



Naga Healer's Mate

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Description: He heals others while she saves lives in the shadows. But when danger strikes, they'll have to save each other.

Niri Healer Nirrn lives by logic, order, and the healer's oath. But everything unravels the moment he stumbles upon Islae—an underground human medic risking her life to treat the forgotten and discarded. She's reckless. Stubborn. And maddeningly brilliant as well as beautiful.

When her illegal clinic is destroyed, Nirrn does the unthinkable: he brings her into his world. Now they're on the run, hunted by a corrupt system that sees their bond as a threat.

Their alliance was supposed to be temporary. A way to survive. But as danger closes in and desire builds, Nirrn realizes Islae isn't just another patient to protect...

She's his mate.

And he'll tear down the galaxy before letting her go.

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Chapter 1

Nirrn

Nirrn's long tail coiled beneath him as he made another note in his datapad. The examination room's sterile white walls seemed to close around him, matching his somber mood. His patient, a young human female, fidgeted on the biobed while he reviewed her test results.

"Everything appears to be in order, Ms. Smith. Your hormone levels are optimal for the procedure."

"Thank you, Healer Nirrn." She twisted her hands in her lap. "Will it... will it hurt?"

"The implantation is painless. We use targeted nanites to ensure proper placement." His golden eyes softened at her obvious nervousness. "The Karthian couple you're matched with has an excellent genetic compatibility rating."

The woman's shoulders relaxed. "They seemed nice. Very... blue."

Nirrn's orange scales rippled with subtle amusement. "Indeed. The Karthians are known for their coloring." He transferred the approved paperwork to the central database. "Please schedule your follow-up with reception on your way out."

After she left, Nirrn allowed his professional mask to slip. His tail twitched restlessly as he stared at the growing list of successful matches on his screen. Three hundred and twenty-seven. That's how many families he'd helped create since arriving on Jorvla.

“Computer, end shift report.”

The ambient lighting in the examination room dimmed as he gathered his belongings and left. The corridors of Jorvla’s central surrogacy clinic buzzed with activity—other healers, nurses, human female surrogates, and prospective parents of dozens of species all seeking the same thing: creating a family.

His orange scales glinted from the fading sunlight streaming through the hallway windows as he made his way to the front of the clinic. The shimmering golden light reminded him of his home planet. Of Nirum, where he’d trained as a master healer, and where he’d expected to find his own mate.

“Healer Nirrn?” his assistant’s voice crackled through his comm device. “Another patient is requesting to be seen today.”

“Send her in tomorrow morning. I’m done for today.”

His massive frame filled the doorway as he exited the surrogacy clinic, ducking slightly despite the raised ceiling designed for various alien species.

The ache in his chest deepened. There he was, surrounded by new beginnings every day, yet his own life felt stagnant. His quarters would be empty again tonight, no mate to share his achievements with, no little ones to nurture. Just another evening of reviewing medical journals and convincing himself that was enough for him.

His powerful tail propelled him through the crowded streets of Jorvla’s underground sector as he headed for the market. His towering frame caused smaller species to dart out of his path. Five years. Five long years since he had left the pristine medical facilities of Nirum for this... this chaos.

The sector’s dilapidated buildings pressed in around him, their worn facades a stark

contrast to the sleek government district where his clinic resided. As he approached the market, a Jorvlen merchant's filaments waved frantically as she haggled with a human female over nutrient supplements at the front entrance. Two Niri warriors slithered past, their mates perched contentedly in their arms.

His scales bristled with suppressed emotion. Yet another reminder of his loneliness.

"Fresh produce!" a vendor's cry pierced through his brooding.

The market sprawled before him, a maze of stalls and shops crammed between crumbling structures. His datapad blinked with his shopping list, but his heart wasn't in it. A young Niri couple passed by, their scales gleaming as they examined baby supplies at a nearby stall.

"What about this one, love?" The female held up a tiny sleeping pod.

"Perfect for our little one," her mate replied, nuzzling her neck.

Nirrn's tail twitched, and he turned away. The market's pungent mix of alien spices and unwashed bodies couldn't mask the bitter taste in his mouth. Here he was, a master healer, helping others start their families while his own dreams of finding a mate slipped further away with each passing day.

"Healer Nirrn!" A passing human nodded respectfully. She was one of his current patients, though he couldn't recall her name. Her rounded belly showed her surrogacy was progressing well.

He tilted his head slightly, maintaining his professional demeanor despite the hollowness he felt in his chest. As he continued on, his golden eyes swept over the market stalls, barely registering the items he needed. Food didn't matter. Nothing really mattered anymore except going through the motions, maintaining the facade of

the successful and composed healer everyone expected him to be.

His massive frame cast shadows over the smaller beings as he wound between the stalls, his orange scales catching the dying light of Jorvla's sun. The gold undertones in his scales seemed duller today, he thought, as if somehow mirroring his darkened mood. Maybe he was just tired of pretending he was fine.

A flash of movement suddenly caught Nirrn's attention—a small figure darting between market stalls with peculiar urgency. His golden eyes narrowed as he tracked the human female's progress through the shadows. She moved with purpose, checking over her shoulder every few steps, her worn medical bag clutched close to her chest.

His healer's instincts prickled. Something about her furtive movements set off warning signals in his mind. His sturdy tail pushed him forward quickly, keeping to the deeper shadows as he followed her path through the market's maze-like passages.

The woman disappeared down a concealed stairwell between two abandoned buildings. Nirrn's scales rippled with interest as he slithered closer. The passage reeked of mold and decay, but underneath lay the sharp tang of antiseptic.

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His towering frame barely fit through the narrow opening. The stairs led to a dimly lit underground chamber that branched off into several makeshift rooms. Medical equipment hummed softly in the background.

“Just breathe slowly,” the woman’s voice drifted from one of the rooms. “The contractions will ease in a moment.”

Nirrn coiled his tail beneath him, pressing against the wall as he observed the scene before him. The human female moved between three beds, each holding a pregnant woman in various stages of distress. Used medical supplies littered every surface. More humans huddled in the shadows, some sporting injuries, others clearly malnourished.

His professional eye cataloged multiple violations of medical safety protocols. The equipment was outdated, and the conditions were unsanitary. Yet the human healer worked with steady hands and quiet confidence, her movements precise despite the primitive conditions.

“There we go,” she murmured to another patient. “The infection is responding to treatment. Keep taking the antibiotics exactly as I showed you.”

Nirrn’s chest tightened uncomfortably as he watched her work. Such defiance of Jorvlen law could result in severe punishment, yet she showed no fear. Her determination to help these people, regardless of the personal dangers, stirred something deep within him—an instinct he’d thought long dormant.

His scales tingled with awareness as she passed near his hiding spot. Up close, he

could see the exhaustion etched on her face and the way her hands trembled slightly as she prepared another injection. She was pushing herself too hard and taking too many unnecessary risks. The thought of Jorvlen authorities discovering this place made his protective instincts flare unexpectedly.

A patient's groan drew her attention back to the beds. "I'm coming," she called softly. "Just hold on."

Nirrn's fingers flexed against the handle of his medical bag as he watched her work. His medical training screamed at him to step in—to correct the angle of that needle, to adjust the dosage calculations scratched on that worn datapad, and to properly sterilize those instruments. The orange scales along his shoulders bristled with tension as another patient moaned.

"Easy now," the human healer murmured, wiping sweat from the patient's fevered brow. "The pain medication will kick in soon."

His golden eyes tracked her movements as she steadily worked, noting how she maximized every step and every gesture—no wasted motion and no hesitation. Despite the crude conditions, her technique showed years of experience. The way she positioned herself between patients, always keeping the most critical cases in her line of sight, spoke of someone who'd learned to manage multiple emergencies simultaneously.

A young woman clutched her swollen belly, tears streaming down her face. "I can't... I can't afford the surrogacy clinic fees," she whispered. "The baby is going to die..."

"Not while I'm here," the healer promised, her voice fierce with conviction. "We'll figure something out."

Something stirred within Nirrn—an echo of that same passion he'd felt when he'd

first taken his healer's oath. His tail coiled tighter under him as memories surfaced: his graduation ceremony in Nirum's grand medical building, and the weight of responsibility settling on his shoulders as he swore to use his skills to protect and heal.

The human female's dedication to these desperate patients, her willingness to sacrifice herself to help them in secret... it resonated with something deep inside him. His hands tingled with the need to join her, to share his expertise, and to ease some of her burden.

She moved to check another patient's vitals, her movements growing more sluggish with fatigue. The dark circles under her eyes spoke of too many sleepless nights. Without proper rest, she'd make mistakes. Without assistance, she'd burn herself out.

A patient's monitor beeped erratically. The healer turned, stumbling slightly as exhaustion caught up with her. Nirn's powerful frame tensed, ready to surge forward and catch her if needed. He set his medical bag down carefully on the ground, trying not to make a sound.

She steadied herself against a makeshift exam table and then froze. Her head snapped up. He thought she sensed his presence, and he would be discovered watching her in the shadows. He held his breath, waiting for her to approach him and demand answers. But instead, she moved toward the patient's bed and pressed a button on the patient's monitor to silence the alarm. He slowly let out his breath, relieved that she hadn't spotted him quite yet. He needed more time to formulate an explanation of why he was down here in the first place.

Chapter 2

Islae

The dank air of the underground chamber clung to Islae's pale skin as she moved between her patients. Sweat trickled down her neck, and the humid space felt suffocating. The constant hum of the outdated medical equipment provided a grim soundtrack to her work.

"Easy now," she murmured softly to the human female on the leftmost bed. "The contractions should ease up in a few minutes." Her patient's knuckles were white against the thin sheets.

"What if the Jorvlen authorities find us?" the woman's voice quavered.

"They won't." Islae checked the IV line, adjusting the flow of fluids. "Focus on your breathing, just like we practiced."

Islae's legs trembled as she crossed to the next bed. Twenty hours without sleep was catching up with her, but she had no time for rest. Not with three high-risk pregnancies and rooms full of injured patients depending on her care.

The monitor beside the third bed chirped an irregular rhythm. Islae's heart jumped momentarily, but she forced her movements to remain steady as she checked the readout. The numbers blurred slightly before her brown eyes. She blinked hard, trying to focus better.

"Your blood pressure is climbing again, Miranda," she said calmly, reaching for a syringe. Her hands trembled a little as she measured the dose.

A distant crash echoed through the tunnels. Islae's head snapped up, her pulse racing. Several patients gasped. She pressed a finger to her lips, and the room fell silent except for the mechanical whirl of equipment.

"It's probably just the market carts above us," she said quietly, though her mouth had

gone dry. She turned back to her task, but the syringe slipped from her trembling fingers and clattered against the metal tray.

The monitor's alarm blared again. She lunged for the silence button, stumbling a bit as her exhaustion made her clumsy. Her vision swam ever so slightly, tiny black spots dancing at the edges.

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“You’re going to make mistakes or burn out if you keep pushing yourself like this,” she muttered.

But I don’t have a choice, she thought. She straightened, forcing her eyes to focus more clearly. Who else will help them?

She moved over to the next room to help more patients. Before long, she threaded a curved needle through torn flesh, her movements precise despite the poor lighting. The human laborer on her makeshift operating table barely flinched. They were used to pain.

“Deep breaths,” she said soothingly, tying off another stitch. “Almost done.”

The wound gaped across his shoulder blade, testament to a Jorvlen overseer’s casual cruelty. The metallic tang of blood mixed with the musty underground air made her nose twitch.

“I shouldn’t have talked back like that,” the man muttered. “It was my fault.”

“No, it wasn’t.” Islae’s fingers never paused in their careful work, but her voice carried steel. “They don’t own your voice. Or your dignity.”

A muffled cry from the adjacent room made her head snap up quickly. Through the doorway, she could see one of her pregnant patients doubling over on her bed.

“Hold still for a minute,” she told her current patient, finishing the last stitch with quick efficiency. “I need to check on her.”

She stripped off her gloves, grabbed fresh ones, and crossed the threshold in three quick steps. The pregnant woman's face had gone gray with pain.

"Breathe through it, Mai." Islae pressed her fingers to the woman's wrist, counting her heartbeats. Too fast, she thought. "When did the contractions change?"

"Just... just now." Mai's fingers dug into the thin mattress. "Something feels wrong."

The monitor beside her bed beeped a warning. Islae glanced at the readout and then back at her patient's face. The baby was in distress.

Another crash echoed from somewhere above, and Islae's heart stuttered. She forced herself to remain focused on Mai's pulse, even as her ears strained for any follow-up sounds. "One crisis at a time," she whispered to herself.

"Your baby's heart rate is dropping. We need to get it out now." She reached for her surgical kit with steady hands that belied her exhaustion. "I know it's not what we planned, but waiting isn't safe anymore."

From the other room, her newly stitched patient called out, "Someone's coming down the tunnel!"

Islae's stomach dropped, but she kept her voice calm. "How are those stitches feeling? Can you move?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"Good. I might need your help over here." She turned back to Mai. "We're going to do this as fast as possible, okay? Trust me."

The distant sound of boots on metal grating made her skin crawl. But her hands stayed

steady as she prepared her instruments for the delivery. She'd learned long ago that fear was a luxury she couldn't afford down here.

The footsteps echoed louder through the underground tunnel as Islae guided Mai through the final stages of labor. The newly stitched man, Marco, braced Mai's shoulders while Islae positioned herself between the woman's legs.

"Almost there. One more push," Islae said, her hands surprisingly steady despite the approaching footsteps. Sweat dripped down her temple as she focused on the crowning head.

Mai's scream suddenly pierced the stale air. The baby slipped into Islae's waiting hands, and she quickly cleared its airways. A sharp cry filled the room.

"It's a boy," Islae announced, wrapping him in a clean cloth. Her heart raced at the sound of someone entering the room, but she kept her movements measured as she tied off the umbilical cord.

"Islae!" The familiar voice cut through the tension like a knife. Sarah, one of her regular patients, stood in the doorway, her chest heaving. Her dark hair stuck to her forehead, and her eyes were wide with urgency.

"Here," Islae handed the baby to his exhausted mother and then stripped off her gloves. "What's wrong, Sarah?"

Sarah glanced nervously over her shoulder before stepping closer. "The network sent me. You need to shut this place down. Now."

Ice spread through Islae's veins. "Why? What's going on?"

"Some Jorvlen bounty hunters recently learned of your secret underground

clinic. Someone must've accidentally leaked out information." Sarah's voice dropped to a whisper. "They plan to raid the place."

Marco shifted his weight uncomfortably. "How long do we have?"

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“Days.Maybe hours.I’m not too sure.”Sarah gripped Islae’s arm.“But they’re watching the area.If they catch you, I don’t know what they will do.”

Islae looked at Mai cradling her newborn, at Marco with his fresh stitches, and at the rooms full of patients who needed medical attention.The thought of abandoning them made her stomach turn.

“These people need my help,” she said firmly.

“You can’t help anyone if your clinic is destroyed, or worse, if they harm you.”Sarah’s fingers dug into her arm.“You need to lay low for a while.”

The baby’s soft cries filled the silence as Islae processed the warning.She’d known this day might come.But facing it now, with rooms full of vulnerable patients, made her chest tighten with sudden panic.

Islae’s mind raced as she outlined her evacuation plan.The underground clinic’s dim lighting cast shadows across her face as she spoke in hushed tones to Sarah and Marco.

“Sarah, take the mobile patients through the east tunnel.It connects to the old maintenance shaft behind the textile factory.”She pressed a rusty key into Sarah’s palm.“Marco, help anyone who can’t walk.The service elevator still works—use it in groups of three.”

“What about the newborns?”Marco adjusted his bandaged shoulder.

“Split them between you. Keep them as quiet as you can.” Islae gathered medical supplies, stuffing them into worn canvas bags. “The market crowds will provide enough cover.”

Sarah touched her arm lightly. “Are you coming with us?”

“I need to gather the records and equipment first. I can’t leave them behind.” Islae’s fingers brushed against the worn leather of her father’s medical journal. “I’ll meet you at the usual spot once it’s safe.”

They worked quickly and methodically, moving patients through the shadows of the underground tunnels. The pregnant women went first, followed by those with fresh wounds. Islae’s heart pounded with each creak of the ancient elevator, but the noise from the market above masked their movements.

“That’s the last of them,” Marco finally whispered, supporting an elderly man with a broken leg.

Sarah squeezed Islae’s hand. “Please don’t take too long. If the bounty hunters—”

“I know,” Islae cut her off, managing a tight smile. “Go now. Keep them safe.”

The silence pressed in as their footsteps faded down the tunnel. Islae moved through the empty rooms of her clinic, methodically gathering patient files and wiping down surfaces. The chemical smell of disinfectant burned her nose as she worked as fast as she could.

Suddenly, a soft rustle broke the quiet.

Islae froze, her pulse quickening. The hair on the back of her neck stood up as an unmistakable sensation of being watched crawled across her skin. She turned slowly,

expecting to find Jorvlen bounty hunters with their cruel smiles and gleaming weapons.

Instead, a towering figure stood in the shadows. Orange scales caught what little light filtered through the tunnel, shimmering with golden undertones. The Niri male's presence filled the narrow space, his golden eyes fixed on her with an intensity that made her breath catch.

Islae's fingers tightened around the bottle of disinfectant—a poor weapon, but better than nothing. “If you're here to spy on me for the Jorvlen bounty hunters, I suggest you leave now.” Her voice came out steady despite the fear coursing through her veins.

He remained motionless, those golden eyes studying her with an unreadable expression. His silence felt heavy, expectant, like the air before a storm.

Chapter 3

Nirrn

Nirrn's tail lashed out instinctively against the tunnel floor. His scales scraped the stone with a sound that shattered the underground silence. He cursed inwardly at his lack of self-control. But watching her deliver that baby with such skill and confidence had stirred a sense of recognition in him. And the way she'd orchestrated the evacuation of her patients with those two helpers, her movements controlled and purposeful, had only intensified the feeling.

They stood alone now in the dim space, his orange scales catching what little light filtered down the tunnel, casting golden reflections on the rough stone walls.

The human female spun toward the sound he'd made, her fingers white-knuckled

around a bottle of disinfectant. “If you’re here to spy on me for the Jorvlen bounty hunters, I suggest you leave now.”

Her voice remained steady, but Nirrn’s keen eyes caught the slight tremor in her hands as well as the way her pulse jumped at her pale throat. He moved forward slowly, his tail sliding silently now across the ground.

He cleared his throat. “You should not be doing this alone. It is extremely dangerous. Not only for the patients but for you.”

She barked out a harsh laugh. “What are you even doing down here? You have no right to spy on me or tell me how to help my people.”

Her gaze dropped to the medical insignia on his shirt, and her lip curled. “Oh, I see. You’re one of them. Part of the system that puts a price tag on survival.” She gestured around the makeshift clinic with her free hand. “These people can’t afford your regulated care. They need help—real help—not bureaucracy and bills they’ll never be able to pay.”

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Nirrn's scales bristled at her accusations, though a part of him recognized the truth in her words. He'd seen too many turned away from proper medical care, their conditions worsening while they waited for approval or struggled to gather the necessary funds.

"The Jorvlen health care system is broken," she continued, her voice rising with passion. "It serves the wealthy while the rest suffer. I'm just doing what needs to be done."

Nirrn's tail coiled tighter as he studied her fierce expression. The dim light caught the sheen of sweat on her forehead, evidence of the long hours she'd spent caring for others today. His medical training screamed at him to point out the risks of her doing that. But something much deeper suddenly stirred within him—admiration for her and for what she was trying to accomplish down here.

Without thinking, he blurted out his praise of her and her work. "Your suture technique is exceptional. That laborer's wound—the placement, the careful consideration of muscle tension. And that breech birth..." He shook his head, his scales catching the light. "Few could have managed that with such skill."

"I don't need your approval or praise," she snapped back. She turned away from him, organizing and gathering supplies with sharp movements.

He pressed her further. "Why waste such talent in the shadows? Any clinic would—"

She spun back to face him. "Those places? Where they turn away the sick because their social status isn't high enough? Where they report injured workers to their

Jorvlen masters?” Her laugh was bitter. “I’d rather work in a sewer.”

The truth of her words stung. How many times had he watched the system fail those who needed it most? His tail shifted restlessly against the rough floor.

He took a deep breath. “The authorities will not be merciful when they find you. And they will find you eventually.”

She glared at him. “Then I’ll move. Set up somewhere else. These people need someone on their side.”

Her raw dedication to help the less fortunate called to something that had been dormant within him from years of bureaucratic compromise. His scales rippled with an unfamiliar protective urge.

“Who are you to lecture me anyway?” She jabbed her finger close to his scaled chest. “Standing there in your clean uniform, judging from your position of privilege. You have no idea.”

“I’ve seen enough down here to know you’re putting yourself at unnecessary risk.” His voice came out rougher than intended.

“Unnecessary? Tell that to the mother who just delivered her baby safely instead of bleeding out in some back alley. Tell that to the man who can still use his arm because someone was here to stitch it properly.”

The pure passion in her voice resonated through him like a physical force. Why did her words affect him so deeply? Why did every fiber of his being want to shield her from what was coming? The intensity of his feelings for a stranger—a human no less—defied logic or reason.

His muscles tensed as he opened his mouth to explain the unfamiliar pull he felt toward her and her dedication, but heavy footsteps suddenly echoed through the tunnel. His tail lashed against the ground as three Jorvlen bounty hunters emerged from the shadows, their leather armor creaking.

“Well, well. The infamous underground healer.” The lead hunter sneered, his scarred face twisting. “You’ve been causing quite a stir around here lately.”

Her fingers tightened around the bottle she was holding. “Get out. This is a place of healing.”

“Oh, we will. Once you pay what you owe for running this illegal operation.” The lead hunter’s eyes gleamed with malice. “Five thousand credits should cover our... discretion.”

“I don’t have that kind of money.” She backed away slowly.

“Wrong answer,” the lead hunter growled.

Before Nirrn could react, one of the other Jorvlen bounty hunters lunged forward, grabbing her from behind. She struggled violently, but the hunter’s grip was iron. The bottle crashed to the floor, antiseptic splashing across the stone.

The lead hunter invaded her space, his slimy face within inches of hers. “Listen here, you little parasite. Either you pay up now, or we’ll make sure you never treat another patient again.”

He pulled out a dagger and pressed it against her throat. She went still, but her eyes blazed with defiance. “I help people who can’t afford your extortion. I won’t apologize for that.”

“Then maybe we should leave your body here as a message to others who might get similar ideas.”He pressed the dagger deeper, drawing a thin line of blood.

Nirrn’s scales rippled with pure rage, his tail coiling tighter beneath him. Every instinct in his body screamed at him to protect her, but violence wasn’t in his nature. He was a healer, trained to mend, not to destroy. Yet watching that blade be pressed against her throat, her blood trickling down her neck, awakened a raw primal instinct within him—something that made his muscles tighten dangerously and his eyes narrow with a singular focus. The tunnel air grew thick with tension.

Then, the scent of her blood hit his nostrils, and something in him completely snapped.

His tail coiled deadly tight, his muscles bunching beneath his orange scales as raw power overrode his healer’s training and discipline.

Without conscious thought, he struck out violently. His powerful tail propelled him forward, and he slammed into the lead hunter with enough force to send them both crashing into the stone wall. The dagger clattered to the ground. His hands, usually so steady with surgical instruments, wrapped around the lead hunter’s throat in a deadly vise grip.

“You dare draw her blood in a place of healing?”The words came out in a snarl he barely recognized as his own.

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The other hunter released her, and the third hunter stepped closer, both drawing their weapons. Nirrn's scales bristled at their approach, glinting in the dim light. His long tail swept low, knocking one of the hunters off his feet.

"You're actually defending this human trash?" the lead hunter wheezed through Nirrn's grip. "What kind of Niri are you?"

Nirrn tightened his hold. "One who recognizes true goodness when he sees it."

The third hunter lunged with a short blade. Nirrn released the leader and twisted away, but not fast enough. Steel scraped across his scales, drawing a thin line of blood along his broad shoulder. The burning pain only fueled his blind rage.

He caught movement from the corner of his eye. She was backing away, her expression a mix of shock and something else he couldn't identify. The distraction cost him. The lead hunter had recovered his dagger and now all three advanced on him, spreading out to flank him in the narrow space of the underground clinic.

"Looks like we found ourselves two problems to solve tonight," the lead hunter sneered, twirling his blade. "A traitor and an illegal healer."

Nirrn's tail lashed violently against the ground, his breath coming in heavy pants. He wasn't trained for this. His muscles already burned from the unfamiliar exertion, and the three armed opponents were more than he could handle. But as he watched them circle closer, he knew with absolute certainty he would die before letting them harm her again.

The hunters moved as one, their blades glinting in the dim light. Nirrn coiled his tail deathly tight, preparing for what might be his last stand.

Chapter 4

Islae

Islae slowly backed up and pressed herself against the cold stone wall as the Jorvlen bounty hunters reached for their weapons and advanced toward the Niri healer. Her heart hammered against her ribs as she watched the orange-scaled Niri face off against the three hunters. His massive tail whipped across the floor of her clinic, scattering medical supplies, and creating a barrier between her and the attackers.

The second hunter lunged, his blade singing through the air. The Niri didn't dodge like she expected. Instead, he caught the Jorvlen's wrist and twisted with calculated precision. The crack of bone echoed through the cramped room, followed by a howl of pain and the clatter of the dropped weapon.

"Stay behind me," the Niri healer commanded, his golden eyes never leaving the remaining threats.

The lead hunter tried to circle around, but the Niri's powerful tail swept out in a controlled arc, knocking the Jorvlen's feet out from under him. No wasted movement, no theatrical displays of strength—just efficient, measured strikes.

"You're protecting a criminal," the third hunter spat, brandishing his blade. "She's been treating patients without proper authorization."

The Niri's muscles tensed, his scales gleaming in the dim light. "She's healing the sick and injured. The only criminals here are you."

His words sent an unexpected warmth through Islae's chest. Minutes ago, she'd been ready to chase him out of her clinic, and now he fought for her with a fury that seemed to come from somewhere deep and primal.

The hunters attacked in unison. The Niri healer moved with lethal grace, his strikes exact and devastating. He wasn't fighting with the brutal, crushing force she'd seen other Niri warriors use. This was different, almost surgical in its execution. Each movement flowed into the next, his healer's knowledge of anatomy turned into a deadly advantage.

"Why?" Islae whispered to herself. "Why risk yourself for me?"

His tail lashed out again, pinning one hunter against the wall while he grappled with another. Blood trickled down his scaled shoulder where a blade had found its mark, but he didn't seem to notice. His focus remained absolute, his massive form coiled and ready as the remaining hunter circled. Something about watching him fight was mesmerizing. This wasn't the mindless rage of a warrior but the calculated defense of someone who understood exactly how much force to use and where to apply it.

Islae couldn't tear her eyes away from her unlikely protector. Who was this Niri who fought with such controlled passion? And why did her safety mean so much to him?

The lead hunter's laugh suddenly echoed through the underground clinic, sharp and mocking. "You're just a pathetic healer. Not a true Niri warrior." He twirled his blade in his hand as he stood back up and approached the Niri healer.

Islae's breath caught in her throat as she watched the Niri healer's reaction. The vibrant orange scales along his shoulders bristled, catching the faint light like burning embers. His towering form tensed, coiled power radiating from every inch of his muscled frame. The golden eyes that had been calculating and controlled now blazed with a fierce intensity that made her take an instinctive step further back.

“You dare mock the oath of healing?” His voice dropped to a dangerous whisper that sent chills down her spine.

The lead hunter opened his mouth for another taunt but never got the chance. The Niri’s massive tail whipped forward with devastating speed, wrapping around the hunter’s throat in one fluid motion. The blade clattered to the ground as the hunter’s hands flew to his neck, clawing desperately at the scaled coils crushing his windpipe.

Islae pressed herself harder against the wall, her heart thundering. The Niri’s scaled body rippled with controlled strength as he lifted the hunter off his feet. This wasn’t the methodical defense of before. This was raw power, barely contained.

“I know exactly how much pressure to apply to collapse your trachea,” the Niri healer said, his words precise and clinical. “How long it takes for oxygen deprivation to cause permanent brain damage. The exact point where your spine will snap.” He tightened his grip on the hunter’s neck slightly, making the hunter wheeze harder. “Leave this place now. Or I will demonstrate everything I’ve learned about the art of healing... but in reverse.”

The other two hunters backed away slowly.

“Mercy,” the lead hunter choked out. “We’re going.” The Niri healer released the leader. The Jorvlen dropped to his knees, gasping and clutching his throat.

They soon scrambled over each other in their haste to flee, nearly tripping up the crude stone steps that led to the street above. The sound of their retreat faded, leaving only the rapid beating of Islae’s heart and the soft rasp of the Niri healer’s scales against stone as he slowly uncurled his massive form.

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Islae stared at her unlikely defender, seeing him with new eyes. He wasn't just powerful. He was lethal in a way that went beyond brute strength. The precision of his threats, the controlled fury in his eyes... this was someone who understood exactly how fragile life could be and exactly how to end it.

Her cheeks suddenly burned with embarrassment. She should have been more careful over the years running this secret underground clinic. She should have posted lookouts more often to avoid situations like tonight. Such amateur mistakes could have gotten her killed. Her hands trembled as she gathered scattered medical supplies from the floor.

As she straightened up, she whirled on the Niri healer, her anger masking her fear. "I didn't ask for your help, you know." The words came out sharp and brittle.

His golden eyes studied her, his massive scaled form blocking most of the dim light from the single lamp in the tiny room. The scales along his arms caught the flickering glow as he moved closer, his serpentine lower body sliding smoothly across the stone floor.

"You're welcome," he said, his deep voice tinged with dry amusement. He reached down to pick up a fallen roll of bandages, his movements careful despite his imposing size. "I am Nirrn by the way. I work as a healer at the central surrogacy clinic."

Islae's spine stiffened. The surrogacy clinic—where humans were treated like breeding stock. But something in his gentle handling of her medical supplies made her pause.

“I saw you in the market,” he continued, passing her the bandages. “The medical bag caught my attention. I apologize for following you, but...” His tail curled thoughtfully. “I needed to know.”

The sincerity in his voice loosened something in her chest. She accepted the bandages, noting how his scaled shoulders relaxed slightly at the gesture.

“I...” She swallowed her pride. “Thank you. For what you did. I’m Islae.” The words felt inadequate after watching him fight for her, but they were all she had.

His golden eyes softened. “You really should not be alone down here.”

“I’m fine,” she said automatically, though her racing heart betrayed her. Those hunters would be back, and next time they’d bring more. She rubbed her arms, trying to ward off the chill that had nothing to do with the underground air.

Nirrn coiled his massive form, bringing himself closer to her eye level. “At least let me help you clean up.” His scaled tail swept gently across the floor, gathering scattered supplies into neat piles.

Islae watched him, struck by the contrast between his lethal power moments ago and his current careful movements. Her fingers brushed against the bandages he’d handed her, remembering the precise way he’d fought—a healer’s knowledge turned almost deadly. Nirrn was a paradox, indeed.

Islae observed as Nirrn’s strong tail coiled around a fallen cabinet, lifting it effortlessly back into place against the wall. His orange scales gleamed in the lamplight as he moved through her makeshift clinic, somehow managing to make the cramped space seem even smaller with his imposing presence.

“You’ve created quite the setup down here,” he said, arranging medical supplies with

surprising delicacy for hands so large. “These organizational systems are impressive.”

“Three years of trial and error.” Islae sorted through a pile of bloodied bandages, separating salvageable ones from those beyond saving. “My father taught me everything I know about medicine. It seemed wrong to let that knowledge go to waste.”

Nirrn’s eyes fixed intently on her face. “And you chose to practice here, in secret?”

“Those who need help the most can’t afford the official clinics.” She shrugged, trying to ignore how his intense gaze made her skin tingle. “I started small—just basic first aid. Word spread. Now I have a network of people who help keep me supplied.”

His scaled tail brushed across the floor, gathering scattered herbs into neat piles. “These medicinal combinations—they’re quite sophisticated.”

“Donations from grateful patients. Everyone contributes what they can.” She gestured to the rows of carefully labeled jars. “Some bring herbs. Others bring clean water or fresh bandages. It’s not much, but—”

“It’s remarkable,” he interrupted, his deep voice firm. “Dangerous and completely illegal, but remarkable nonetheless.” He moved closer, his large form blocking the light. “Though your sterilization methods could use improvement.”

Heat crept up her neck at his proximity. “Oh? And I suppose you have suggestions?”

“Several.” His lips curved into a slight smile as he reached past her to grab a container of antiseptic. “For instance, this solution should be diluted differently for treating open wounds versus cleaning instruments.”

Islae crossed her arms, fighting the urge to step back. “I’m managing just fine.”

“Clearly.” His tail curled around a fallen stool, setting it upright. “That’s why you’re working alone in an underground clinic with inadequate security and questionable sanitation.”

“I don’t recall asking for your opinion on my methods.”

“No?” He raised an eyebrow, continuing to organize supplies with methodical precision. “Then perhaps you’d prefer I left you to handle the next group of hunters alone?”

The memory of his fury during the fight made her pause. She watched him work, noting how his powerful form moved with careful grace through her cramped clinic. Despite his intimidating size, he handled her medical supplies with a healer’s reverence.

“I’ve survived this long on my own,” she said, but the words lacked their usual edge.

His intense eyes met hers. “That doesn’t mean you have to.”

Chapter 5

Nirrn

Nirrn's shoulder throbbed where the Jorvlen's blade had cut him, but he kept his movements steady as he helped Islae gather scattered medical supplies and equipment from the dusty floor. His tail swept debris aside while his hands collected fallen bandages and vials. The humid underground chamber smelled of copper and antiseptic, illuminated by a flickering lamp that cast dancing shadows on the rough-hewn walls.

The cut on his shoulder stung sharply as he reached up to put the medical supplies on a shelf. The wound wasn't deep, but it needed cleaning. Still, he ignored it, focused on the woman before him.

She met his gaze briefly and then looked down at the ground, shifting her weight uncomfortably. The vulnerability in her stance made his protective instincts flare stronger.

"You should leave," she snapped abruptly.

Instead of responding, Nirrn slithered into the shadows of the tunnel where he'd left his belongings. His tail muscles flexed as he retrieved his own medical bag—the one he kept stocked with the finest supplies the surrogacy clinic could provide. The leather was soft and worn from years of use, filled with tools that had helped countless lives.

He set it down on the table in front of her with careful deliberation. "If you are so

determined to help others, you will do it with the proper tools.”

His heart raced as he stared at her from across the table, eagerly waiting for her response. The pull he felt toward her had only grown stronger in the past hour, like an invisible thread drawing him closer. Every instinct screamed at him to protect her, to ensure she had everything she needed to continue her noble work—work that resonated with his own healer’s oath in ways his position at the surrogacy clinic never had.

He watched her fingers trace the glass vial of premium antibiotic, her touch almost reverent. His scales rippled with satisfaction as she examined each item in his medical bag, though her jaw remained stubbornly set.

“I don’t need you,” she muttered, but her grip tightened on the vial.

“Keep it.” His tail shifted against the rough stone floor. “Keep all of it.”

She shot him a suspicious look. “Nothing comes without a price here.”

“Consider it a professional courtesy between healers.” He gestured to her makeshift clinic. “Though I could offer more than just supplies.”

Her laugh was sharp. “Right. A respected Niri healer wants to risk his position to help me and my patients in an illegal clinic?”

The rational part of his mind screamed warnings about lost licenses and prison sentences, but watching her sort through his supplies with such careful precision made those concerns seem distant. His eyes tracked her delicate movements as she organized the vials by usage rather than value—a healer’s instinct he recognized.

“What I want,” he said carefully, “is to support work worth doing. You’re skilled,

determined, and helping those who need it most.”His tail curled unconsciously closer to her.“But you’re also alone and vulnerable.”

“I prefer it that way.”She turned her back to him, arranging gauze on a shelf.“No one else gets hurt when things go wrong.”

“And when the Jorvlens return?When they bring more men?”

“Then I’ll handle it like I always do.”She spun to face him, her brown eyes blazing.“I don’t need some Niri protector swooping in to save me again.”

His scales bristled at her tone, but he kept his voice level.“I’m offering to be an ally, not a savior.You’ve proven you can handle yourself.”The memory of her steady hands stitching wounds in the darkness sent an unexpected surge of respect through him.“But imagine how many more you could help with proper supplies, advanced warning of raids, and someone to watch your back while you work.”

“And risk your career?Your life?”She shook her head.“Why would you do that?”

Nirrn coiled his tail tightly beneath him, drawing himself to his full height.The answer burned in his chest—because something about her fierce independence and quiet strength called to him in ways he couldn’t explain.Because for the first time in years, simply being in her presence and then fighting to protect her, made him feel truly alive.

Instead, he said, “Because it’s right.”

She turned away, but not before he caught the flicker of consideration in her eyes.

His scaled tail scraped against the rough stone floor as he helped gather more shattered glass vials, his muscles coiled with tension.The underground room felt

smaller with each passing moment, heavy with unspoken words and the lingering scent of antiseptic. His orange and golden scales caught the dim lamplight as he moved, creating dancing patterns on the walls.

He watched Islae dart between shelves, her movements exact but agitated. She reorganized already-neat stacks of bandages, wiped clean surfaces that didn't need cleaning, anything to avoid acknowledging his presence. The cut on his shoulder still throbbed, but the pain barely registered compared to the ache in his chest at her deliberate silence.

His tail swept another pile of debris aside. "At least let me show you how to properly store these healing herbs. They'll lose potency if kept in direct light."

She turned away, sorting through a box of sutures with unnecessary focus. The tension in her shoulders spoke volumes. She heard him but chose not to respond. His scales bristled with barely contained frustration, but he tamped down the urge to demand her attention. Instead, he continued organizing, moving closer to where she worked.

The makeshift clinic slowly transformed under their combined efforts, though they moved in careful orbits around each other, never quite touching. His height allowed him to reach the highest shelves, storing the most valuable supplies away from prying eyes. Each time he placed something just so, he caught her watching from the corner of her eye, though she quickly looked away when he turned.

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The silence stretched between them like a living thing. His tail coiled and uncoiled restlessly as he watched her small hands sort through his medical supplies, still refusing to meet his gaze. Something protective and possessive stirred in his chest at the sight of her touching his tools, accepting his offering even while denying his presence.

“You are not alone in this, Islae,” he said softly, letting his voice drop to a gentle rumble. “Please, let me help you with your operation.”

She stiffened but kept working, her fingers trembling slightly as she arranged bottles on a shelf. The scent of her anxiety filled the air, mixing with determination and something else—something that made his scales tingle with awareness. His tail shifted closer unconsciously, drawn to her despite her silence.

The weight of unspoken words hung heavily in the air between them as he waited for her response, his eyes fixed on her rigid form. His instincts shouted at him to stay, to protect, and to prove himself worthy of her trust. He wouldn’t leave—couldn’t leave—until she gave him an answer.

Her shoulders suddenly dropped, the tension leaving her delicate frame. “Fine. I’ll accept your help with my operation.” She raised a finger. “But I won’t be responsible if you lose everything because of it.”

Relief flooded through Nirrn’s body, his scales rippling with pleasure. His tail relaxed its tight coil against the stone floor. The prospect of working alongside her, of protecting her while she helped others, made his heart race. He’d never felt such certainty about anything in his life.

“My choices are my own,” he said, his voice gentle. “I would never hold you accountable for the risks I choose to take.”

Something in her expression softened. Her eyes drifted to his injured shoulder, where dried blood had crusted around the tear in his shirt.

“Let me look at that,” Islae said, her voice softer than before. She gestured to a wooden stool. “Sit.”

He curled his tail around the stool, lowering himself to her eye level. The lamp cast warm light across her pale face as she gathered supplies. Her movements were calculated and methodical—a healer’s grace he recognized in himself.

“Remove your shirt,” she instructed, not meeting his eyes as she prepared the antiseptic.

He complied, carefully pulling the torn fabric away from his wound. His scales gleamed in the lamplight, shimmering gold where they tapered down his chest.

She stepped closer, her small hands hovering over his injured shoulder. “This might sting.”

The moment her fingers touched his scales, a jolt of lightning shot through his body. His tail coiled tightly against the floor, every muscle tensing as awareness exploded through his nervous system. The world narrowed to the points where her skin met his scales, and something deep within his soul clicked into place with devastating finality.

Mate.

The recognition hit him like a physical blow. All these years of searching, of feeling

incomplete, and she had been here in the shadows of Jorvla. His golden eyes fixed on Islae's pale face as she worked, memorizing every detail—the slight furrow between her brows as she concentrated, the way she bit her bottom lip between her teeth.

“You're very tense,” she murmured, dabbing antiseptic along the cut. “Try to relax.”

He forced his muscles to unclench, though every cell in his body screamed to pull her closer, to wrap his tail around her and never let go. The mate bond hummed between them, a symphony she couldn't hear yet. His scales rippled involuntarily under her touch.

“Sorry,” she said, misinterpreting his reaction. “I know my hands are cold.”

“No,” he managed, his voice rougher than intended. “Your hands are perfect.”

She paused, her brown eyes flicking to his face before quickly looking away. A slight blush colored her cheeks as she reached for the bandages. The sight made his heart stutter.

His mate. His healer. His fierce, independent human who risked everything to help others. Pride and possessiveness warred in his chest as she finished dressing his wound.

Chapter 6

Islae

Islae secured the last bandage over Nirrn's shoulder wound. Her fingers lingered a little longer than necessary against his smooth orange scales. The contrast between his powerful frame and her small hands made her breath hitch slightly. His bare chest rose and fell steadily, rippling muscles beneath scales that faded to exposed skin at his

abdomen.

She turned quickly and busied herself cleaning up the bloodied gauze, trying to ignore how her skin tingled where she'd touched him. The medical supplies he'd brought were spread across her work table—more than she'd seen in months. Top-grade stuff that would cost her a fortune.

“Thank you,” Nirrn said, his deep voice sending an involuntary shiver down her spine.

She kept her eyes on her task, gathering used supplies. “You’re welcome.”

Why was he here, really? A respected Niri healer from the central surrogacy clinic, risking everything to help her with her illegal operation. It made no sense at all.

But when he had offered to help her after the Jorvlen bounty hunters attacked, something had clicked into place. Like recognizing a piece of herself in him—that same drive to protect and to heal. Her fingers trembled as she dropped the bloodied gauze into the disposal bin.

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His massive tail shifted, his scales rasping against the floor as he coiled it beneath him. The movement drew her eyes back to him despite her best efforts. The orange-gold scales glinted in the light, mesmerizing her momentarily. Heat crept into her cheeks as she realized she was staring.

Her clinic suddenly felt too small with his commanding presence filling it. Yet instead of feeling trapped, she felt... safe. Protected.

The electric awareness between them crackled in the silence. She rubbed her arms, trying to dispel the lingering sensation of recognition that had sparked within her when she had touched him. But as she watched him put his shirt back on, she couldn't deny how much she wanted him to stay.

She continued to watch him as his powerful form moved through her clinic, his tail leaving subtle patterns in the dust as he methodically reorganized her supplies. His broad shoulders flexed beneath his shirt as he reached for items on higher shelves. Even after treating his wound, she couldn't quite believe he was here, helping her clean up and sort through her meager medical supplies.

"These antiseptics should really be stored away from direct light," he said, moving the bottles to a darker corner. "And these bandages need to be elevated off the ground more to prevent moisture damage."

She sank down beside him with a heavy sigh. "You really don't have to do this."

His eyes locked on to hers, intense and unwavering. "Yes, I do. Because I see you—your need to heal and protect others—and it reminds me of myself."

His words hit her like a physical blow. Her chest tightened as something shifted inside her. All these years working alone in the shadows, scraping together supplies, treating others who had nowhere else to turn—no one had ever truly understood why she did it. Until now.

His massive tail curled around the space where they sat, not touching her but creating a protective circle that made her pulse quicken. His orange scales caught the dim light, creating patterns that drew her eye.

“I—” She started but then stopped, uncertain how to respond. How could she explain that she’d recognized that same drive in him? That watching him fight earlier, seeing his precise, controlled power used to protect rather than harm, had awakened something in her she couldn’t name?

He continued sorting her supplies, giving her space to process her emotions. His movements were deliberate and efficient—a healer’s movements, just like her own. The similarity between them struck her again, making her breath catch.

But he was Niri, and she was human. This connection between them, this understanding—it complicated everything. She had patients who depended on her, a clinic to run, and Jorvlen threats to avoid. Having him here was dangerous, not just physically but emotionally.

Yet as she watched him expertly arrange her supplies and establish some semblance of order to her clinic, she could not deny how right it felt to have another healer, to have him beside her. Someone who completely understood the drive that pushed her, no matter the cost.

He slithered closer to where she sat, reaching across her for a vial of antiseptic. His hand brushed against hers, sending electricity racing up her arm again. The air between them thickened, charged with a burning intensity that made her skin

prickle.His large frame towered over her, radiating heat that seemed to seep into her bones.

Their eyes met.His golden gaze had darkened, his pupils dilating as he looked down at her.Islae's breath caught.His cool and collected healer's expression had transformed into something primal and possessive.

"You should rest," he said, his voice rougher than usual.

Neither of them moved.Islae's heart thundered in her chest.What was happening to her?She had never felt this drawn to anyone before, let alone a Niri.But something about his presence intoxicated her, made her feel both completely safe and dangerously vulnerable.

He finally broke away, putting distance between them.His tail coiled restlessly as he gestured to one of the empty patient beds.

"Lie down," he commanded."I'll keep watch while you sleep."

"I'm fine," she protested weakly, even as exhaustion dragged at her limbs.

His eyes narrowed."I suspect you've been awake for far too long.A healer who doesn't rest becomes a liability."

She opened her mouth to argue, but a yawn escaped instead.He was right.She was running on fumes.

"Sleep," he insisted."I won't let anything happen to you or your clinic."

The quiet authority in his voice broke through her remaining resistance.She made her way to the nearest bed, her body feeling heavier with each step.As she settled onto

the thin mattress, she watched him position himself near the door, his powerful form a protective barrier between her and any potential threats.

Her eyes drifted closed despite her best efforts to stay alert. The last thing she saw was Nirrn's watchful gaze, his orange scales gleaming in the dim light as his tail coiled protectively around the room's perimeter.

Islae's eyes eventually fluttered open. Her body was stiff from sleeping on the narrow patient bed. Dim light filtered through the underground clinic's ventilation shafts, casting long shadows across the stone floor. Her gaze immediately found Nirrn, still perched by the doorway. His massive form dominated the small space, his orange scales catching what little light reached them.

Her heart skipped. He had actually stayed. All night. The realization sent warmth spreading through her chest, followed quickly by an uncomfortable flutter in her stomach. This wasn't like her at all—blindly trusting a complete stranger. It went against everything she had learned on the streets of Jorvla.

She quickly sat up, running her fingers through her tangled hair. "You should go home, get some rest yourself. I'll be fine now."

His golden eyes narrowed. "The Jorvlens will return. You know this."

"I've handled worse on my own." The words came out sharper than intended, driven by her growing unease at how his presence affected her so much.

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“That doesn’t mean you should have to.” He shifted forward, his powerful upper body tensing. “I’m not leaving you unprotected down here.”

“I don’t need protection!” She stood up, her hands clenched at her sides. “I’ve survived this long without anyone’s help.”

His tail lashed once against the floor, his frustration evident in the quick movement. “Surviving isn’t living, Islae.”

The way he said her name sent shivers through her body. She turned away, unable to handle the intensity of his gaze. “Just go. Please.”

“No.”

She whirled back. “This is my clinic. My life. You can’t just slither in here and take over!”

Pain flashed across his face before his expression hardened. His tail unwound as he rose to his full height, towering over her. “Very well. If that’s what you wish.”

“It is.” The lie tasted bitter on her tongue.

He moved slowly toward the door, his powerful form fluid and graceful despite his size. At the threshold, he paused briefly. “Be safe.”

Then he was gone, leaving only the lingering scent of him and an aching emptiness in his wake. Islae sank back onto the bed, pressing her palms against her eyes.

“Stupid,” she whispered to herself. “So stupid.”

She had pushed him away, just like she pushed everyone away. It was safer like that. Easier. But as she stared at the empty doorway where he had stood watch all night, she couldn't shake the feeling that she had just made a terrible mistake.

Chapter 7

Nirrn

Nirrn slithered slowly through the streets of Jorvla, his vibrant orange scales catching the faint light of the rising sun. Islae's words echoed in his mind, each syllable a fresh wound. The phantom sensation of her touch on his shoulder burned, a cruel reminder of the mate bond that had sparked between them—a bond she didn't even know existed.

His tail dragged slightly against the ground, lacking its usual fluid grace. The morning air felt thick and oppressive, matching the weight in his chest. He'd spent the entire night guarding her clinic door, alert to every sound, every shadow that might have meant danger. And for what? To be dismissed like a common intruder.

“This is my clinic. My life. You can't just slither in here and take over!”

Her words had struck deep. But his response to her had been measured and controlled, despite the turmoil raging inside him. “Very well. If that's what you wish.”

“It is.”

Her two simple words had shattered something fundamental within him.

His house soon came into view, a modest dwelling on the outskirts of the market

district. He entered through his front door sluggishly, the familiar surroundings offering no comfort. The space felt emptier than usual, darker somehow. His scales rasped against the wooden floor as he moved through the rooms, eventually reaching his bedroom.

He coiled himself onto the bed, but sleep remained elusive. “All this time,” he muttered to the ceiling. “All this time searching, only to find her like this.”

The mate bond pulsed weakly inside him, a reminder of what he’d found and lost in the span of a day. His eyes closed, but Islae’s face remained—fierce, determined, and beautiful. How could he walk away now? The very thought of never seeing her again made his chest tighten.

But he wasn’t like other Niri males. He couldn’t—wouldn’t—force himself into her life, demand her attention, and claim her against her will. That wasn’t who he was. His fingers traced the scales on his chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath them.

“What am I supposed to do now?” The question hung in the air, unanswered.

Sleep finally came, but it brought no peace. His body remained tense, his tail coiled tightly, trying to protect himself against an enemy he couldn’t fight—rejection from the one person who was meant to be his other half.

The acrid stench of smoke jolted Nirrn from his restless sleep. His eyes snapped open, his scales bristling along his broad shoulders as he lifted his head. Through the cracked window of his bedroom, wisps of dark smoke curled against the late morning sky.

Something pulled at him—an instinct deeper than thought. The mate bond thrummed with warning, drawing him toward the source of the smoke. His tail uncurled from its sleeping position as he slithered to the window, his muscles tensing at what he saw.

Black smoke billowed up from the market, precisely where Islae's clinic lay hidden. His heart stopped.

"No." The word escaped in a harsh whisper as he burst through his front door.

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His powerful tail propelled him through the streets, his orange scales flashing in the sunlight as he wove between startled pedestrians. The smoke grew thicker, burning his eyes and throat. The mate bond pulled harder, urgent now, leading him to the gap between buildings where Islae's clinic entrance lay concealed.

Heat blasted his face as he descended the stairs. Flames licked up the wooden support beams, turning the underground space into an inferno. Medical supplies melted and bubbled on shelves, releasing toxic fumes into the air.

"Islae!" His deep voice boomed through the crackling flames.

The smoke stung his eyes as he searched, his height allowing him to see over the flames. Movement caught his attention—a stumbling figure through the haze. Islae emerged from the back room, doubled over and coughing violently.

His protective instincts surged. He lunged forward, his tail pushing off the ground with explosive force. His arms wrapped around her just as a support beam groaned overhead. He pulled her against his chest, shielding her with his body as the tunnel began to collapse.

The mate bond sang at the contact, even as debris rained down around them. His tail coiled and sprang, launching them both toward the exit. Heat seared his scales, but he kept Islae tucked safely against him, using his larger frame to protect her from the flames.

They burst out of the stairwell into clean air just as the entrance collapsed behind them with a thunderous crash. His chest heaved as he held Islae close, his eyes

scanning her for injuries while smoke curled off his scorched scales.

A cut above her eyebrow oozed blood, and angry red welts marked her arms where embers had struck. She still coughed violently, her small frame shaking against his scaled chest.

Her eyes met his, blazing with a mix of fury and devastation that made his protective instincts surge even further. The mate bond throbbed painfully as he absorbed her grief.

“Everything I built...” Her voice cracked. “All those people who needed help...”

“Islae.” He tightened his hold on her, his tail coiling restlessly beneath him. “You’re coming with me.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but another coughing fit racked her body. His scales bristled at the raw sound of it.

“The Jorvlens won’t stop.” His voice remained steady despite the anger coursing through him. “They meant to destroy everything you built, and they won’t hesitate to destroy you, too.”

Behind them, the flames consumed what remained of her clinic. The acrid smell of burning medicine and melting supplies filled the air. His own burns stung, but he barely noticed them through his focus on her.

“I can’t just leave,” she whispered, but the fight had drained from her voice.

“You can’t help anyone if you’re dead.” His tail shifted, preparing to move. “Let me protect you.”

She slumped against him, her exhaustion finally winning out. The simple act of trust made his chest tight. Without waiting for further protest, he began moving through the winding back alleys of Jorvla, keeping to the shadows. His orange scales, usually so striking, helped them blend with the russet walls in the late morning light.

Each time Islae coughed, his arms tightened fractionally around her. The mate bond urged him to stop, to check her over properly, but he knew they needed distance first. His tail propelled them through the streets, his movements quick and deliberate despite his precious cargo.

“Your scales,” she murmured, touching a scorched patch on his shoulder. “They’re burned.”

“I’ll be fine.” He kept his voice low, focusing on navigating the quickest route to his house. The late morning crowd had begun to fill the main streets, their chatter providing cover for his movements through the alleyways.

A patrol of Jorvlen guards passed nearby. Nirrn pressed back against a wall, curling his tail around them both as he held perfectly still. Islae’s breath hitched, but she remained quiet, her face pressed against his chest.

The patrol’s footsteps echoed off the narrow alley walls. His tail coiled tighter around Islae, his scales tingling where her breath ghosted across them. Her small frame fit perfectly against the planes of his chest, as if she had been made specifically to nestle there. His heartbeat quickened, and he fought to keep his breathing steady.

Once the danger passed, he navigated through the winding streets until they reached his modest dwelling. Once inside, he carefully set Islae down on his couch, his hands lingering a little longer than necessary.

“Let me tend to those wounds.” He retrieved his spare healer’s kit, settling beside her.

“I can do it myself,” she protested weakly, but another cough interrupted her.

“Please.” His voice softened. “Allow me this.”

She remained still as he cleaned the cut above her eye, his movements precise and gentle. The wound wasn’t deep, but it made his scales bristle with protective anger. Her arms bore several burns and gashes that he treated with the same careful attention.

“Your scales need attention, too,” she murmured, reaching toward his shoulder where the fire had scorched him.

“They’ll heal.” He caught her hand, his thumb brushing across her knuckles. “You need to rest now. You’re safe here. The Jorvlens don’t know this place.”

She began to argue but exhaustion won out. She lay down on the couch, her eyes drifting closed. Her breathing evened out as sleep claimed her. He watched over her, his tail curled protectively around the couch. Something settled in his chest—a rightness he’d never known before. Here was his mate, safe under his protection at last.

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His eyes traced her features, memorizing every detail. The mate bond hummed contentedly within him, even as worry for her safety gnawed at his thoughts. He'd never felt such a strong need to protect anyone before, but then, he'd never had a mate before. The very concept still stunned him. This fierce human was his other half, whether she knew it yet or not.

"Sleep well," he whispered, his tail tightening slightly around the couch. "I'll keep you safe as long as I live."

Nirrn's tail twitched as Islae stirred on his couch, her eyelashes fluttering against her cheeks. He'd spent the last few hours watching over her, memorizing the gentle rise and fall of her chest, the way her brown hair spilled across his cushions.

"How long was I asleep?" She pushed herself up, wincing as the movement pulled at her burns.

"Three hours." His scales rippled with concern as he noticed her discomfort. "The medicine should have helped with the pain."

"It did." She touched the bandage above her eye. "Thank you."

The simple words caused his chest to tighten. He slithered closer, his tail curling restlessly. "We can't stay here."

Her eyes snapped to his. "What?"

"The Jorvlens will connect me to you soon enough. This place won't be safe." His

eyes met hers. “I’ve heard whispers from my patients about an underground refuge. A place where humans hide from Jorvlen persecution.”

“And you want us to go there?” Her voice held a note of skepticism.

“You think I’m letting you face this alone?”

She crossed her arms. “I don’t need—”

“Someone burned down your clinic.” His voice remained steady, but his tail coiled dangerously tight. “They tried to kill you, Islae. This isn’t about what you need anymore. It’s about keeping you alive.”

The mate bond pulsed inside him as she stood, swaying slightly. His hands shot out to steady her, the contact sending sparks through his scales.

“Why are you doing this?” she whispered. “I still don’t understand why you would risk everything to help me. First with my clinic, now with my safety.”

Because you’re mine, he wanted to say. Because every fiber of my being exists to protect you. Instead, he said, “Because it’s the right thing to do.”

She studied him for a long moment and then nodded. “Where is this refuge?”

“The old mining district.” He moved toward his medical supplies, gathering what they might need. “We’ll have to be careful. The streets will be closely watched.”

“I know how to move unseen.”

“So do I.” His tail twitched restlessly as he finished packing. “Just stay close to me.”

She stepped closer to him, and his body responded instinctively, his scales shifting toward her presence. “Then lead the way.”

His hand found her waist as they moved toward the door, his protective instincts flaring at the contact. Whatever came next, he would keep her safe. The mate bond demanded nothing less.

Chapter 8

Islae

The stenchof smoke still clung to Islae’s clothes as she followed Nirrn through the winding tunnels beneath Jorvla’s slums. Water dripped from rusted pipes overhead, each drop echoing through the darkness. Her legs ached after walking for what seemed like miles, but she pressed on steadily.

“Watch your step here.” Nirrn’s massive form blocked most of her view of the tunnel ahead, his orange-scaled tail leaving intricate patterns in the dirt as he moved. “The ground’s uneven.”

Her fingers traced the rough stone wall, steadying herself. “I can handle a few bumps in the road.” The words came out sharper than she meant, her throat still raw from the smoke inhalation of the clinic fire.

“I don’t doubt that.” His golden eyes caught the light that filtered through the metal grates above as he glanced back at her. “But there’s no shame in accepting help sometimes.”

She really wanted to argue, to maintain that fierce independence she’d worn like armor all these years. But the image of her clinic engulfed in flames kept flashing through her mind with each step. The hundreds of patient records, the carefully

organized medical supplies, the safe haven she'd built for the less fortunate of Jorvla—all reduced to ash in a matter of minutes.

“Stop.” Nirrn's tail curled protectively around her as voices echoed from a connecting tunnel ahead. His shoulders tensed, and his scales glinted in the dim light as he pressed her against the stone wall.

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The voices grew closer. She held her breath, her palm pressed against Nirrn's chest. His heartbeat thrummed steady and strong beneath her fingers.

"They went this way, I'm sure of it," a gruff male voice called out.

"Jorvlen patrols," Nirrn whispered, his breath warm against her ear. "We need to keep moving."

"Those bastards destroyed all my hard work," she murmured, the reality of her situation crashing down on her. "Everything I built..."

"Look at me." Nirrn's hand cupped her chin gently, forcing her to meet his gaze. "Your work isn't destroyed. It's all right here." He tapped his finger on her temple lightly. "Your knowledge, your dedication to helping others—they couldn't burn that away."

The heavy footsteps grew closer. Her heart hammered wildly against her ribs, but something in Nirrn's words steadied her. He was right. They could destroy her clinic, but they couldn't destroy what drove her to build it in the first place.

"This way." Nirrn's tail unwound from around her, and he took her hand. "I know another route."

His grip was firm and grounding. For once, she didn't pull away. She let him guide her deeper into the darkness, away from the echoing voices of their pursuers. Maybe she didn't need saving, but having someone at her side—someone who understood her—didn't feel like weakness so much anymore.

Her boots splashed through shallow puddles as they reached what appeared to be a dead end. Nirrn's long tail coiled beneath him as he pressed his palm firmly against a seemingly ordinary section of wall. A hidden door suddenly scraped open, revealing a bustling underground sanctuary city.

The cavern stretched wider than she'd imagined possible with makeshift homes carved into the rock walls. Strings of lights crisscrossed overhead, casting a warm glow over dozens of humans going about their daily lives. Children darted between market stalls while adults haggled over supplies.

"Welcome to Haven," Nirrn said, his eyes scanning the crowd of people in front of them. His scales gleamed in the light as he moved, powerful and protective beside her.

Her chest suddenly tightened. Too many people. Too many eyes. She had spent years in the shadows, working alone, trusting no one fully. Now she stood exposed in this small hidden city.

"I work better alone," she whispered, more to herself than to him.

Nirrn's tail shifted closer, creating a barrier between her and the curious onlookers. "You've carried that burden long enough."

"Why are you really helping me?" She turned to face him, studying the intricate patterns of his scales. "And don't say it's the right thing to do."

His large form towered over her, but his expression softened. "Because from the moment I saw you treating that injured man, I knew you were different. You fight for others, consequences be damned." His hand brushed her arm.

The touch sent electricity through her skin. She wanted to pull away, to maintain that safe distance she had always kept from others. But something about him drew her in,

like a puzzle piece clicking into place.

“I don’t know how to do this,” she admitted. “Be part of something bigger.”

“Then we’ll figure it out together.” His tail curled protectively around her feet. “I’m not leaving your side.”

The certainty in his voice should have frightened her. Instead, it felt like coming home. She watched his powerful form as he guided her deeper into Haven, his scales reflecting the dim light. A group of children ran past, their laughter echoing off the stone walls. One small girl stopped and stared at Nirrn with wide eyes before scampering away.

“They’re not used to seeing Niri here,” she observed.

“They’ll adapt.” His eyes met hers. “We all will.”

A tall man with graying temples approached them, his weathered face creasing with confusion as he studied Nirrn’s imposing form. Islae shifted her weight, fighting the urge to retreat further into the shadows.

“Joseph.” The man extended his hand to Nirrn. “I run this place.”

Nirrn’s massive tail coiled as he explained, “One of my patients at the surrogacy clinic mentioned Haven. We need sanctuary.” His scaled arm caught the light as he gestured to Islae. “The Jorvlens burned down her clinic today. I saved her from the wreckage. Now, they’re hunting both of us.”

Islae’s fingers traced the rough stone wall behind her, seeking something solid to ground herself. The cavern suddenly felt too small and too crowded. Her skin prickled with awareness of every unknown face that turned their way.

Joseph stroked his chin. "I never had a Niri ask to stay before." His eyes narrowed. "But if you helped one of our people, that counts for something." He sighed. "I only got one room available, though. You'll have to share."

Nirrn's tail shifted, creating a protective barrier between Islae and a group of passing residents. "We appreciate your generosity."

The room Joseph led them to was barely large enough for a narrow bed and small table. A single lamp cast shadows across the stone walls. Her breath caught in her chest. The space was tight, especially with Nirrn's massive frame taking up a lot of it.

"It's not much," Joseph said from the doorway, "but it's safe."

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Nirrn's eyes swept the tiny room, his scaled shoulder brushing against the wall as he moved in the cramped space. His tail dragged across the wooden floor, leaving intricate patterns in the dust.

Islae pressed herself against the far wall, her heart hammering. This was too much—too many people, too small a space, too close to this Niri healer who'd turned her life upside down in a matter of a day. She watched his tail coil protectively near the door, effectively blocking any escape route she had.

Joseph cleared his throat. "I'll leave you to get settled." The door clicked shut behind him.

The silence stretched between her and Nirrn, thick with unspoken words. She wrapped her arms around herself, still smelling smoke in her hair and on her clothes. Everything she had managed to build, everything she had fought so hard for, gone in a single day. And now she was here, sharing a cramped room with a Niri she barely knew, surrounded by strangers in an underground sanctuary city.

"You need more rest," he finally said, breaking the silence. "You're safe here."

The word "safe" sparked something inside her. All the grief, confusion, and exhaustion of the past day ignited into white-hot anger.

"Safe?" She clenched her hands at her sides. "My clinic is gone. The Jorvlens are after me. And now I'm in some strange underground city with complete strangers and—" Her voice cracked just as she was about to say something hurtful to him. She took a deep breath. "Look, I don't need you or anyone else to keep me safe. I can take care of

myself just fine.I've been doing it for quite a long time."

Nirrn's tail shifted, but he didn't back down from her outburst.Instead, he moved closer."You do not have to fight alone anymore."His voice dropped lower, more intense."I vow to stand by you and protect you."

The sincerity in his words made her stomach flip.She pressed her back against the cool stone wall, trying to put distance between them in the cramped space.His presence overwhelmed her senses—the subtle shine of his scales, the raw power in his movements, the way his human-like torso tapered into that magnificent tail.

"This room is barely big enough for one person," she muttered, desperate to change the subject.

"Then I'll give you some space."He straightened to his full height, his head nearly brushing the ceiling."I'll find you some fresh clothes and food."His tail whispered against the floor as he turned toward the door."Get some rest, Islae.I'll return soon."

She watched him slip through the narrow doorway, his powerful form somehow managing to move gracefully despite the tight quarters.The door clicked shut behind him, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

Her fingers traced the stone wall as she sank onto the small bed.Why did his presence affect her so strongly?And why did part of her wish he had stayed and lay down beside her?

Chapter 9

Nirrn

Nirrnfinallyreturnedtothe small chamber that he and Islae were sharing.He slithered

quietly across the worn wooden floor, carrying a bundle of fresh clothes and a basket of food for Islae. He set it down on the small table in the corner and turned to face her. The flickering lamplight cast dancing shadows across the cold stone walls, making the tiny space feel even more confining.

Islae sat cross-legged on the narrow bed, her shoulders tight with tension. The scent of smoke still clung to her, a harsh reminder of everything she had lost today.

“I brought you some clean clothes,” he said softly. “And food. You need to eat something.”

“Thank you.” Her voice was barely a whisper.

His chest tightened at the defeat in her tone. He arranged the food between them—fresh bread, dried meat, and some fruit. His tail curled around the bed as he settled on the thin mattress.

“The bread is still warm,” he said, tearing off a piece and offering it to her.

She took it, but didn’t eat right away. “I keep thinking about my patients. Where will they go now?”

“We’ll find a way to help them.” Nirrn watched her pick at the bread. “You’re not alone in this anymore, Islae.”

“I’ve always worked alone. It’s safer and easier that way.”

His scales rustled as he leaned in closer. “And look where that got you. Sometimes we need others, whether we want to admit it or not.”

She shot him a sharp look, but there was less fire in it than before.

“When you’re ready,” he said, “I can show you around Haven. There’s more here than you might expect.”

Islae took a small bite of bread, chewing slowly. “Maybe in a little bit. I’m not... I’m not ready to face everyone yet.”

Nirrn nodded, understanding her need for space while his instincts screamed to wrap her in his coils and keep her safe. The mate bond hummed between them, though she didn’t realize it yet. He watched her eat another piece of bread, fighting the urge to brush her hair away from her face.

“You’re safe here with me,” he said softly. “I can promise you that.”

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Nirrn soon slipped out of their shared quarters, his tail rustling softly on the wooden floor. The mate bond tugged at him, urging him to stay close to Islae. Instead, he forced himself to move away. She needed her space, and he would give it to her, no matter how his instincts protested.

The underground sanctuary of Haven spread before him like a hidden jewel. Carved pathways wound through the rock, leading to various chambers and alcoves. Small market stalls lined the wider tunnels, their wares illuminated by hanging lanterns that cast warm light across the rough-hewn walls. The orange glow caught on his scales as he moved past vendors selling everything from dried herbs to handwoven blankets.

His eyes tracked the movement of humans going about their daily lives. Children ran along the pathways while their parents procured their goods. The scent of cooking food wafted from somewhere deeper in the complex.

In a large central cavern, dozens of people gathered around a communal fire pit. The flames cast dancing shadows on the ceiling, and the sound of quiet conversation echoed off the walls. His scales rippled with appreciation for this hidden community.

“Settling in all right?” Joseph approached, his face creased with concern.

Nirrn’s tail curled slightly as he turned. “As well as can be expected. Islae needs time to process everything.”

“The clinic must’ve meant everything to her.” Joseph nodded. “We’ve all lost something to the Jorvlens. She’ll find her footing here.”

“The kindness I’ve seen here...” Nirrn’s gaze swept across the cavern. “It gives me hope.”

“We look after our own.” Joseph paused as he met Nirrn’s gaze. “And those who protect us.”

“Thank you,” Nirrn said. “For giving us sanctuary.”

Joseph squeezed his shoulder and moved away, leaving Nirrn to watch the flames dance and think of the fierce human woman who had captured his heart without even trying.

The mate bond pulsed beneath his scales. He wanted to tell Islae about the electric connection he felt with her. But she was dealing with too much already. The last thing she needed was a Niri male claiming her as his mate right now.

Nirrn soon slithered back to their shared chamber, his scales making a soft whisper against the smooth stone floor. The mate bond pulled at him like a physical tether, drawing him back toward Islae. When he entered, he found her standing near the small table, dressed in the fresh clothes he’d brought earlier. The simple brown tunic hung loosely on her frame, but at least she’d shed the smoke-stained garments.

“Would you like to see Haven now?” he asked, keeping his voice as gentle as possible.

She turned, and his chest tightened at the shadows under her eyes. “I suppose I should learn where everything is.”

Nirrn led her through the winding tunnels, his tail creating smooth patterns in the dust. The underground city sprawled around them, a maze of carved passages and chambers lit by glowing crystals embedded in the walls. Merchants called out their

wares, children darted around, and the scent of cooking food wafted through the air.

But Islae didn't seem to take in any of it. She paced beside him, her fingers twisting together and her gaze darting from shadow to shadow. The restless energy rolled off her in waves that made his scales prickle with concern. He'd seen this before—in warriors after battle, in mothers who'd lost children. That raw, haunted look of someone whose world had been ripped away.

"This is the main gathering area," he said, gesturing to a large cavern ahead. "The kitchens are through there, and—"

"How many injured are here?" Islae cut in, her voice tight. "Do they have proper medical supplies? Who treats them?"

His tail curled slightly. "Islae—"

"I need to know. I need to do something useful." She ran her hand through her hair. "I can't just sit here if people need help."

He reached for her, his larger hand engulfing her restless fingers. "You need to rest and heal first."

"I'm fine." She tried to pull away, but he held firm.

"You're not fine. You're barely holding yourself together." He drew her closer, fighting the urge to wrap his coils around her protectively. "The people here are safe. They have healers. Let yourself breathe."

She stared up at him, and for a moment he thought she might argue. Then her shoulders slumped, just slightly. "I don't know how."

“Then let me help you learn,” he said, his voice low and comforting.

Nirrn guided Islae to the communal fire pit. He curled his tail beneath him as he settled near the fire, watching Islae sink down beside him. The flames cast a warm glow across her face, highlighting the exhaustion etched into her features. His scales rippled with the urge to pull her closer to him, to wrap her tightly in his protective embrace, but he held back.

“Why do you stay here in Jorvla, Islae? Why risk so much?” The questions had burned in his mind since he first saw her working in those dangerous conditions of her clinic.

She drew her knees to her chest, staring into the flames. The silence stretched between the two of them, broken only by the crackling fire and distant voices echoing through the cavern. His tail shifted restlessly, waiting for her response.

“My father was a healer,” she finally said, her voice but a whisper. “The best in our district. He treated everyone, regardless of their ability to pay.” She wrapped her arms tighter around her knees. “The Jorvlens didn’t like that he was helping humans and taking away their profits. They came for us one night.”

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Nirrn's scales bristled at the pain in her voice. His protective instincts spiked, making his tail coil closer to her.

"They killed him. My mother, too. My little sister." Her fingers dug into her arms. "I was fifteen. I managed to hide, but I watched..." She swallowed hard. "I watched them destroy everything I loved."

"Islae." He reached for her, but she shook her head, a tear escaping down her cheek.

"I promised myself I would continue his work. Help those who can't help themselves." Her chin lifted then, defiance blazing through her grief. "The clinic was my way of honoring him. Of making sure his legacy lived on."

The mate bond thrummed between them as he absorbed her words. The fierce protectiveness he felt for her intensified, mixing with a deep admiration for her strength.

"That's why I work alone," she added softly. "I can't... I can't watch anyone else I care about die in front of me."

His hand found hers in the firelight, his larger fingers entwining her smaller ones. She stiffened slightly but didn't pull away. "You carry too much weight alone," he said, his voice rough with emotion. "I don't want you to have to do that anymore."

The firelight danced across her face as she turned to look at him, vulnerability raw in her eyes. His tail curled closer, creating a protective circle around where she sat.

Nirrn's muscles rippled with tension as her brown eyes searched his face. The mate bond thrummed, urging him to pull her close, to wrap his coils around her and never let go.

"Why do you care so much?" she whispered. "About me, about all of this?"

His tail shifted restlessly. The truth burned in his throat—that she was his mate, that every cell of his being recognized her as the other half of his soul. But the words wouldn't come. Not yet. Not when she was still raw from losing everything.

Instead, he let out a slow breath. "On Nirum, there are expectations. Warriors are revered. Healers..." His scales rustled as he adjusted his position. "We're respected, but not in the same way. My father wanted me to join the military, to be something I'm not."

"But you chose healing instead."

"It chose me." His eyes reflected the firelight. "I could feel the energy flowing through bodies, could sense where the pain lived. Fighting never came naturally to me. Healing did."

Her fingers on her free hand brushed against his scales, sending electricity through his body. "So you came here?"

"I thought working at the central surrogacy clinic would give my life purpose." His tail coiled tightly around them both. "Help others build families, maybe find my own. But all I found was emptiness. Watching others move forward while I stayed still."

The fire crackled between them as he gathered his thoughts. His hand wrapped tighter around hers, engulfing it completely.

“For so long, I believed my purpose was to use my healing for what others needed or wanted. But now, I have never felt more purpose than I do here—with you.”

The words hung in the air between them, heavy with meaning. His scales shimmered in the firelight as he watched her process his confession.

Chapter 10

Islae

Islae stared into the dancing flames, her heart thundering against her ribs at Nirrn’s words. She could feel his eyes boring into her with a burning intensity that made her breath hitch.

“I...” The words got stuck in her throat. A thousand responses swirled in her mind, but none seemed adequate. She wanted to tell him how his presence had changed everything, how his support made her feel less alone in her mission. How for the first time since losing her family, she felt like someone truly understood her.

Instead, she met his gaze and offered a small smile, hoping he could read in her eyes what she couldn’t voice aloud. The heat from the fire couldn’t match the warmth spreading through her chest as his tail shifted closer, barely brushing against her leg.

She stood abruptly, breaking their connection. “I should get some more rest.” Her fingers trembled as she smoothed down her fresh clothes and turned away from him.

“Islae.” His deep voice stopped her retreat. “You don’t have to keep pushing others away.”

She paused, her back to him, feeling the weight of his gaze. “I’m not pushing anyone away. I just...” She turned slightly, catching the way his powerful form coiled in

preparation to follow her. "I just need some time to think."

His scaled chest rose with a deep breath. "Then go think. But know that whatever you decide, I will be here."

The quiet certainty in his voice made her heart stutter. She nodded once and headed toward their shared chamber, her mind racing with possibilities she had never allowed herself to consider before.

As she walked away, she heard him shift behind her, his scales scraping softly against the ground. The sound reminded her of how different they were, yet somehow, those differences had stopped mattering. In the brief time they had known each other, he had become more than just an ally. He had become essential.

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Islae slipped into the small chamber, her mind whirling. The narrow bed pressed against the rough stone wall, barely wide enough for one person, let alone someone of Nirrn's size. She sat on its edge, running her fingers over the worn blanket.

Everything had changed so fast. Her clinic, her life's work, was reduced to nothing this morning. Yet somehow having Nirrn by her side through it all today, she didn't feel as devastated as she should. His presence had become an anchor, his unwavering support filling a void she hadn't known existed.

The soft scrape of scales against stone announced his arrival. He ducked his head to enter the low doorway, his large form filling the small space.

"Are you feeling better?" His golden eyes searched her face. "I can return to the city if you need more time alone."

Islae shook her head. "Stay. You need rest, too."

He hesitated for a moment, his tail coiling with uncertainty as he glanced at the narrow bed. "The bed is small."

"We'll manage." She shifted toward the wall, making space for him.

His massive form settled beside her, his scales gleaming in the dim lamplight. The mattress dipped under his weight, forcing her closer to the wall. Heat radiated from his body, and his unique scent—something like sun-warmed stone and healing herbs—wrapped around her.

She lay on her side, facing the wall, hyper-aware of every movement behind her. His tail curled carefully around the bed's edge, and she felt his warm breath against her neck. Her muscles tensed at his proximity.

"I won't hurt you," he murmured, his voice rough with exhaustion.

"I know." And she did know, with a certainty that should have frightened her.

As minutes passed, Nirrn's breathing deepened and evened out. The steady rhythm seeped into her bones, melting away her tension. His presence at her back felt like a shield against the world, and since losing her family, a true peace settled over her. She let her eyes drift closed, surrendering to the unexpected comfort of having someone to lean on.

Islae jerked awake, her heart pounding in her chest. The screams from her nightmare still echoed in her mind—her mother's desperate plea, her father's final shout, her little sister's terrified cry. The memory of that night fifteen years ago ripped through her with savage clarity: the Jorvlen raiders breaking down their door, the flash of weapons, and the spray of blood.

Her chest heaved as she fought for breath in the darkness. The rough stone walls of their refuge chamber pressed in around her and sweat dampened her shirt. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to block out the images, but they kept coming—her sister's small hand going limp in hers, her mother's eyes glazing over, and her father's body crumpled on the floor.

A warm hand pressed against her back, solid and real, anchoring her to the present.

"You are safe," Nirrn murmured, his deep voice cutting through the remnants of her nightmare. He shifted closer, his scaled chest pressing against her back. The heat of his body seeped through her thin shirt, chasing away the cold sweat of fear.

Instead of pulling away as she usually did when anyone got too close, Islae turned to face him. His golden eyes gleamed with concern. Without thinking, she pressed her forehead against his chest, where smooth skin met iridescent scales. His heartbeat thundered, steady and strong, against her skin.

“I couldn’t save them,” she whispered into his chest. The words she’d never spoken aloud tumbled out. “I wanted to fight back, but I was too weak. Too small.”

Nirrn’s strong arms wrapped around her, one hand cradling the back of her head while his tail wrapped protectively around their shared bed. “You were only a child,” he said, his voice thick with emotion. “The fault lies with the monsters who murdered them, not with you.”

Her fingers curled against his chest as tears finally broke free after fifteen years of holding them back. His scales were smooth beneath her fingertips, warm and alive, so different from the cold memories haunting her.

“I’ve got you,” he murmured into her hair. “You’re not alone now.”

For the first time since that terrible night, Islae let herself break. She let someone else shoulder some of her pain, let someone else be strong while she crumbled. And Nirrn held her through it all, his body wrapped around hers like armor protecting her from anything that dared to harm her.

Her tears gradually subsided, leaving behind a peculiar sense of calmness. His arms remained wrapped around her, his scaled chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm that somehow matched her own heartbeat. The warmth radiating from his body chased away the lingering chill of her recurring nightmare.

His tail shifted slightly, coiling more securely around her feet, and she found herself tracing the pattern of scales along his biceps with her fingertips. The texture

fascinated her—smooth and warm where scales met skin.

“Sleep,” he murmured, his deep voice vibrating through his chest against her cheek. “You’re safe.”

She should have protested at his protective tone, should have insisted she didn’t need a guardian. Instead, she pressed closer, breathing in his unique scent.

“Why does this feel so…” She struggled to find the right words, her voice barely a whisper. “So familiar?”

His hand stroked her back, the gesture both protective and possessive. “Because some things are written in our souls.”

The thought should have terrified her, but instead it sent a warm flutter through her chest. She had spent so long building walls, determined to never need anyone again. Yet here she was, curled against a Niri male she’d known for barely a day, feeling more at home than she had in fifteen years.

He shifted, his scales gleaming in the faint light as he adjusted his position to better shelter her. The raw power in his movements contrasted sharply with the gentle way he cradled her.

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“Rest now,” he commanded softly, his golden eyes glowing in the darkness. “Tomorrow will bring its own challenges.”

She felt her eyes growing heavy, lulled by the steady thrum of his heartbeat and the protective circle of his arms. She didn’t feel the need to stay alert, to worry about danger right now. Something deep inside her recognized Nirrn as her safe harbor, her other half—as impossible as that should have seemed.

As sleep claimed her, she realized that maybe she didn’t have to carry her heavy load alone anymore. Maybe, just maybe, she had found someone worth trusting with not just her safety but her heart.

Chapter 11

Nirrn

Nirrn woke first, and his eyes soon adjusted to the dim light of their small room. Islae’s warmth pressed against his chest, her head tucked beneath his chin. He coiled his tail more securely around them both as his fingers traced the curve of her shoulder. He marveled at the softness of her skin compared to his scaled form.

The mate bond pulsed gently between them. A smile spread across his face, remembering what she said last night about how being in his arms felt familiar. His clever mate was beginning to sense the mate bond on her own. But he would tell her she was his mate soon enough. He just needed to wait for the right moment.

She stirred, her eyes fluttering open. When she looked up at him, a genuine smile

curved her lips, making his heart flutter in his chest.

“Morning,” she murmured, making no move to pull away from his embrace.

“Did you sleep well?” His voice came out a little rough, still thick with sleep.

“Better than I have in...” She paused, her smile faltering as reality crashed back. “I can’t believe my clinic is really gone.”

Nirrn tightened his hold on her. “The Jorvlen patrols will be searching every district right now, looking for us, since we were spotted somehow escaping through the tunnels yesterday. We need to stay here, at least until their fury dies down.”

She pushed up on one elbow, her hair falling in a curtain around them both. “How long?”

“A few more days, perhaps.” His hand came up to brush her hair back, unable to resist touching her. “Haven is well-hidden. We’re safe here for now.”

“You keep saying we.” Her eyebrow arched.

“Yes, we.” His tail shifted and drew her closer to him. “I’m not leaving you.”

She studied his face, her expression softening. “You really mean that. Don’t you?”

“Every word.” The mate bond pulled at him, urging him to tell her everything. But not now. Instead, he settled for a simple truth. “You matter to me, Islae.”

Her cheeks flushed, but she didn’t look away. “You’re different from any Niri I’ve ever met.”

“Is that a good thing?”

“I’m still deciding.” But her smile returned, warming him from the inside out.

Nirrn’s tail curled lazily around them as he stared at her beautiful smile. “I found something yesterday while exploring Haven. Would you like to see it?”

Her eyes lit up with curiosity. “What kind of something?”

“Let me show you.” He slipped from their shared bed, offering his hand to help her up.

He soon led her through the winding tunnels, his scaled body easily navigating the narrow passages. The mate bond hummed stronger whenever she was close, and he had to concentrate to keep his tail from wrapping around her protectively.

“Just through here.” He pushed aside a heavy wooden door, revealing a hidden garden bathed in ethereal light.

Bioluminescent vines crawled up the carved stone walls, their leaves pulsing with gentle blue-green light. Crystal formations jutted from the ground, refracting the glow throughout the space. Strange flowers bloomed in patches, their petals translucent and delicate.

“This is incredible,” Islae whispered, stepping into the garden. “How is this even possible down here?”

“Haven’s builders were clever. They created these self-sustaining ecosystems throughout the refuge.” Nirrn watched as she approached a cluster of star-shaped flowers, their centers glowing like tiny moons.

Her fingers reached out to touch one of the blossoms, and his breath caught. The way she moved—precise yet gentle, just like when she worked on her patients—stirred something primal in him. Her hands were built for healing, like his, but a grace in her movements made his scales tingle.

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The mate bond tugged, urging him to close the distance between them, to wrap her tightly in his arms. But he held back, his tail twitching with the effort of restraint. She needed this moment of peace, away from the chaos of her life.

“Thank you for showing me this,” she said, turning to face him and giving him a small smile. The bioluminescent light played across her features, making her eyes sparkle. “It’s nice to forget about everything else, even if it’s just for a little while.”

His chest tightened at her words. He would give anything to keep that smile on her face, to protect her from the harsh reality waiting beyond these walls of the underground sanctuary city.

Nirrn soon settled onto the stone bench nestled in the corner of the hidden garden. Islae sat beside him, close enough that her thigh pressed against his scales. The contact sent electricity racing through his body, making his muscles tense.

She leaned forward, reaching out to touch one of the glowing flowers. “These remind me of the night-blooming jasmine my mother used to grow.”

The soft curve of her neck caught the ethereal light, making his hands itch to trace the delicate line. His tail shifted restlessly, wanting to wrap around her waist and pull her closer.

“Tell me about your mother’s garden,” he said, his voice deeper than usual. The mate bond thrummed between them, growing stronger with each passing moment.

“She had this tiny patch behind our house.” Her fingers brushed the luminescent

petals. “Even after working all day, she’d spend hours tending it. Said beauty was worth fighting for, even in the darkest places.”

When she sat back, her shoulder pressed against his chest. The thin fabric of her shirt did nothing to mask her warmth. His scales rippled in response, and he had to fight the urge to envelop her in his arms.

“Like you,” he murmured, his breath stirring her hair. “Fighting to heal others, even in the darkest corners of Jorvla.”

She turned her head to look at him, their faces inches apart. “I’m not—”

“You are.” His tail coiled around the bench, bracketing her without touching. “Your strength draws me to you, Islae.”

Her breath hitched, her pupils dilating as she met his golden gaze. The air between them grew thick with tension. His scaled shoulders flexed as he fought the primal urge to claim her right there.

She shifted slightly, and her hip pressed against his abdomen where his scales gave way to smooth skin. The contact sent fire racing through his veins. His tail twitched, nearly wrapping around her waist before he caught himself.

“Nirrn,” she whispered, her voice trembling slightly.

The way she said his name made his control slip another notch. He gripped the edge of the bench.

Her brown eyes searched his golden ones, something unspoken flickering in their depths. Before he could decipher her expression, she leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. The tentative touch sent electricity crackling through his entire body. His

scales rippled with pleasure as the mate bond surged between them, stronger than ever.

Acting on pure instinct, his hand cupped the back of her neck, his fingers threading through her soft hair. His tail finally gave in to its urges, coiling around her waist to draw her closer. The kiss deepened as she parted her lips, and a low growl rumbled in his chest. She tasted like sunshine and possibility.

But then suddenly, she jerked away, stumbling to her feet. The loss of contact left him cold. His tail dropped limply to the ground. His muscles coiled with tension as he watched her retreat a few steps, her arms wrapped around herself.

“I-I shouldn’t have done that,” she stammered, not meeting his eyes.

His chest tightened. He hadn’t expected her to kiss him, but now that she had, his body screamed at him to pull her back into his arms. Still, he forced himself to remain seated, knowing she needed space.

“Islae.” His voice came out rough with restraint. “Look at me.”

She shook her head, backing up another step. “We should go. The market will be busy soon.”

The mate bond ached between them, but he understood. He could sense her fear—not of him but of connection itself. Of letting someone close enough to matter. After losing her family so tragically, her walls were built high and thick.

He gathered his composure and rose to his full height, his tail unfurling behind him. “The market it is then. You must be hungry.”

Relief flickered across her face at his easy acceptance, though her cheeks remained

flushed.As they made their way out of the garden, his tail twitched with the effort of keeping distance between them.But he would wait.His mate was worth waiting for.

Nirrn slithered silently behind Islae through Haven's bustling market.His eyes followed her every movement, watching how she kept a careful distance between them.The mate bond throbbed like a physical ache in his chest, demanding he close that gap.

The market vendors called out their wares, but he barely heard them.His mind kept replaying the kiss—the softness of her lips, the way she'd melted against him for that brief, perfect moment.His scales rippled with the memory, and his tail twitched with the need to wrap around her again.

They gathered food from various stalls—fresh bread, some kind of underground-grown vegetables, and dried meat.Islae barely spoke two words to him, keeping her eyes down and her shoulders tense.Every instinct in his body screamed at him to pull her close, to tell her about the mate bond, to make her understand why that kiss had felt so right.

Instead, he followed her to a small table in the communal eating area, his massive form coiling beside the bench while she perched on it.The space between them felt like a chasm.

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“The bread here is surprisingly good,” he said, breaking the silence.

“Mm.” She picked at her food, still not meeting his eyes.

He shifted restlessly. “Islae.”

“Don’t.” She finally looked up, her brown eyes guarded. “We should just forget what happened in the garden.”

His scaled shoulders tensed. “Is that what you want?”

“It’s what needs to happen.” She pushed her plate away. “We can’t... I can’t...”

“Can’t what?” His voice came out deeper, more commanding than he intended. His tail wrapped around the base of the table, his orange scales gleaming. “Can’t feel something real? Can’t let someone care about you?”

Color flooded her cheeks. “You don’t understand—”

“I understand perfectly.” He leaned forward, his large form casting a shadow over her. “You’re afraid. But pushing me away won’t make those feelings disappear.”

She stared at him, her breath catching. The mate bond pulsed between them, and for a moment, he thought she felt it, too. But then she looked away again.

His frustration mounted but he forced himself to remain still, to give her the space she needed. He would wait. She was his mate—his body, his soul, every scale on his body

knew this truth.Eventually, she would feel it, too.

Chapter 12

Islae

Islae wandered alone through the underground city's winding tunnels later that afternoon.The kiss between her and Nirrn replayed in her mind—the warmth of his scales beneath her palms, the surprising softness of his lips, the way his powerful body had tensed when she touched him.

“Stop thinking about it,” she muttered to herself, ducking under a low-hanging crystal that cast prismatic light across the earthen floor.

But she couldn't stop.Every time she closed her eyes, she saw the intensity in his golden gaze, felt the ghost of his hands hovering at her waist before she had pulled away.The connection between them thrummed like a living thing, defying her attempts to dismiss it as mere attraction.

She paused at a junction where bioluminescent fungi painted the walls in soft blues.A group of human children ran past, their laughter echoing through the tunnel.One small girl stopped, offering Islae a tiny glowing flower.

“Thank you,” Islae said, accepting the delicate bloom.Its petals pulsed with gentle light, reminding her of how Nirrn's scales had caught the garden's glow.

“You're the healer lady,” the girl said.“The one the big orange Niri brought.He looks scary, but he's nice.He showed us how to make the flowers grow better.”

Islae's chest tightened.Of course he had.Even here, he was helping and caring for others.Just like in her clinic and when he'd saved her from the fire.

“Heisnice,” Islae agreed softly.

The girl skipped away, leaving Islae alone with her thoughts. She pressed her small back against the cool wall, closing her eyes. The kiss had felt right in a way that transcended logic. When their lips met, something deep within her soul had finally clicked into place, like finding its other half.

“It was a mistake,” she whispered to the empty tunnel, but the words rang hollow. The truth was, she’d never felt more complete than in that moment, despite their differences. Despite everything she’d told herself about not needing anyone.

“I can’t,” she said aloud, but she wasn’t sure what, exactly, she was denying anymore.

Later that night, Islae finally slipped into their shared chamber. Nirrn sat coiled in the corner, his massive frame somehow making the small space feel even more intimate. His golden eyes tracked her movement as she settled on the opposite side of the room on the narrow bed.

The single lamp cast dancing shadows across his orange scales, highlighting the powerful muscles of his chest and shoulders. Her fingers tingled, remembering how those scales had felt beneath her touch in the garden.

“You’ve been gone a while,” he said, his deep tone sending a shiver down her spine.

“I needed time to think.” She pulled her knees to her chest, trying to ignore how the air seemed to crackle between them.

His tail shifted, the scales gleaming as he adjusted his position. “And what conclusions did you reach?”

Instead of answering, she found herself studying the way his abdomen flexed as he moved—smooth skin there, unlike the scales that adorned his broad chest and arms. The dichotomy fascinated her.

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Their eyes met across the room. He didn't move, didn't pressure her, but the powerful intensity of his gaze caused her breath to hitch slightly. The quiet patience in his expression spoke volumes. He would wait for her and let her come to him.

Something inside her suddenly snapped. Years of loneliness, of holding everyone at arm's length, crumbled in the face of this connection she couldn't deny any longer. She rose to her feet, crossing the small space between them in three quick steps.

His eyes darkened as she approached, but he remained still, letting her choose. She pressed her palms against his chest, feeling the smooth scales beneath her fingers and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

"I'm tired of running," she whispered and captured his lips in a fierce kiss.

He responded instantly, one hand tangling in her hair while the other curved around her waist. The kiss deepened, became desperate, years of isolation and longing pouring into the contact. His scales were warm beneath her exploring fingers, his skin impossibly soft where it transitioned to human-like texture.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing heavily, he pressed his forehead to hers. "I've been waiting my whole life for you," he murmured.

Nirrn's body moved with fluid grace, his powerful tail uncoiling as he lifted her effortlessly. His golden eyes never left hers, the intensity in them making her breath catch. She'd never felt so small, so utterly claimed, yet a tenderness in his touch melted her resistance.

“You’re sure?” he asked as he laid her down on the narrow bed, his voice rough with desire.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice trembling but resolute. Her heart pounded, every nerve in her body alight with anticipation. She reached up, her fingers brushing the smooth scales on his shoulders and feeling the heat radiating from his body.

His lips claimed hers again, hard and demanding yet achingly slow. He kissed her as if he had all the time in the world, as if memorizing her. His hands slid up her sides, pulling her shirt up and over her head. She shivered as the cool air hit her skin, but his body soon replaced it, his warmth enveloping her. His lips left hers, trailing slow, burning kisses down her neck, his tongue flicking against her pulse point. She gasped, arching into him, her fingers tangling in his hair.

“Nirrn,” she breathed, her voice a plea and a protest all at once.

He growled low in his chest, the sound vibrating through her as his lips moved lower, his hands cupping her breasts through the fabric of her bra. “You’re beautiful,” he murmured, his voice thick with need. He unhooked her bra, tossing it aside before his mouth descended on her exposed skin.

She cried out as he took one nipple into his mouth, his tongue swirling around the sensitive peak. His other hand kneaded her other breast, his touch sending electric shocks straight to her core. She writhed beneath him, her hips lifting instinctively.

“So perfect,” he murmured against her skin. His lips trailed lower, leaving a path of fire down her stomach. He tugged her pants and underwear down in one smooth motion, his hands sliding back up her thighs as he spread her legs.

His eyes met hers, a question flickering in their depths. She nodded, her breath hitching as she braced herself. The first touch of his tongue against her folds sent a jolt

through her entire body. She gasped, her hands gripping the bed sheets as he explored her with a slow, deliberate rhythm.

“Nirrn,” she moaned, her voice shaking as his tongue found her most sensitive spot, circling it with just the right amount of pressure. Her legs trembled, her hips lifting off the bed as he increased the pace, his hands holding her firmly in place.

Her pleasure built with every stroke, every lick, until she was teetering on the edge. “I’m... I’m going to—”

“Just let go,” he growled softly against her. She soon cried out, her orgasm crashing over her like a tidal wave, her body arching off the bed as wave after wave of pleasure tore through her.

He didn’t stop, his tongue continuing to lap at her as the aftershocks rocked her body. Her hands fisted in the sheets, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath. He finally pulled away, his golden eyes gleaming with satisfaction as he looked up at her.

He moved up her body, his arms caging her in as he kissed her again, slow and deep. Her body sparked with renewed desire.

“You’re incredible,” he murmured against her lips, his hands roaming her body with a possessiveness that made her heart race.

She smiled weakly, her fingers tracing the smooth scales on his chest. “So are you,” she whispered, her voice hoarse.

He chuckled, the sound low and rumbling. “We’re just getting started,” he promised, his golden eyes dark with promise.

He rolled onto his back, his strong tail coiling under him as he reached for the garment covering his lower half. Islae's breath hitched as he removed it, revealing his dual members—thick, hard, and pulsing with need. Her eyes widened, a mix of awe and anticipation flooding her senses. She'd never seen anything like it, but the sight sent a thrill through her, her body already responding to the promise of what was to come.

“Get on top of me,” he commanded, his deep voice rough with desire. His golden eyes locked on to hers, unwavering and leaving no room for hesitation.

Islae hesitated for only a moment before climbing over him, her knees settling on either side of his hips. His hands gripped her waist, steadying her as she positioned herself above his primary member. The heat radiating from him was almost overwhelming, and she could feel the slickness between her thighs betraying her eagerness.

“Slowly,” he murmured, his voice a low growl that sent shivers through her. “Take your time.”

She nodded, biting her lip as she lowered herself onto him, inch by agonizing inch. The stretch was intense, her body adjusting to his size as he filled her completely. A loud gasp escaped her lips, her hands braced against his chest for support.

“You're doing so well,” he praised, his hands moving to her hips, guiding her as she began to move. “Take control.”

Islae started slow, rocking her hips in a deliberate rhythm, feeling every inch of him slide in and out of her. The sensation was overwhelming, pleasure building with each movement. Her breath came in short, uneven gasps, her moans growing louder as she lost herself in the rhythm.

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“That’s it,” Nirrn encouraged, his voice thick with need. His hands tightened on her hips, his tail shifting beneath them as he fought to maintain control.

Her pace quickened, her movements becoming more urgent as the pleasure coiled tighter within her. She could feel her orgasm building, a pressure that threatened to consume her. Her fingers dug into his chest, her nails scraping lightly against his scales as she rode him with increasing desperation.

“Nirrn,” she moaned. “I’m close.”

“Let go,” he commanded, his voice a deep growl that sent a jolt of electricity through her.

Her orgasm hit her with powerful force, her body convulsing as pleasure ripped through her. She cried out, her walls clenching around him as wave after wave of ecstasy washed over her. The intensity was unlike anything she’d ever experienced, her mind blanking as her body shuddered with release.

Her convulsing walls triggered his climax. A low growl tore from his throat as he plunged himself deep into her, his seed spilling inside her in hot, pulsing waves. His hands gripped her hips tightly, holding her in place as he shuddered beneath her, his eyes dark with utter satisfaction.

She collapsed onto his chest, her body still trembling with the aftershocks of her orgasm. His arms wrapped tightly around her, holding her close as they both caught their breath. She could feel his steady heartbeat beneath her ear, a comforting rhythm that grounded her in the moment.

“You’re amazing,” he murmured, his voice soft but filled with awe. His hand stroked her back gently, his touch soothing as she came down from the high of their shared pleasure.

Islae smiled weakly, her fingers tracing the smooth scales on his chest. She felt a sense of deep connection with him that went beyond the physical, a bond that had been forged in the heat of their passion.

Chapter 13

Nirrn

Nirrn’s eyes opened to the soft morning light filtering through the underground city’s hidden ventilation shafts. The weight against his chest made his scales tingle with satisfaction. Islae’s small form curled perfectly against him, her breath warm on his skin. His orange-scaled tail coiled protectively around her legs, keeping her close.

He traced his index finger along her bare shoulder, marveling at her smooth skin. The mate bond sang between them, a connection he had waited so long to feel. The fact that she had chosen him, had come to him first, filled him with fierce pride.

“Mine,” he whispered, the word rumbling deep in his chest. His arms tightened around her instinctively.

Islae stirred, her brown eyes fluttering open. “Good morning,” she murmured, her voice still rough with sleep.

“Sleep well?” His fingers threaded through her dark hair, savoring its silky texture.

“Better than I have in years.” A small smile played on her lips. “Though someone kept me up rather late.”

“I heard no complaints.” His tail squeezed her thigh gently, drawing a soft gasp from her.

“Nirrn...” She pressed closer, her hand splaying across his chest where scales met skin.

He grabbed her wrist gently, bringing it to his mouth to press a kiss to her hand. “I would have waited for you, you know. As long as it took.”

“I know.” She met his gaze. “That’s part of why I didn’t want to wait anymore.”

Joy and satisfaction coursed through him. He had found his mate—this fierce, strong woman who challenged him at every turn yet trusted him enough to let down her walls. His chest swelled with pride and possessiveness.

“You are everything I’ve been searching for,” he said, his voice raw with emotion. The scales across his shoulders rippled with pleasure as she traced them with her gentle fingers. His tail coiled possessively around her as she nestled closer against his chest. They lay there in comfortable silence, enjoying each other’s warmth and presence.

“You need to eat,” he rumbled after a while, though his arms tightened around her. “I’ll bring us breakfast.”

“I can come with you,” she offered, but he shook his head.

“Stay here and rest,” he said softly. “I won’t be long.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Are you going to be this protective from now on?”

“Yes.” He pressed his lips to her forehead.

Reluctantly unwinding his tail from around her, he slipped from their bed. He pulled on his clothes, the fabric settling over his scaled shoulders and lower half. His tail moved silently as he slithered through Haven's winding pathways.

The market area buzzed with early morning activity—humans trading goods and sharing news in hushed voices. His towering height made him stand out among them, but they had grown used to his presence over the past few days. He selected fresh fruit and bread, along with some of the dried meat Islae preferred.

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“Healer Nirrn.” A young human scout appeared at his side, his voice low. “News from the surface.”

Nirrn’s scales bristled. “Speak.”

“The Jorvlen patrols are searching every district. They’re offering rewards for information about you and the human healer.” The scout’s eyes darted around nervously. “They’re angry—saying a Niri has no right to interfere with human affairs.”

A low hiss escaped Nirrn’s throat. His tail coiled tightly with tension, the orange scales darkening with anger.

“How many patrols?”

“At least six that we’ve counted. They’re methodical, working their way through each sector.”

Nirrn’s jaw clenched. He needed to get back to Islae. His protective instincts roared to life, demanding he return to her side immediately. Without another word, he turned and moved swiftly through the tunnels, breakfast clutched in one hand while the other curled into a fist.

Nirrn soon burst into their chamber, his tail propelling him forward with urgent speed. The breakfast items scattered onto the small table as he reached for Islae, who sat cross-legged on their bed.

“Six Jorvlen patrol units are searching for us.”His eyes blazed as he pulled her against his chest.“The Jorvlen authorities have put a bounty on our heads.”

“What?”Islae pushed back, her brown eyes widening.

His scales rippled with agitation.“We need to leave Haven.My home planet Nirum would be safest—”

“No.”Islae stepped away from him, her chin lifting.“I won’t abandon my patients.”

“Your patients?”His tail lashed in frustration.“Your clinic is gone, Islae.”

“People still need me here.”She crossed her arms.“I won’t run away to another planet just because things got difficult.”

His chest rumbled with a low growl.His protective instincts screamed at him to simply wrap her in his coils and take her to safety, willingly or not.But he knew better than to try that with his mate.

“This isn’t about difficulty.”He towered over her, his scales catching the soft light.“They will harm you if they find you.”

“They haven’t caught me yet.”

“Because you hadn’t caught their full attention before.”His hands gripped her shoulders.“But now you have, and they won’t stop until they find us.”

She met his gaze steadily.“Then we’ll be more careful.”

“Islae.”His voice dropped lower.“Do not test me on this.Your safety is not negotiable.”

“My work here isn’t negotiable, either.”She pressed her palm against his chest.“These are my people, Nirrn.I can’t abandon them.”

His long tail coiled around her waist possessively, but she didn’t flinch.The fierce determination in her eyes made his chest tighten with pride even as it frustrated him.

Finally, he released a heavy breath.“Fine.We stay in Haven for now.”His tail squeezed gently.“But we do not return to the surface until the patrols have moved on.That is non-negotiable.”

“How long?”

“As long as necessary.”He pulled her closer, nuzzling her neck.“I will not risk losing you.”

Nirrn soon coiled his long tail beneath him as he settled onto their small bed, arranging the breakfast items between them.He watched Islae as she picked at a piece of bread, her usual appetite notably absent.The worry radiating from her was almost tangible.

“You need to eat more than that,” he said, selecting a ripe fruit and placing it in her hand.She reluctantly took a small bite.

“I keep thinking about Mrs.Reeves,” Islae said softly.“Her wound needs cleaning and new bandages by now.”

His tail twitched.The central surrogacy clinic would be opening soon, his absence already noted.By tomorrow, they would connect him to the bounty.Five years of dedicated service gone in an instant.The thought should have bothered him more.

“Let them wonder where I am,” he muttered aloud.“That life held nothing for me.”

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She looked up, her brown eyes searching his face. “Your job?”

“It meant nothing to me.” His orange scales darkened with intensity as he leaned closer to her. “I spent years examining surrogates. Helping others build their families while feeling empty. Until I found you.”

“Nirrn...”

“No.” His tail curled around her waist, drawing her closer. “I watched countless Niri find their purpose, never thinking I would find that myself. Now I have.” His hand cupped her cheek. “You are my purpose, Islae. Everything else is secondary.”

She pressed her forehead against his scaled chest, releasing a shaky breath. “I don’t want you to regret this.”

A low rumble built in his chest as he wrapped his arms around her. “The only regret would be letting you face danger alone.”

His tail squeezed gently as he kissed her temple. The mate bond hummed, strengthening his resolve. He would sacrifice everything—his career, his standing, his very life—to keep her safe and fulfilled. This fierce, compassionate woman was his future now, and he would ensure she thrived.

Nirrn and Islae soon finished the last morsels of their breakfast. He watched her as she gathered the empty packages, memorizing the graceful way she moved.

“I should go check Haven’s perimeter,” he said, his scales rippling with protective

instinct. “Stay here.”

Her chin lifted. “I could help—”

“No.” He wrapped his tail around her waist, pulling her close. “I won’t risk you being seen now that there’s a bounty on us.”

She pressed her palm against his scaled chest. “Be careful.”

He nuzzled her neck, inhaling her scent. “Always am.”

He moved silently through Haven’s tunnels, his long tail propelling him forward with practiced ease. The orange scales on his shoulders darkened as he focused, every sense alert for any sign of danger.

Near the eastern tunnel entrance, movement caught his eye. A human male crouched in the shadows, speaking in hushed tones into a comm device. Nirrn’s scales bristled as he caught fragments of the conversation.

“...confirmed sighting... orange Niri... the human female healer...”

Cold rage flooded Nirrn’s veins. His tail coiled tightly with tension as he watched the spy relay their location. Haven was compromised.

Without hesitation, he whipped around and surged through the tunnels, his powerful tail driving him forward at breakneck speed. His heart raced wildly. He had to get to Islae.

He burst into their chamber, finding her organizing their meager supplies.

“We need to leave. Now.” His tail wrapped around her waist, pulling her against his

chest.

“What?Why?”

“They found us.”His scales darkened with fury.“A spy.He’s already alerted the patrols.”

Islae’s eyes widened.“But the other refugees—”

“Will be warned, but we must go.”His hands gripped her shoulders.“You are my priority.”

“Nirrn—”

“No arguments.”His voice dropped to a low growl.“I will not lose you.”

She met his intense gaze for a long moment before nodding.His tail unwound from her waist as she gathered their supplies, her movements swift and efficient.

His scales rippled with agitation as he listened for approaching footsteps.The mate bond thrummed with urgency, driving his need to get Islae to safety.They had minutes, perhaps less, before Haven would be swarming with Jorvlen forces.

Chapter 14

Islae

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:17 pm

Islae's heart pounded as she and Nirrn raced through the dimly lit tunnels of the underground sanctuary city. The rough-hewn walls blurred past, their path illuminated by bioluminescent fungi casting an eerie blue glow. Her leg muscles burned from running, but adrenaline kept her moving forward.

"Left here," Nirrn commanded, his massive form gliding ahead of her. His orange scales reflected the blue light, rippling with tension as his powerful tail propelled him forward.

The sound of heavy boots hitting stone soon echoed behind them. Too close.

"There they are!" a gruff voice shouted.

Islae glanced back. Armored Jorvlen soldiers poured into the tunnel, their weapons drawn. The human refugees around them scattered like startled birds, pushing past each other in their desperation to escape.

"Help us!" Islae called out to a group rushing past. They averted their eyes, shouldering past her without slowing down.

"Keep moving," Nirrn growled, his tail curling protectively around her waist. His golden eyes blazed with fury as he watched the others abandon them to save themselves.

They rounded another corner into a wider chamber. Islae's breath caught—more Jorvlen forces blocked the exit ahead. They were trapped.

The soldiers formed a circle around them, their weapons trained directly on them. Nirrn's scales darkened to a deep burnt orange as he positioned himself between Islae and the nearest threats. His muscles coiled with lethal tension, ready to strike.

"Nowhere left to run," the Jorvlen commander sneered, stepping forward. "The human female healer comes with us. Step aside, Niri."

Islae pressed closer to Nirrn's back, feeling the heat radiating from his towering form. Her fingers brushed the rough texture of his arm, drawing comfort from his solid presence. After everything they had shared, after finding someone who truly saw her, she refused to let the Jorvlens tear them apart.

Nirrn's tail tightened protectively around her waist. "They will not touch you as long as I breathe." His voice was low and dangerous, a promise of violence.

The Jorvlen commander raised his weapon. "Last chance."

Nirrn's massive form shot forward toward the Jorvlen commander, his powerful tail propelling him in a blur. His orange scales flashed in the dim light as he wrapped his long tail around the commander, crushing the breath from his lungs.

Islae's heart seized in her chest as more Jorvlen soldiers swarmed forward toward Nirrn. Nirrn fought with raw desperation, his muscles rippling as he threw one attacker into the wall. But for every Jorvlen soldier he struck down, two more took their place.

"No!" The scream tore from her throat as a stun baton caught Nirrn in the ribs. He staggered, his golden eyes blazing with fury and pain. His tail lashed out violently, sending another Jorvlen soldier flying, but they kept coming at him.

"You're no warrior," the Jorvlen commander wheezed, driving his armored fist into

Nirrn's unprotected abdomen. "Just a soft-hearted healer who forgot his place here."

Blood trickled from a gash above Nirrn's eye, staining his orange scales crimson. Still, he fought with raw power, shielding Islae with his body even as the blows rained down on him. His protective instincts wouldn't let him yield, wouldn't let him abandon her.

"Stay back," he snarled at her through gritted teeth, his voice rough with pain. But Islae couldn't move or breathe. The scene before her blurred with another memory—her family's screams and fighting as the Jorvlens attacked and killed them.

Suddenly, a sickening crack echoed through the underground chamber as a metal baton connected with Nirrn's skull. He slumped to the ground, his massive frame going still. Blood started pooling beneath him, his beautiful orange scales growing duller.

The Jorvlen commander grabbed Islae's chin, forcing her to look at Nirrn's motionless body. "Say goodbye to your Niri protector. He'll be dead within the hour, and you'll never see him again."

Her chest constricted, each breath like swallowing glass. Not again. She couldn't lose someone else she cared about to these monsters.

"You should have stayed hidden better, little healer," the Jorvlen commander sneered. "Now you get to live with the knowledge that he died trying to save you."

Rough hands suddenly seized her arms, yanking her backward. The soldiers' armored fingers dug into her flesh as they dragged her away from Nirrn's crumpled form. His chest barely moved with each shallow breath.

"Nirrn!" The name tore from her throat, raw and desperate. "Let me help

him!Please—”

A Jorvlen soldier backhanded her across the face.“Shut up.”

Tears blurred her vision as she struggled against their iron grip.Her medical training screamed at her to assess his injuries, to stop the bleeding, to do something.But she could only watch helplessly as the distance between them grew.

“You can’t leave him like this,” she begged, her voice breaking.“He’ll die!”

“That’s the point,” one Jorvlen soldier sneered, twisting her arm until she gasped in pain.

As the distance kept widening between her and Nirrn, a realization suddenly hit her.She loved him.The stubborn, protective Niri healer who had refused to let her fight alone.Who had seen past her walls and touched something in her she thought long dead.And she had never gotten a chance to tell him.

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“Nirrn!” she screamed again, thrashing against their hold. “I love you! Do you hear me? I love you!”

His eyes flickered open for just a moment, meeting hers across the chamber. Blood matted the skin along his temple, but his gaze held that same fierce protectiveness that had drawn her to him from the start. And then he disappeared from view as they dragged her around the corner of the underground tunnel.

Within minutes, the Jorvlen soldiers shoved her through Haven’s heavy wooden door, the ancient hinges groaning. Rough fabric soon covered her eyes, plunging her into darkness. Cold metal bit into her wrists as they secured the handcuffs.

“Please,” she whispered again, though she knew it was futile. “Let me save him.”

The only response was cruel laughter as they dragged her forward into the unknown, leaving behind the only being who had ever truly understood her. The only one who had made her feel safe enough to let down her walls. And now she would never know if he survived, never get to tell him how much he meant to her. The thought carved a deep hole in her chest that felt like it would never heal.

The Jorvlen soldiers continued dragging her through the winding tunnels for what felt like miles. The blindfold pressed tightly against her eyes, but her other senses heightened in response. The musty scent of underground decay filled her nostrils, mixed with the metallic tang of Nirrn’s splattered blood still lingering on her clothes.

“Move faster,” one Jorvlen soldier growled, yanking her forward when she stumbled.

Her medical training started to kick in, cataloging her own injuries—bruised ribs, split lip, and possible sprained wrist from the tight handcuffs. But her thoughts kept circling back to Nirrn, lying motionlessly in a pool of his own blood. The image burned behind her eyes, making her chest constrict tightly.

The underground tunnel air soon grew less stale, signaling they were nearing the surface. A sudden gust of cold wind whipped across her face as they emerged, carrying the acrid stench of Jorvla's industrial sector.

"Please," she tried one last time, "he needs medical attention—"

Before she knew it, an armored fist slammed into her stomach, driving the air from her lungs. She doubled over, gasping.

"Shut your mouth," the Jorvlen commander snarled. "Your Niri pet is dead by now."

Another blow caught her across the face, splitting her cheek open. Warm blood trickled down her jaw as she fought to stay conscious. Her legs buckled, but the Jorvlen soldiers' grip kept her upright.

"Not so brave now. Are you?" One of them laughed, driving his knee into her back. "No one to protect you anymore."

The beating continued, their fists and boots finding every vulnerable spot on her body. Through the haze of pain, her thoughts drifted to Nirrn—his gentle hands, his fierce protectiveness, and the way he had looked at her like she was precious.

A final blow to her head sent darkness rushing in. As consciousness slipped away, she thought she heard Nirrn's deep voice whispering to her that he loved her, too, and that he was coming to save her. But that was impossible. Nirrn was dead. She was alone again, just like before.

Then, the world faded to black.

Chapter 15

Nirrn

The sharp scent of medicinal herbs and antiseptic stung Nirrn's nostrils as consciousness crept back. Pain radiated through his torso where the Jorvlen soldiers had struck him, each breath sending daggers through his ribcage. His orange-scaled tail coiled instinctively as he tried to orient himself in the unfamiliar room.

"Islae?" His voice came out as a rasp. The silence that answered made his stomach drop.

"Easy there, big guy." Joseph's voice came from somewhere to his left. "You took quite a beating."

Nirrn's eyes snapped open, his upper body leaning forward despite the protest of his injuries. "Where is she?" The words came out as a growl, his protective instincts flaring hot and fierce.

Joseph stepped back, his hands raised. "I don't know. When the raid hit, everyone scattered. I found you unconscious in a pool of your own blood in the cavern. Brought you straight to the healer's house here in Haven."

Nirrn's fingers clenched the thin blanket covering him, his scales bristling with barely contained rage. The memory of Islae's eyes filled with fear flashed in his mind. He had failed her.

"You're lucky to be alive," Joseph continued, watching him carefully. "Must be fighting for something pretty important."

“Someone,” Nirrn corrected, his voice hard with determination. His tail shifted as he pushed himself up straighter, ignoring the throbbing pain across his torso and in his head. “Islae. She is my mate, and I will tear apart every building in Jorvla until I find her.”

The conviction in Nirrn’s voice made Joseph step back again. This wasn’t the calm and collected healer he had known from days before. Nirrn’s golden eyes blazed with a predatory intensity, his massive frame coiled with lethal purpose despite his injuries.

“They will regret taking her from me,” Nirrn said, his voice dropping to a dangerous whisper. “Every single one of them.”

Nirrn’s tail coiled restlessly as the human healer came into the room and changed his bandages. The antiseptic stung, but he barely noticed through his growing agitation. Every second spent in this bed was another second Islae remained in danger.

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“The head wound is healing nicely,” the healer murmured, “but you lost too much blood. You need rest.”

Nirrn’s scales bristled at the healer’s orders. “I need to find her.”

“You’ll be no good to anyone if you collapse in the street,” Joseph said from his position by the door. “Besides, the Jorvlens think you’re dead. Use that to your advantage.”

A low growl rumbled in Nirrn’s chest. “They took my mate.”

“And they’ll kill you both if you go charging in there now.” Joseph crossed his arms. “Look, once you’re stronger, you should just leave Jorvla. Get somewhere safe before they realize—”

“No.” Nirrn’s tail whipped out, knocking over a tray of medical supplies. The crash echoed through the small room. “I am not leaving without Islae.”

The healer stepped back. “Sir, please—”

“You don’t understand.” Nirrn’s eyes fixed on Joseph. “I spent years searching for her. Every day examining surrogates, feeling nothing, until I saw her in that alley. She is mine to protect, and I failed her.” His scaled shoulders tensed as he pushed himself up straighter. “I will tear this city apart stone by stone until I find her.”

Joseph’s face softened. “You really love her. Don’t you?”

“She is everything.” The words came out rough, raw with emotion. “And if they’ve harmed her...” His tail coiled tighter, his muscles rippling beneath his orange scales.

“At least give yourself today,” Joseph pleaded. “Regain your strength. Then we’ll help you find her.”

Nirrn’s hands gripped the bed, fighting against the weakness in his body. Every instinct screamed at him to move, to search, and to destroy anything between him and Islae. But Joseph was right. He needed his full strength to save her.

“One day,” he conceded, his voice hard. “No more.”

Nirrn shifted restlessly on the narrow bed, his orange-scaled tail coiling and uncoiling with agitation. The healer’s house smelled of herbs and antiseptic, reminding him of countless hours spent tending to others. But now, as he closed his eyes, all he could hear was Islae’s voice echoing through his mind.

“I love you!” Her desperate scream had torn through the chaos of the raid as he was losing consciousness. The memory made his muscles tense, a low growl rumbling in his chest.

He pressed his palm against his chest where the scales transitioned to smooth skin, feeling the steady beat of his heart. The mate bond pulsed there, a constant reminder of what they’d taken from him.

“Sir, you need to stay still,” the human healer muttered, attempting to check his bandages.

Nirrn’s tail whipped out in frustration, knocking over another tray. “Do not touch me.”

The healer backed away, his eyes wide. “Your wounds—”

“Mean nothing.” His eyes fixed on the ceiling, his voice lowering to a dangerous level. “I have lived my life by the healer’s oath. Always gentle. Always careful.” His hands clenched into fists. “And where has it gotten me? They took her. They took my mate.”

The rage building inside of him felt foreign, yet right. His shoulders tensed as he pushed himself upright. All these years he had believed his path lay in healing, in gentle touches and careful words. But now...

“I chose healing because I thought it was my nature,” he said, more to himself than the frightened healer. “But they have awakened something else in me. Something that demands blood.”

His tail moved with deadly precision, coiling around the bedpost. The wood groaned under the pressure until it snapped clean through.

“If they want a warrior,” he growled, “I will show them one. I will become what they fear most.” His golden eyes narrowed. “And they will gravely regret ever touching what is mine.”

The healer pressed himself against the wall. “You’re different than before.”

“Yes.” Nirrn’s massive frame straightened, ignoring the pain that shot through him. “I am becoming what I need to be. For her.”

The door suddenly burst open, sending a gust of stale air through the healer’s house. Nirrn’s scales rippled as Joseph and a human scout rushed in, their boots scuffing against the stone floor.

“We found her,” the scout said, his breath coming in quick gasps.

Nirrn surged upward, his tail uncoiling from beneath him. The room spun violently, forcing him back down onto the bed. His orange scales rippled with frustration as he steadied himself.

“Where?” The word came out as a dangerous growl.

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Joseph stepped forward. “The Jorvlen stronghold near the government district. It’s heavily guarded, but—”

“Then we go now.” Nirrn’s eyes narrowed, his hands gripping the edge of the bed until his knuckles whitened.

“Listen,” the scout cut in, “I know some people who can get us detailed maps of the compound. Give me a few hours to track them down. We’ll need a solid plan to get her out alive.”

Nirrn’s tail lashed out, cracking against the wall. “Every moment we wait is another moment they have her.”

“And rushing in there half-dead will get you both killed,” Joseph countered. “You can barely sit up straight.”

A low hiss escaped Nirrn’s throat, but he couldn’t deny the truth of it. His muscles trembled from the simple act of staying upright, and the room still tilted at odd angles when he moved too quickly.

“I will give you three hours,” he said, his voice lowering to a dangerous whisper. “No more.”

The scout nodded. “I’ll be back with those maps before then.”

As the humans left, Nirrn’s tail coiled tightly around himself. The mate bond throbbed in his chest like an open wound. He could feel Islae’s fear, her anger, and her

determination not to break. His hands clenched into fists.

“Hold on,” he murmured into the empty room. “I’m coming to save you.”

His shoulders tensed as he forced himself to stay still, to conserve his strength. The warrior rising within him demanded action, violence, and retribution. But the healer in him knew they needed strategy. He could not risk Islae’s safety with impatience.

Still, his tail moved restlessly, leaving scratch marks in the stone. Three hours. Three hours to regain his strength. Three hours until he could begin hunting those who dared touch what was his.

Three hours later, Nirrn’s massive frame coiled with restless energy as Joseph and the scout spread the stolen blueprints across his bed. His eyes narrowed, scanning each detail of the Jorvlen stronghold’s layout. The mate bond pulsed in his chest, drawing his attention to a section marked “Medical Wing.”

“This medical wing.” His finger tapped against the indicated area. “What exactly do they keep there?”

The scout leaned forward, pointing to specific sections. “Everything from basic medical equipment to experimental drugs. Worth a fortune on the black market.”

Nirrn’s orange scales rippled as an idea formed. “And there are humans who would risk their lives for such supplies?”

“The rogues in the outer district,” Joseph said, understanding dawning on his face. “They’ve been trying to get their hands on Jorvlen medical tech for months.”

“Then we give them what they want.” Nirrn growled low. “In exchange for their help breaking into the compound.”

His tail coiled tightly around the bedpost as he pushed himself upright. The weakness from before had faded, replaced by a surge of strength that seemed to flow directly from the mate bond. Every scale tingled with renewed energy, his muscles responding with fluid grace as he rose to his full height.

“Sir, you shouldn’t be—” the healer started to protest.

Nirrn silenced him with a look. “I am fine.” His large frame towered over the humans as he gathered the maps. “The medicine has done its work. And Islae...” His hand pressed against his chest where the bond pulsed strongest. “She gives me strength.”

“The rogues won’t be easy to find,” the scout warned. “They don’t trust outsiders.”

“Then we will make them trust us.” Nirrn’s tail moved with deadly precision as he collected his belongings. “Take me to their territory.”

Joseph stepped forward. “You seem different now. The healer I met would never—”

“The healer you met died when they took my mate.” Nirrn’s golden eyes flashed. “I am becoming what I must be to get her back.”

His scaled shoulders rolled as he moved toward the door. The mate bond burned in his chest like molten metal, driving him forward. Somewhere in that stronghold, Islae waited for him. And he would tear down anyone who stood between them.

“Let’s go,” he commanded, not bothering to look back to see if the scout followed. “We have rogues to find.”

Chapter 16

Islae

Consciousness returned slowly, like swimming up through murky water. Pain radiated through Islae's body as her eyes fluttered open to darkness. Cold metal cut into her wrists, and the chains rattled as she tried to move.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:17 pm

The cell reeked of mold and decay. Water dripped somewhere in the darkness, each drop echoing off stone walls. Her healer's mind kicked in as she assessed her multiple injuries. She had severely bruised ribs, a probable concussion, and multiple lacerations. The Jorvlen soldiers hadn't held back.

"Nirrn..." The whisper escaped her cracked lips before she could stop it. The image of him lying motionlessly on the cavern floor in Haven flashed through her mind. His orange scales dulled with dirt and blood, those golden eyes closed forever.

Tears slid down her cheeks, mixing with the dried blood there. "I'm so sorry," she choked out to the empty cell. "This is all my fault. I should have listened to you. Should have left when you said..."

The chains clinked as she slumped against the damp wall. Her shoulders shook with silent sobs. If she'd just swallowed her pride, stopped being so stubborn about staying in Jorvla, he would still be alive right now. They would both be safe on Nirum if she'd only done as he'd suggested.

"I got you killed," she whispered into the darkness. "You protected me, saved me over and over, and I got you killed in the end."

Her fingers felt the wall behind her, finding deep gouges in the stone. How many others had been chained here before her? How many humans had suffered in this cell while she'd been hiding away in her clinic, helping so few when she should have done more?

A rat scurried across her feet, making her jump. The sudden movement sent fresh

waves of pain through her battered body. She bit back her cry of pain, refusing to give her captors the satisfaction of hearing her suffering.

“I never even told you...” Her voice cracked. She’d never got the chance to tell him how she really felt about him, how his quiet strength had become her anchor in this forsaken world. Now she never would.

The sound of distant footsteps made her tense. They were coming for her. She straightened despite the pain, lifting her chin. They may have taken everything from her—her family, her clinic, her freedom, Nirrn—but they wouldn’t take her dignity. She wouldn’t give them that.

The heavy footsteps grew louder with each passing second, echoing through the stone corridors. Her heart hammered fiercely against her bruised ribs as a beam of harsh light suddenly flooded her cell, making her squint and turn away.

“Well, well. The defiant little human healer.” The Jorvlen lead commander’s gravelly voice carried a note of cruel amusement. His boots scraped against the stone floor as he approached and opened the cell door. “Not so brave right now. Are we?”

Islae forced herself to meet his gaze, though her vision swam slightly.

“Did you really think you could hide from us forever?” He grabbed her chin, his slimy fingers digging into her jaw. “That pathetic little clinic of yours was just the beginning. We had to make an example, you see. Can’t have humans thinking they can operate outside our authority.”

She jerked her face away from his grip. “Go to hell.”

The back of his hand cracked across her face. Stars exploded behind her eyes as her head snapped to the side.

“You have two options,” he continued, pacing before her. “Either we auction you off to the highest bidder—and trust me, many parties are interested in a skilled healer—or we make a public spectacle of your execution. Show everyone what happens to those who defy us.”

The words should have terrified her. But a strange numbness had settled over her mind. What did it matter anymore? Her family was gone. Nirrn... The image of his bloodied body flashed through her thoughts again. Everyone she'd ever loved had been taken from her.

“Nothing to say?” he nodded to his soldiers. “Perhaps we need to loosen her tongue.”

The first blow caught her in the stomach, driving what little air remained from her lungs. She sagged against the chains as fists and boots connected with her body. Each impact sent fresh waves of agony through her, but she barely registered them anymore.

Let them beat her. Let them kill her. What was the point of fighting anymore? Of being strong? She'd failed everyone who ever counted on her.

Blood filled her mouth as another punch landed. Her legs gave out completely, the chains at her wrists now supporting her full weight. The metal cut deeper into her skin, but she couldn't bring herself to care.

“Not so defiant now?” the commander's voice came from somewhere above her. “Don't worry. It will all be over soon enough.”

Islae closed her eyes, letting the darkness creep in around the edges of her consciousness. Maybe it was better this way. Maybe death would finally bring her peace.

The darkness crept in fast as her body sagged against the metal chains. Warm blood dripped from her split lip onto the cold stone floor, each drop echoing in the silence of her dank cell. The Jorvlen commander and his men had finally gone away, leaving her alone with her pain and despair.

Through the haze of approaching unconsciousness, a familiar deep voice whispered in her mind. “Hold on, Islae. I’m coming for you.”

Her heart clenched. “Great,” she muttered through swollen lips. “Now I’m hallucinating.” The beating must have damaged her head worse than she thought. Nirrn was dead. She’d watched him fall, his orange scales dulled with blood pooling under him, his powerful body crumpled under the Jorvlen assault.

“Stay strong.” The voice came again, rich and commanding, exactly as she remembered. “Don’t give up.”

“You’re not real,” she whispered to the empty cell. “You’re dead because of me.” Tears mixed with the blood on her face.

A sudden surge of electricity shot through her veins, making her gasp. The sensation wasn’t painful—more like static dancing across her skin, awakening every nerve ending. Her clouded mind emptied with startling clarity, and with it came an impossible certainty.

Nirrn was alive.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:17 pm

“That’s impossible,” she breathed, but the energy pulsing through her body told a different story. She could feel him, somehow, like a phantom touch against her consciousness.

“I will protect you.” His voice resonated through her mind, stronger now. “Whatever it takes.”

The raw possession in those words sent a shiver through her. This wasn’t a hallucination. The Nirrn she knew had never spoken with such fierce dominance. This was something else entirely.

“How?” she whispered, hardly daring to hope.

“Our bond cannot be broken by distance or walls.” His words carried a growl that made her gasp. “Fight, Islae. Stay alive. I’m coming.”

The energy coursing through her veins settled into a steady hum, like a lifeline connecting her to something—someone—beyond her prison walls. Her body still ached, her situation remained dire, but something had changed.

Islae straightened against her chains, ignoring the protest of her battered body and the unconscious sensation tugging at her. If there was even a slight chance that Nirrn had managed to survive, she would not break. Not yet.

“Hurry,” she whispered into the darkness, allowing herself to believe, just for a moment, that he was alive and could hear her.

“Rest now,” Nirrn’s voice commanded in her mind. “You need to heal.”

Islae’s lips quirked despite her pain. Even in her head—or whatever this strange connection was—he held an authoritative tone that should have irritated her independent nature. Instead, warmth spread through her chest at the way he tried to take care of her even now.

“This is completely insane,” she muttered, testing the chains again. “I’m talking to voices in my head.”

“Sleep.” His voice carried both command and tenderness. “I will watch over you.”

The energy humming through her veins was a gentle rhythm, like the beating of a second heart. Her eyelids grew heavy as exhaustion crept in. The rational part of her mind screamed that she shouldn’t let her guard down in enemy territory, but something deeper, more instinctive, trusted that presence in her mind.

She drifted into uneasy sleep, haunted by fragments of memories—Nirrn’s massive form coiled protectively around her in their tiny chamber at the refuge, the way his orange-scaled chest had rumbled against her cheek, how his powerful tail had wrapped around her waist as they’d...

When consciousness returned, the cell remained as dark and damp as before. Her injuries throbbed with renewed intensity, but her mind felt clearer. The connection still hummed faintly at the edges of her awareness, though Nirrn’s voice remained silent.

Water still dripped steadily somewhere in the darkness as she assessed her situation. The Jorvlen commander would return soon, expecting an answer to his ultimatum. Her medical knowledge made her valuable—too valuable to execute immediately. But if she showed any sign of yielding, they’d sell her to the highest

bidder without hesitation.

She flexed her fingers, wincing as the movement pulled at her raw wrists. The chains allowed minimal movement, but maybe that was enough. If she could just keep them talking, keep them uncertain about her true value...

“Think,” she whispered to herself. “What would Nirrn do?” The image of his golden eyes narrowing in calculation filled her mind. He’d always been methodical and strategic—even in healing. Every move had purpose.

The faint hum in her blood strengthened briefly, as if in response to her thoughts. Islae closed her eyes, drawing comfort from that impossible connection. Whether real or imagined, it gave her strength. And right now, strength was what she needed most.

Chapter 17

Nirrn

Nirrn slithered silently across the grimy pavement as he and the human scout traveled through the winding alleys of Jorvla’s outer district. The stench of decay and desperation hung thick in the air, but he barely noticed it. His focus remained razor-sharp on one goal: getting to Islae.

The scout led him to a crumbling warehouse where a group of human rogues lounged against rusted shipping containers. Their eyes narrowed at his approach, their hands tightening on concealed weapons.

“A Niri seeking us out? That’s new,” a scarred man said, stepping forward. “Either brave or stupid.”

Nirrn drew himself up to his full height, his orange scales glinting off the light

filtering in through the broken windows. “I have a proposition for you. Medical supplies from the government district stronghold—enough to set you up for months on the black market. All yours if you help me get inside.”

“And why would a Niri want to break into a Jorvlen stronghold?” A tall man with close-cropped hair circled him, studying his healer’s markings. “Especially a healer?”

“My reasons are my own.” His eyes tracked the human rogue’s movement, his voice lowering into a growl. “The supplies are real. That’s all you need to know.”

The human rogues exchanged glances, having a silent conversation. The scarred man stepped closer, his chin lifted in challenge. “Prove you’re not setting us up. Prove you’re a real warrior.”

Nirrn’s tail coiled tighter, his muscles tensing. He had spent his life healing, not fighting. But Islae’s face suddenly flashed in his mind, driving out all hesitation. “Whatever test you require.”

A slow smile spread across the scarred man’s face. “Follow us then, Niri. Let’s see what you’re made of.”

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His scales bristled with anticipation as they led him deeper into the warehouse shadows. The healer in him whispered doubts, but he silenced it. For Islae, he would become whatever was necessary. His hands flexed, remembering the softness of her skin and the trust in her eyes as she lay in his arms.

“I hope you’re ready,” the scarred man called back. “This won’t be gentle.”

Nirrn’s lips curved into a dangerous smile. “Neither will I.”

The stale air grew thicker as they descended into the warehouse basement. Nirrn’s scales scraped against rough concrete and the metallic tang of old blood grew stronger with each step. The scarred human rogue’s footsteps echoed ahead of him, leading him deeper into what could only be described as a makeshift arena.

Crude spotlights illuminated a circular fighting pit. The walls, stained with various shades of both human and Niri blood, told stories of countless brutal matches. Around the rim, humans pressed against chain-link fencing, their hungry eyes fixed on him.

“Your opponent.” The scarred human rogue gestured to a massive blue-scaled Niri warrior who uncoiled from the shadows.

The Niri warrior’s battle scars created intricate patterns across his scales, each one a testament to victories Nirrn had never sought. As a healer, Nirrn had treated similar wounds countless times. Now he’d be on the other end of them.

“Last chance to back out, healer,” the Niri warrior sneered, flexing his heavily muscled arms. “Go back to your clinic where you belong.”

Islae's face flashed through Nirrn's mind again. His golden eyes narrowed. "I belong wherever I choose."

The Niri warrior lunged forward and struck first, his tail whipping out like a steel cable. Nirrn barely managed to dodge, his healer's instincts shouting at him to retreat. But retreat meant losing his chance to save Islae.

Pain exploded across his jaw as the Niri warrior's fist connected. Nirrn tasted blood, his vision blurring slightly. He tried to counter, but his movements were too measured, too precise—a healer's movements, not a fighter's.

"Pathetic," the Niri warrior spat, landing another crushing blow to Nirrn's ribs. "You think you can protect anyone like this?"

The words hit harder than the punch. Nirrn's orange scales stood on edge as rage coursed through him. His tail lashed out instinctively, but the Niri warrior caught it, using Nirrn's momentum to slam him against the wall.

"Stay down," the Niri warrior hissed.

Blood dripped from Nirrn's split lip as he pushed himself up. "No." His voice was a dangerous growl. "She needs me."

The Niri warrior circled him, clearly enjoying his dominance. "Your mate? Is that what this is all about?" He let out a harsh laugh. "She'll die waiting for you, healer."

Something snapped inside Nirrn. His carefully maintained and measured control shattered, replaced by a blind primal fury he'd never known could exist in him. His golden eyes blazed as he faced his opponent, no longer thinking like a healer in battle, but something far more dangerous—a Niri fighting for his mate's life.

Nirrn's tail whipped through the air with devastating force, catching the blue-scaled Niri warrior across the chest. His opponent stumbled back, shock registering in his eyes at the sudden display of raw power. Years of precise and controlled movements dissolved into pure instinct as Nirrn struck again and again, his orange scales bristling with primal rage.

The Niri warrior tried to counter, but Nirrn caught his arm and yanked him forward, slamming his opponent face-first into the concrete wall. The impact cracked the surface, sending dust and debris raining down. Blood splattered across Nirrn's knuckles as he delivered another crushing blow.

"She's mine to protect," Nirrn snarled, his voice unrecognizable to himself. His eyes blazed with an intensity that made the watching humans step back from the chain-link fence.

The Niri warrior spat blood and launched himself at Nirrn, managing to land a hit that sent them both crashing to the ground. They grappled, tails intertwined, scales scraping against concrete as they fought for dominance. Nirrn felt ribs crack under his fist, heard the wet snap of bone, but he didn't stop.

His body moved with a savage grace he'd never known he possessed—every strike precise but lethal, every movement calculated for maximum damage. The healer in him recognized exactly where to hit to cause the most pain, and for once, he used that knowledge without mercy.

The final blow came as Nirrn wrapped his powerful tail around the Niri warrior's throat, squeezing until his opponent's struggles weakened. He released just before unconsciousness claimed his rival, letting the blue-scaled body slump to the ground.

Nirrn towered over his fallen opponent, his chest heaving and blood dripping from his split knuckles onto the concrete below. His orange scales gleamed under the harsh

lights, some edges torn and bleeding from the brutal fight. The familiar urge to heal and to mend whispered at the edges of his consciousness, but he pushed it aside.

For the first time, he understood what it meant to be more than just a healer. The raw power thrumming through his veins felt right, natural, as if some dormant part of him had finally awakened. Every breath was filled with Islae's image. Every heartbeat echoed with the need to find her and protect what was his.

The humans pressed against the fence remained silent, their earlier bloodlust replaced by a wary respect. None dared approach yet as Nirrn stood guard over his victory, his golden eyes still burning with unleashed fury.

Nirrn finally turned and slithered out of the fighting pit, his orange scales covered in his and the Niri warrior's blood. He approached the scarred human rogue who took an instinctive step back. The primal energy still coursed through Nirrn's veins, making his movements fluid and predatory.

"Well?" Nirrn rumbled low. The taste of copper lingered in his mouth from his split lip.

The scarred man cleared his throat. "I've seen a lot of fights in that pit. Never seen anything like that." He gestured to where the blue-scaled Niri warrior was being carried away. "Especially not from a healer."

"You have your answer then." Nirrn's eyes fixed on the human, unblinking. "Do we have a deal?"

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A few other fighters had gathered around them—both human rogues and Niri warriors drawn by the spectacle. Their whispered conversations fell silent as they watched the exchange.

The scarred man studied Nirrn's face. "Whatever you're fighting for must be worth dying for."

"It is." The image of Islae's radiant smile burned in Nirrn's mind.

"Count me in," a voice called out. A heavily muscled Niri warrior with battle-scarred green scales stepped forward. "Anyone who fights like that has my respect."

Others voiced their agreement, forming a loose circle around Nirrn. The scarred man nodded slowly. "All right. We'll help you get into that stronghold. But first, let's talk about strategy."

Nirrn's tail coiled with barely contained energy as they moved to a planning area with his map of the Jorvlen stronghold. Every second spent here was another second Islae remained in danger. He forced himself to focus on the task at hand. He would need these allies to reach her.

"The stronghold has three entry points," the scarred man began, spreading out the crude map.

Nirrn leaned forward, his eyes scanning the layout. His healer's precision merged with his newfound warrior's instinct, analyzing every detail of the stronghold. He would tear that place apart piece by piece if he had to.

Hold on, Islae, he thought. I'm coming for you.

Chapter 18

Islae

The dank underground cell reeked of mold and despair. Islae's wrists throbbed where the metal cuffs bit into her flesh. She shifted her weight, trying to find a position that didn't strain her shoulders quite so much.

"...new weapons shipment coming in tomorrow," a guard's voice drifted down the stone corridor.

"What about the healer?" another guard asked.

"Commander wants to break her. Says she's too valuable to damage permanently, though."

She closed her eyes, remembering how Nirrn would analyze a situation—methodical, leaving no detail unchecked. She needed that same clinical detachment now.

The hum in her blood pulsed stronger, like a phantom touch of Nirrn's fingers against her skin. Her breath caught. The connection felt incredibly real, as if some part of Nirrn reached across the city to find her. At that moment, she realized it could only mean one thing. Nirrn was indeed alive.

Heavy boots scraped against stone as the guards changed shifts. Three steps to the door, pause for key check, two more steps to the end of the hall. They were clockwork in their routine—perhaps too routine.

"Hey! The prisoner needs water," a young one called out.

“Let her thirst. Commander’s orders.”

Islae’s throat burned at the mention of water. They had given her nothing since throwing her in here. But the denial of her basic needs told her something—they feared her influence. A healer could gain trust and could manipulate through kindness. Maybe she could use that to her advantage if she got the chance.

The night dragged on. Every hour, new snippets of conversation filtered through her cell door—duty rosters, complaints about pay, and whispered fears about the growing human resistance. She filed each detail away, searching for leverage.

But the guards who had beaten her earlier showed no weakness and no sympathy. Their hatred of humans ran too deep. She flexed her fingers again, wincing as the cuffs cut too deeply.

“What would you see that I’m missing?” she murmured, picturing Nirrn’s calculating golden eyes. The phantom warmth in her blood surged, as if in answer. She held on to that feeling, letting it chase away the chill of the cell.

Dawn soon approached, marked by the changing of the guard once more. The commander would return soon enough, demanding she choose between a slave’s collar or a quick death. Neither was acceptable. There had to be a way out of here.

Her mind raced as she pieced together everything she had overheard in the past day. Her wrists ached from the chains, but the physical discomfort barely registered against the sudden sharp clarity of her thoughts.

“Weapons shipment,” she whispered to herself. “Loading dock three, east wing.”

The guards’ casual conversations had revealed more than they realized. She wiggled her fingers, keeping them nimble despite the cold and tingling sensation. If she could

just get to those weapons, or any weapon...

Her attention snapped to footsteps approaching—lighter than the night guards, with a slight hesitation between steps. The young one, the one who had mentioned water before.

The strange warmth in her blood pulsed, making her catch her breath again. It felt like Nirrn was right here with her, his powerful presence giving her strength. She could almost see him—his orange-golden scales gleaming in the darkness, his golden eyes fierce with protective fury.

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“Focus,” she muttered.

The young guard appeared, his uniform still crisp with newness. His eyes darted to her chains and then away.

“Please,” Islae said, letting her voice crack. “Just a little water?”

He shifted his weight. “I’m not supposed to...”

“I know. But I’m so thirsty.” She let her head drop, her shoulders slumping. “I never meant to cause trouble. I just want to help people.”

The guard’s fingers twitched toward his water flask. “The commander said—”

“I’m a healer,” she interrupted softly. “Like you have in your family. Your sister, right? I heard you mention her to the other guard.”

His eyes widened slightly. Got him.

“She works in the medical wing. Right?” Islae continued. “She’s trying to make a difference, just like I was.”

The guard took a half step forward. “How did you know that about my sister?”

“The same way I know you’re different from the others. You see people for who they are, not just humans or Jorvlens.” She met his gaze. “Please. Just a few sips?”

He glanced down the corridor and then back at her. His hand moved to his keys.

The warmth in her blood surged stronger, as if Nirrn himself urged her forward. Just a little more...

The cell door soon creaked open, and Islae's heart raced as the young guard stepped inside with his water flask. Her wrists throbbed beneath the metal cuffs, the pain giving weight to her next words.

"The cuffs... they're cutting off my circulation." She rotated her hands, letting him see the raw skin. "Could you maybe loosen them? Just for a minute while I drink?"

He shifted from foot to foot. "I shouldn't..."

"Please? I promise I won't try anything." She met his eyes, projecting innocence. "I just want to get some feeling back in my hands."

The guard glanced down the corridor before pulling out his keys again. The cuffs fell away with a soft click, and Islae bit back a gasp of relief as she massaged her tender wrists. The strange tingling in her blood—that connection to Nirrn—grew stronger again, as if warning her to be careful.

"Thank you," she breathed, accepting his water flask. The cool liquid soothed her parched throat, but she forced herself to drink slowly and deliberately. Let him watch. Let him think he was being kind.

"You're different from other humans," the guard said, his eyes trailing over her face and then lower. "Most of them just curse at us."

Islae lowered the flask, letting her fingers brush his as she handed it back. "Violence solves nothing. That's why I became a healer." She tucked a strand of hair behind her

ear, noting how his gaze followed the movement. “What made you join the guards?”

“My father’s position. But I...” He stepped closer. “I don’t always agree with how things are done here.”

“No?” She tilted her head, offering a small smile. “It’s nice to meet someone who thinks for himself.”

His chest puffed slightly at the praise. Another step closer, and she could smell his cologne—too strong, trying too hard to seem mature. But she kept her expression soft and interested.

“Maybe I could bring you more water later,” he suggested, his voice dropping lower. “Or some food?”

“That would be wonderful.” She let her smile widen, even as her skin crawled at his proximity. The tingling in her blood surged again—Nirrn’s presence, his strength flowing through their connection. She held on to that feeling, using it to maintain her mask of gentle flirtation.

Her stomach churned as he pressed even closer to her, his hands suddenly sliding up her sides. His breath reeked of synthetic mint—some cheap breath freshener that did nothing to mask the sour undertones. She forced herself to lean into his touch, remembering every anatomy lesson she had ever learned about the carotid arteries and blood flow to the brain.

“You’re so beautiful,” he mumbled against her neck. “Not like other humans.”

She tilted her head, giving him better access while positioning her arms. “You’re different, too,” she whispered, letting her fingers trail across his chest. The bond-warmth in her blood surged with possessive fury—Nirrn’s presence burning through

her veins. She pushed the feeling down, focusing on the task at hand.

The guard's hands grew bolder, pawing at her chest through her shirt. His inexperience showed in his clumsy groping. She bit back her revulsion and arched into his touch, using the movement to shift her weight.

“Such soft skin,” he groaned, nuzzling her throat.

Perfect position. She struck, her right arm wrapping around his neck in a precise hold. The guard stiffened, trying to pull back, but she locked her grip with her left hand, applying pressure to both sides of his neck.

“Wha—” he gasped, his hands scrabbling at her arm.

She maintained steady pressure, counting the seconds. The carotid arteries would compress first followed by the jugular veins. Within ten seconds, his struggles weakened. By fifteen, his knees buckled.

The bond-warmth pulsed through her—Nirrn’s strength flowing into her arms as she held the guard’s unconscious body, carefully lowering him to the ground. She checked his pulse—steady and strong. He’d wake up with a headache, but no permanent damage.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, retrieving his keys and weapon. “But I’m not staying here to be your toy or anyone else’s.”

The thrumming in her blood settled into a steady hum, as if Nirrn approved of her actions. She allowed herself a small smile, imagining his fierce golden eyes watching over her. Soon, she promised silently. Soon they would be together again.

She froze mid-step as alarms suddenly blared through the stronghold, their piercing wail echoing off the stone walls. Her fingers tightened around the stolen weapon, her heart thundering erratically against her ribs. The unconscious young guard lay

crumpled at her feet, his breathing steady and slow.

Shouts erupted from somewhere above, followed by the thunder of running feet and the distinct sound of weapons fire. But not from the corridor leading to her cell. The chaos seemed centered in the upper levels.

“What the hell?” she whispered, pressing herself against the cold stone wall.

The steady warmth flowing through her veins suddenly spiked. That connection she’d felt with Nirrn was more intense than ever before.

Explosions rocked the building, sending dust cascading from the ceiling. The guards’ voices grew more panicked, their words carrying down the ventilation shaft.

“...multiple breaches in sectors three and four!”

“They’re everywhere! How did they get past—”

Another explosion cut off the rest. The overhead lights flickered, casting wild shadows across the stone floor.

She held perfectly still, analyzing each new sound. The fighting seemed concentrated away from the cellblock. Whatever—or whoever—was attacking had the Jorvlens thoroughly distracted.

The warmth in her blood spiked again, even stronger this time. The sensation felt familiar, like Nirrn’s touch but charged with a wild and dangerous energy she’d never felt from him before.

More weapons fire erupted above, followed by screams that cut off abruptly. The overhead lights flickered again, threatening to plunge the corridor into darkness. Her

fingers tightened on her stolen weapon as she listened intently, barely breathing.

Something was happening in this stronghold. Something big enough to throw the usually disciplined Jorvlen forces into chaos. But what? And more importantly—should she make her move now while they were distracted, or wait to see how the situation developed?

Chapter 19

Nirrn

Nirrn moved silently across the damp stone as he led his team through the twisting alleyways of Jorvla's government district. The orange-gold scales along his broad shoulders gleamed in the dim predawn light as he pressed himself against a retaining wall, signaling the others to halt. His golden eyes narrowed at the looming Jorvlen stronghold ahead.

"Three entry points," he whispered to Kackjin, the scarred green-scaled Niri warrior beside him. "Sectors three, four, and six. Guards rotate every twenty minutes."

"You're sure about this intel?" The scarred human rogue, Tyrus, adjusted his weapon harness. "Because if you're wrong—"

"I'm not." Nirrn's voice carried an edge that hadn't existed before Islae's capture. "I've memorized every detail of that map. Every guard post. Every security measure."

A patrol of Jorvlen guards marched past their position. Nirrn's muscles coiled, ready to strike if needed, but they passed without incident. The memory of Islae being dragged away by the Jorvlens burned in his mind, feeding the rage he'd kept carefully controlled since the brutal fight in the underground fighting ring.

“Remember,” he said to the group, “we move fast, and we move smart. The medical supplies are our primary target.” The lie tasted bitter but necessary. These rogues wouldn’t risk their lives for one human woman, no matter how precious she was to him.

“Since when does a healer lead raids?” one of the human rogues muttered.

Nirrn’s strong tail whipped around, pinning the man against the wall. “Since now.” His golden eyes blazed. “Question me again, and you can find your medical supplies elsewhere.”

Kackjin chuckled low. “He’s not the same healer that first entered the pit. There’s warrior blood in him now.”

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“The guards are changing soon.” Nirrn released the human, focusing on the stronghold. “Sector three will be exposed in five minutes. We move then.” His hand brushed the concealed blade at his hip—a weapon he’d never needed before but now seemed as natural as any medical tool he’d ever used.

“And if we encounter resistance?” Tyrus asked.

Nirrn’s lips curved into a deadly smile. “Then they learn why Niri are feared across the galaxy.”

His allies shifted nervously behind him, but Nirrn barely noticed. His entire being focused on the stronghold, on the precious cargo it held. Islae was in there, waiting for him. He would tear down every wall and every Jorvlen that stood in his way trying to get to her.

Nirrn’s powerful tail soon propelled him through the shadows of sector three, his darkened orange scales blending with the rusty metal walls of the stronghold. Behind him, three human rogues and a fellow Niri moved in perfect sync, their footsteps barely whispering against the stone floor.

Through his earpiece, Kackjin’s voice crackled. “Sector four breach successful.”

“Six is clear,” Tyrus added from his position.

Nirrn’s eyes narrowed as he scanned the corridor ahead. The prison cells lay three levels below, where they kept Islae. His mate. The thought sent a surge of possessive rage through his blood. The healer in him had always sought to mend—but now his

instincts screamed for vengeance.

“Movement ahead,” one of the humans whispered.

Nirrn held up his hand, halting his team. In the distance, boots thundered against metal flooring. His sensitive hearing picked up the sound of weapons being primed.

An explosion rocked the building from sector six. The shock wave rippled through the walls followed by screams and the distinct sound of combat. Alarms began wailing throughout the complex. Red emergency lights bathed the corridors in crimson, casting eerie shadows across Nirrn’s scaled shoulders.

“Tyrrus’s group made contact,” another human muttered.

A second explosion erupted from sector four.

“They’re pushing back hard in four!” Kackjin’s voice strained through static. “These bastards were ready for—” His transmission cut off in a burst of weapons fire.

Nirrn’s tail coiled tighter, ready to strike at a moment’s notice. He could smell Jorvlen guards approaching from both directions. His team was about to be caught in a crossfire.

“Get ready,” he growled, unsheathing his blade. The weapon felt oddly right in his healer’s hands. “Remember, we hold this position as long as possible.”

Through the chaos of alarms and distant fighting, Nirrn’s enhanced hearing picked up a familiar voice echoing from below—Islae. His mate was alive, and she was moving.

His chest swelled with pride and worry. Of course she wouldn’t wait to be rescued. But now he needed to reach her before the Jorvlens did.

Another explosion rocked the building, closer this time. The acrid smell of smoke filled the air as his team pressed against the walls, waiting for the inevitable clash. Nirrn's muscles tensed, his newfound warrior's blood singing for battle.

He was no longer a weak and submissive healer. He was a Niri male fighting for his mate. And the Jorvlens were about to learn exactly what that meant.

The first Jorvlen guard didn't even see Nirrn coming. His mighty tail whipped around the corner, crushing the guard's windpipe before he could cry out. Nirrn's golden eyes narrowed as he scanned the corridor, his scaled shoulders tensing at the sound of approaching footsteps.

"Two more coming from the east," one of the human rogues whispered.

Nirrn's hand tightened on his blade. "Take the right. I'll handle the left."

The guards rounded the corner, their weapons raised. Nirrn's tail propelled him forward with lightning speed, his blade finding the weak spot in the first guard's armor. The human rogue dispatched the second with equal efficiency.

"Clear the path ahead," Nirrn ordered, his deep voice carrying an edge of steel. "I'm going for the prison cells."

"You're supposed to lead us to the medical supplies," another rogue protested.

Nirrn's long tail coiled around the man's throat, not squeezing but threatening. "The supplies are yours. But my mate comes first for me."

"Your mate?" The rogue's eyes widened. "The human healer with a bounty?"

"Any objections?" Nirrn's scales bristled, a low growl rumbling in his chest.

The rogue swallowed hard. “No, sir.”

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Nirrn released him, already moving toward the stairwell. His heightened senses picked up Islae's scent, growing stronger as he descended. The healer in him recognized the metallic tang of blood in the air, and his warrior's blood roared at the thought of her hurt.

Two more guards appeared at the bottom of the stairs. Nirrn didn't hesitate. His tail swept their legs out from under them while his blade found its mark. Their bodies hadn't even hit the floor before he was moving again.

"Nirrn!" Kackjin's voice crackled through his earpiece. "We've got heavy resistance in sector four. They're pushing us back!"

"Hold them as long as you can." Nirrn's blade sliced through another guard's armor. "I'm almost there." The lie didn't even faze him. He had one sole objective—get to Islae.

The prison level stretched before him, lined with dozens of cells. Islae's scent was fresh. She had been here recently. He noticed a young Jorvlen guard lying unconscious in a holding cell with the door open a few feet away. That must've been Islae's handiwork. Pride flooded his chest but was quickly replaced by concern. A grunt of pain echoed from around the corner.

Nirrn's tail propelled him forward, his warrior's instincts singing with the need to fiercely protect what was his. His mate was close. And nothing would stand between them ever again.

Nirrn's nostrils flared at the acrid stench of fear emanating from the six Jorvlen

guards suddenly rushing toward him. His massive tail coiled tightly, the orange scales rippling with deadly intent. These weren't the tentative movements of a healer anymore. This was pure predator.

"Take him down!" The lead guard raised his weapon.

Nirrn's lips pulled back in a savage grin, exposing his sharp teeth. "You should have brought more men with you."

His tail whipped forward with devastating force, catching the first two guards across their chests. Bones cracked as they slammed into the stone wall. The sound ignited something deeply primal in him—the thrill of the hunt, of protecting what was his.

A blade sliced toward his abdomen. Nirrn grabbed the guard's wrist, crushing it in his grip. The guard screamed as Nirrn yanked him close, his eyes blazing. "Where is she?"

"Go to hell, snake!"

Nirrn's tail constricted around the guard's throat. "Wrong answer." With a brutal twist, he threw the guard into his companions.

Two more rushed him from opposite sides. Nirrn's upper body twisted with serpentine grace, his scaled shoulders gleaming in the red emergency lights as he caught both attacks. His healer's knowledge coupled with his warrior's instincts proved lethal.

Blood sprayed across his orange scales as his blade found the weak point in one guard's armor. The metallic scent filled his nose, feeding the savage need coursing through his veins. This wasn't about healing or helping anymore. This was about claiming what belonged to him.

The last guard backed away, terror evident in his eyes. "You're supposed to be just a

healer!”

“I am whatever my mate needs me to be.” Nirrn’s tail lashed out, wrapping around the guard’s legs and yanking him off his feet. He loomed over his prey, his muscles rippling beneath his scaled chest. “And right now, she needs a warrior.”

The guard reached for a fallen weapon. Nirrn’s tail crushed his arm, drawing a scream that echoed through the prison corridor. He leaned down, his voice lowering to a deadly whisper. “Tell your commander when you wake up—anyone who dares touch my mate dies screaming.”

With clinical precision, Nirrn struck a pressure point, rendering the guard unconscious. He surveyed the carnage around him, his chest heaving. Blood dripped from his blade onto the stone floor. The healer in him should have felt horror at such violence.

Instead, he felt only primal satisfaction.

Chapter 20

Islae

The flickering light overhead cast eerie shadows across the cool stone walls as Islae pressed herself against the corridor’s edge of the underground prison. The stolen weapon, a standard-issue neural disruptor, felt foreign in her hand compared to the familiar weight of her medical instruments. Another explosion rocked the facility, sending more dust and debris cascading from the ceiling.

“This is my only chance,” she whispered to herself, her heart pounding against her ribs. The chaos above provided the perfect cover for her escape. Whatever was happening up there had drawn most of the Jorvlen guards away from the prison level.

She crept forward stealthily, her worn shoes silent against the cracked stone floor. The first corridor stretched empty ahead of her, the emergency lights pulsing an angry red around her. She had memorized the guard rotations during her captivity here—a habit born from years of avoiding Jorvlen patrols in the slums.

A distant scream echoed through the ventilation system, followed by the distinctive whine of plasma weapons. Islae quickened her pace, keeping low to the shadows. The main corridor hub should be two turns ahead. If she could reach it...

“Stop right there!”

The harsh command made her freeze mid-step. Two Jorvlen guards emerged from a cross-corridor, their plasma weapons trained on her chest. The larger one’s filaments twitched in amusement.

“Look what we found here. The little human healer, trying to escape.”

Islae’s fingers tightened on her weapon behind her back, but she didn’t reveal it. Not yet. The Jorvlen guards were too far apart. She couldn’t take both out before one of them shot her. Her analytical mind started kicking in, assessing their positions, and looking for weaknesses on their bodies.

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“Back to your cell,” the second guard ordered, taking a step forward. “Now.”

“I heard the alarms,” Islae said, keeping her voice steady despite the adrenaline pumping through her veins. “Something’s wrong up there. Shouldn’t you be helping?”

The guards exchanged concerned glances. Above them, another explosion shook the ceiling. Perfect—they were distracted and uncertain. Just like she had hoped for. She would use this to her advantage.

“Shut up and move back to your cell,” the larger guard snapped back, but Islae caught the nervous twitch of his jaw. Whatever was happening upstairs had them spooked.

She took a careful step backward. Her eyes darted around the corridor as her mind raced through options of how to get away from the guards. The corridor behind the Jorvlen guards led to the maintenance shaft. If she could just buy herself a few more seconds and get around them.

She shifted her weight, analyzing the guards like she would a patient’s injury. The larger Jorvlen’s stance favored his right side—an old wound, perhaps. The smaller one kept glancing upward at the sounds of combat, his grip on his weapon loose.

“I said get back to your cell!” The larger guard took another step forward.

Islae lifted her hands slowly, the stolen neural disruptor concealed against her forearm. “The facility’s under attack. Do you really want to waste time with one escaped prisoner?”

More explosions rocked the prison corridor. Perfect timing. She lunged forward, ducking under the larger guard's grab and firing the neural disruptor directly into his knee. He crashed down with a roar of pain.

The second guard's plasma bolt seared past her ear as she rolled on the ground, the heat making her skin prickle. Her healer's mind kicked in again. She could almost see the nerve clusters beneath their thick slimy skin, the vulnerable pressure points.

"You little—" The standing second guard's curse cut off as Islae slammed her elbow into his throat, right where she knew the cartilage was weakest. But before she could follow through, the fallen larger guard's massive hand wrapped around her ankle.

Pain exploded through her leg as he yanked with brute force. She hit the ground hard, the impact driving the air from her lungs as she landed on her back. The neural disruptor fell out of her hand and skittered away from her across the cold stone floor.

"Not so clever now," the larger guard growled, dragging her closer to him. His partner had recovered, rubbing his throat.

Islae kicked out with her free leg, catching the standing guard in the knee. But exhaustion slowed her movements. Her captivity with no food and the brutal beatings she sustained had taken their toll on her body. The larger guard pinned her down, his massive weight practically crushing her.

"You should have stayed in your cell," he sneered, pressing down harder on top of her. "Now we'll have to teach you a lesson."

Black spots danced at the edges of her vision. She couldn't breathe. Couldn't focus. But she refused to give up, refused to let them win. Her fingers scrambled on the cold stone floor, searching for anything she could use as a weapon.

The smaller guard aimed his plasma pistol at her head. “Make one more move and—”

Another explosion cut him off, much closer this time. Debris rained down on them from the ceiling. Islae twisted desperately, fighting against the crushing weight pinning her down, but her strength was fading fast.

Pain suddenly exploded through her body as the larger Jorvlen’s fist connected with her ribs. The metallic taste of blood filled her mouth. Through blurred vision, she watched the smaller guard circle them laughing. Then suddenly, he struck her face with his weapon. Her head snapped to the side, white stars bursting behind her eyes.

“Not so defiant now. Are you?” The larger guard’s hot breath washed over her face, making her stomach turn. His slimy hands pawed at her body. “Let’s see how that pretty mouth of yours tastes.”

“Get off me!” She thrashed beneath him, but her exhaustion and injury had robbed her of strength. Her healer’s mind screamed at her about the damage being done to her body—a cracked rib, another possible concussion, and possible internal bleeding. She couldn’t afford to sustain much more.

The smaller guard pressed his boot into her shoulder, pinning her down further. “Hold still and maybe we’ll be gentle.”

Tears of rage and fear burned in her eyes as the larger guard’s rough hands grabbed at the waistband of her pants. She had survived so much, fought so hard through the years, only to end up here being taken advantage of in the worst way possible. The thought of these monsters violating her body made bile rise in her throat.

“Such soft skin,” the larger guard purred into her ear, his bulbous eyes gleaming with sick pleasure. “I bet you’ll feel so—”

A deep, primal roar shattered the air, echoing off the stone walls with such fury that even the Jorvlen guards froze. The sound wasn't human or Jorvlen. It was something ancient and dangerous, promising violence and death.

Islae's heart leaped. Through the haze of pain and fear, a single thought crystallized: Nirrn had come for her.

The larger guard's grip loosened slightly as he turned toward the sound. "What the—"

Another loud roar, even closer now. The smaller guard raised his weapon, his hands shaking. "Show yourself!"

Islae smiled through her bloodied lips. These idiots had no idea what was coming for them. She had seen the change in Nirrn's eyes before they took her away in Haven—seen the warrior emerging from beneath the healer's calm exterior. And now they were about to learn exactly what happened when you threatened someone a Niri had vowed to protect with his life.

Through her pain-blurred vision, she watched as Nirrn's massive form filled the prison corridor. Blood dripped from his scaled arms, staining the orange and gold patterns dark crimson. His muscular chest heaved with barely contained rage, and his usual gentle golden eyes blazed with a predatory gleam she'd never witnessed before.

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The larger Jorvlen's grip on her loosened further as he turned to face the newcomer. "The Niri healer? What are you doing down here?"

Nirrn's long and powerful tail coiled against the rough stone floor, his upper body rising to his full towering height. The red emergency lights caught the flex of his blood-spattered muscles as he moved forward with lethal grace.

"Take your hands off her." His voice emerged as a guttural growl that sent shivers through Islae's body. This wasn't the soft-spoken healer she knew. This was something ancient and deadly awakening.

The smaller guard aimed his weapon at Nirrn. "Back off! This prisoner is property of—"

"She belongs to no one." Nirrn's tail lashed violently against the cracked floor, the impact echoing like thunder. His hand, usually so gentle in its healing work, curled tightly around a warrior's sword with deadly intent.

Islae felt the larger Jorvlen's weight shift as uncertainty crept into his voice. "You're just a healer. We've heard about you—the soft-hearted Niri who works in the central surrogacy clinic."

A dark laugh rumbled from Nirrn's chest. "You're right. I am a healer." His golden eyes locked with Islae's, and she saw something possessive and primal in their depths. "Which means I know exactly where to strike you to cause the most intense and horrible pain before I kill you."

The smaller guard fired his weapon, but Nirrn moved with impossible speed. His tail whipped gracefully through the air, knocking the guard's legs out from under him. The plasma bolt scorched the ceiling as the guard crashed to the ground.

“Last warning,” Nirrn snarled, his scaled shoulders rippling with barely contained violence. “Release her, or I will show you what happens when you threaten the one I’ve vowed to protect with my life.”

Islae’s heart thundered wildly in her chest. She had never seen anything more terrifying—or more beautiful—than Nirrn at that moment, poised to unleash devastation on those who had hurt her. The healer was all but gone, replaced by something far more dangerous—a Niri male protecting what was his.

Chapter 21

Nirrn

The world blurred red at the edges of Nirrn’s vision. Islae lay pinned beneath the large Jorvlen guard, her clothes torn, blood trickling from her split lip. The sight ignited something deep and primal inside of him—a force that shattered his healer’s restraint completely.

“You dare touch her?” His voice emerged as a guttural snarl. The larger guard stood up, startled by the deadly promise in those words.

“Back off, healer. This bitch needs to learn her place.”

Nirrn coiled his massive tail, his muscles rippling beneath the orange and gold scales. “I’ll show you your place.” He struck with devastating speed, wrapping around the guard’s throat and yanking him off the ground.

“The cervical vertebrae.” Nirrn squeezed the guard’s throat tighter, his clinical knowledge merging with savage intent. “They’re so delicate. Shall I demonstrate exactly how much pressure it takes to paralyze you?”

The second guard picked up his weapon and fired it wildly. Nirrn twisted, using the larger guard as a shield. The plasma bolt seared through his captive’s chest. The acrid stench of burned flesh filled the air.

“You should have studied anatomy.” Nirrn dropped the lifeless body. “Now you’ll learn the hard way.”

He lashed his long tail out, sweeping the second guard’s legs again. As the Jorvlen crashed down, Nirrn’s hand closed around his throat. Knowledge of pressure points and nerve clusters became a roadmap for inflicting agony.

“The brachial plexus.” He dug his fingers in, eliciting a scream. “Fascinating how much pain can radiate from such a small cluster of nerves.”

“Please...” the guard choked out.

“Did you stop when she begged?” Nirrn’s golden eyes blazed with deadly fury. “When your partner tore her clothes? When you both held her down and threatened to do vile things to her?”

Each question was punctuated by precise, devastating strikes. Bones snapped. Tendons tore. The guard’s screams echoed off the stone walls until a final, savage twist silenced him forever.

Nirrn turned to Islae, his chest heaving. Blood dripped from his scaled arms, but his touch was achingly gentle as he reached for her. “No one will ever harm you again. You are mine to protect now and forever.”

Nirrn gathered Islae into his arms, cradling her against his chest with utmost care. Her shallow breathing and the way she curled into him, protecting her left side, confirmed his diagnosis—cracked ribs, likely internal bleeding. The metallic scent of her blood made his scales darken to a burnt orange hue.

“Stay with me,” he murmured, one hand cupping her head where a nasty gash still oozed. “I need to check your pupils.”

“M’fine,” Islae slurred, but her unfocused gaze told a different story. Definite concussion.

His mighty tail propelled them swiftly through the dim corridor of the prison level. The stone walls amplified every sound—heavy boots hitting metal grates above, distant shouts, and the hum of plasma weapons. A small group of Nirrn’s human rogue and Niri warrior allies emerged from the shadows, unexpectedly but pleasantly falling into protective formation around them.

“Main access is compromised now,” Mikal, one of the human rogues, reported in hushed tones. “They’ve doubled the guards at the exits.”

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Nirrn's muscles tightened. "Then we make our own exit." He adjusted his grip on Islae's injured body, keeping her head steady against his shoulder. "Cover our six. Anyone who threatens her dies."

The small band moved as one unit through the stronghold's maze-like passages. Nirrn's tail left crimson smears on the smooth floor—both his blood and that of the guards he had killed. He felt no remorse. They harmed his mate.

"Stay awake, Islae," he ordered when her eyes started to flutter shut. "Tell me about the medical supplies you need to restock your clinic."

"Need everything," she mumbled against his scales. "They burned it all, remember?" She tried to smile up at him, but her eyes started rolling back into her head.

"I'll build you a new one. Better. Safer." His voice dropped lower, meant only for her. "No one will ever take you from me again."

They reached the second level side access point. Alarms blared overhead, bathing everything in pulsing red light. Nirrn's allies immediately took defensive positions.

"Multiple hostiles approaching from the east corridor," one of the Niri warriors warned. Nirrn's eyes narrowed as he peered down the corridor at the looming threat. His tail curled protectively around Islae's unconscious body as he pressed them against the wall, shielding her with his larger frame. "Well then, let's give them something to remember us by."

Smoke soon filled the corridor as Nirrn's allies engaged the Jorvlen guards. His powerful tail pushed him forward with Islae tucked securely in his arms. Her shallow breathing drove him to move faster and more aggressively. Two guards blocked their path. Nirrn didn't hesitate.

"Clear me a path," he commanded, his voice resonating with authority. His allies responded instantly, plasma bolts lighting up the smoky corridor.

The acrid smell of burning metal and flesh filled his nostrils as they fought their way up through the next level. His scales rippled with tension, darkening to a deep red orange. The stronghold groaned around them, the support beams cracking from the heat of the earlier explosions.

"The building is coming down!" Mikal shouted, firing another round at the pursuing guards. "We need to move!"

Nirrn's tail whipped out, sending a Jorvlen guard flying into a wall. "Through here!" He led them up a maintenance shaft, the heat intensifying as they climbed. Islae stirred weakly in his arms, her face pressed against his scaled chest.

They soon burst onto the main level into utter chaos. Flames licked up the walls, and black smoke billowed across the ceiling. Nirrn's medical knowledge screamed about smoke inhalation, about Islae's already compromised breathing.

"Cover our exit!" His tail swept debris aside as they made for the nearest window. Glass shattered, and fresh evening air rushed in. Without hesitation, Nirrn launched them through the opening, his tail absorbing the impact of their landing.

They emerged into the purple dusk, the stronghold burning behind them. Nirrn immediately moved them away from the thick smoke, finding shelter behind a low wall. His hands, steady despite the adrenaline, began checking Islae's vital signs.

“Get me those medical supplies,” he ordered, his eyes never leaving Islae’s face. One of the human rogues produced a stolen medkit. Nirrn’s fingers moved with practiced precision, cleaning wounds, and applying pressure bandages.

“Stay with me, my mate,” he murmured, injecting her with a pain suppressant. His scales rippled with protective fury as he worked quickly and diligently. The stronghold’s destruction painted the sky orange behind them, but Nirrn focused solely on healing the woman in his arms. His woman. His mate.

Nirrn curled his tail protectively around Islae as he applied another healing patch to the gash on her temple. Her breathing had steadied, but the bruises blooming across her skin made his scales bristle with rage.

“The safe house isn’t far,” Mikal said, crouching beside them. “We’ve got lookouts posted. No Jorvlen patrols in sight.”

Nirrn’s eyes narrowed at him. “Lead the way.” His tail propelled him forward, cradling Islae against his chest. Her small form felt fragile in his arms, igniting every protective instinct he possessed.

“You fought well back there,” Mikal commented as they wound through narrow alleys. “Never seen a healer move like that.”

“I am more than just a healer now.” Nirrn’s voice rumbled deep in his chest. “Anyone who threatens her will learn that lesson quickly.”

The safe house turned out to be an abandoned warehouse, cleverly disguised beneath layers of decay. Inside, the space had been converted into a makeshift medical bay and living quarters. The stolen supplies from the stronghold were already being sorted by efficient hands.

“Set her here,” a human healer gestured to a clean cot, but Nirrn shook his head.

“No one touches her but me.” He moved to a private corner, laying Islae down with care. “Bring me fresh bandages and antiseptic.”

The humans exchanged glances but complied. Nirrn’s hands moved with practiced skill over Islae’s injuries, his touch gentle despite the deadly strength he’d displayed earlier. The mate bond sang with satisfaction as her vital signs continued to improve under his care over the next several hours.

“The Jorvlens will definitely think twice about hunting you down after that attack,” Mikal said, approaching with extra medical supplies. “But you’ve earned our protection here on Jorvla should you ever need it. The supplies you helped us acquire will save many lives here. The extras will provide our operation with much-needed profits on the black market as well.”

“Let the Jorvlens dare come find me.” Nirrn’s tail twitched, remembering the satisfying crunch of bones beneath his coils. “They won’t live long if they do.”

Nirrn coiled protectively around the small cot where Islae lay recovering in a private room in the safe house. The dim light cast shadows across her bruised face, but her color had improved significantly in the past few hours. His hands moved with practiced precision as he changed her bandages, his eyes constantly monitoring her vital signs.

A soft moan escaped her lips, and Nirrn’s scales rippled with anticipation. Her eyelids fluttered open, those deep brown eyes finding his immediately. Despite her injuries, she managed a weak smile that made his heart clench.

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“I knew you’d come for me,” she whispered, her voice hoarse but steady. “I felt you. In my blood. In my mind.”

Nirrn’s hands stilled on her bandages. His tail tightened reflexively around the cot.

“When I was in that cell,” Islae continued, reaching up to touch his forearm, “I swore I could hear your voice inside my head. Telling me to hold on. To fight.”

A deep primal instinct stirred in Nirrn’s chest. A human shouldn’t be able to sense the mate bond without being made aware of it. And his mate, human or Niri, definitely shouldn’t be able to hear his mental calls. Yet she had. His scales darkened as the implications washed over him. A true mate bond—pure and rare even among his own kind.

“Rest now,” he rumbled, his large hand engulfing hers. “You’re safe.”

“You’re different somehow,” she observed, studying his face. “Stronger. Deadlier.”

“I became what you needed me to be.”

Her fingers traced the scales along his shoulder, and Nirrn had to suppress a shudder. Later, he would explain everything—the mate bond, what it meant, and why she could sense him. But for now, he simply watched over her, his tail wrapped securely around them both as she drifted back to sleep.

The bond hummed between them, stronger than he’d ever dared to hope possible.

Chapter 22

Islae

The broth's warmth seeped through the clay bowl into Islae's palms. She watched as Nirrn coiled attentively beside her, his orange scales shining in the soft lamplight. Four days of his constant attention had changed something fundamental between them. The strange heat in her blood that began in that prison cell now thrummed steadily, a connection she couldn't explain but didn't want to fight anymore.

"You're staring again," Nirrn said, meeting her gaze.

"I'm not used to being the patient." Islae touched the healing gash on her temple. His skilled hands had stitched it with such gentleness, despite those same hands having torn through Jorvlen guards to reach her. "Usually, I'm the one hovering and fussing."

"I do not hover." His tail twitched, betraying his words. He hadn't left her side for more than minutes at a time since their escape from the stronghold.

"Right." She hid her smile behind another spoonful of broth. "And I suppose you didn't threaten that scout yesterday for speaking too loudly near my room?"

"He was being disruptive to your recovery." Nirrn's broad shoulders tensed. "Your concussion required rest."

"Required rest, not complete silence in a three-room radius." But warmth bloomed in her chest at his protectiveness. She had spent so long taking care of others and fighting alone for what was right. Having someone care for her with such fierce dedication felt foreign but addictive.

Nirrn moved closer, his bare torso rippling with muscle as he reached for her empty bowl. His fingers brushed hers, sending that familiar spark through her body. "How does your rib feel?"

"Completely better." She pressed a hand to her side, assessing the area. "The binding really helped. Though I still say you didn't need to carry me to the washroom yesterday."

"You seemed unsteady." His voice dropped lower, more possessive. "I will not risk you falling."

"I've handled much worse on my own before."

"Well, you are not alone anymore." His hand gently cupped her cheek, his thumb tracing her jaw. "Accept it."

The heat in her blood surged at his touch. She leaned into his palm, finally letting herself acknowledge the truth. "I know. I just... I've never had anyone take care of me like this before."

"Then it's time you learned how to be taken care of." His tail curled around her cot protectively as he leaned in, his presence both commanding and gentle. "Because I am not going anywhere, ever, Islae." His voice was low and firm, the kind of certainty that made her chest tighten.

For a moment, she just stared at him, tracing the hard lines of his face, the orange scales that shimmered faintly along his shoulders and upper arms. His presence was overwhelming, a mix of power and gentleness that she still couldn't reconcile.

Without thinking, she leaned forward, closing the gap between them, and kissed him.

It started soft and tentative, her lips brushing against his in a quiet acknowledgment of all he'd done for her. But the moment their mouths met fully, something primal surged between them. Nirrn's hand slid to the back of her neck, his fingers tangling in her hair as he deepened the kiss. His tail, coiled around her cot, tightened its grip, pulling her closer until she was practically in his lap.

Islae's hands roamed over his chest, her fingers skimming the smooth, warm skin of his abdomen before moving up to the rough texture of his scales. She could feel the wild thrum of his heartbeat beneath her palms, a rhythm that matched the frantic pace of her own. Her mind raced, but not with fear or doubt—this time, it was pure, unrelenting need.

“Nirrn,” she breathed against his mouth, her voice barely a whisper.

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He pulled back just enough to meet her gaze, his golden eyes dark with hunger. “Islae.” Her name on his lips sounded like a vow and a promise.

She didn’t hesitate this time. Her hands slid up his shoulders, feeling the strength in his muscles as she pulled herself closer. Their lips met again, this time with a desperation that left her dizzy. His tail shifted, sliding up her leg in a slow, deliberate motion that made her shiver. His hands explored her body with a possessive urgency, as if he needed to memorize every curve and every inch of her.

“You’re mine,” he growled against her lips, his voice rough with raw emotion. “Mine to protect. Mine to care for.”

The words sent a thrill through her, a heat that pooled low in her stomach. She’d spent so long pushing everyone away that his claim felt both foreign and aching right.

“I’m yours,” she whispered back, her fingers trailing down his chest again. She didn’t think, didn’t second-guess. She just let herself feel.

His lips left hers, trailing down her neck in a series of kisses that made her gasp. His tongue soon circled against her skin, sending jolts of pleasure through her body. His hands were everywhere, touching and claiming, igniting a fire she couldn’t control.

“Nirrn,” she moaned, arching into him.

“Tell me what you need,” he murmured, his breath hot against her ear.

“You.” The word came out as a plea, one she didn’t try to hold back. “Just you.”

His response was immediate. His tail shifted, lifting her effortlessly until she was straddling him, her legs resting on the smooth, powerful coils beneath her. His hands grabbed her hips as his mouth found hers again.

The kiss was relentless, all-consuming, a silent communication of everything they couldn't put into words. Her fingers tangled in his dark hair, pulling him closer as the heat between them reached a boiling point.

His tail shifted again beneath her. The smooth, powerful coils flexed as he gently rolled them over. Islae's breath caught as her back pressed into the cot, Nirrn looming over her, his golden eyes burning with intensity. His hands braced on either side of her head, his broad shoulders blocking out the dim light of their small room. She could feel the heat radiating off his body.

"I'll be gentle," he murmured, his voice low and gravelly, his gaze flicking to her ribs.

She nodded, her heart pounding as his hands moved to the hem of her shirt. His touch was deliberate, reverent even, as he slowly peeled the fabric away, revealing her bare skin. His eyes darkened as he took her in, his tail curling tighter around the cot, as if to anchor himself. She shivered under his gaze, her nipples hardening as the cool air brushed against them.

"Nirrn," she whispered, her voice trembling with anticipation.

He didn't respond with words. Instead, he lowered his head, his warm breath ghosting over her skin before his lips closed around one nipple. She gasped, her back arching off the cot as he licked and suckled, his tongue flicking over the sensitive bud. His hand trailed down her abdomen. His fingers soon slipped under her pants and between her thighs, exploring her folds.

“You’re so wet,” he growled against her skin, his voice thick with need.

She moaned, her hand grabbing his hair as his touch sent sparks shooting through her. His fingers moved with precision, stroking and teasing until she was writhing beneath him. Every nerve in her body was alight, every touch igniting a fire she couldn’t resist.

When he finally pulled away, she whimpered at the loss of his touch. But before she could protest, his hands moved to the waistband of her pants, sliding them down her legs and tossing them aside. He leaned back, his eyes raking over her naked form, his expression a mix of desire and possessiveness.

“Simply beautiful,” he murmured, the words a low rumble in his chest.

Her cheeks flushed slightly, but she didn’t look away. She watched as he reached for the garment covering his dual members, his hands steady despite the hunger in his eyes. When he freed himself, she couldn’t help but stare. Her breath hitched at the sight of his members, thick and throbbing, ready for her.

“Relax,” he said, his voice a soothing balm as he positioned himself between her thighs. His hands grabbed her hips, his touch firm but gentle, as he guided himself to her entrance. “I’ll go slow.”

She nodded, her heart pounding as he pressed forward, the tip of his primary member barely breaching her. She gasped, her fingers digging into his shoulders as he stretched her, filling her inch by excruciating inch. He moved with deliberate slowness, his eyes locked on hers, watching for any sign of discomfort.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice strained.

“Yes,” she breathed, her hips lifting to meet him. “More.”

He didn't need to be told twice. He pushed himself deeper, his movement steady but unrelenting, his tail coiling tighter around her as he buried himself inside her. Islae moaned, her legs wrapping around him as he filled her completely, the sensation overwhelming and perfect.

"Mine," he growled, his voice rough with need as he started to move, his thrusts slow and deep.

"Yes," she gasped, her nails raking down his back as pleasure coiled in her belly. "All yours."

Her words seemed to ignite something primal in him. His pace quickened, his thrusts growing harder and deeper, his tail tightening around her as he drove into her with a desperate urgency. She cried out, her back arching as he hit a spot inside her that made stars burst behind her eyelids.

"Again," he demanded, his voice a low growl. "Say it."

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“I’m all yours,” she gasped, her voice breaking as pleasure consumed her.

He growled, his lower half snapping against her as he pushed her closer to the edge. She could feel the tension building, coiling tighter and tighter until it finally snapped. Her orgasm crashed over her like a tidal wave, her inner walls clenching around him as she cried out, “You are mine.”

He soon followed her over the edge with a guttural roar, his release spilling deep inside her as he collapsed against her chest, his tail coiling possessively around her. They lay there, breathless and tangled, their bodies still connected as the aftershocks of pleasure rippled through them.

“I’m yours,” he murmured against her skin, his voice soft.

She couldn’t argue, not anymore. He was hers, and she was his.

Chapter 23

Nirrn

Nirrn coiled protectively around Islae as morning light filtered through the safe house’s narrow windows. His eyes traced the curves of her face, memorizing every detail—the slight part of her lips, the way her dark lashes fanned against her cheeks, the gentle rise and fall of her chest. The bruises from her captivity had faded to yellowed shadows, testament to her body’s remarkable healing capacity.

His fingers ghosted over her bare shoulder, careful not to wake her. Five days of

constant vigilance, of tending her wounds, of watching her slowly regain her strength. Five days of falling deeper into this fierce need to keep her safe, and to shield her from harm. His orange scales reflected the sunlight as he shifted, throwing prismatic patterns across her soft skin.

“Mine,” he whispered, the word barely a breath. The mate bond hummed contentedly between them, stronger now than ever. He still couldn’t believe he found his true mate, and one as remarkable as Islae. Her determination and her passion for healing and protecting others despite the risks—she matched him in every way.

A cool breeze drifted through the room, carrying the scent of looming danger. They couldn’t stay here much longer. The Jorvlens might still be searching for them, and this safe house, while secure for now, wouldn’t remain so forever. His tail tightened fractionally around her sleeping form. There was only one solution—Nirum. His home planet would offer them protection, resources, and a chance to build a life together away from the corruption of Jorvla.

Islae shifted in her sleep, pressing closer to his chest. His scales rasped softly against her skin as he adjusted his hold, supporting her more fully against him. She was strong, his mate, capable of defending herself. But that didn’t diminish his need to protect her and to ensure she never faced such dangers alone again.

“You’ve changed me for the better,” he murmured, watching the sunlight play across her features. “Made me more than just a healer.” His fingers traced the line of her jaw. “Made me into someone worthy of you.”

The warrior that had awakened within him during her rescue still simmered beneath his skin, ready to emerge if needed. He would tear apart anyone who threatened her, heal any wound she suffered, and stand between her and any danger. Not because she needed him to, but because protecting and loving her had become as natural to him as breathing.

Nirrn coiled tighter around Islae's sleeping form. The past ten days had changed everything—his purpose, his very nature. The healer in him had merged with something more primal and more possessive. He continued to watch her while she slept, noting every subtle movement of her chest as she breathed, counting each precious inhale and exhale.

The mate bond sang louder as he lay there tightening his strong arms around her. She didn't fully know about the bond yet, not until he explained what it really meant, what they truly were to each other. The thought of telling her made his scales ripple with anxiety. What if she rejected him? Humans didn't usually have such instant and powerful connections. Would she understand the depth, the permanence of what it meant to be his true mate?

His hand drifted to her hair, his fingers gently stroking the soft strands. Islae stirred, her eyelashes fluttering open. She peered up at him with an expression that made his heart stutter—open, vulnerable... loving? His heart started beating wildly in his chest.

"You're watching me sleep again," she murmured, reaching up to trace his jaw.

"Always," he rumbled, catching her hand and pressing it against his chest where his heart thundered.

Nirrn's tail coiled tighter around Islae's waist as the words tumbled from his lips before he could stop them. "Islae, you are my mate." His eyes met hers, searching for any sign of rejection or fear.

"What do you mean?" Her fingers stroked the orange scales on his chest, sending shivers down his spine.

"The first day I met you, when you touched my shoulder in your clinic, I felt it—the mate bond. It's sacred among my kind, a connection that binds two souls

together.”His voice deepened with emotion.“Our minds and our hearts become one.The mental connection we share is rare, a precious gift.”

“The warmth in my blood,” Islae whispered.“When we were apart, it made me feel things... made me feel you.”She paused, her brown eyes widening with recognition.“And in that cell...I knew I heard your voice in my mind.”

Nirrn’s scales rippled with joy as he cupped her face between his hands.“That was the mate bond you felt.The bond cannot be denied or forced.It simply is—two halves of one whole, finding each other across the stars.”

Instead of pulling away, Islae pressed her forehead to his.Her breath mingled with his as she spoke.“I thought I was going mad, feeling and hearing you there.But this... this makes sense.”She inhaled deeply, breathing in his scent.“It’s why I trust you when I’ve never trusted anyone.Why I feel complete when you’re near.”

Relief and happiness surged through him.His tail wrapped more securely around her, drawing her closer until there wasn’t a breath of space between them.“You accept this?Accept me?”

“Yes,” she whispered against his lips.“I accept being your mate.”

The warrior in him roared with triumph.His mate.His to protect, to cherish, and to love.The words he had held back for so long finally broke free.“I love you, Islae.”

She smiled, pressing a soft kiss to his jaw.“I love you, too, Nirrn.”

His large hand cupped the back of her delicate head, his fingers threading through her hair as he claimed her mouth with his.The kiss started gentle, a whisper of devotion, but quickly deepened into something more primal.His mate, finally his.The thought sent a surge of possessive pride through him.The warrior that had awakened within

him growled in satisfaction as she melted against his chest.

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“Mine,” he rumbled against her lips, his scaled chest rising and falling rapidly. The mate bond hummed, electric and alive. His hand traced down her spine, memorizing every curve and every dip of her body.

Her fingers skimmed across his shoulders, exploring the transition between smooth scales and bare skin. “Yours,” she breathed, the word sending a shiver through his powerful form.

His tail tightened as he deepened the kiss further, pouring all his love and protection into the connection. The healer in him wanted to be gentle, but the warrior demanded more. He groaned as she pressed closer, fitting perfectly against him as if she had been made for him alone.

“I will protect you,” he promised against her lips. “No one will ever harm you again.” His scaled arms flexed around her, emphasizing his words.

She pulled back slightly to meet his intense gaze. “I know.” Her hand came up to cup his jaw. “My warrior healer.”

The trust in her eyes nearly undid him. Nirrn captured her lips again, this time with fierce possession. Their bond sang between them, a symphony of belonging and hope. This was exactly what he had waited and hoped for all these years—not just any mate, but this remarkable woman who matched his strength and challenged his heart.

His tail shifted, drawing her impossibly closer as he poured every ounce of his love into their kiss. They had a future now—together. And he would destroy anyone who tried to take that from them.

Nirrn broke their kiss reluctantly, his eyes studying Islae's flushed face.

"We need to leave Jorvla," he said, his voice filled with emotion. "Come with me to Nirum. I can protect you there and give you everything you deserve." His orange scales rippled with intensity as he pulled her closer against his bare chest. "No more hiding, no more running. Just us, building a life together."

Islae tensed slightly in his arms. "But what about the humans here? They need help..."

"Others can continue your work," Nirrn rumbled, his protective instincts flaring. His tail tightened around her as memories of her capture flashed through his mind. "I won't risk losing you twice. On Nirum, you'll be safe. Respected. We have the finest medical facilities where you can heal without fear."

He watched her emotions play across her face—uncertainty, longing, and hope. His hand cupped her pale cheek, his thumb stroking her soft skin. "You are my mate. Let me give you the life you deserve."

The warrior within him demanded she accept, needing her safe and protected on his home planet. Instead, he forced himself to wait and let her choose.

Her fingers traced the orange scales across his chest, sending shivers through him. "Will I be accepted there? A human mate?"

"You will be honored as my chosen one," he growled possessively, pulling her flush against him. "Any who dare question that will have to answer to me."

She studied his face for a long moment before a smile curved her lips. "Yes," she finally whispered. "I'll go with you to Nirum."

Relief and joy flooded his chest. Nirrn pulled her flush to his chest, his scaled arms

encasing her completely as he claimed her mouth in another fierce kiss. She was completely his, and soon she would be safe on his planet, where he could protect her properly.

Chapter 24

Islae

Sunlight filtered through the safe house's small window as Islae pulled her worn tunic over her head. Behind her, Nirrn's powerful tail made a soft whisper against the worn floor as he rose up from the cot.

"You're thinking too hard," he said, his rich, deep voice filling their tiny room. She turned around and his eyes locked intently onto hers with that burning intensity that made her heart flutter.

"My father spent his whole life helping people here on Jorvla." Her fingers trembled slightly as she adjusted her clothes. "Leaving feels like abandoning everything he worked so hard for."

Nirrn's muscled torso flexed as he reached for her, pulling her against his chest. The scales along his shoulders felt smooth beneath her palms. "Your father would want you alive and thriving."

"But Nirum will be so different," she said, tracing the line where his scales met skin. "What if—"

"No." He coiled protectively around her legs. "You will be safe there and live the life you deserve. I will make sure of it."

The possessive edge in his voice made her shiver. This was the same male who'd torn

through the Jorvlen stronghold to save her, who'd transformed from healer to warrior for her sake. Her mate.

The mate bond pulsed in her blood. The recent discovery of Nirrn as her true mate was still very new and thrilling to her. Each touch from him sent fresh sparks through her body, making her understand why she had been drawn to him from the start. His presence filled a void she hadn't known existed until she met him.

"I never thought I'd have this," she admitted, pressing closer to his warmth. "Someone who—"

"Who would kill for you?" His hand cupped her face. "Who would die for you?" His thumb brushed her lower lip. "Who belongs to you as much as you belong to me?"

Her heart raced at the raw truth in his words. The mate bond pulsed stronger, and she could feel his determination to keep her safe, his need to protect her at any cost.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“Then trust in that.” He pressed his forehead to hers. “Trust in us.”

Islae stepped into the safe house’s main chamber, her fingers intertwined with Nirrn’s. The room smelled of earth and metal, illuminated by strips of artificial lighting that cast long shadows across the worn concrete floors. Nirrn’s tail whispered against the concrete as he moved beside her, his powerful body coiled protectively near her.

A man emerged from the shadows—tall and lean, with a jagged scar running from his left temple to his jaw. His eyes held a familiar determination that made her chest tighten with recognition.

“Islae Raelle,” he said, extending his hand. “I’m Tyrus. Your work in the slums... it gave our people hope.”

Nirrn’s scales rippled with tension, but Islae squeezed his hand reassuringly. “You knew of my clinic?”

“Knew of it? Your father started that tradition over twenty years ago, before the Jorvlens...” Tyrus’s voice trailed off, his scarred face tightening. “Before they took him from us. You carried on his legacy well. Every human in the underground knows the name Raelle.”

Tears pricked at Islae’s eyes. She hadn’t heard anyone speak of her father in years. Nirrn’s arm slid around her waist, steadying her.

“The Jorvlens may have burned your clinic,” Tyrus continued, “but they can’t destroy what you built. What you taught us.” He straightened his shoulders. “We have healers, supplies, and safe houses. We’ll continue what you and your father started.”

“You’ll need to be careful,” Islae said, her voice thick with emotion. “The Jorvlens—”

“Can go to hell,” Tyrus interrupted with a fierce grin. “We learned from the best how to stay hidden and how to help our people. Your father showed us the way, and you proved it could be done.”

Nirrn’s deep voice rumbled. “You understand the risks?”

“Better than most.” Tyrus gestured to his scar. “Some things are worth dying for.”

The weight that had been pressing on Islae’s chest since her clinic burned down began to lift. Her father’s dream, her mission—it wouldn’t die with her departure from Jorvla. The human underground network would ensure their people weren’t forgotten.

She looked up at Nirrn, seeing the fierce pride in his golden eyes. This powerful Niri male had changed everything about himself to protect her, to love her, and to give her the life she truly deserved. Her true mate. And now she could leave with him for Nirum, knowing her father’s legacy would live on.

“Thank you,” she whispered to Tyrus, meaning it with every fiber of her being.

Tyrus’s weathered face broke into a knowing smile. “Kackjin’s ship leaves in two hours. He’s agreed to take you both to Nirum.”

Relief suddenly flooded through Islae’s body. They soon would be off this corrupt planet and on Nirrn’s peaceful planet. Beside her, Nirrn shifted.

“You risked everything to help us,” Nirrn said, his deep voice resonating through the small space. “We owe you.”

Tyrus waved off the gratitude. “Just keep her safe on Nirum. That’s payment enough.”

The journey to the spaceport passed in tense silence. Islae’s heart raced as they approached Kackjin’s ship—a sleek vessel with worn edges that spoke of countless missions.

The green-scaled warrior waited at the boarding ramp, his scarred face impassive. He nodded once at Nirrn, a gesture of respect between males who had fought together.

Inside the ship, Nirrn guided Islae to the viewport, his powerful body coiling protectively around her. His scaled chest pressed against her back as the engines rumbled to life.

“Having second thoughts?” he murmured, his breath hot against her ear.

Islae watched as Jorvla’s grimy surface fell away beneath them. The sprawling planet where she had spent her entire life fighting and healing and surviving grew smaller with each passing second.

“No,” she whispered, surprising herself with the truth of it. “For the first time, I’m not running away from something. I’m running toward something instead.”

Nirrn’s arms tightened around her waist, his scales smooth against her skin. “Toward what?”

She turned in his embrace, meeting those intense golden eyes that had captured her from the start. “Toward you. Toward us. Toward a life where I don’t have to hide or fight just to exist.”

His hands cupped her face, his thumbs tracing her cheekbones with surprising gentleness. “You will never have to hide again. On Nirum, you will be my mate, my equal.”

His possessive growl sent shivers down her spine. Her mate and her equal, who now promised her a future she had never dared to dream of—a future filled with peace and happiness.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:17 pm

Jorvla's atmosphere burned orange behind them as the ship broke orbit. Islae gripped Nirrn's hand, watching her past fade into the star-filled darkness of space. For once, the unknown didn't frighten her. Not with Nirrn's powerful presence wrapped around her, promising protection, love, and home.

The door to their private chamber soon hissed shut, sealing them in a cocoon of silence save for the faint hum of the ship's engines. Nirrn's eyes locked on hers, burning with that familiar intensity that sent a shiver through her. Before she could speak, he pressed her against the wall, his powerful frame towering over her. His hands cradled her face, his touch firm but tender, and then his lips crashed against hers in a kiss that stole her breath.

The kiss was all-consuming, searing and leaving her lightheaded. His tongue swept into her mouth, claiming her with a possessiveness that made her knees weak. She moaned into him, her hands fumbling with the clasp of his tunic, desperate to feel more of him. He pulled back just long enough to yank the fabric over his head, revealing the broad expanse of his scaled chest and the smooth, taut muscle of his abdomen. Her fingers traced the line where his scales changed to smooth skin, marveling at the contrast.

"Nirrn..." Her voice came out uneven, barely a whisper.

"Islae," he growled against her lips, his hands already working to rid her of her clothing. His fingers were deft, and within moments she stood bare before him, her skin prickling under the heat of his gaze. His eyes roamed over her, golden and predatory, and she felt a flush of pleasure at the way he looked at her—like she was everything he had ever wanted.

He coiled his tail around her legs, drawing her closer until their bodies were flush. The heat of his scales against her bare skin sent a jolt through her, and she gasped as his hands slid down her back. "On the bed," he breathed, his voice low and rough against her ear.

She obeyed without hesitation, her heart pounding as she climbed onto the narrow bed. He followed, his movements deliberate as he positioned himself on his back. "Straddle me," he instructed, his eyes never leaving hers.

Islae hesitated for only a moment before settling over him, her thighs trembling as she felt the hard length of his primary member pressing against her entrance. She lowered herself slowly, gasping as he filled her, inch by inch, until she was seated fully atop him. The sensation was overwhelming—hot, stretching, and perfect.

"Ride me," he growled, his voice thick with need, his hands gripping her hips.

She obeyed, rolling her hips in a slow, deliberate rhythm that made him groan. His hands tightened on her, guiding her as she moved, his tail curling around her waist to hold her steady. The deep, guttural sounds he made with every thrust sent a thrill through her. She leaned forward, her hands braced against his scaled chest, letting the angle drive him deeper.

"Nirrn," she gasped, her breath hitching as pleasure coiled tightly in her belly.

"Feel me inside you," he rasped. "Feel how much I want you."

Her rhythm faltered as the pleasure built, her movements becoming urgent, almost frantic. He met her thrust for thrust, his strong tail tightening around her as he pulled her down harder and faster. The world narrowed to the two of them, to the heat of his body beneath hers, to the sound of their ragged breathing mingling in the small, enclosed space.

“Islae,” he growled again, his voice strained, and she felt his control slipping, his thrusts becoming deeper and more desperate. Her vision blurred as the tension in her body snapped. She cried out as waves of pleasure crashed over her, her body trembling uncontrollably. Beneath her, Nirrn let out a guttural roar. His tail curled tighter around her as he thrust deep into her one final time, his seed flooding her as he held her close to his chest.

For a long moment, they stayed like that, their bodies still joined, their breaths ragged and uneven. Islae rested her forehead against his chest, her heart still racing, and her mind reeling. She had never felt so completely claimed and so utterly wanted.

Chapter 25

Islae

Islae’s jaw dropped as she stepped off Kackjin’s ship and onto Nirum’s surface. The twin suns painted the sky in shades of amber and rose, their light catching on the crystalline towering spires that seemed to grow straight from the ground. The air tasted sweet and clean in a way Jorvla’s polluted atmosphere never had been.

“This is...” She trailed off, unable to find words adequate enough to describe the majestic landscape before her.

Nirrn curled possessively around her, his scaled chest pressing against her back as he leaned down to murmur in her ear. “Welcome home, Islae.”

The word “home” struck a chord in her mind. Beautiful as it was, the alien landscape before her felt worlds away from everything she had ever known. Crystal temples rose like frozen waterfalls, their surfaces refracting light in rainbow patterns across the ground. The architecture defied physics, the structures seeming to float without support.

Nirrn guided her through the winding crystal paths toward a structure that took her breath away. His home stood three stories tall, its walls appearing to be hewn from a single massive crystal. Sunlight poured through tall windows, creating prisms that danced across pristine marble floors.

“You lived here before Jorvla?” Islae ran her fingers along a wall, marveling at its smooth, cool surface.

“This has always been my sanctuary.” His eyes fixed intently on her face, watching her astonished reaction. “Though it never felt quite right until now.”

The interior opened into a vast living space, the ceiling stretching high above them. Unlike the cramped, dark spaces of Jorvla, every room breathed with light and space. Gardens grew in indoor courtyards, exotic plants she had never seen before reaching toward the twin suns.

“It’s so beautiful,” she whispered, though the word “beautiful” felt inadequate.

Nirrn’s chest rumbled with satisfaction. His tail unwound from her ankle only to slide up her leg, pulling her closer. “You’re so beautiful in this light. Like you belong here.”

She turned in his arms, pressing her palms against the smooth scales of his chest. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to this. It’s so different from...”

“From the filth and corruption of Jorvla?” His voice hardened. “You deserve better than hiding in the shadows and healing others in secret.” His hand brushed against her cheek. “Here, you can heal openly. Work in a proper clinic. Be who you were always meant to be.”

The possibility of it all overwhelmed her. No more fear. No more running. No more watching over her shoulder. Just this—light and peace and Nirrn.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:17 pm

Later that afternoon, the Nirum Medical Plaza rose before them like a cathedral of healing, its crystal walls gleaming in the light from both suns. Islae gasped as she took in the towering spires and intricate archways. Unlike the stark, utilitarian buildings of Jorvla, this place radiated warmth and welcome.

Nirrn slid his arm gently around her waist as they approached the entrance. His orange scales shimmered in the sunlight, and Islae couldn't help but notice how his presence seemed to fill the space around them.

The doors swept open, and a group of Niri healers emerged. Their eyes widened at the sight of Nirrn, and Islae felt the wave of respect that rolled through them.

"Master Nirrn..." One of them stepped forward, bowing deeply. "We had heard rumors of your return. And this must be your mate?"

Nirrn nodded, his lips curving upward. "This is Islae. She is a skilled healer in her own right."

Another Niri, her scales a deep blue, approached with reverence. "Your work with difficult births has become legendary here, Master Nirrn. The techniques you developed have saved countless mothers and children."

Islae glanced up at Nirrn, seeing him in a new light. She had known he was skilled, but this level of admiration from his peers spoke volumes.

"Come," the first healer gestured. "Let us show you how we've implemented your methods."

As they moved through the facility, Islae marveled at the advanced equipment, the pristine conditions, and the sense of purpose that permeated every room. This was what healing should be—not hidden away in dark corners but celebrated and refined.

Nirrn kept her close, his powerful form coiled protectively around her as they toured the facility. His hand rested possessively on the small of her back, a constant reminder of their connection. When another Niri approached, his tail would tighten slightly around her waist, a subtle claim that made her heart race.

“Your mate bond sure is strong,” one of the elder healers observed, nodding approvingly. “We can sense it.”

Nirrn’s eyes met Islae’s. “She is everything I searched and hoped for.”

The respect these healers showed Nirrn stirred something deep in Islae’s chest. Pride, yes, but also a growing understanding of just who she had chosen for her mate. He wasn’t just any healer here on Nirum—he was a pioneer and a master of his craft. And somehow, impossibly, the universe had chosen her for his mate.

The elder healer turned to Islae, her silver scales catching the light. “We would be honored if you would consider taking a teaching position in our healing program. There’s a small clinic within the university that would be perfect for your practical demonstrations.”

Her breath caught in her chest. The offer hung in the air like crystal chimes, beautiful but fragile. Her fingers twisted in the fabric of her tunic as memories of dark alleys and whispered warnings flooded back. How could she teach others when she’d spent so long hiding her skills?

“I...” She glanced around the pristine facility, so different from her makeshift clinic in Jorvla’s slums. “I’ve never taught before.”

“Which is precisely why we need you,” the elder continued. “Your experience with emergency field medicine, your adaptability—these are invaluable skills our students must learn.” She turned to Nirrn, her expression warm. “And we’d like you to join her as senior partner, Master Nirrn. Your expertise would complement hers perfectly.”

Nirrn’s tail coiled around Islae, pulling her closer to his chest. The familiar press of his scales against her back steadied her racing thoughts. His chest rumbled as he spoke, “Teaching together would be...ideal.”

The word “together” sent a shiver through her body. She turned to look up at him, finding his golden eyes already fixed on her. Pride radiated from him, along with something deeper—a fierce possessiveness that made her heart race.

“What do you think, mate?” he murmured, his voice pitched low for her ears alone. The way he said “mate”—like a claim and a caress all at once—made her knees weak.

Islae studied his face, seeing not just pride but absolute certainty. He believed in her and trusted her abilities completely. And working alongside him every day, building something together instead of fighting alone in the shadows...

“Yes,” she said, surprising herself with the steadiness of her voice. “Yes, I’ll do it.”

The elder healer beamed, but Islae barely noticed. She was too caught up in the way Nirrn’s eyes darkened with pleasure, the way his tail tightened possessively around her waist. This was more than she had ever dreamed possible—not just survival, but a chance to truly live and heal and teach. And to do it all with Nirrn by her side.

Later that day, Islae’s eyes widened as they entered the Floating Gardens of Veridia. The setting suns painted the crystalline structures in deep orange and pink, creating an ethereal glow that seemed to pulse with its own life. Her fingers tightened

on Nirrn's muscled arm as she took in the impossible sight before her—entire islands of earth and vegetation suspended in mid-air, drifting like clouds in a gentle breeze.

“How is this even possible?” She peered over the edge of their platform, her heart skipping at the dizzying drop below. The districts of Nirum sprawled out beneath them, their spires catching the last rays of sunlight.

“Ancient magic.” Nirrn coiled around her, drawing her back against his chest. His scales were warm against her skin, and she breathed in his familiar scent mixed with the garden's exotic blooms. “The founders of Nirum discovered how to harness the air currents.”

A nearby flower unfurled its petals, releasing a shower of iridescent pollen that danced in the fading light. Islae watched, mesmerized, as the tiny particles caught the light and transformed into miniature rainbows.

“I've never seen such vibrant colors.” She reached out to touch a flower whose petals shifted from deep crimson to molten gold before her eyes.

Nirrn guided her across a bridge that seemed woven from pure light, his tail never loosening its protective grip. “These gardens are one of Nirum's greatest treasures.” His golden eyes met her brown ones, intense and possessive. “But its beauty is nothing compared to yours.”

Heat bloomed in her cheeks at his words. Just a few weeks ago, she had been hiding in Jorvla's shadows, and now here she stood in this floating paradise with her mate. The thought still stunned her.

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“I feel like I’m in a dream,” she whispered, watching a pair of crystal-winged birds soar past, their songs echoing like wind chimes. “Yesterday I was on Jorvla, and now...” She gestured at the floating paradise around them. “How can this be my life?”

“Because you were destined to be here.” His voice rumbled through her body. “With me.”

Islae leaned into his embrace, feeling truly safe for the first time in years. “Thank you for bringing me to Nirum.” She pressed closer, savoring his strength. “For giving me a real home and future.”

The suns continued their descent, painting everything in deep golds and purples. Islae felt Nirrn’s chest rise and fall against her back, his presence both protective and possessive. Here, surrounded by floating gardens, impossible beauty, and Nirrn, she finally felt truly happy.

Chapter 26

Nirrn

Nirrn slid through his kitchen with practiced ease. The familiar scent of spiced meats and aromatic herbs filled the air as he prepared a traditional Niri feast for Islae. His eyes kept drifting to her, perched on a crystal bar stool, watching him work.

“You’re staring,” he said, a smirk playing on his lips as he chopped vegetables with precise movements.

“I’ve never seen a Niri cook before.”Islae leaned forward, her brown eyes sparkling with interest. “The ones I knew had servants for that.”

“I prefer to do things myself.”His orange scales glimmered in the soft light as he reached for seasonings. “Especially for my mate.”

The word still sent a thrill through him. After a lifetime of emptiness, his home finally felt complete with her presence. The way she had moved through his space earlier, touching crystal walls and examining the intricate carvings—it felt right.

“The patio is ready,” he said, arranging the dishes on a floating tray. “Unless you’d prefer to eat inside?”

“Outside. I want to see your moons again.”

He led her through the glass doors to his backyard patio where he had arranged cushions around a low table. Candles floated in crystal bowls, their light dancing across the carved stone. Above them, Nirum’s twin moons painted everything in silver and gold.

“This is really beautiful,” Islae whispered, settling onto the cushions.

Nirrn positioned himself close to her. “Not as beautiful as you.”

She rolled her eyes, but he noticed her slight blush. “Smooth talker.”

“Only for you.”He served her a portion of spiced meat. “Tomorrow, we’ll review the healing curriculum together. The university is eager for your perspective on human anatomy.”

“Working together.”She smiled, taking a bite of the meat. “I never thought I would

end up teaching, let alone alongside a Niri.”

“The universe has strange ways of bringing mates together.” His tail brushed against her leg. “Though I must admit, I’m looking forward to having you in my teaching clinic.”

“Your teaching clinic. Is it?”

“Our teaching clinic.” He reached across the table, taking her hand. “Everything I have is yours, Islae. My home, my work, and my heart.”

The candlelight caught tears in her eyes, but her smile was radiant. Under the twin moons, sharing a meal in the home that was now theirs, he felt a completeness he’d never known before. His warrior spirit had found its purpose, and his healer’s heart had found its match.

Nirrn cleared the dinner plates with a sweep of his tail, his eyes captivated by Islae’s delicate features in the moonlight. The twin moons cast an ethereal glow across his gardens, illuminating the crystalline flowers that dotted the landscape.

“I have something else to show you,” he said, his voice deep and resonant. His orange scales shimmered in the moonlight as he extended his hand to her.

He led her down a winding crystal path, his tail moving silently across the ground. Steam rose from hidden vents, creating an otherworldly mist that swirled around their feet. The path opened to reveal a natural hot spring, its waters a deep azure that reflected the starlight.

Crystal formations jutted from the rocks surrounding the spring, their facets catching and splitting moonlight into rainbow prisms. Bioluminescent plants lined the water’s edge, their soft purple glow adding to the dreamlike atmosphere.

“This is incredible,” Islae breathed, her fingers trailing through the mist.

Nirrn drew her closer. “This spring has been in my family for generations.” His hand cupped her face. “Now it’s yours, too.”

The way she looked at him, wonder in her brown eyes, made his blood surge. Gone was the hesitation that had plagued him in their early days. She was his mate now, and he would never let her doubt that again.

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He dipped his head, capturing her lips in a searing kiss. His orange-scaled arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her flush against his bare chest. The heat from the spring enveloped them in a warm cocoon of steam as he deepened the kiss.

“All mine,” he growled against her mouth, his tail tightening slightly around her. The warrior that had awakened in him during their time on Jorvla remained, tempering his healer’s gentleness with a fierce possessiveness.

Islae’s hands slid up his chest, her fingers tracing the patterns on his scales. “All yours,” she whispered back, and the admission made his eyes darken with desire.

The twin moons cast their silver light across the spring, turning Islae’s skin luminescent. Nirrn pulled back slightly to drink in the sight of her, his mate, bathed in the light of his world. The steam curled around them like a veil, creating their own private sanctuary in the heart of his ancestral gardens.

Nirrn’s hands suddenly moved to the hem of Islae’s tunic, his eyes locking with hers as he slowly peeled the fabric away. Her breath hitched, but she didn’t stop him, her trust in him evident in the way she lifted her arms to help. He lowered himself before her as he removed her boots and pants, his fingers grazing her skin with deliberate slowness. Every touch was a claim, a reminder that she was his. When she stood bare before him, bathed in the moonlight with steam curling around her, he let his gaze roam openly, his admiration fierce and unapologetic.

“You’re perfect,” he murmured, his voice low and thick with desire.

Her pale cheeks flushed, but she held his gaze. Nirrn raised himself up then, towering

over her, and began to undress himself. He unwrapped the sash around his waist, letting it fall to the ground, his large dual members fully exposed. Islae's eyes widened slightly as she took him in, and he felt a surge of pride. He took her hand and guided her into the hot spring, the warm water enveloping them as they stepped in together.

The heat was soothing, and for a moment, they simply floated together, her back pressed against his chest, his arms wrapped tightly around her. Nirrn closed his eyes, savoring the feel of her in his arms, her softness against his scales. But the peace didn't last long. The desire that had simmered beneath the surface roared back to life, and he turned her to face him, capturing her lips in a fierce kiss.

His hands roamed her body, mapping every curve as if he could never get enough of her. He felt her hands on his chest, her fingers brushing over his scales, and he growled against her mouth. "My mate," he said, his voice heavy with need.

"Always," she whispered back, her breath warm on his lips.

Nirrn lifted her effortlessly and set her on the edge of the hot spring. The moonlight bathed her body, and he couldn't resist running his hands over her thighs. He soon positioned his head between her thighs, his eyes locked on hers, and parted her legs gently.

"Nirrn—" she started, her voice shaky, but he silenced her with a look.

"Let me," he said, his voice firm but gentle. "I want to make you come apart for me."

Her lips parted, but no words came out, just a soft gasp as he pressed his mouth to her core. He took his time, licking and sucking with a slow, deliberate rhythm, savoring every sound she made. Her hands found his hair, her fingers tightening as he worked her with his tongue, his own arousal a heavy ache.

“Nirrn,” she whispered, her voice trembling. “Please.”

He growled against her, the vibration making her shudder, and he intensified his movements, his hands gripping her hips to hold her steady. He could feel her getting closer, her body tensing, and he didn’t let up. His mouth was relentless until she cried out, her body spasming with the force of her release.

When it was over, he looked up at her, his eyes blazing with satisfaction. She was panting, her chest rising and falling rapidly, and she looked down at him with a dazed expression.

“I will always make sure you are completely taken care of,” he breathed, his voice thick with desire as he pressed a kiss to her inner thigh.

Nirrn glided from the hot spring, water cascading down his orange scales. He reached for Islae, his powerful arms lifting her effortlessly from the edge. Her skin glistened in the moonlight, and he wrapped her in his arms and held her against his chest.

“Let’s get you inside,” he rumbled, his tail propelling them smoothly along the crystal path toward their home. His scales rippled with joy at the thought—their home, not just his anymore.

Inside the master suite, the moonlight streamed through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting silver patterns across the massive bed. Crystal formations grew naturally from the walls, their soft bioluminescence creating an intimate glow. The space that had once felt so empty years ago now hummed with her presence.

“This room is incredible,” Islae murmured.

Nirrn set her down and dried her off with a soft towel. “Everything here is yours now.” His golden eyes gleamed. “Including me.”

He retrieved a soft sleeping shirt for her from the wardrobe, helping her slip it over her head. The domesticity of the moment made his chest tighten with emotion. After years of returning to an empty bed, watching other Niri find their mates while he remained alone, the universe had finally led him to her.

“Come here,” he said, pulling back the covers and settling onto the bed. His tail created a natural cradle for her body as she curled against his chest. The scent of her hair filled his nostrils, and he pressed his lips gently to her temple. “I never thought I would find you.”

“Mmm,” Islae mumbled sleepily, her fingers tracing patterns on his scales. “The universe works in mysterious ways.”

Nirrn tightened his hold on her, his warrior spirit at peace knowing she was safe in their bed. The challenges they had faced on Jorvla seemed distant now, like a dark dream replaced by this perfect reality. His tail wrapped more securely around her legs, and he felt her breathing even out as she drifted to sleep.

He stayed awake a while longer, watching the play of moonlight across her face. His mate. His miracle. Finally home where she belonged.

Chapter 27

Islae

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:18 pm

Sunlight streamed through the crystalline windows of their bedroom and cast rainbow patterns across the bedsheets. Islae stretched, still marveling at the softness of their bed compared to the old cot in her clinic on Jorvla.

Nirrn shifted beside her and traced his finger down her arm, making her shiver.

“You should visit the High Temple today,” he said, meeting her eyes. “Many humans gather there. It might help you feel more... settled.”

Islae rolled onto her side, studying the intricate patterns of the orange scales across his broad chest. “You’re not coming?”

“I need to prepare our course materials for the healing program at the university,” he replied. “Unless you’d rather I escort you?”

“I can find my own way.” She started to move away, but he grabbed her hand.

“Islae.” His voice dropped lower. “Look at me.”

She met his gaze, challenging him. “I’m not going to break, Nirrn. I managed just fine on my own before.”

“But you’re not on your own anymore.” He pulled her closer, until she was pressed against his chest. “Nirum is your home now. Our home. I want you to find your place here.”

Home. The word stuck out in her mind. Such a simple concept, yet it felt foreign after

years of surviving in the shadows. Yesterday's tour of the Medical Plaza had left her feeling overwhelmed—so much knowledge and potential, all freely given instead of fought for.

“I don't know how to just... exist,” she admitted. “Without fighting. Without hiding.”

Nirrn's hand cupped her cheek. “Then learn. Start with the temple. Meet others who've made this transition. But come back to me.”

He leaned in and captured her lips. His kiss was fierce and possessive, leaving no doubt about his claim on her. When he pulled back slightly, his eyes had darkened to molten gold.

“I will always come back to you,” she whispered, meaning it despite her uncertainties about Nirum. “But first, I need to shower.”

He pulled further away from her reluctantly. “The temple services begin at midday. Don't be late.”

Islae walked through the winding crystal streets of Nirum, marveling at how the twin suns cast prismatic shadows across the gleaming surfaces. The High Temple loomed ahead, its spires stretching toward the lavender sky.

Inside, the temple's vast chamber hummed with quiet conversation. A group of humans gathered near an ornate fountain, their voices carrying across the polished stone floor. Two women caught her attention—one with flowing brown hair, the other blonde—both radiating a sense of peace she hadn't expected to find.

“You must be Nirrn's mate,” the brunette said, smiling warmly. “I'm Mila, and this is my sister Priscilla. We heard about your arrival yesterday.”

“News travels fast here,” Islae said, tension easing from her shoulders at their friendly demeanor.

Priscilla laughed. “That’s Nirum for you. Come, sit with us.”

They settled onto cushioned benches near the fountain. The cool mist felt refreshing against Islae’s skin.

“We were once like you,” Mila said, her eyes knowing. “Trapped on Jorvla, until my mate Brivul helped save me and my sister. He’s a former Niri general.”

“And now you’re...” Islae trailed off, her curiosity piqued.

“Studying law at the university.” Mila beamed. “Something I never dreamed possible on Jorvla.”

“I found my mate here,” Priscilla added. “Andear, the Niri warlord. Now we train warriors together, and I advise the council on human integration.”

Islae’s fingers twisted in her lap. “You both seem so... settled.”

“It takes time,” Priscilla said gently. “But Nirum offers the freedom we never had before. Real choices. Real futures.”

“I still wake up sometimes expecting to be back in slavery,” Mila admitted. “But then Brivul’s there, and I remember this is home now.”

“If you ever need friends who understand...” Priscilla touched Islae’s hand, “we’re here. We can show you around and help you find your place.”

Warmth bloomed in Islae’s chest. “I’d really like that,” she said, meaning it

fully. Since arriving on Nirum, something inside her began to settle and accept all this planet had to offer her.

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Islae settled more comfortably between Mila and Priscilla. The temple's high ceilings stretched above them, adorned with intricate crystal formations that caught the light from the twin suns. The space filled with a soft hum as more people filtered in for the midday service.

"The services here are different from what you might expect," Mila explained, her voice gentle. "More meditation than ceremony. It helps quiet the mind."

Islae nodded, remembering Nirrn's words from that morning. He'd known exactly what she needed—a moment of peace and a chance to connect. Her mate's intuition never ceased to amaze her.

"How did you adjust?" Islae asked, watching a group of humans and Niri enter together. "To all this freedom?"

Priscilla laughed softly. "Small steps. I started by allowing myself to walk outside without looking over my shoulder. Then I learned to speak up in council meetings without fear of punishment."

"Andear helped," Mila added with a knowing smile. "Just like Nirrn helps you. These Niri males—they're protective, but they give us room to grow and be ourselves."

The service began with a low, resonant tone that vibrated through the chamber. Islae closed her eyes, letting the sound wash over her. For the first time since arriving on Nirum, her shoulders relaxed completely.

"You're still thinking too hard," Priscilla whispered as the tone faded. "Just let

go. You're safe here."

Those words struck something deep in Islae. Safe. The concept felt foreign after spending most of her life hiding on Jorvla. But here, surrounded by others who understood her journey, she felt the truth of it settling into her bones.

The meditation guide's voice floated through the chamber, speaking of connection and belonging. Islae thought of Nirrn—his fierce protection, his gentle healing hands, and the way his tail would curl possessively around her when they slept. He had given her more than safety. He had given her a future filled with hope.

"Thank you," Islae murmured to her new friends as the service ended. "For welcoming me."

"We're having dinner tomorrow night," Mila said. "You and Nirrn should join us. Meet our mates."

Islae smiled, feeling a warmth spread through her chest. "That sounds wonderful."

Islae stepped into their home, the crystal walls catching the late afternoon light from Nirum's twin suns. The familiar scent of healing herbs and Nirrn's unique musk welcomed her. He was coiled on their oversized cushions in the living space, datapads spread around him, his orange scales gleaming as he worked.

His head snapped up at her entrance, his eyes intense. "You're finally back." His tail shifted, making space for her beside him.

"I just wanted to say thank you," she said, settling next to his powerful form. "For suggesting the temple. I met two women there—Mila and Priscilla. They understood exactly what I'm going through."

His lips curved into a knowing smile. “I thought they might help. Mila’s mate, Brivul, mentioned they would be there today.”

“You planned this,” she accused, but warmth flooded through her at his thoughtfulness.

“Perhaps.” He pulled her closer with his tail, wrapping it loosely around her waist. “Now that you’re here, I need your expertise.” He gestured to the scattered datapads. “The human anatomy sections need review, and I’d value your input on the course materials.”

Islae picked up the nearest pad, scanning the detailed diagrams. “These are quite thorough, but the nerve pathways could use clarification.” She leaned against his broad chest, pointing out specific areas.

Nirrn’s arm slid around her shoulders. “Show me.”

They worked together for hours, Islae adding her practical knowledge to his theoretical expertise. The familiar medical terminology flowed between them, punctuated by debates over teaching methods and healing techniques. It felt natural and collaborative—nothing like her desperate solo work in Jorvla’s shadows.

“We should include more about human pain responses,” she suggested, settling deeper into his embrace. “Many Niri healers don’t realize how differently humans process trauma.”

“Noted.” His voice rumbled through his chest against her back. “Your experience will be invaluable to our students.”

Islae paused, struck by the simple rightness of this moment—working alongside her mate, building something meaningful together. The fear and uncertainty that had

plagued her since arriving on Nirum began to fade.

“I never imagined this,” she admitted softly. “Teaching, helping others openly. Being here with you.”

Nirrn’s tail tightened possessively around her. “This is only the beginning. We will build something extraordinary together.”

Chapter 28

Nirrn

The smooth scales of Nirrn’s tail brushed against Islae’s skin as he pulled her closer. The warmth of her body pressed against his, and he could feel the steady rhythm of her heartbeat, a quiet reassurance that she was here, with him, perfectly safe. His golden eyes locked on to her brown ones, the burning intensity of his gaze unwavering.

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Islae's lips curved into a small, knowing smile, her eyes glinting with a mix of mischief and affection. She didn't respond with words, but the way her fingers traced the scales along his shoulder told him everything he needed to know. She was his, and he was hers.

Nirrn leaned in and captured her lips. His hands came up to cradle her face, his touch firm yet tender. The kiss was slow and deliberate, a silent conversation between them that spoke of trust, desire, and a bond that went beyond words.

Before he knew it, Islae's hands were moving, her fingers deftly undoing the sash that secured the fabric around his lower half. The material fell away, exposing his dual members, thick and heavy, already throbbing with need. Nirrn's breath hitched as she pushed him back onto the oversized cushions, her movements confident and unhurried.

He watched her, his eyes darkening with desire as she bent down, her lips wrapping around his primary member. The sensation was electric, her mouth hot and wet, her tongue teasing him with expert precision. Her hand wrapped around his secondary member, stroking him in time with the rhythm of her mouth. His tail coiled tighter, his body trembling with the effort to hold back.

"Islae," he growled, her name a plea and a command all at once.

She didn't stop, her eyes meeting his as she continued to pleasure him, her gaze daring him to take control. But Nirrn let her take the lead, his hands gripping the cushions as he surrendered to her touch. He had never imagined she would be so bold, so unapologetically in control, and it only deepened his desire for her.

Just as he felt the tension building, the edge of release within reach, he reached down and pulled her up. His strength was effortless as he lifted her into his arms. Her breath caught, her eyes wide with surprise, but she didn't protest.

"Not yet," he said, his voice filled with need. He raised himself up and carried her through the living space, his strong tail propelling him forward with a fluid grace.

The master suite was dimly lit, the soft glow of the crystals embedded in the walls casting a warm, intimate light. He set her down gently in their bathroom and removed her clothes with practiced ease. He took her hand, led her into the shower, and turned the water on, the steam rising around them.

Her hands rested on his chest, her fingers tracing the scales that ran along his pectoral muscles. "You're insatiable," she teased, her voice breathless but playful.

His lips curved into a smirk, his eyes gleaming with amusement. "And you're irresistible," he countered, his tail wrapping around her waist once more, pulling her closer.

The water cascaded over them, washing away the tension of the day and leaving only the two of them in this moment. His hands roamed over her body, his touch possessive yet reverent, memorizing every curve and every inch of her.

She leaned into him, her head resting against his chest and her breath warm against his skin. "I've never felt so complete," she admitted softly, her voice barely audible over the sound of the water.

His heart swelled at her words, a deep, primal satisfaction settling in his chest. He pressed a kiss to the top of her head, his tail coiling tighter around her. "Tonight, I'm going to make you mine completely," he said, his voice a low rumble.

Nirrn coiled his tail tightly around her waist as he lifted her effortlessly, pressing her up against the cool, tiled wall of the shower. The water cascaded over them, steam rising in the air, but he barely noticed. His focus was entirely on her—her warmth, her scent, the way her legs wrapped around him, pulling him flush against her. Her breath hitched as his strong hands gripped her hips, his eyes locking on to hers.

“Let me have you. Completely,” he growled, his voice low and commanding, the words more a demand than a request. Before she could respond, his lips crashed against hers, claiming her mouth with a ferocity that left no room for hesitation. He kissed her deeply, his tongue sliding against hers, tasting and devouring her. When he pulled back, her lips were swollen, and her eyes dark with desire.

“Yes,” she whispered, her voice trembling but resolute. Her hands slid up his chest. “I’m ready.”

Nirrn’s heart pounded in his chest, a primal satisfaction surging through him. She was his, and she was finally ready to accept the bond fully. He trailed his lips down her neck, his teeth grazing the sensitive skin there, and he felt her pulse quicken beneath his touch. His tail tightened around her, holding her firmly in place as he pressed his dual members against her, the heat of her body driving him wild.

“Mine,” he breathed against her skin, the word a promise and a vow. He positioned himself, his primary member pressing against her entrance, and he paused, his eyes meeting hers. “Say it again.”

“Yes,” she breathed, her voice steady now, her gaze unwavering. “I’m yours, Nirrn. Completely.”

He thrust into her in one smooth, powerful motion, and she gasped, her nails digging into his shoulders. He didn’t stop, didn’t give her a moment to adjust. He moved with a fierce, unrelenting rhythm, his tail supporting her weight as he drove into her again

and again. The water around them seemed to pulse in time with their movements, the steam thickening the air.

Her head fell back against the wall, her breath coming in ragged gasps as she clung to him. “Nirrn,” she breathed. “Please.”

He knew what she was asking for, and he didn’t hesitate. His lips found her neck again, his teeth grazing the spot where his mark would go. He bit down gently at first, testing her, and when she arched into him, her body trembling with need, he bit harder. The taste of her blood was faint and metallic, but it only fueled his desire. He sealed the mark with his tongue, the bond between them solidifying in that moment.

“You are mine,” he growled. “Always and forever.”

Her body soon tightened around him, her climax crashing over her in waves. He felt her surrender completely, her walls clenching around him, and he followed her over the edge, his release intense and all-consuming. He held her against him, his tail keeping her steady as he whispered his vow into her ear.

“Always and forever,” he repeated, his voice softer now but no less firm. He pressed a kiss to her forehead, his hands cradling her face as he looked into her eyes. “You are my mate, Islae. My heart, my soul, my everything.”

She smiled up at him, her fingers tracing his jaw. “And you’re mine,” she said, her voice filled with a quiet certainty that made his chest ache. “Always and forever.”

He set her down gently once the shower’s warmth had washed away the remnants of their intensity. Her body was still flushed, her breath uneven, and he could feel the tremble of her muscles as she leaned into him. The mark on her neck—his mark—stood out against her pale skin, a testament to the bond they had sealed. He ran his finger over it lightly, a possessive growl rumbling in his chest. She was his,

completely and irrevocably.

He turned off the water and guided her out of the shower. The cool air of the room hit them, but neither seemed to notice, their focus entirely on each other. He led her to the bed, his eyes never leaving hers. She was quiet, her expression a mix of curiosity and hesitation, but the desire in her eyes was unmistakable.

“Are you ready, Islae?” he asked, his voice low and commanding. “This will be new for you.”

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She swallowed, her gaze flickering down his body before meeting his again. “What do you mean?”

Nirrn smirked. “You’ll see. Trust me.”

She nodded, her voice barely a whisper. “I trust you.”

Her words sent a surge of satisfaction through him. He didn’t just want her body. He wanted her trust and her surrender. And now, he had it. He leaned in, his lips brushing against her ear as he spoke. “Get on your hands and knees. Now.”

Islae hesitated for the briefest moment before obeying, her movements slow but deliberate. She crawled onto the bed, her back arching slightly as she positioned herself. His eyes raked over her, taking in the way her body looked—vulnerable, yet willing. It was a sight he’d never tire of.

He positioned himself behind her, his tail coiling around her legs to hold her still. His primary member was already hard and throbbing, and his secondary one twitched with anticipation. He leaned forward, his hands gripping her hips as he aligned himself.

“This might hurt at first,” he warned. “But I’ll make it good for you. I promise.”

She nodded, her breath hitching as she gripped the sheets beneath her. “I’m ready.”

Nirrn didn’t wait any longer. He pressed the tip of his primary member against her entrance, sinking into her with a slow, deliberate thrust. She gasped, her body tensing,

but he didn't stop. He pushed deeper, his secondary member pressing hard against her other entrance. She let out a sharp cry, a mix of pain and pleasure, and he paused, giving her a moment to adjust.

"Relax," he murmured. "Breathe."

She did as he said, her muscles gradually loosening around him. When he was sure she was ready, he pushed his secondary member into her, the dual sensation making her cry out again. This time, there was less pain, more pleasure. He groaned, the tightness of her body overwhelming him. It was unlike anything he'd ever felt before—her walls clenched around both of his members, hot and perfect, and for a moment, he had to fight the urge to lose control.

"Nirrn," she whimpered, her voice trembling. "It's... a lot."

"I know," he growled, his voice low with restraint. "But you can take it. You're strong."

He began to move, his thrusts slow and measured at first, giving her time to adjust to the dual sensation. Her moans grew louder, her body trembling beneath him as he picked up the pace. The sound of their bodies meeting filled the room, mingling her gasps with his low growls.

The sensation was beyond overwhelming—her tightness, her heat, the way she clenched around him with every thrust. He forced himself to focus, to maintain control, but it was a battle. His large hands gripped her hips tighter as he drove into her harder and faster.

"That's it," he growled, his voice strained. "Take it, Islae. All of it."

She cried out, her body arching as the dual stimulation pushed her closer to the

edge. Her moans turned into gasps, her hands clawing at the sheets as her climax hit her. The tightness of her body around him was too much, and with a final, powerful thrust, he followed her over the edge, spilling his seed deep inside her depths.

For a moment, they stayed like that, their bodies joined, their breaths ragged. Nirrn leaned over her, his forehead resting against her back as he caught his breath. She was trembling, her body still pulsing around him, and he couldn't help the possessive satisfaction that filled him. She was completely his, body and soul.

Chapter 29

Islae

Islae woke to the gentle warmth of Nirum's twin suns streaming through the crystal windows of their bedroom. Her body ached in the most delicious way, memories of last night flooding back. Nirrn curled around her protectively, his orange scales glinting in the morning light.

She reached up to touch the raised mark on her neck, the slight tenderness sending a shiver through her. His mate mark. The physical proof of their bond, of her choice to be his. For so long, she had run from connection, from letting anyone close enough to matter. But here, wrapped in Nirrn's embrace, she felt something she thought died with her family—belonging.

"What are you thinking about?" Nirrn asked, his eyes opening to study her face. He tightened around her waist, drawing her close against his chest.

"Just realizing something." Islae traced his scales. "For years after losing my family, I thought being alone meant being strong. That needing someone meant weakness."

Nirrn's hand came up to brush her cheek. "And now?"

“Now I know better.” She traced her finger along his jaw. “Being here, with you—it feels right. Like coming home.” The truth of it settled deep within her.

He nuzzled the raised mark on her neck. “You have given me everything,” he said softly. “A purpose beyond healing. A reason to become more than I was. A mate who matches me in every way.”

“Even when I fought you at every turn?”

“Especially then.” His lips curved against her skin. “Your inner fire drew me from the first moment I saw you. Now that fire is mine.”

The possessive growl in his voice made heat pool in her belly. This was her mate—not just a healer, but a warrior who had fought for her, changed for her, and claimed her completely.

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Islae pressed closer, breathing in his scent. "I spent so long just surviving. But you showed me there was another way to live."

Nirrn shifted, drawing her flush against him. His scaled arms caged her protectively and possessively. The way he held her spoke volumes. She was his to protect, his to cherish, and his to love.

The mate mark on her neck pulsed with their shared connection. No more running. No more hiding. No more surviving. Now, it's time to thrive.

Islae soon padded into their kitchen, the smooth crystal floors cool beneath her bare feet. Nirum's morning light filtered through the translucent walls, casting rainbow prisms across the countertops. Such luxury still felt foreign after years of living in Jorvla's slums.

Nirrn moved behind her, his chest practically pressing against her back. His orange scales glinted as he reached past her for the cooking implements.

"Let me help," he murmured, his hands settling on her hips.

"I can manage breakfast on my own," Islae said but couldn't help leaning into his touch.

"Perhaps." His lips brushed her marked neck. "But I prefer watching you work while keeping you close."

Heat bloomed in her chest at his possessive tone. Even doing something as simple as

preparing breakfast, he maintained that protective dominance.

She cracked eggs into a bowl while Nirrn's tail curled loosely around her ankles, keeping her anchored to him as he chopped fresh fruits from the garden. The domestic simplicity of it all struck her—no more scrounging for supplies and no more looking over her shoulder.

“You’re thinking too loudly,” Nirrn observed.

“Just appreciating the difference.” Islae gestured to their sun-filled kitchen. “Two weeks ago, I was hiding in dark alleys and treating wounds with whatever I could salvage.”

“Now?” His scaled arms slid around her waist.

“Now I’m making breakfast with my mate in our home.” She turned in his embrace. “It feels surreal at times.”

“You deserve this peace.” His thumb traced her cheek. “Though I must admit, I enjoy seeing you so relaxed and soft in our home.”

“Soft?” Islae raised an eyebrow. “I can still take anyone down if needed.”

Nirrn's laugh rumbled through his chest. “My fierce little mate.”

The eggs started to sizzle, and Islae reluctantly pulled away to tend to them. Nirrn's tail remained in contact with her legs as they moved around each other, preparing their meal together in comfortable synchronicity.

Islae soon settled into the curved crystal chair on their patio, breathing in the crisp morning air of Nirum. Their breakfast spread before them looked like something from

a dream—fresh fruits, warm bread, and perfectly cooked eggs, a far cry from the meager meals she'd scraped together in Jorvla's slums.

Nirrn poured her a cup of steaming tea. His orange scales caught the light, making the gold undertones shimmer across his broad shoulders and chest.

"The university sent the final approval for our clinic setup," he said, his eyes meeting her gaze. "We can start organizing the teaching space today."

Islae's heart quickened at the thought. "Our own clinic. Where we can actually teach others instead of hiding in shadows." She took a sip of tea, savoring the sweet-spicy blend. "Though I admit, I'm nervous about dinner tonight."

"With Mila and Priscilla?" Nirrn's hand covered hers on the table. "You seemed to connect well with them at the temple."

"I did. It's just..." Islae pushed a piece of fruit around her plate. "They've adapted so well here. Priscilla advising the council, and Mila at university. Sometimes I wonder if I'll ever feel that settled."

Nirrn drew her closer to him. "You are already finding your place. Our students will benefit from your experience and strength."

"And tonight?"

"Tonight, you'll see that even fierce warrior mates like Andear and Brivul can become family." His lips curved. "Though none are as fierce as me."

Islae rolled her eyes, but warmth bloomed in her at his possessive tone.

He lifted her hand to his lips, pressing a kiss on her palm. "Now, shall we go see our

clinic?”

The way he said “our” made something settle deep inside her. This was their future together. And later, they’d share a meal with others who understood the journey from survival to belonging.

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“Yes,” she said, squeezing his hand. “Let’s go see our clinic.”

The university’s healing wing stretched before them, its crystal walls shimmering in the late morning light. Islae’s steps faltered as she took in the pristine corridors and state-of-the-art equipment. So different from her makeshift clinic in Jorvla’s shadows.

Nirrn’s tail brushed against her legs as he guided her forward, his powerful form towering protectively beside her. “This will be our teaching space,” he said, using his access card to open a set of ornate doors.

The room beyond took Islae’s breath away—curved walls of smoky crystal, rows of examination tables, and shelves lined with every healing tool she could imagine.

“It’s simply beautiful,” she whispered, running her fingers along one of the pristine counters.

“Not as beautiful as you.” Nirrn’s golden eyes settled on her as he coiled closer, his scaled chest pressing against her back. “Though I must admit, watching you teach will be... distracting.”

Heat crept up Islae’s neck at his possessiveness. Even here, in this professional setting, he couldn’t help marking his territory. “We’re supposed to be setting up equipment.”

“Then by all means, continue.” His hands settled on her hips, keeping her close as she organized supplies. “I enjoy watching you do your work.”

Islae tried to focus on arranging medical instruments, but Nirrn's presence made her skin tingle. His tail wrapped loosely around her as she moved about the room, never letting her get too far.

"The students arrive tomorrow," she said, more to distract herself than anything else. "Do you think they'll accept a human instructor?"

Nirrn's chest rumbled against her back. "They will respect my mate or answer to me." His fingers traced the mate mark on her neck. "Besides, your skills speak for themselves."

"Your protective streak is showing," Islae teased, but warmth flooded through her chest at his words.

"Always," he murmured, nuzzling her neck. "Now, shall we finish organizing our clinic?"

This was their shared space, their future together. Teaching, healing, and building something special—while belonging completely to each other.

Later that evening, Islae stepped into Mila and Brivul's home, taking in the elegant crystal architecture. Nirrn's arm wrapped possessively around her waist as they entered.

Mila rushed forward to greet them, her dark hair bouncing as she moved. Behind her, Brivul's massive blue-scaled form towered, his warrior's presence commanding even in casual dress.

"You made it!" Mila pulled Islae into a warm embrace. "Priscilla and Andear are already here."

“Let them breathe, little one,” Brivul rumbled, his hand settling on Mila’s shoulder.

In the living area, Priscilla sat curled against Andear’s red-scaled chest, their easy intimacy making Islae’s chest tighten with recognition. She’d seen that same comfortable possession in Nirrn’s eyes.

“The newly mated pair arrives,” Andear’s deep voice carried across the room. “How are you finding Nirum, Islae?”

Before she could answer, Nirrn’s tail curled around her. “She’s adapting well. We’re opening our teaching clinic tomorrow.”

“Already working?” Priscilla raised an eyebrow. “I took weeks to stop jumping at every shadow after leaving Jorvla.”

“Some of us are stronger than others,” Andear teased, earning a playful swat from his mate.

They settled around the dining table, laden with traditional Niri dishes. Islae found herself relaxing as conversation flowed, watching how the three couples interacted. Brivul’s protective position behind Mila’s chair mirrored Nirrn’s position beside her. Andear kept one hand on Priscilla’s thigh, his red scales gleaming as he gestured with the other.

“Remember when you first showed up at the training grounds?” Mila asked Priscilla. “You nearly took Andear’s head off during combat training.”

“He deserved it.” Priscilla grinned. “Kept telling me my form was wrong.”

“It was,” Andear growled playfully, nuzzling her neck.

“Speaking of combat,” Brivul turned to Nirrn, “I heard about your fight in the underground rings. Impressive for a healer.”

Nirrn’s chest puffed slightly. “I did what was necessary to protect what’s mine.”

His possessive tone sent heat rushing through Islae’s body. Under the table, his tail stroked along her calf, a subtle reminder of his claim.

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“And now you’re both here.” Mila smiled. “Just like us. Safe and free.”

Islae felt Nirrn’s hand squeeze hers. Yes, she thought, watching these couples who had walked the same path. This was what freedom looked like. This was her home now.

Epilogue

Nirrn

Nirrn coiled near the base of a medical cabinet as he organized supplies with practiced efficiency. Their teaching clinic gleamed under the soft light, every instrument in its designated place and every shelf meticulously arranged. He looked on as a group of students clustered around Islae while she demonstrated proper suturing technique.

“The key is maintaining consistent pressure,” Islae explained, her fingers moving with precise grace. “In emergency situations, you won’t always have ideal conditions.”

Pride swelled in Nirrn’s chest as he watched his mate command the room. The students hung on her every word, their faces rapt with attention. She had brought something invaluable to their program—real-world experience that went beyond textbook theory.

“Notice how she angles the needle,” Nirrn added, his deep voice carrying across the room. “That technique reduces tissue trauma and promotes faster healing.”

A young Niri student raised her hand. “But Professor Nirrn, the standard protocol—”

“Sometimes protocol must adapt to circumstance,” he interrupted, moving closer to the demonstration table. His scales glinted as he reached around Islae to adjust the practice dummy. “Professor Islae learned that treating patients in conditions that would make most healers flee in terror.”

Islae shot him a knowing look. “And some healers are too proper for their own good.”

“Says the woman who organized my entire medicine cabinet by color code last week.” His tail brushed against her ankle, a subtle gesture of affection that made her cheeks flush.

“That was different. I was tired of watching you waste time searching for things.”

One of the human students giggled, quickly stifling it when Nirrn’s golden gaze fell on her. But his expression remained warm. This was what they had built together—a space where humans and Niri learned side by side, where Islae’s practical knowledge merged seamlessly with his clinical expertise.

“Your next practical exam will require you to handle multiple trauma scenarios,” he announced. “You’ll need both precision and adaptability.” His tail tightened protectively around Islae as memories of her old clinic flashed through his mind. “The best healers know when to follow protocol—and when to break it to save a life.”

Nirrn’s tail swept across the teaching clinic’s floor as he coiled around a cabinet, watching the last students filter out. The familiar scent of antiseptic filled the air, mingling with traces of medicinal herbs. His mate moved with practiced efficiency, arranging instruments on metal trays.

“You intimidated that poor student today,” Islae said, shooting him a knowing look.

“She’ll learn.” He reached past her to straighten a row of vials. “Just like you learned to accept help.”

“I accepted help just fine.”

“Right.” His scales rippled with amusement as he remembered their first meeting. “You were ready to fight me with nothing but determination and a spray bottle.”

“You invaded my clinic.”

“I gave you supplies.” He drew her closer. “After saving you from those Jorvlen thugs.”

“Which I didn’t ask for.” But she leaned into his touch, her fingers trailing along his scaled chest.

“You never asked for anything.” He nuzzled her neck where his mark stood proud against her skin. “Too stubborn and too fierce.”

The memory of that night blazed fresh in his mind—her tiny clinic in shambles after the fight, medical supplies scattered across blood-stained floors. She’d stood amid the chaos, chin lifted in defiance, refusing to show fear. Even then, something in him had recognized her strength, had wanted to shelter and protect her while letting that fire burn bright.

“You’re still the most stubborn female I’ve ever met,” he rumbled against her skin.

“Says the male who tracked me across half of Jorvla and fought his way into a Jorvlen stronghold.”

His grip tightened at the memory. “They took what was mine.”

“I wasn’t yours then.”

“You were always mine.” His golden eyes met hers. “From the moment I saw you healing those humans in the shadows. I just had to wait for you to realize it.”

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Nirrn slithered beside Islae as they left the teaching clinic, his tail leaving smooth tracks in Nirum's crystalline paths. The suns painted the sky in brilliant hues of purple and gold, casting long shadows across the temple spires that pierced the horizon. His scales glimmered in the fading light, each movement fluid and precise as he matched his pace to her shorter strides.

"Our students are improving," he rumbled, his golden eyes tracking a group of young Niri warriors training in a nearby courtyard. His tail curled protectively around Islae's ankles when one of them glanced their way too long.

Islae laughed, squeezing his hand. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?" But he knew exactly what she meant. Since claiming her, his protective instincts had only grown stronger.

"That thing where you try to intimidate everyone who looks at me." She bumped her shoulder against his scaled arm. "I'm not going anywhere."

His chest swelled as he watched her navigate the crystalline paths with familiar ease. Gone was the wary tension that had marked her first months here. She moved now with confidence, greeting passing Niri and humans alike with warm smiles.

"Can you blame me for wanting to show off my mate?" He pulled her closer, nuzzling the mark on her pale neck. "The fierce little human who tamed a healer and turned him into a warrior."

"You were always a warrior," she murmured, trailing her fingers along his

forearm. “You just needed the right motivation.”

The memory of their escape in Jorvla flashed through his mind—the blood on his hands, the rage in his heart, and the primal need to protect his mate, driving his every movement. He had discovered parts of himself back then he never knew existed.

“Speaking of motivation,” he purred, his tail wrapping more firmly around her. “I believe you promised to help me reorganize the home clinic tonight.”

Islae’s eyes sparkled with mischief. “Is that what we’re calling it now?”

“Among other things.” He lifted her easily, cradling her against his chest as his tail propelled them forward with powerful undulations.

Nirrn soon slithered through their home’s entrance and set Islae down gently. His tail swept across the polished crystal floors as he followed her through their living space. The teaching day had left him energized rather than drained—watching her work always filled him with pride. She moved toward their balcony with that graceful sway that had only grown more pronounced with her pregnancy.

He observed her every movement as she stepped out into the early evening air. The setting twin suns painted the sky in deep crimsons and violets, their light catching on her brown hair and making it glow like copper. Her hands rested on her swollen belly, now clearly visible beneath her flowing tunic at six months along.

His chest tightened at the sight. Their child. His heir. The miracle he never thought possible during those lonely years at the central surrogacy clinic. Now his mate carried their future within her.

Unable to resist any longer, Nirrn glided forward, his scaled chest pressing against her back as his arms encircled her. One hand splayed protectively over her rounded stomach while the other gripped her hip. His tail coiled loosely around her ankles,

anchoring her to him.

“You should rest,” he rumbled against her ear, though he made no move to pull her inside. The warmth of her body against his scales felt too perfect to disturb.

“I’m fine.” Islae leaned back into his embrace without hesitation, her head resting against his chest. “The baby likes the sunset.”

As if in response, Nirrn felt a flutter of movement beneath his palm. His breath caught, still amazed by every tiny kick and roll. “Strong, like their mother.”

Islae turned in his arms, her brown eyes meeting his golden ones. Her fingers traced the scales along his shoulders, following their pattern down to where they disappeared at his forearms. “And like their father.” She pressed closer, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “Nirrn, you are my true home.”

Her words struck deep, making his tail coil tighter around her in response. After everything—the fighting, the running, and the claiming—she was finally, truly his. His mate. His home. His future.