagers have spared no effort in preparing. Tables are laden with roasted meats, honey-glazed pastries, and pitchers of spiced ale. A great bonfire crackles at the village's center, its golden light flickering against the dusk-painted sky.

There is music. Laughter. Hope.

I feel light, like the past has no bearing anymore.

But as the night unfolds, the peace is shattered—by my name.

“Eryss!”

I blink, turning as the village chief steps forward, raising his arms to silence the crowd. The murmur of conversation dies, and all eyes shift toward the long wooden platform where the elders sit.

Beside them, Naranus.

He stands tall, arms crossed over his broad chest, his expression unreadable. My stomach twists.

The chief gestures toward him with great reverence. “Tonight, before our people, our protector has something to say.”

My pulse jumps. What?

I glance at Naranus, waiting for an explanation, but his golden eyes are locked on me, intense, unwavering. The world narrows, the noise fading.

He moves.

In his hands, flowers.

My heart stops.

The giggling starts. The women whispering to one another, hands pressed to their lips, eyes gleaming with knowing amusement.

Naranus, the terrifying warlord, presenting me with flowers?

I think I’ve stopped breathing.

The man who once snarled at me for getting too close, who has fought wars and

survived curses, who has seen entire civilizations crumble beneath his might, now stands before me, offering delicate moon-blossoms like some bashful suitor.

Heat creeps up my neck. Oh gods.

“Naranus, what are you doing?” My voice comes out hoarse, strangled.

He doesn’t hesitate. Doesn’t falter.

Instead, he steps forward, closing the distance between us, his clawed fingers brushing mine as he places the flowers in my hands.

He kneels.

Gasps ripple through the crowd.

My mind goes blank.

Naranus kneeling? In front of me?

His gaze burns, sharp as steel, heavy with meaning. “Eryss,” he says, voice deep, rich. “I have fought for many things. Killed for many more. But I have never fought for something like this. Like you.”

A lump lodges in my throat.

“I am yours,” he continues, unwavering. Raw. Open. “I ask you to be mine. To stand beside me—not as an obligation, not as a duty, but as my mate.”

My vision blurs.

He lifts his hands, palms up, offering them in the way of his people. “In the way of my kind, I bind myself to you.” His voice softens, golden eyes piercing. “And in the way of yours, I ask you to bind yourself to me.”

The silence is deafening.

The fire crackles. The wind stirs. My heart threatens to shatter my ribcage.

This is real. This is happening.

I sway where I stand, legs trembling, emotions crashing over me in waves.

Everything we have endured. Every battle, every loss, every sacrifice, led us here.

Suddenly, there is no hesitation.

I sink to my knees, meeting him there, clutching the flowers so tightly the petals crumple against my palms.

“Yes,” I breathe, the word barely escaping before I’m grabbing him, before I’m kissing him like I’ll never stop.

A roar of approval erupts, the villagers cheering, clapping, laughing.

But all I feel is him.

His arms wrap around me, lifting me against him as he devours my lips, as if he can’t get close enough.

I hear their voices, but they are nothing compared to the thunder of my own pulse.

This moment. This choice.

This future.

Naranus grins against my lips, his forehead pressing to mine. “You’re mine now, little purna, my bride.”

I laugh, breathless. “And you’re mine, warlord.”

And with the stars watching over us, with our people cheering, celebrating, believing.

We begin.

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ERYSS

The moon hangs huge and luminous, casting its glow over the village like an ancient guardian, watching, waiting.

The villagers gather in the clearing, forming a wide circle around the sacred stones where the ritual will take place. The heart of the village.

They whisper in excitement, their eyes shining with anticipation. Children clutch their parents' hands, their wide-eyed innocence making my chest tighten. I never thought this moment would come, not for me.

Yet, here I stand, at the edge of a destiny I never imagined.

The aroma of burning sage and wildflowers drifts through the air, mingling with the smoke from the towering bonfire crackling in the village. It flickers with a golden glow, casting shifting shadows over the expectant crowd.

I feel him.

Naranus.

He steps forward from the other side of the clearing, bathed in silver light. His golden eyes lock onto mine, his expression unreadable, but his power hums across the space between us, wrapping around me like a whisper of heat.

The villagers fall silent.

The village elder steps forward, her face lined with wisdom, her weathered hands steady as she raises a bowl of blessed water to the sky. "Tonight, under the eyes of the gods, under the witness of the land and the stars, two souls become one."

My throat tightens.

Naranus walks toward me, each step deliberate. The crowd parts for him, the villagers bowing their heads as he passes. His people may be gone, but they have been replaced with a new kind of kin, humans who now call him their own.

He stops in front of me, gaze unwavering, as if he can see straight into my soul. Maybe he can.

We stand together.

Magic crackles in the air, responding to the moment, to the power of what is being forged between us.

"Eryss." His voice is rough, raw, and so achingly deep. "Are you ready?"

My lips part, but words fail me.

Ready?

To belong to him? To give myself over, not because of duty, not because of magic, but because I choose him?

The answer is so simple it shakes me.

“Yes,” I breathe.

He exhales, something easing in his expression. Then he lifts his hand, claws retracted, palm up. An offering.

My heart thunders as I lift mine, pressing my palm against his. Heat surges. The villagers gasp as a ring of light flares between us, magic responding to the vows yet to be spoken.

The elder dips her fingers into the blessed water and draws a sigil on my forehead, then his. “Under the moon’s witness, you bind your souls.”

Naranus lowers his head, pressing his brow to mine. Electricity snaps between us.

“Say it,” he murmurs, voice rough with something dark and possessive.

I swallow, breath shuddering. The words come naturally.

“In the way of my people,” I whisper, “I bind myself to you.”

His hands slide to my wrists, gripping firmly, claiming.

“And in the way of mine,” he rasps, “I take you as my mate.”

Magic ignites.

A rush of power, uncontrollable, undeniable, swirls around us, sending dust and petals spiraling into the night. The fire behind us roars higher, and the village erupts into cheers.

Someone sobs. A woman wipes her tears, muttering about how beautiful it is.

Children laugh, their innocence untouched by the weight of the moment.

And through it all, Naranus' golden gaze never wavers.

I'm his.

He's mine.

It is done.

The ceremony melts into celebration.

Tables overflow with food, roasted meats, spiced stews, fruit so ripe it drips nectar onto eager hands. Ale flows freely, mugs clinking, voices raised in song and laughter.

The bonfire crackles high, casting golden ribbons of light across the dancers twirling in the center of the village.

Of course, they don't let us sit out.

"Come on, Warlord!" one of the elders calls, lifting a mug high. "Even mighty warriors must dance for their mates."

Naranus snorts. "You wish to see me make a fool of myself?"

The villagers laugh. But I narrow my eyes. "Oh, I think you'll do just fine, warlord."

Challenge flickers in his gaze. "Is that so?"

I grab his hand. He doesn't resist.

We step into the clearing, surrounded by clapping hands, stomping feet. The music swells, and suddenly, we're moving.

Naranus isn't graceful. He's a warrior, not a dancer. But he follows me, his grip strong, his movements surprisingly fluid.

The villagers whoop and cheer, clapping to the beat.

I laugh, spinning, twisting, until my pulse pounds from something other than battle. His hands grip my waist, pulling me against him as the world spins.

"You planned this," he accuses, low in my ear.

I smirk. "Maybe."

We dance until the stars turn. Until the night air is thick with laughter, warmth, belonging. Until there is nothing left but the sound of our hearts beating in time.

He takes my hand, leading me away from the crowd, away from the noise.

Away, until it's just us.

The bonfire's glow fades, replaced by the soft silver light of the moon.

I lift my head, breathless, giddy. He watches me, silent, steady, eternal.

"You're mine now," he murmurs, fingers brushing my cheek.

I press into his touch. "I always was."

His lips capture mine, deep and lingering. A promise, sealed in moonlight.

I am home.

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Source Creation Date: July 26, 2025, 2:34 pm

The night is thick with the aroma of wildflowers and burning embers, the village still alive with laughter and music in the distance. But here, in the sacred quiet beyond the celebration, beneath the watchful eye of the moon, there is only us.

Only him.

Naranus stands before me, his golden eyes glowing, smoldering. His body, a perfect mixture of power and warmth, strength and tenderness is poised, waiting. He has fought battles, conquered enemies, and yet, in this moment, I see something raw and unguarded in his expression.

Love.

I am undone by it.

A breeze teases through my hair, brushing against my exposed skin, but it is nothing compared to the heat rolling from his body as he steps closer.

"I never imagined this," he murmurs, his deep voice curling around my heart, tightening like an unbreakable bond.

I swallow hard. "What?"

His hand lifts, tracing a slow, reverent path along my jaw. "A future." He presses his forehead to mine, his breath hot against my lips. "A life where I was not alone."

Emotion swells inside me, thick and overwhelming. I reach up, threading my fingers

into his dark hair, my voice barely above a whisper. "You're not alone anymore."

He exhales sharply, as if those words are the only battle cry he has ever truly needed. And then, he kisses me.

A kiss that consumes.

A kiss that seals.

His lips capture mine, moving deep and slow, reverent yet hungry. The bond between us thrums to life, an undeniable pull of fate, of destiny.

Heat spreads through my veins, coiling low in my stomach as he wraps his arms around me, pulling me flush against him. My hands roam his broad shoulders, memorizing every curve, every ridge of hardened muscle. Every scar that tells a story of survival.

He lifts me effortlessly, carrying me into the small dwelling the villagers prepared for us. The walls are lined with flickering lanterns, casting golden light over the woven blankets and fur pelts laid in preparation for this night.

For our night.

He lays me down with aching care, as if I am made of something fragile.

I grab his wrist, my breath uneven. "Don't you dare treat me like glass, warlord."

A dark chuckle rumbles through his chest. "Then I will treat you like fire."

And he does.

His lips trail heat across my skin, burning a path of devotion.

His hands worship me, learning every dip and curve, every secret place that makes me sigh his name.

His lips find the sensitive skin of my neck, his breath hot against my ear as he whispers, "Your nipples are exquisite, Eryss." His tongue flicks out, teasing the hardened peaks before his mouth closes over one, sucking gently, then harder, drawing a moan from my lips.

My fingers tangle in his thick, dark hair, pulling him closer, urging him on.

"Naranus, please!" I moan, arching, almost rubbing onto him.

He moves lower, his hands exploring the landscape of my body. His calloused fingers graze my stomach, then lower, tracing the curve of my hip before settling possessively on my cunt. He spreads my legs, his touch sending shivers down my spine.

"Such a beautiful pussy," he murmurs, his voice thick with desire. His fingers delve inside, exploring the wet heat, eliciting a gasp from me.

I arch against him, desperate for more. "Take me, my mate."

He groans, his own need palpable. He pulls back, taking off the cloth covering his genitals with shaking hands, revealing the impressive length of his cock, thick and hard, throbbing with anticipation. The sight of it sends another wave of heat through me.

Gods, he never fails me.

"Fuck me hard, Naranus," I urge him, slinging my legs around his hips. I want him hard and deep in me, branding me in ways no other being can ever do.

He positions himself above me, his weight settling gently yet powerfully. The friction is exquisite, his cock filling me completely, the pressure intense and overwhelming.

“Yes!” I scream as he growls in pleasure as I will my muscles to suck him in deeper. To milk him of every last drop of his essence. I move my legs, driving him inside me deeply.

“Holy gods,” he roars, almost coming as I buck my hips and he moves faster.

Each thrust is a wave of pure pleasure, his name escaping my lips in gasps and moans. He kisses me again, deep and hungry, our tongues tangling, mirroring the passion exploding between our bodies.

He grips my hips, increasing the rhythm as he race to the top.

“Naranus, Naranus,” I gasp his name as if calling out for salvation.

His hands continue to explore, caressing my nipples, twisting them gently, adding a layer of exquisite torture to the already intense pleasure. I'm a whirlwind of sensation, my entire body screaming in silent ecstasy.

With each powerful thrust, the world narrows down to this, him, me, the raw, untamed passion consuming us. Our mating bond. The magic slowly binds us as it fires my nerve endings one by one, changing me fundamentally in a soul level.

To us, this isn't just physical. This is beyond any pleasure the physical plane can offer.

He buries his face in my hair, his grunts punctuating the rhythm of our coupling. The air is thick with sweat and desire, a potent aphrodisiac driving us insane.

“I'm coming!” I scream.

He moans his assent as he shivers.

The climax hits with the force of a storm, ripping through me, leaving me breathless and spent. We collapse together, limbs tangled, our bodies still trembling from the aftermath.

It is acceptance.

It is completion.

Two warriors who have found their peace in each other.

The bond flares bright, the magic binding us deep and permanent. I feel it seeping into my bones, whispering into my soul, forever, forever, forever.

Naranus groans against my neck, his breath ragged, shaken. "Eryss..." His voice is thick, reverent. "You are my greatest victory."

Tears prick my eyes, but I don't let it fall.

I cup his face, pressing our foreheads together. "And you are my home."

A promise forged in love and fire.

I run my fingers down the center of his chest, feeling the steady thrum of life beneath my palm.

He catches my wrist, kissing the inside of it before pulling me tight against him. "I will never leave you alone," he murmurs.

I smile, pressing a kiss over his heart. "And I will never let you."

The fire in the hearth crackles softly, the night wrapping around us like a warm embrace.

Beyond the walls, the village still celebrates, the sound of laughter and music a gentle hum in the distance.

Here, in this small space, we rest.

Together.

Always.