



Naga Warrior's Mate

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Category: Romance, Paranormal

Description: Some warriors fight for glory. He fights for her.

Dernin was born to protect, not to entertain a bloodthirsty crowd.

Captured on Jorvla and forced into a brutal underground fighting ring, he's spent months battling for survival.

Until his next match comes with a prize he never expected.

Alaysia never believed in heroes. Sold as a trophy for the tournament's victor, she refuses to be another man's possession. But when a golden-scaled warrior steps between her and a monster, she sees a different kind of power.

One that offers not just survival but a chance at freedom.

Bound by circumstance, drawn by something deeper, they form an uneasy alliance. But in a world where the only rule is strength, winning the tournament is just the beginning.

Because escaping together is impossible... Unless they're willing to risk everything.

Total Pages (Source): 70

Page 1

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

Chapter 1

Dernin

TheacridstenhofJorvla's industrial district assaulted Dernin's senses as he slithered down the transport ramp with his fellow warriors. His tail muscles coiled and released with each movement, his golden scales gleaming under the harsh artificial lighting of the spaceport.

Commander Thex's tail thumped against the metal deck plates, drawing everyone's attention. "Listen up, warriors. Our mission here is critical. The human surrogate clinics and, more importantly, the women who use them need our protection."

Dernin's jaw clenched. He'd heard stories of exploitation, of women being coerced or misled. His golden eyes narrowed as he scanned the towering structures around them, already mapping potential security weaknesses.

"Each of you will be assigned a sector," Thex continued. "Your primary duty is to verify that all participants are willing and that proper compensation protocols are followed. We're not here to interfere with legitimate business, just to ensure everything stays above board."

The commander pulled up a holographic map of the district. "Dernin, you'll take Sector Seven. It's got the highest concentration of clinics and the most reported incidents."

"Understood, Commander." Dernin's tongue flicked out and tasted the air. The

metallic tang of the city mixed with something else—fear, perhaps, or desperation.

“Remember,” Thex’s voice grew stern, “these women provide an invaluable service to those who can’t carry their own young. They deserve our respect and protection.”

“What’s our protocol for suspected trafficking?” Dernin asked, his muscles tensing at the thought.

“Document and report first. We need solid evidence before we can act.” Thex’s tail coiled tightly.

“Won’t let you down, Commander.” Dernin straightened to his full height, towering over most of his fellow warriors. The weight of his responsibility settled on his broad shoulders.

Dernin coiled his powerful tail beneath him as he perched atop one of Sector Seven’s towering structures, surveying the streets below. The evening air carried traces of industrial waste mixed with the sweet perfume wafting from the human surrogate clinics.

“All clear on the eastern perimeter,” he reported through his comm unit. Pride swelled in his chest at how smoothly his first week of assignments had gone.

Kress’s voice crackled back. “Same here. Though I wouldn’t mind some action. Getting tired of watching humans shuffle in and out all day.”

“Better quiet than trouble,” Dernin responded, his muscles rippling as he shifted positions. “Besides, gives us time to learn the sector’s patterns.”

“Speaking like a true veteran already,” Sergeant Vrils chimed in from her position two blocks over. “Though I expected nothing less from our top graduate.”

Dernin's jaw clenched at the praise, but he allowed himself a small smile. He'd earned his position through countless hours of training and dedication.

Later that night, during their meal break, Dernin joined several fellow warriors at their designated rest point. His massive frame dwarfed the reinforced seating designed for various species.

"How's Sector Seven treating you?" Mira asked, her own scaled tail curled neatly beneath her.

"Like it was made for me." Dernin's golden eyes gleamed. "The layout provides excellent vantage points for surveillance."

"And excellent spots for showing off those muscles," Kress teased, earning a round of laughter.

"These muscles aren't for show." Dernin flexed deliberately, his golden scales reflecting the light. "They're tools, just like everything else we have at our disposal."

"Tools that haven't seen much use lately," Voss pointed out, but her tone was approving. "Though that's exactly what we want. Our presence alone deters most trouble."

Dernin nodded in agreement, relishing in that fact. Even if the assignment seemed routine, he knew their vigilance made a difference. Every peaceful day meant another day these clinics could operate safely, providing their vital services without exploitation.

The camaraderie among his fellow warriors felt natural, earned through shared purpose and mutual respect. As they bantered and shared observations about their sectors, Dernin felt his place among them solidify. He might be new to the unit, but

he'd already proven himself worthy of their trust.

The weeks flowed into a comfortable routine for Dernin. His powerful tail carried him across the rooftops of Sector Seven, where he'd established several prime surveillance points. The morning sun glinted off his golden scales as he completed another circuit of his patrol route.

Below, the steady stream of clinic visitors continued their daily business. His keen senses picked up fragments of conversation, monitoring for any signs of distress or coercion.

"Patrol Seven reporting in," he spoke into his comm unit. "All clear at the Marina District clinics."

"Copy that," Voss responded. "You're getting pretty comfortable up there. Aren't you?"

Page 2

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

“Just doing my job.” Dernin shifted positions, maintaining his vantage point over three different clinic entrances simultaneously. “Someone has to keep these streets safe.”

A group of warriors passed beneath his position, their tails leaving distinctive patterns in the dusty streets. Kress spotted him and waved.

“Show-off,” Kress called up. “Some of us have to patrol at ground level.”

Dernin’s low chuckle carried down to them. “Maybe if you’d paid more attention in tactical positioning training, you’d be up here, too.”

“Speaking of training,” Voss cut in through the comm, “the other warriors could use some pointers on urban surveillance. Care to demonstrate your technique later?”

“Of course.” Pride swelled in him at the request. His methods had already been noted and approved by command.

Later that afternoon, Dernin demonstrated proper positioning techniques to a group of warriors from another sector. His tail coiled beneath him as he explained the importance of multiple sight lines and escape routes.

“The key is to remain visible enough to deter trouble,” he instructed, “while maintaining the tactical advantage of height and coverage.”

One of the younger warriors raised her hand. “But what about when we need to move quickly?”

Dernin responded by executing a fluid movement across three different levels of architecture, his powerful form making the complex maneuver look effortless. “Your tail is your greatest asset. Learn to use it instinctively, and you’ll never lose your balance.”

The admiration in their eyes fed his confidence. He’d earned his position through dedication and skill, and now he could pass that knowledge on to others. This was what being a warrior meant—not just protecting but leading by example.

As dusk settled over Sector Seven, Kress slithered up to Dernin with an eager expression. “Hey, I hate to ask, but my mate’s wanting to have an early dinner. Mind if I head out early?”

“Go. I’ve got this covered.”

“You’re sure? It’s against protocol—”

“When have I ever not handled things?” Dernin’s strong tail coiled beneath him.

The final hours of patrol passed smoothly, and Dernin soon made his way back to the barracks. As he slithered through the streets of Jorvla, satisfaction coursed through him at his abilities and leadership. His mind wandered to the training session he’d led earlier, replaying the admiring looks from the other warriors.

The attack came without warning.

Something sticky and cold wrapped around his torso, pinning his arms. Before he could react, more viscous tendrils ensnared his tail. His nostrils filled with the putrid stench of Jorvlen secretions.

“What the—” His words cut off as a thick, slimy appendage forced itself between his

lips. The taste made him gag as another tendril covered his eyes.

Dernin thrashed, his powerful muscles straining against the restraints. But the more he struggled, the tighter they became. His heart hammered in his chest as multiple hands grabbed him, dragging him somewhere.

The ground changed beneath him—metal became stone and then dirt. The air grew colder and damper. His tongue flicked out instinctively, but the gag prevented him from picking up any scents beyond the overwhelming Jorvlen stench.

Voices muttered around him in the Jorvlen dialect, too low and gurgling for him to make out the words. His warrior training kicked in—count the steps, note the turns, maintain awareness. But the Jorvlens seemed to move in circles, deliberately confusing his sense of direction.

Shame burned through him. He'd let his guard down, gotten cocky. If he'd followed protocol, insisted Kress stay... The thought of his fellow warriors discovering his capture made his jaw clench against the gag.

The journey continued for what felt like hours, and his muscles screamed from the awkward position. Without his sight, every sound, every change in temperature or air current became magnified. Water dripped somewhere nearby, the echo suggesting a large, enclosed space.

This wasn't a random attack. They'd known his patrol route, known when he'd be vulnerable. The realization sent ice through his veins. Someone had been watching him, waiting for precisely this moment.

Chapter 2

Dernin

A sharp sting in his neck was the last thing Dernin remembered before darkness claimed him. His consciousness returned slowly, like swimming through murky water. The cold stone beneath his coiled tail brought him fully awake.

“Where...” His throat felt raw. His tongue flicked out and sampled his surroundings. The air tasted stale, carrying traces of mold and decay.

The holding cell measured barely ten feet across. Moisture seeped down rough-hewn walls, creating dark streaks in the stone. A single light panel flickered overhead, casting uneven shadows.

Page 3

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

Dernin pushed himself up, his muscles protesting the movement. His head throbbed where it had been struck at some point during the ambush. He reached up to touch the tender spot, his jaw clenching at the dried blood he found there.

“You disappoint me, warrior.” The voice came from beyond the metal bars. A Jorvlen guard stood there, its slimy, bulky form rippling with amusement. “I expected more of a fight.”

“Remove these bars,” Dernin’s voice came out as a low growl, “and I’ll show you exactly what I’m capable of.”

The guard laughed. “Save that energy. You’ll need it soon enough.”

Dernin’s tail coiled beneath him in agitation as he assessed his prison cell. The bars looked sturdy, but the mounting brackets showed signs of rust. The stone walls might provide grip points for climbing if he could find the right moment. His captors had stripped him of his weapons and comm unit, but they couldn’t take away his training.

“The others will come looking for me,” he said, more to himself than the guard.

“Oh? Like your patrol partner?” The guard’s form rippled again. “The one who left you alone? Face it, warrior. You’re exactly where we want you.”

Shame and anger warred in Dernin’s chest. The guard was right—his own overconfidence had led to this. But whatever these Jorvlens had planned, they’d learn the hard way that capturing him was their first mistake.

A bundle of fabric suddenly sailed through the metal bars and landed in front of Dernin. Another Jorvlen guard materialized from the shadows.

“Put those on, snake,” the guard gurgled. “You’ll need them where you’re going.”

Dernin tasted the air again with his tongue, searching for any more clues about his present location. But there was none. Reluctantly, Dernin picked up the clothes. They carried the metallic tang of old blood mixed with sweat. His scales bristled as he unfolded what appeared to be fighting gear—practical, reinforced fabric allowing freedom of movement.

“What is this?” Dernin’s tail coiled tighter beneath him.

“Welcome to the underground.” The guard’s form jiggled with amusement. “Hope you like to fight.”

Before Dernin could respond, footsteps echoed down the corridor. A figure emerged from the darkness—tall and dressed in expensive synthetics. Power radiated from his presence, but it wasn’t the honorable kind Dernin recognized from his commander. This was something altogether more predatory.

“I am Kingpin Fyret,” the figure announced, his voice carrying the weight of someone accustomed to being obeyed. “And you belong to me now.”

Dernin’s muscles tensed. “I belong to no one. I am a warrior of Nirum.”

“Was.” Fyret’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Now you’re my newest acquisition. You’ll fight in my ring, entertain my guests, make me money.”

“I refuse.”

“Refuse?” Fyret laughed, the sound bouncing off the stone walls. “This isn’t a negotiation, warrior. You’ll fight because that’s what you’re good at. You’ll fight because that’s all you have left now.”

Dernin rose to his full height, his golden scales catching what little light filtered into the cell. “You underestimate what I’m capable of.”

“No.” Fyret’s expression hardened. “You underestimate what I’m capable of. Put on the clothes. Your first fight starts in an hour.”

The roar of the crowd hit Dernin like a physical force as the guards shoved him into the fighting ring. He tasted blood, sweat, and fear in the air. The arena was circular, maybe thirty feet across, with walls too high and smooth to climb. Above, behind reinforced barriers, spectators waved credit chips and shouted numbers.

His opponent, a hulking Kraxen with thick arms and chitinous armor, circled him. The creature’s mandibles clicked in anticipation.

“Fight!” The command boomed through hidden speakers.

Dernin’s tail coiled beneath him as he took a defensive stance. He wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of—

The Kraxen’s fist whistled past his head. Dernin weaved, dodging another strike. His opponent was fast, but Dernin was faster. He blocked a third punch with his forearm, the impact jarring his bones.

“What’s wrong, snake?” The Kraxen’s mandibles clicked. “Too noble to fight back?”

Dernin’s jaw clenched. He slipped under another wild swing, his movements fluid and controlled. The crowd’s disappointment rolled over him in waves.

“Fight properly!” Fyret’s voice cut through the crowd. “Or we’ll find other ways to motivate you.”

The Kraxen’s next attack caught him in the ribs. Pain exploded through his side.

Page 4

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

Something inside Dernin snapped. His tail whipped out, catching the Kraxen's legs. As his opponent stumbled, Dernin struck. His fist connected with the creature's thorax, finding the weak spot between armor plates. The Kraxen wheezed.

Dernin pressed his advantage. He grabbed one of the Kraxen's arms, using the creature's momentum to slam it into the arena wall. His tail wrapped around another arm, immobilizing it.

"Yield," Dernin growled.

The Kraxen spat and thrashed. Dernin tightened his grip, his muscles straining against his opponent's strength.

"I said yield!"

The Kraxen's free arm went limp. "I...yield."

The crowd erupted in a mix of cheers and angry shouts as guards rushed in to separate them. Dernin's chest heaved as they grabbed his arms, but he didn't resist. He'd won without killing—small comfort.

As they led him from the arena, Dernin caught Fyret's calculating stare. The kingpin's smile promised this was only the beginning.

The guards shoved Dernin into a larger holding area, his tail sliding across the rough stone floor. The room stank of sweat and desperation, mixed with the distinct odor of various species crammed together. Other fighters lounged on metal benches bolted to

the walls or paced in tight circles, their movements carrying the restless energy of caged predators.

A Jorvlen approached, his bulky form rippling with each step. Filaments along his slimy skin twitched as he moved. The creature's scent carried notes of violence and old blood.

"Fresh meat." The Jorvlen's deep voice gurgled. "I'm Bariv. That was quite a show you put on."

"I don't perform for anyone's entertainment," Dernin growled.

"That's what they all say." Bariv's form pulsed with amusement. "Yet here you are, same as us. Fighting. Surviving."

"I won't be here long." Dernin's jaw clenched.

"Planning an escape?" Bariv leaned closer, his voice dropping to a wet whisper. "Three fighters tried last month. Want to know what happened to them? Their pieces decorated the ring for days. Made quite an impression on the crowd."

Dernin's muscles tensed, but he held his ground. "I'm not like the others."

"No?" Bariv circled him, filaments writhing. "You're exactly like us. Property. The sooner you accept that, the longer you'll live. Fyret owns you now, warrior. Your honor, your pride—none of that matters here. Only the fight matters."

"You sound like someone who's given up."

Bariv's form rippled violently. "I sound like someone who's survived. But by all means, keep your delusions. They'll make it more entertaining when Fyret breaks

you.”The Jorvlen then moved away.

Dernin coiled his tail under him as he settled into a corner of the holding cell, his golden scales scraping against the rough stone wall. The constant drip of water from somewhere above matched the rhythm of his mounting frustration.

“Stupid,” he muttered, running a hand over his face. “So damned stupid.”

The taste of his own failure lingered bitter on his tongue. A warrior’s first lesson: Never patrol alone. Yet he’d dismissed it like some fresh recruit.

His jaw tightened as he watched the other fighters mill about the cell. The air hung thick with the stench of fear and resignation.

“I’m a warrior of Nirum,” he whispered to himself. “And warriors find a way.”

He flexed his muscles, testing the soreness from his recent fight. The Kraxen had landed some solid hits, but nothing was broken. He could work with that.

“They expect me to break,” he said under his breath, his tail tightening with renewed determination. “But they don’t understand what it means to be Niri.”

He’d find a way out—not through brute force like the others had tried but with patience and precision. The warrior way.

Chapter 3

Alaysia

The rough fabric of the blindfold scratched against Alaysia’s eyelids as unseen hands guided her forward. Her bare feet padded across what felt like polished stone, cool

and smooth beneath her toes. The air shifted—warmer, stuffier—suggesting they'd entered a room.

Page 5

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

The hands released her shoulders. Heavy footsteps echoed and then a door clicked shut behind her. The silence pressed in, broken only by the soft whisper of expensive fabric and the measured breathing of someone else in the room.

“My latest acquisition,” a voice purred from somewhere to her left. “I am Kingpin Fyret, your new owner.”

Footsteps circled her, deliberate and slow. Alaysia’s skin prickled. Though she couldn’t see him, she sensed his gaze crawling over her body. Her fingers curled into fists at her sides.

“Such exotic coloring,” Fyret mused. “That hair—such a bright red. Rare among humans. No wonder you went for such a high price at the auction house.”

The footsteps stopped. A waft of spiced cologne preceded his presence as he moved closer. Alaysia fought the urge to step back, knowing it would only amuse him. Her heart hammered against her ribs.

His breath fanned across her neck, hot and damp. He inhaled deeply, like a predator savoring the scent of prey. The tip of his nose brushed her skin, sending a violent shudder through her body.

“Perfect,” he whispered, his lips nearly grazing her ear. “You’ll do nicely.”

Alaysia’s throat constricted. Her mother’s warnings about the cruel whims of powerful men echoed in her mind.

Fyret's fingers soon brushed against Alaysia's temple as he untied the blindfold. The fabric slipped away, and she blinked against the sudden light. The office materialized around her—all polished wood and gleaming metal, wealth dripping from every surface. A massive desk dominated the space, carved from what looked like expensive wood.

Fyret stepped back slightly, and Alaysia's muscles coiled tightly, preparing for him to reach for her clothes next. Instead, he circled back to lean against his desk, crossing his arms with a satisfied smirk.

"You're probably wondering why you're here." He gestured to an ornate chair. "Sit."

Alaysia remained standing, her chin lifted. "I'd prefer not to."

"Spirited. Good." His lips curved. "You'll need that fire. You see, you're not here for the usual...entertainment. You're going to be something far more valuable—the grand prize."

The words hit her like cold water. "Grand prize?"

"For my tournament." Pride colored his voice. "The winner gets you—permanently. My fighters need proper motivation, you understand. Nothing drives a male quite like the promise of such a...unique reward."

Bile rose in Alaysia's throat. The room seemed to tilt sideways as the full meaning sank in. She'd be passed over like a trophy, handed off to whatever brute managed to beat the others into submission.

"And if I refuse?"

Fyret's laugh scraped against her ears. "Refuse? My dear, you're property. The only

choice you have is whether to accept your role with grace or make things unnecessarily difficult for yourself.”

“I’m not property.”The words came out steady despite the tremor in her hands.“I’m a person.”

“No, a human.”He waved dismissively.“Which makes you property by law.But don’t worry.I’ll make sure whoever wins you is worthy of such a prize.”

Fyret pressed a button on his desk, and the door swung open.Two Jorvlen guards entered, their heavy boots thudding against the polished floor.The taller one’s scarred face twisted into a leer as his gaze landed on Alaysia.

“Take her to the slave area.”Fyret’s voice hardened.“And spread the word—anyone who touches her before the tournament ends will answer to me personally.She’s to remain...pristine for the winner.”

The shorter guard grabbed Alaysia’s arm.She yanked away, earning a warning squeeze.

“I can walk on my own.”The words came out sharp enough to cut glass.

“Feisty little thing.”The scarred guard chuckled.“Sure you don’t want us to break her in a bit first, boss?”

Fyret’s eyes narrowed.“Did I stutter?She’s worth more untouched.Now get her out of my sight.”

Before long, they escorted her down a dimly lit corridor.The air grew thick with the scent of sweat and blood.The underground fighting rings weren’t far.Alaysia’s stomach churned.Her mother had warned her about these places, where slaves were

forced to fight until their bodies gave out.

The guards' boots echoed off stone walls as they descended deeper into the complex. Other slaves pressed themselves against the walls as they passed, their eyes downcast. None dared meet her gaze.

“Fresh meat,” someone whispered.

“Poor thing won't last long.”

Page 6

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

“Shut it,” the scarred guard barked, and the whispers died.

Alaysia’s mind raced, mapping their route. Three right turns, one left, down two flights of stairs. The complex was a maze, but every maze had an exit. She just had to find it.

“Lucky you,” the shorter guard sneered, his breath hot against her ear. “Getting to be some champion’s prize. Better than ending up in the rings yourself.”

Alaysia’s lip curled. “I’d rather fight.”

The guards laughed, the sound bouncing off the walls. “Careful what you wish for, pretty thing.”

The guards soon pushed Alaysia through a doorway with a heavy metal door. It appeared to be the slaves’ living quarters. The space opened into a common area filled with worn furniture. The musty air carried traces of cheap soap and desperation.

A woman with graying temples and sharp eyes approached, her movements slow but purposeful. “I’m Marcella. You must be our...prize.” She dismissed the guards with a wave. “I’ll take it from here.”

Alaysia’s shoulders remained tense until the door clanged shut behind the guards. Her fingernails dug half-moons into her palms.

“Come.” Marcella guided her to a secluded corner where a threadbare couch sagged against the wall. “You’re safe here, at least from unwanted advances.”

“Safe?” Alaysia’s laugh came out hollow.

“Fyret’s word is iron, dear. No one will touch you before the tournament ends.” Marcella’s gray eyes softened. “He may be a monster, but he’s a businessman first. Damaged goods don’t fetch top coin for him.”

The couch creaked as Alaysia sank into it. Her mother’s lessons on survival echoed in her head—adapt, endure, wait for opportunity. “And after the tournament ends?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.” Marcella settled beside her. “For now, you’ve got me watching your back. The other girls, too. We take care of our own here.”

“Why?” Alaysia studied the older woman’s face. “You don’t know me.”

Marcella’s hand found Alaysia’s shoulder, squeezing gently. “Sometimes, having someone in your corner makes all the difference between breaking and surviving.”

The knot in Alaysia’s stomach loosened slightly. She wasn’t alone. It wasn’t much, but it was something to hold on to in this underground hell.

“Thank you,” she whispered, meaning it despite her lingering anger and worry.

“Rest now.” Marcella stood and walked away.

Alaysia got up from the couch and walked over to the sleeping area. Several bunk beds were lined up in rows. She climbed onto the top bunk of one, the thin mattress creaking under her weight. The scratchy blanket rubbed against her skin as she lay down. Water stains created abstract patterns above her, and she traced them with her eyes, her mind spinning with possibilities.

Three right turns, one left, down two flights. The route played on repeat in her head. She'd need to know every detail to find her way back out. The guards' patrol patterns, the timing of shift changes—all crucial pieces of the puzzle.

The ventilation system hummed overhead. Alaysia mapped its path with her eyes, noting the size of the ducts. Too small for escape, but maybe useful for hiding something. Her fingers absently traced the metal frame of her bunk. Sharp edges could become tools with enough patience.

Marcella meant well, but survival wasn't enough. Not anymore. Alaysia refused to be passed around like a trophy, refused to accept the fate others had chosen for her. The tournament wouldn't happen for a while—plenty of time to learn the rhythms of this place, to find its weaknesses.

She closed her eyes, pretending to sleep while her mind cataloged everything she'd seen. Any little detail could be the difference between freedom and the unknown.

Let them think she'd accepted her role. Let them believe she was just another pretty prize waiting to be claimed. They'd learn too late that she was something else entirely—a survivor, yes, but more importantly, a fighter.

Chapter 4

Alaysia

A sharp jolt yanked Alaysia from sleep the following morning. Marcella's face hovered inches from hers, lined with urgency.

“Up. Now.”

Alaysia's muscles protested as she climbed down from the top bunk. The cold floor

shocked her bare feet. “What’s happening?”

“Bath time. Fyret wants you presentable,” Marcella replied firmly.

Page 7

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

They soon walked through winding corridors, each step echoing against stone walls. Alaysia counted the turns—right, left, up a narrow staircase. Different from yesterday's route.

The private chamber sparkled with polished marble and gold fixtures. Steam rose from a sunken bath filled with rose-scented water.

“Strip now,” Marcella ordered, her voice gentler than before.

Alaysia reluctantly complied, removing her worn linen dress. She stepped toward the sunken bath with hesitation.

The water enveloped her in silken warmth when she finally entered. Two attendants soon scrubbed her skin raw with pumice stones and sweet-smelling oils.

“Careful with her hair,” Marcella barked at an attendant wielding a comb. “It's her best feature.”

“My best feature is my ability to throw a punch,” Alaysia muttered.

Marcella's lips twitched. “Save that spirit. You'll need it.”

After the bath, they dressed her in an emerald silk dress that clung to every curve. The neckline plunged dangerously low, exposing her cleavage.

“Hold still.” Marcella fastened a delicate gold chain around Alaysia's neck. It felt like a collar.

“I look like a prize animal at auction,” Alaysia said, examining her reflection.

“You look valuable.” Marcella met Alaysia’s eyes in the mirror as she worked through her damp hair, arranging the red waves to frame her face.

Alaysia touched her dress. It restricted her movement, making her vulnerable. But vulnerability could be a weapon, too. Let them think she was just something pretty to look at.

“There.” Marcella stepped back to examine her work. “Beautiful.”

The crowd parted as Alaysia walked through, her emerald dress swishing against the polished floor. Every step felt like walking on needles in the heeled shoes they’d forced her to wear. The fighting ring’s main hall buzzed with activity—gambling, drinking, and deal-making happening in every corner.

Marcella’s presence beside her was both a comfort and a cage. “Eyes forward,” she murmured. “Don’t engage.”

A drunk Jorvlen reached for Alaysia’s hair. Marcella’s hand shot out, blocking his path. “The prize is not to be touched.”

The way they looked at her made her skin crawl. Like she was meat at the market. She kept her chin high, though, counting exits and noting guard positions. Three doors to the east, heavily watched. Two to the west, less security but required crossing the main floor.

They climbed carpeted stairs to a private viewing box. The elevated position gave her a perfect view of both the fighting ring and the crowd below. Plush velvet chairs lined the railing.

“Sit,” Marcella commanded, positioning herself between Alaysia and the box’s entrance.

Below, two fighters circled each other in the sand-covered ring. Blood already stained the ground from earlier matches. The larger competitor lunged, his fist connecting with a sickening crunch.

“This is barbaric,” Alaysia whispered.

“This is business,” Marcella replied flatly.

A roar went up from the crowd as one fighter went down. Alaysia’s stomach turned at the spray of blood.

As the fighting matches continued, Marcella told Alaysia about the different fighters as well as their strengths and weaknesses.

“That one there,” Marcella pointed to a scarred fighter with cybernetic enhancements, “fights dirty. Keeps plasma charges in his artificial arm. Half the time they malfunction and explode in his face.”

Alaysia leaned forward, her silk dress rustling against the velvet chair. She studied the various combatants. Any intel on them might be useful to her later.

“The tall one with the tentacles? Slower than he looks. Gets tangled up in his own limbs when he’s tired.” Marcella’s commentary continued as fighters rotated through matches.

The crowd’s roar shifted to hushed whispers as the next fighter emerged. Alaysia’s breath caught in her throat. A Naga entered the ring, his powerful tail leaving serpentine patterns in the bloodstained sand. Golden scales caught the harsh arena

lights, creating an ethereal shimmer across his muscled torso. Each movement was precise, calculated, deadly grace personified.

Her fingers gripped the chair's armrest as he circled his opponent. The Naga's jaw clenched, his golden eyes focused with predatory intensity. A network of small scars marked his skin—testament to countless battles. His opponent, a burly Jorvlen, charged forward with a battle cry.

Page 8

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

The Naga moved like liquid gold. His tail swept low, knocking the Jorvlen off balance. In the same fluid motion, his upper body twisted, delivering a devastating strike. The fight was brutal, efficient, and beautiful.

Sweat gleamed on the Naga's skin. His muscles rippled as he grappled with his opponent, using his superior strength and agility to his advantage. Alaysia found herself holding her breath, mesmerized by the raw power on display.

The match ended swiftly. The Jorvlen lay unconscious in the sand while the Naga stood victorious, his chest heaving from exertion.

"The house always wins," Marcella continued her commentary, but Alaysia barely heard her.

She couldn't tear her eyes away from the Naga as he left the ring, his tail leaving another intricate pattern in the sand. The memory of those golden scales and fierce eyes burned into her mind. Something about him seemed different from the other fighters—less savage, more controlled. More dangerous.

Before long, the last match ended with a thunderous cheer from the crowd. Alaysia's feet ached in the heeled shoes as she followed Marcella down from the viewing box. The emerald silk of her dress whispered against her legs with each careful step on the stairs.

"That Naga warrior," Alaysia said, keeping her voice low as they navigated through the dispersing crowd. "Who is he?"

“Dernin.” Marcella guided her past a group of rowdy gamblers collecting their winnings. “He showed up here six months ago. Rising star in the ring—undefeated so far.”

Alaysia’s steps faltered. “He’s a slave, too?”

“I’m not sure, but most of them are.” Marcella’s hand settled on her elbow, steadying her. “Some volunteer for the money and glory, but most?” She shook her head. “Captured, sold to pay debts, or tricked into contracts they can’t escape.”

The silk dress suddenly felt too tight, constricting. Alaysia watched a cleaning crew sweep blood-stained sand from the ring when they reached the ground level. She thought of Dernin’s controlled movements, the way he’d fought with precision rather than brutality. Not like the other fighters who seemed to revel in violence.

“He doesn’t belong here,” she murmured.

“None of us do.” Marcella’s voice carried a sharp edge. “But here we are.”

Alaysia’s heels clicked against the stone floor as she made her way through the dimly lit corridor toward the slave quarters. Her dress caught on rough patches of wall, making her curse under her breath.

A guard’s sharp whistle pierced the air. “Marcella! Fyret needs you.”

“The slave quarters are just past the holding cells. You remember the way?” Marcella asked.

“Down the corridor, left at the fork, and then right,” Alaysia replied without hesitation.

“Do you feel comfortable walking that short distance alone?” Marcella asked, her voice tinged with slight concern.

“Yes, I can handle myself,” Alaysia replied confidently.

Marcella nodded, and her footsteps soon faded away.

The musty scent of the underground level filled Alaysia’s nostrils. Water dripped somewhere in the darkness. Her skin prickled as she passed the holding cells, conscious of eyes following her movement.

“Well, what do we have here?”

The slimy voice froze her in place. His massive form blocked the corridor ahead, his filaments writhing in the dim light.

“Just heading back to quarters.” Alaysia kept her voice steady, though her heart started beating faster.

“Dressed like that?” His dark eyes roamed over her body. “Seems a waste to rush off.”

“I need to go.” She tried to step around him.

His hand shot out, pressing against the wall beside her head. His skin glistened with an oily sheen. “Come on, pretty thing. Let’s have some fun. My name’s Bariv, but you can call me anything you want.”

“I’m Fyret’s prize. No one’s allowed to touch me.” The words tasted bitter.

“What Fyret doesn’t know won’t hurt him.” His other hand reached for her hair.

Alaysia ducked away, her back hitting the cold stone wall. “Back off.”

Page 9

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

“Or what?” His bulk pressed closer, trapping her. The stench of his breath made her gag. “You gonna tell on me?”

Her fingers curled into fists. One good shot to his throat...

“Such fire.” Bariv’s filaments brushed against her cheek. “I like that.”

Chapter 5

Dernin

Blood dripped from Dernin’s knuckles as he slithered through the dimly lit corridor. The familiar stench of sweat and iron filled his nostrils, a constant reminder of what his life had become. His muscles ached from the fight, though he barely registered the pain anymore. It had become as routine as breathing.

“Another day, another victory,” he muttered, his voice hollow. The words held none of the pride they might have six months ago. He paused at a grimy mirror mounted on the wall, barely recognizing the hardened warrior staring back at him. His golden scales, once gleaming with pride, now bore the dull sheen of resignation.

“Look at yourself. Some warrior you turned out to be.” He clenched his jaw, a habit that had only grown worse during his captivity. The corridor’s torches cast dancing shadows across his scarred torso. Each mark was a testament to his fall from grace.

His tail dragged slightly against the stone floor, leaving a faint trail in the dust. He’d stopped maintaining the proud posture of a Niri warrior weeks ago. What was the

point?The only people who saw him now were other slaves and gamblers betting on whether he'd win or lose.

He shook his head.“Six months of fighting like a common street brawler.”The warrior code he'd lived by seemed like a distant dream now.Here, there was only survival, victory, and the next fight.

This was his world now, whether he liked it or not.

The flickering torchlight caught a flash of emerald silk and drew Dernin's attention down the corridor.His tongue flicked out instinctively, tasting perfume and fear in the air.A human woman with hair like flames stood backed against the stone wall.Her delicate hands were clenched into fists at her sides.Bariv loomed over her, his bulky frame blocking any escape route.

“What is going on over there?”Dernin muttered under his breath, his jaw clenching as he observed the scene.The woman's chest rose and fell rapidly, her breath coming in quick gasps.

Bariv's slimy filaments writhed as he reached for a lock of her hair.The silk of her dress rustled as she tried to move away, the sound carrying clearly to Dernin's sensitive ears.His scales bristled at the sight.

“Six months of standing by,” he growled softly to himself, his muscles coiling with tension.“Six months of watching.Not today.”

The woman's blue eyes darted around, seeking help, and for a brief moment, they locked with his.Something electric shot through him, awakening instincts he'd thought long buried under layers of survival and resignation.This wasn't just any human.Something about her seemed to call to the warrior he used to be.

His tail shifted, remembering his original mission on Jorvla. To protect. To serve. To guard human women from exactly this type of situation. The irony wasn't lost on him.

The filaments on Bariv's slimy skin undulated as he pressed closer to the woman, his vile intentions clear in every movement. Dernin's hands curled into fists.

Something primal stirred in him, something that had been dormant since his capture. The need to protect. The need to fight for something more than just survival.

Dernin's muscles flexed as he moved forward. Each motion was deliberate and controlled. The corridor seemed to shrink as he approached, his seven-foot-plus frame dominating the space.

"Step away from her, Bariv." His voice cut through the tension like a knife.

Bariv's filaments twitched as he turned, his bulk shifting to face Dernin. "Mind your own business, snake."

"This is my business now." Dernin's golden eyes narrowed, his jaw clenching. The scent of Bariv's aggression filled his nostrils, mixing with the human woman's fear.

"You forget your place here." Bariv's fingers flexed, his skin glistening in the torchlight. "Champion gets what champion wants."

Dernin's tail swept across the floor in a slow arc, ready to strike if needed. "Your title means nothing here. Back. Away. Now."

"Or what?" Bariv stepped closer to Dernin, leaving the woman pressed against the wall. "You want to settle this now? Because I've been itching to put you in your place."

The smart move would be to back down. Bariv hadn't lost a fight in two years. There was a reason he wore the champion's brand. But something in those blue eyes behind him made Dernin's warrior blood sing. Made him remember who he was before all this.

"Last warning," Dernin's scales bristled, catching the torchlight. "Walk away with your dignity intact."

"You threatening me?" Bariv's filaments writhed with rage. "I'll break you in half, snake."

Dernin's muscles coiled, ready for the explosion of violence he felt building. One wrong move and this would turn ugly fast. The champion was stronger, but Dernin was faster. If it came to blows...

Page 10

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

“No threats,” Dernin said, his voice deadly calm. “Just facts. The lady isn’t interested. And you’re going to leave. Now.”

Bariv’s face contorted with rage, his massive frame tensing. The space between them crackled with potential violence, like the moment before lightning struck.

Heavy footsteps soon echoed down the corridor as a guard rounded the corner, drawn by their confrontation. “What’s going on?”

Dernin’s scales rippled with satisfaction as he caught the guard’s recognition of the human woman.

“The redhead’s off limits, Bariv,” the guard barked. “Direct orders from Fyret himself. No one touches her.”

Bariv’s filaments writhed with barely contained rage. “This isn’t over,” he growled, shouldering past Dernin. His bulk cast a shadow across the stones as he stalked away.

The guard’s boots scraped against the stone floor as he continued his patrol, leaving them alone in the torch-lit corridor. Dernin’s tongue flicked out, tasting a hint of rose—her scent.

“Thank you,” she said softly, her voice steady despite what had just happened. She kept her distance, those striking blue eyes assessing him with careful consideration.

“I’m Dernin.” He inclined his head, making sure to keep his movements slow and nonthreatening. His warrior training had taught him how to appear less intimidating

when needed, despite his impressive height and build.

“Alaysia.” She pushed away from the wall but maintained the space between them. Her fingers twisted in her dress.

“Why did you help me?” The question carried an edge of suspicion that made his jaw clench.

“Because it was the right thing to do.” His golden eyes met hers. “And Bariv’s a piece of work who needed to be put in his place.”

She studied him for a few moments, her head tilted slightly. Something sparked between them in that moment—an understanding, perhaps, or recognition.

“You’re not like the others here,” she said, a statement rather than a question.

“Neither are you.” The words came unbidden, but they felt true.

Alaysia’s silk dress rustled as she took a small step closer to Dernin. His scales tingled at her proximity, every sense attuned to her movements.

“I watched you fight earlier,” she said, her blue eyes meeting his without fear. “The way you move...it’s different from the other fighters. More controlled. More purposeful.”

Dernin’s chest swelled with an old familiar pride. His tail shifted against the floor, maintaining perfect balance as he turned to face her fully.

“You know something about fighting?” The question came out deeper than intended, his interest piqued.

“I know enough to recognize skill when I see it.” A smile played at the corners of her mouth. “That last move, when you used your opponent’s momentum against him—that wasn’t just brute force. That was strategy.”

His jaw unclenched slightly. Most spectators only saw the violence, the blood. She had seen the art beneath it. “In true combat, strength means nothing without—”

“Alaysia!” Marcella’s voice cut through their conversation. The older woman hurried down the corridor, her practical shoes clicking against stone. “We need to go. Now.”

Alaysia’s spine straightened, though her eyes lingered on Dernin’s face. “I have to—”

“Now,” Marcella insisted, taking Alaysia’s arm.

Dernin watched them hurry away, his eyes tracking the flash of red hair until it disappeared around the corner. The scent of roses lingered in the air, teasing his senses.

The warrior in him recognized something in her—a fighter’s spirit wrapped in silk and beauty. But there was more. Something made his scales ripple with awareness and woke the protective instincts he’d thought buried under months of survival.

He needed to know more about her. About the woman who saw past the slave fighter to the warrior beneath.

Chapter 6

Dernin

Sweat dripped down Dernin’s scales on his back as he coiled his tail beneath him, joining the other fighters in the ring. The day’s matches had left him sore but

satisfied.He'd dominated his opponent with a swift combination of strikes that ended the fight in minutes.The cheering still echoed in his ears, though now they waited in expectant silence.

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

Fyret strutted into the ring, his expensive boots kicking up the sand. The kingpin's gaudy rings caught the light of the arena as he raised his arms.

"My dear patrons!" His voice boomed through the arena. "You've witnessed spectacular battles today, but they pale in comparison to what's coming."

Dernin tasted the anticipation in the air. Beside him, a brutish Kolgari fighter shifted his weight, making the chains on his wrists jingle.

"Today marks the beginning of our annual tournament!" Fyret's announcement drew excited murmurs from the crowd. "Seven matches. Single elimination. One champion."

"Think you can last seven matches, snake?" The Kolgari sneered.

Dernin's golden eyes narrowed. "I'll do more than last."

"The tournament begins tomorrow!" Fyret continued, turning to look at the fighters. "Each victory brings you closer to the ultimate prize. Who among you has the strength, the skill, the determination to claim glory?"

Bariv pushed his way to the front of the gathered fighters, his chest puffed out. "The prize is already mine."

Dernin's scales rippled with irritation. His muscles tensed, ready for action despite his exhaustion. He'd faced worse odds in battle. Seven matches? He'd survived months of endless fighting already.

“The bracket will be posted tonight,” Fyret announced.

Fyret’s smile then widened as he gestured toward the side entrance. “And now, my esteemed fighters, behold!”

Dernin’s breath caught in his throat. Alaysia stepped into the ring, the midnight blue silk of her dress catching the light like water under moonlight. Her red hair cascaded down her back in waves, adorned with small crystal pins that sparkled with each graceful step. The dress hugged her curves, the fabric whispering against the sand as she moved.

His tail coiled tighter beneath him as his muscles tensed. The warrior code he’d sworn to uphold six months ago screamed in his mind—protect the innocent, defend those who cannot defend themselves. He’d failed to fulfill his vow when he was captured. He wouldn’t fail again.

“The champion of this tournament,” Fyret announced, taking Alaysia’s hand, “will claim this exquisite creature as their prize.”

Dernin’s jaw clenched as he watched Alaysia’s subtle flinch at Fyret’s touch. Her blue eyes scanned the crowd of fighters, stopping briefly when they met his golden gaze. He saw steel in those eyes, despite her circumstances.

“Like I said,” Bariv growled, “already mine.”

“Over my dead body,” Dernin muttered, his voice low enough that only those nearest could hear.

The heat of protective fury coursed through his veins. This wasn’t just about redemption anymore. Something stirred deep within him when he looked at Alaysia standing there—something primal and fierce that went beyond duty or honor. She

wasn't just another human to protect. She was...more.

"Let the anticipation build," Fyret proclaimed. "Tomorrow, we begin!"

As guards escorted Alaysia from the ring, she glanced back over her shoulder. Their eyes met again, and Dernin's resolve hardened like forged steel. He would win this tournament. He would protect her. And then, somehow, they would both taste freedom again.

Later that night, Dernin's tail scraped against the rough stone floor as he studied the tournament bracket posted on the wall. The flickering torchlight cast shadows across the parchment, but the matchups were clear enough. His golden scales reflected the orange glow as he traced his path through the brackets with a callused finger.

"First fight tomorrow," a gravelly voice behind him said. "Against Kren."

The speaker was another fighter, a scarred Velken with cybernetic implants glinting in the dim light.

"The Kolgari brute?" Dernin's muscles tightened at the memory of watching Kren fight. The beast had torn through his last three opponents like paper.

"That's right. Better say your prayers, snake."

"Save your concern," Dernin muttered.

His eyes tracked further up the bracket. If he won against Kren, he'd likely face T'zar, the four-armed Darzios warrior.

The image of Alaysia in that silk dress suddenly flashed through his mind. The way she'd held her head high despite being paraded around like property. The fire in her

eyes when she'd looked at him.

"You're wasting your time," the Velken said. "Bariv's got this locked down. Always does."

"Things can change," Dernin replied. His warrior training hadn't prepared him for underground fighting rings, but it had taught him one thing. Victory went to the one who wanted it most, and nothing in his life had ever mattered more than winning this tournament.

Page 12

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

He memorized the bracket, noting potential weaknesses in each opponent. Seven fights stood between him and victory.

Tomorrow morning, it would begin. He'd need every ounce of strength, every trick he'd learned in six months of ring fighting. But for her—for Alaysia—he'd find a way.

His jaw clenched. "I'm coming for you, Bariv," he whispered to the empty corridor. "And this time, I won't stop until you're broken."

The large holding room's stale air carried the familiar mix of sweat, blood, and anticipation the following morning. Dernin stretched his powerful tail across the stone floor, his golden scales gleaming in the dim light as he focused on his pre-fight routine. His muscles flexed as he worked through a series of exercises. He cleared his mind of everything except his goal.

Bariv's voice cut through the tense atmosphere. "When I win, that pretty little redhead's going to learn to like me real quick."

The slimy Jorvlen's filaments twitched as he paced the room, addressing anyone who'd listen. Dernin kept his eyes closed and channeled his rising anger into controlled breathing.

"Hey, snake!" Bariv called out. "Maybe I'll let you watch while I break her in. Show you how a real champion claims his prize."

A few of the other fighters snickered, but Dernin remained still, his jaw taut. The

image of Alaysia's fierce blue eyes flooded his mind, strengthening his determination. She wasn't some trophy to be claimed. She was a person.

"What's wrong? Tongue tied?" Bariv's heavy footsteps approached. "Or maybe you're finally accepting that you don't stand a chance."

Dernin opened his eyes, fixing them on the far wall as he continued his stretches. His voice came out low and steady. "Save your breath, Bariv. You'll need it when you're choking on sand in the ring."

"Big words from someone who's about to face Kren." Bariv's filaments writhed. "Hope you've said your goodbyes."

"Unlike you," Dernin replied, finally rising to his full height and towering over Bariv, "I don't need to talk about winning. I just win."

He turned away, effectively dismissing Bariv as he focused on wrapping his hands. The tournament wasn't about proving anything to this braggart. It was about protecting Alaysia, about finally doing what he'd sworn to do when he first came to Jorvla. Everything else was just noise.

A guard appeared at the entrance. "Bariv! You're up."

After a few minutes, Dernin slithered through the dark corridor toward the arena, his strong tail propelling him forward with silent efficiency. The crowd's cheering grew louder with each yard. He positioned himself in the shadows near one of the fighter viewing areas.

Bariv strutted into the ring, his filaments twitching with anticipation. His opponent, a lean Sytheran with metallic skin, circled warily.

“Watch and learn how a champion fights,” another slave fighter whispered to his companion.

The Sytheran lunged first, quick as lightning, but Bariv caught the punch with ease. What followed was brutal efficiency that even Dernin had to admire from a tactical standpoint. Bariv’s fighting style was all power moves and crushing holds, using his superior strength to maximum advantage.

The Sytheran never stood a chance. Within minutes, Bariv had him pinned, one knee pressed into his throat until he tapped out.

“First round goes to Bariv!” The announcer’s voice boomed. “Our champion advances!”

Dernin cataloged every move he’d witnessed, storing the information away for later use. Bariv favored his right side and telegraphed his kicks slightly before launching them—small details that could make the difference between victory and defeat.

“That’s how it’s done!” Bariv shouted to the crowd, his filaments pulsing with victory. “Who’s next?”

Dernin turned away, his muscles coiled tightly with determination. Bariv was good—better than good—but he had weaknesses. Everyone did. And Dernin would exploit every single one of them when the time came.

Chapter 7

Alaysia

The plumsatindress hugged against Alaysia’s body as she shifted in her seat, the fabric catching the light from the arena below. Her fingers traced the gilded arms of her

chair in the private viewing box. She tried to ground herself as Bariv's massive form dominated the ring.

The Sytheran opponent's metallic skin flashed under the lights as he ducked and weaved, but Bariv's brute strength proved overwhelming. Each thunderous impact of his fists against the Sytheran's chest sent vibrations through the viewing box floor.

"No, no, no," Alaysia muttered. She pressed herself back as if trying to disappear into the cushions.

The crowd roared as Bariv landed a decisive blow. The Sytheran fell to the ground. Bariv pinned him with one knee pressing into his throat until he tapped out. Bariv raised his arms in victory, his filaments moving with excitement as he soaked in the applause.

"This can't be happening." Her words were barely a whisper, lost in the thunderous cheering below.

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

From her elevated position, she could see every detail of Bariv's triumphant posturing—the flex of his muscled form, the way his slimy skin caught the light, the predatory satisfaction in his stance. When he turned toward her viewing box, she instinctively shrank back into the shadows. Her stomach knotted as Bariv made a show of bowing in her direction before leaving the ring.

Below, slave workers dragged the broken Sytheran from the ring as announcers prepared the crowd for the next match. Alaysia hardly heard them, too focused on steadying her breathing and fighting back the wave of panic threatening to overwhelm her.

Alaysia jumped slightly as Marcella slipped into the viewing box, carrying a tray with water and fruit. "Oh, I'm sorry to startle you dear."

The older woman's presence brought a small measure of comfort but couldn't entirely dispel the cold dread that had settled in her.

"I can't let him win," Alaysia whispered. "You didn't see how he looked at me, Marcella. Like I was already his property."

Marcella set the tray down and took the seat beside her. "Tell me what happened."

"He cornered me when you were gone. The way he talked, the things he said..." Alaysia shuddered, remembering Bariv's filaments wriggling with excitement as he'd invaded her space. "If Dernin hadn't stepped in..."

Marcella's eyebrows furrowed in suspicion. "That's interesting."

“Is it?” Alaysia’s blue eyes narrowed. “He could be just as bad as Bariv for all I know.”

“Or maybe he’s exactly who he appears to be—someone who’s just trying to protect others.”

Alaysia crossed her arms. “Since when has any male in this place done anything that wasn’t self-serving?”

“You’re not wrong to be cautious,” Marcella replied. “But I’ve watched Dernin these past months. He’s different from the others. Maybe even honorable.”

“Honor?” Alaysia’s laugh held no humor. “What good is honor in a place like this? I won’t be anyone’s prize, Marcella. Not Bariv’s, not Dernin’s, not anyone’s.”

“Of course you won’t.” Marcella’s voice was gentle. “But until we figure something out, having someone like Dernin in your corner might not be the worst thing.”

Alaysia remembered how Dernin had placed himself between her and Bariv, his presence protective rather than possessive.

Alaysia found herself leaning forward in her seat as Dernin entered the ring, his golden scales shining in the harsh arena lights. Her fingers twisted in the plum satin of her dress as Kren stomped in from the opposite entrance. The Kolgari’s stone-like skin was covered in crystalline patterns. His massive frame dwarfed Dernin’s impressive height as they stood face-to-face squaring off.

“Come on,” she whispered, surprising herself with the intensity of her investment. “Show me what you can do.”

The bell rang. Kren charged forward like an avalanche, but Dernin’s tail propelled

him aside with fluid grace. The Kolgari's fist cracked the ground where Dernin had been moments before.

"That's it." Alaysia's knuckles whitened around the armrests as she tracked their movements.

Dernin landed three rapid hits to Kren's kidney area with his fists. The Kolgari barely flinched, spinning with shocking speed for his size and catching Dernin with a backhand that sent him sliding across the ring.

"No!" The word escaped before she could stop it. She pressed her hand to her mouth, conscious of Marcella's knowing look beside her.

Dernin recovered, using his momentum to right himself. Blood trickled from a cut above his eye, but his expression remained focused, calculating. He circled Kren, his tail leaving a trail in the sand.

"He's studying him," Alaysia murmured. "Looking for weaknesses."

Kren lunged again. This time Dernin met him head-on, shocking the crowd. His tail coiled around Kren's leg while he grappled with the bigger fighter's arms. For a moment, they were locked in a contest of pure strength.

"Are you crazy?" Alaysia hissed through clenched teeth. "You can't overpower him!"

But Dernin wasn't trying to overpower Kren. As the Kolgari pushed forward, Dernin suddenly released his grip and dropped, using Kren's own momentum against him. His tail yanked the brute's leg out from under him, sending him crashing face-first into the arena wall.

The crowd roared. Alaysia found herself on her feet, her heart pounding. She couldn't

explain the relief flooding through her at seeing Dernin gain the upper hand or why her breath caught when his golden eyes flicked briefly toward her viewing box.

“I shouldn’t care who wins,” she whispered to herself, but her eyes remained fixed on Dernin’s powerful form.

Alaysia’s breathing got faster as she watched Dernin press his advantage. His tail whipped through the air, catching Kren’s legs again and sending the massive Kolgari stumbling. Each movement was precise, purposeful—so different from Bariv’s brute force display earlier.

“He’s actually going to do it,” she whispered, leaning forward as she stood.

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

Dernin's muscles rippled as he dodged another of Kren's wild swings. The Kolgari's movements soon became sluggish. Dernin capitalized on this and struck like lightning, his fist connecting with Kren's jaw. The impact echoed through the arena.

Kren dropped to his knees. The crowd erupted as Dernin coiled his tail around the Kolgari's throat, applying just enough pressure until Kren tapped out.

A strange warmth bloomed in Alaysia's chest as she watched Dernin release his opponent immediately. No showboating, no unnecessary violence. Just clean, efficient skill.

"If someone has to win..." she muttered and then caught herself. "What am I thinking? I shouldn't want any of them to win."

Dernin turned toward her viewing box and bowed, his golden scales catching the light. Unlike Bariv's mocking gesture earlier, this felt...different. Respectful. Her cheeks flushed.

"Well, well," Marcella's knowing tone made Alaysia's spine stiffen. "Seems our Naga fighter has taken quite an interest in you."

"That's the whole point. Isn't it?" Alaysia's voice came out sharper than intended. "I'm the prize they're all fighting for."

"Mmhmm. And I'm sure that's exactly why he defended you from Bariv before he even knew about the tournament."

Alaysia watched Dernin exit the ring, his movements fluid despite the beating he'd taken. She remembered the gentle way he'd spoken to her, how he'd maintained a respectful distance even while protecting her.

"I don't know what to think anymore," she admitted softly, pressing her cool fingers to her heated cheeks.

The plum satin of her dress rustled as she shifted her weight, trying to process the conflicting emotions churning inside her.

"He didn't have to help me earlier. But for some reason he did," she murmured, more to herself than Marcella.

Her reflection in the glass caught her eye—flushed cheeks, bright eyes, red hair falling in waves past her shoulders. She touched her neck where Bariv's filaments had nearly brushed her skin, remembering how Dernin had positioned himself between them without hesitation.

"The way he fights is different too." She crossed her arms, analyzing what she'd witnessed. "No unnecessary brutality, no showing off. Just..." Her mind flickered to the deliberate and accurate movements, the way he'd released Kren the moment he'd submitted.

The crowd below began clearing out, and their excited chatter about the matches floated up to her position.

Maybe Marcella is right. Maybe he is different. But different how? And why?

She remembered the intensity in his golden eyes when he'd intervened with Bariv, the gentle tone of his voice when he'd spoken to her.

Nothing like the predatory gazes and crude comments she was used to receiving.

Alaysia sighed. Too many questions were left unanswered, too many pieces that didn't fit the pattern she'd come to expect from the fighters in this place.

"I need to know more," she whispered.

Chapter 8

Alaysia

The stone walls of the slave quarters felt especially confining as Alaysia paced the small area. Her satin dress swished with each turn, the sound grating on her already frayed nerves.

"Something's eating at you," Marcella said, watching from her perch on a worn wooden stool.

Alaysia's hands found their way to her hips. "It doesn't make sense. None of it does."

"What doesn't?"

"Dernin. The way he stepped in with Bariv." She stopped pacing, her blue eyes narrowing. "No one here does anything without an angle. So, what's his?"

"Maybe he told you the truth. Maybe he really did it because it was right."

"In this place?" Alaysia scoffed. "Right and wrong don't exist here. There has to be more to it." She resumed her pacing. "I need to talk to him."

"And how exactly do you plan to do that? You can't exactly waltz into the fighters'

quarters wearing that get-up.”

Page 15

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

A smile tugged at Alaysia's lips. "Then I'll need something less conspicuous."

Marcella sighed. "I'm becoming very familiar with that look. There's no talking you out of this. Is there?"

"Not a chance."

"Fine." Marcella disappeared into the adjacent room, returning with a bundle of cloth. "These belonged to one of the kitchen staff. Should help you blend in better."

The rough-spun fabric felt strange against Alaysia's skin after the satin, but the simple brown dress and apron would draw far less attention. She twisted her bright red hair into a tight bun, tucking it under a cloth cap.

"You're really going through with this?" Marcella asked as Alaysia checked her reflection in a clouded piece of glass.

"I need answers." She smoothed down the front of the dress. "And I'm not leaving anything to chance. Not when my future's at stake."

"Just be careful."

Alaysia's jaw set with determination. "I can handle myself."

Her heart pounded in her chest as she crept through the dimly lit corridor. The rough stone walls pressed close, channeling the musty air that carried the scent of sweat and iron. Ahead, Dernin's massive form paced the narrow space.

She drew in a steadying breath. “Dernin?”

He spun, his tail sweeping a graceful arc. His golden eyes widened as recognition sparked there. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“There’s an alcove around the corner. We need to talk.”

He hesitated but then followed her lead. The secluded space barely contained his bulk, forcing them close enough that she felt the heat radiating from his skin.

“Your fight today was incredible,” she said, studying the way his muscles tensed beneath his scales. “The way you moved...I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I have to win.” His jaw clenched. “The tournament—”

“Why?” She planted her hand on her hip. “What’s your angle here? Nobody does anything in this place without wanting something in return.”

“My angle?” He leaned back, his brow furrowing. “I’m fighting to win you.”

“That’s exactly my point. What do you want from me?”

“Nothing.” His voice dropped lower. “I swear on my honor, I won’t harm you. Won’t touch you unless you wish.”

The sincerity in his golden eyes made her breath catch. Her skin tingled where their arms nearly brushed in the confined space.

“Then why?”

“Because you deserve better than being traded like property. Because when I saw you

with Bariv, I remembered why I came to Jorvla.”His scales shifted, catching the light.“And because something about you makes me want to be worthy again.”

The heat in his gaze sent a shiver through her body.She’d never felt such an instant connection, such raw attraction mixed with...trust?The thought should have terrified her.

Instead, she found herself drawn closer, like a moth to a flame.

Alaysia frowned as Dernin’s shoulders suddenly slumped.The flickering torchlight cast shadows across his face, highlighting the weariness etched there.

“Six months ago, I arrived here fresh from training.”He paused.“So proud to wear my warrior uniform, to serve a noble cause.”

The raw pain in his voice made her chest ache.She shifted closer, drawn by some inexplicable need to comfort him.

“We were assigned to protect human women at the surrogate clinics.”His eyes met hers.“To ensure they weren’t being coerced or exploited.”

“That’s why you stepped in with Bariv,” Alaysia breathed, understanding dawning.

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

“My patrol partner wanted to leave early that night.” His jaw clenched. “I let him go, thinking I could handle the rest alone. Stupid pride.” He shook his head. “They jumped me on my way to the barracks. Next thing I knew, I was here.”

The irony twisted like a knife in her gut. A warrior meant to protect humans from exploitation, now forced to fight for the right to own one.

“We’re both prisoners here,” he said, his tail coiling restlessly in the narrow space. “You deserve freedom as much as I do.” His scaled hand hesitated near her face but didn’t touch. “I can’t promise I can win you that freedom, but I swear I’ll protect you. No matter what happens.”

Alaysia studied him, searching for any hint of deception. But all she found was earnest determination and something else—a spark of the honorable warrior he’d once been, not yet extinguished by six months of fighting.

“Why tell me this?” she asked.

“Because you needed to know the truth. About who I am. What I stand for.” His golden scales caught the torchlight again. “Even if I’ve failed at everything else, I won’t fail at protecting you now.”

Alaysia’s heart tried to process Dernin’s words. The genuineness in his voice, the raw honesty in his eyes, wore away at her carefully constructed walls.

His eyes locked on to hers, and for a moment, time seemed to stop.

“Thank you,” she whispered, surprised by the tightness in her throat. “For being honest with me. For wanting to protect me.”

“You don’t need to thank me.”

“I do, though. And I want to repay you somehow.”

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. “Unless you know how to break out of this place, there’s nothing I need.”

The words hit her like lightning. Her mind raced with possibilities—the guard rotations she’d memorized, the weak points in security she’d noticed since she got here.

“What if...” She bit her lip. “What if I did?”

His golden eyes widened. “What?”

“I’m not as closely watched as you fighters. I see things. Routes. Patterns.” She stepped even closer to him, lowering her voice to a breath. “I’ve been planning my own escape since I got here. Maybe...maybe we could help each other.”

His tail shifted restlessly. “It’s too dangerous. If they caught you helping me—”

“They’ll do worse if I stay.” She planted her hands on her hips. “Think about it. I know this place’s rhythms. You have the strength to fight if we need it. Together, we might actually have a chance.”

Dernin’s jaw clenched, conflict clear in his expression. “I can’t ask you to risk yourself for me.”

“You’re not asking.I’m offering.”She touched his arm, feeling the smooth scales beneath her fingers.

Alaysia watched the internal struggle play across Dernin’s features.Her heart hammered against her ribs as she waited for his answer.The dank air of the alcove pressed around them, heavy with the weight of their potential alliance.

“You understand what you’re risking?”His voice dropped lower.“If they catch us...”

“I understand exactly what I’m risking by staying here.”She crossed her arms.

“How would we even begin?”he asked, his voice tinged with uncertainty.

“I’ve noticed patterns in the guard rotations.Weak spots in security.”

“You’ve really thought this through.”

“Of course I have.I’m not just a pretty face to be won in some tournament.”Her lips curved into a smile.“So, do we have a deal?”

Dernin’s golden eyes studied her face for a long moment.Finally, he nodded.“We watch each other’s backs.And when the moment’s right...”

“We take our chance.”She extended her hand.“Partners?”

His scaled hand engulfed hers, warm and surprisingly gentle.“Partners.”

Page 17

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

Relief flooded through her, mixed with something else she couldn't quite name. "Good." She squeezed his hand before letting go. "Now make sure you win tomorrow. I'll be watching."

"You'll be cheering for me?"

"Every match." She grinned. "Can't have my escape partner losing, can I?"

The hint of a smile touched his lips. "I won't let you down."

"I know you won't." She turned to leave but then paused. "Thank you again, Dernin. For everything."

As she slipped away through the shadows, her heart felt lighter than it had in weeks.

Chapter 9

Dernin

The fighters' barracks reeked of sweat and defeat. Dernin coiled his tail beneath him on his sleeping mat, focusing on reviewing his match strategies while Bariv's voice boomed across the room.

"Did you see how I crushed that fool?" Bariv slammed his fist against the wall. "One decisive hit and down he went. That's how a champion fights."

Dernin's jaw tightened as he tried to block out the noise. The cool stone floor against

his scales helped ground him, but Bariv's next words shattered his concentration.

"And when I win this tournament..."Bariv's filaments quivered with excitement."That little red-haired prize is going to be all mine."

A muscle twitched in Dernin's neck.He kept his eyes fixed on the wall.

"Those curves, those eyes."Bariv's voice dropped lower."I'll make her appreciate a real fighter."

The other fighters laughed, egging him on.Dernin's tail coiled tighter, his scales rasping against the stone floor.

"Hey, snake-boy," Bariv called out."You think you've got a chance with her?She needs someone who can actually hold her, not some cold-blooded reject."

Dernin's golden eyes remained fixed ahead, though his hands had curled into fists.The promise he'd made to Alaysia echoed in his mind, keeping him anchored.Starting a fight now would only jeopardize their escape plan.

"What's wrong?Lost your voice?"Bariv laughed at his own joke."Don't worry, I'll take good care of your little girlfriend when I win."

"Some of us are trying to rest," Dernin said, his voice carrying across the room with quiet authority."You've had your moment of glory.Let it go."

"Or what?"Bariv's filaments bristled."You going to do something about it?"

"No."Dernin stretched out, deliberately casual."I'm going to win.That's all I need to do."

The quiet confidence in his voice made Bariv's next taunt die in his throat. Several other fighters nodded with respect at Dernin's restraint.

Dernin shifted on the cold stone floor, his tail coiling and uncoiling as sleep eluded him. The barracks had finally grown quiet, but his mind refused to settle. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw waves of red hair and bright blue eyes.

The memory of Alaysia's scent lingered in his mind—rose and something uniquely her. His scales rippled with awareness. The way she'd stood up to Bariv, her chin raised despite her fear. How she'd approached him alone, taking control of her fate rather than accepting it.

"Damn it," he muttered to himself, pressing his palms against his eyes. He was supposed to protect her, not fantasize about the curve of her lips when she smiled or how perfectly she'd fit against his chest. His warrior discipline seemed to mean nothing against the pull he felt toward her.

His tail lashed in frustration. She wasn't some damsel to be rescued. She was plotting their escape right alongside him. The thought of her courage made his chest tight.

He rolled onto his side, trying to focus on tomorrow's match instead of imagining running his fingers through that flame-bright hair. But even as he mapped out combat strategies, his mind drifted to their conversation earlier—how her eyes had lit up when he'd promised to protect her, not possess her.

"Focus," he growled to himself. These feelings were dangerous. They'd get them both killed if he let them cloud his judgment. But his warrior's heart recognized something in her—a fighter's spirit wrapped in silk.

His scales rasped against stone as he shifted again. The tournament, the escape—that had to be his priority. Not the way his pulse jumped when she said his name. Not how

badly he wanted to wrap his tail around her and shield her from everyone who'd ever tried to break her spirit.

Sleep continued to evade him as memories of her fierce determination mingled with softer thoughts he had no business entertaining. Tomorrow he'd fight. Tomorrow he'd be the warrior she needed him to be. Tonight...tonight he'd allow himself to admit, if only in the darkness, that Alaysia had staked a claim in more than just his protection.

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

Fed up with trying to fall asleep, Dernin slithered off his sleeping mat. His muscles twitched with restless energy. The training center's artificial lights cast long shadows across the equipment as he entered, the familiar scent of leather and metal filling his nostrils.

He wrapped his hands with strips of cloth, his movements slow and measured. The punching bag swung slightly as his fist connected—once, twice, three times. Each impact sent vibrations up his arms but failed to clear his head.

Red hair. Blue eyes. The way her spine straightened when she was determined.

His tail lashed out, striking the weighted post. The crack echoed through the empty room.

“Focus,” he muttered, moving to the climbing ropes. His powerful arms pulled him upward, his scales gleaming with sweat.

But even as he pushed his body through the familiar exercises, memories of Alaysia's scent invaded his concentration along with the excited look in her eyes when she'd proposed helping him escape.

Dernin dropped from the ropes, disgusted with himself. “What's wrong with you?” His voice bounced off the stone walls. “She's not for you. She's not even your kind.”

He moved to the weight station, loading plates onto the bar. The metal clinked as he added more weight than usual.

“You’re a warrior,” he reminded himself, positioning his body under the bar. “Act like one.”

The weights strained his muscles as he pressed upward. One rep. Two. Three. Each one accompanied by thoughts he couldn’t suppress.

The curve of her neck when she’d looked up at him. The way her presence made his warrior instincts surge with the need to protect, to possess...

The bar slammed back into its cradle. Dernin’s chest heaved as he stared at the ceiling.

Six months of fighting had hardened him, stripped away everything but the drive to survive. Then one human woman walks into his life and suddenly he’s...what? Swooning like some untried youth?

His tail coiled in frustration as he sat up. Tomorrow’s match demanded his full attention, yet here he was, distracted by soft skin and fierce eyes. When had he become so weak?

But even as he berated himself, he knew. She wasn’t his weakness. She was his strength, his reason to fight harder.

Dernin sat up on the weight bench and let his heated muscles cool down. As he stared ahead at the wall, trying to push Alaysia out of his mind, his thoughts drifted to Nirum—the crystal spires that caught the twin suns’ light at dawn to the sacred training grounds where he’d earned his warrior marks. The familiar ache of homesickness suddenly twisted in his gut.

The metallic tang of the training equipment faded as his mind conjured the sweet scent of jurla flowers that bloomed along the temple paths. He’d walked those paths

countless times, proud in his warrior's uniform, never imagining he'd end up in an underground fighting ring on Jorvla.

"Careless fool," he muttered for what seemed like the hundredth time.

And then, without fail, Alaysia's determined face flickered through his mind. The way she'd looked at him when they'd made their pact, her blue eyes blazing with purpose. For the first time in six months, possibility stretched before him like a path through darkness.

His muscles swelled with renewed energy. Working together, they might actually succeed. The thought of freedom—of returning to Nirum with his honor restored—sent a surge of power through him.

Dernin's tail whispered across the floor as he headed to the barracks, his muscles still humming from the workout. The bracket board caught his eye, its metal surface gleaming under the dim lights. His finger soon traced the progression of names, confirming what he'd suspected. If both he and Bariv won their matches, they'd meet in the finals.

The memory of Bariv's crude comments about Alaysia made his scales bristle. The way that slime-covered excuse for a fighter had looked at her, like she was meant to be devoured.

"Going to be a pleasure putting you in your place," he muttered, studying Bariv's upcoming matches. The Jorvlen had raw power, but Dernin had seen some flaws in his technique.

The thought of Bariv's filaments anywhere near Alaysia's skin made his warrior blood boil. No. That wouldn't happen. He'd make sure of it.

Dernin's eyes narrowed as he memorized the rest of the bracket. Five more matches stood between him and Bariv. Five chances to prove himself worthy of the warrior markings he'd earned on Nirum. Five steps closer to ensuring Alaysia's safety.

Chapter 10

Alaysia

Alaysia paced the length of her narrow bunk, her bare feet silent against the cold stone floor. The underground quarters pressed in around her. The air was thick with the breathing of other slaves trying to sleep. A single lamp flickered in the corner, casting shadows across the cramped space.

She twisted a strand of her red hair around her finger. Her mind raced. Dernin's words echoed in her head: "We're both prisoners who deserve freedom."

"Six days," she whispered to herself, climbing onto her bunk. "Six days to figure this out."

Page 19

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

The underground quarters felt like a tomb—no windows, no fresh air, just stale darkness and the occasional drip of water from somewhere in the walls.

She pressed her palms against her temples. Getting a message out wouldn't be easy. The guards checked everything that came in or went out.

But there had to be a way. Someone on the outside had to care that a Niri warrior had been captured. His own people would want to know what had happened to him. Wouldn't they?

The image of Dernin in the ring flashed through her mind—powerful and graceful yet carrying a weight of sadness in those golden eyes. He didn't belong here anymore than she did.

"Think," she muttered. "There has to be someone who could help."

But who? And how to reach them? The fighting rings were illegal. Everyone who came to watch was either a criminal themselves or paid well to keep quiet. The authorities wouldn't help. They were probably getting kickbacks to look the other way.

She stared at the darkness above her bunk. Tomorrow she'd have to watch more fights, watch Dernin risk his life again. The thought made her sick.

Alaysia closed her eyes, but sleep felt impossible. Her mind wouldn't stop turning over possibilities, each one seeming more impossible than the last.

The soft padding of footsteps drew Alaysia's attention as Marcella entered the

sleeping quarters carrying fresh linens. Alaysia watched her through half-closed eyes. Marcella had shown nothing but kindness since her arrival, but kindness didn't always equal trustworthiness.

"Can't sleep?" Marcella asked, setting down her bundle.

Alaysia propped herself up on her bunk. "Just thinking."

"About that handsome Naga fighter?" Marcella's eyes twinkled in the dim light.

"Sort of." Alaysia twisted her hand in her thin blanket. "Marcella, how long have you been here?"

"Three years, give or take." Marcella rested her hand on the edge of Alaysia's bunk. "Long enough to know every crack in these walls."

That caught Alaysia's attention. She leaned forward, lowering her voice. "And in all that time, has anyone ever..."

"Escaped?" Marcella finished. "They've tried. Failed." She paused, studying Alaysia's face. "But I know why they failed."

Alaysia's heart quickened. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I see something different in you." Marcella glanced around the room before continuing. "And in that fighter of yours. Most who try to escape do it alone, out of desperation. But together..." She left the thought hanging.

"If I tell you something, will you swear to keep it secret?"

Marcella placed her hand over her heart. "On my life."

“Dernin and I...we’re planning something.”The words tumbled out in a whisper.“But we need help.Someone who knows this place, who has connections.”

A slow smile spread across Marcella’s face.“Finally.Someone smart enough to ask.”She then covered Alaysia’s hand with hers.“Meet me early tomorrow morning at the laundry.We’ll talk more then.”

Relief flooded through Alaysia.Maybe, just maybe, they had a chance after all.

Steam rose from the massive washing vats in the underground laundry, creating a humid haze that clung to Alaysia’s skin.The smell of harsh soap burned her nostrils as she made her way between the rows of industrial washers.

Marcella stood sorting linens, her experienced hands moving swiftly through the piles.The early hour meant they were alone.Most of the other slaves wouldn’t arrive for another hour.

“So dear, how can I be of assistance?”Marcella asked, not looking up from her work.

Alaysia glanced around before stepping closer.“We need to pass along some information to the outside world.”She picked up a stack of towels, mimicking Marcella’s movements to blend in.“Dernin isn’t just any fighter.He’s a Niri warrior who was captured and forced to fight here.”

Marcella’s hands stilled.“A warrior?Are you certain?”

“He told me himself.He was stationed here to protect human surrogates before they took him.”The towel twisted in Alaysia’s grip.“If we could get word to his people...”

“The Niri warriors would tear this place apart looking for one of their own.”Marcella resumed her sorting, but her movements were more deliberate now.“Getting a

message out won't be easy. The guards check everything."

Page 20

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

“But you know ways around them. Don’t you?” The steam made Alaysia’s red hair curl against her temples. “You’ve been here three years. You must know something.”

Marcella studied her for a long moment. “I might. But information like that comes with a price.”

“Name it.”

“When you and your warrior make your move, I want in.” Marcella’s voice dropped lower. “I’ve waited long enough for my chance. Help me get out, too, and I’ll help you contact the Niri warriors.”

Alaysia’s heart pounded harder. More people meant more risk but also more help. And Marcella knew the ring’s inner workings better than anyone. “Deal.”

“Smart girl.” Marcella nodded approvingly. She folded a sheet with practiced efficiency. “The food vendors...” she whispered. “They’re our best shot.”

Alaysia’s hands stilled on the laundry. The constant hum of the industrial washers covered their conversation, but she still leaned closer. “How?”

“They come from all over Jorvla. Different districts, different levels of the city.” Marcella grabbed another sheet. “More importantly, they leave. Every day, multiple times a day.”

Hope flickered in Alaysia’s chest like the dim lights overhead. The steam made her skin prickle with sweat, but she barely noticed. “And they’re not searched as

thoroughly?”

“Food is perishable. Guards don’t want to waste time going through every crate.” Marcella’s eyes darted to the door before continuing. “Plus, some of them have been delivering here for years. Guards get lazy, familiar.”

Alaysia’s mind raced with strategies. Her fingers gripped the damp fabric she held. “Can any of them be trusted?”

“There’s one. Old woman named Kira. She’s got a soft spot for the slaves here.” Marcella lowered her voice further. “Sometimes sneaks extra food to the younger ones. I can approach her.”

“But will she be able to reach the Niri warriors directly?”

“Probably not.” Marcella shook her head. “But she knows people who know people. Word will spread, especially about a captured Niri warrior. That kind of news has a way of finding the right ears.”

The plan wasn’t perfect, but it was more than they had last night. “When can you talk to her?”

“She delivers later this morning.” Marcella stacked the folded sheets. “I’ll speak with her then. I’ll arrange for you and Dernin to meet her soon to get your message out.”

Alaysia touched Marcella’s arm. “Thank you for helping us.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” Marcella’s expression was serious. “This is just the beginning. Now get back to the slave quarters before anyone notices you’re missing.”

Alaysia hurried through the dim corridors back to her quarters. They needed help, yes,

but they also needed time. Time for the word to spread, time for help to arrive. Time for Dernin to keep winning his matches.

She just hoped they would have enough of it.

Marcella's footsteps soon echoed across the stone floor as she approached Alaysia's bunk several hours later. The familiar collection of cosmetics and hair tools clinked in the basket she carried.

"Time to make you shine again, dear." Marcella set down her supplies.

Alaysia stretched, her muscles still tense from the early morning's scheming. The thought of watching more fights and knowing what they did to Dernin made her angry. But now, they had a plan in motion.

"At least today I have something to look forward to besides being ogled," she said, climbing down from the bunk.

Marcella pulled out a gilded brush. "Hold still while I tackle this mane of yours."

The brush caught in Alaysia's tangled red waves. "Ouch!"

Marcella's hands never paused in their work, but her voice dropped to a whisper. "Everything's set. You and Dernin will meet Kira in two days to pass off your message."

Relief flooded through Alaysia's chest as Marcella weaved her hair into an intricate style. For once, the poking and prodding felt less like preparation for display and more like armor for battle. Each pin and curl were another step toward freedom.

Chapter 11

Dernin

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

Dernin's tail wriggled restlessly as he watched two fighters clash in the ring. His eyes tracked their every move, analyzing their strengths and weaknesses. The shorter fighter telegraphed his punches—a fatal mistake that would cost him dearly in later rounds.

“Amateur hour,” muttered a voice beside him.

Dernin's scales bristled at Krav's unwelcome presence. The scarred fighter had taken up position next to him in the fighters' viewing gallery.

“You see the way the taller fighter favors his right side? Old injury that never healed right,” Krav rumbled.

“I didn't ask for your help.” Dernin kept his gaze fixed on the match.

“Just trying to be friendly. We're all brothers in chains here.”

The fight ended predictably—the shorter fighter face-down in the dirt. Dernin memorized how the victor moved, the slight hitch in his stride confirming Krav's observation about the injury.

Two more matches followed. Dernin studied each fighter methodically, mapping out potential strategies. His tongue flicked out occasionally, tasting the air thick with sweat and blood. The crowds above roared with each decisive blow.

“Your pretty little prize is watching today,” Krav said with a smirk. “Up there in Fyret's private box.”

Dernin's muscles tensed but he kept his voice neutral. "She's not my anything." The lie felt bitter on his tongue.

Another fighter hit the ground hard. Poor form—he'd overextended on a kick. Amateur mistakes could get you killed here.

"My match is next," Dernin said, effectively ending the conversation. He moved away from the railing, his muscles already loosening in preparation.

He had promises to keep—to himself and now to Alaysia. His warrior's spirit stirred at the thought.

Time to show these arena fighters what a true Niri warrior could do.

Dernin's scales ruffled as he circled T'zar in the blood-stained arena. Sand crunched beneath his powerful tail while the four-armed warrior tracked his movements. The crowd's roars faded to background noise as he focused on his opponent's stance.

T'zar struck first, two fists jabbing while the other pair swept low. Dernin's tail whipped him backward, barely avoiding the combination. The Darzios fighter pressed forward, using his multiple limbs to cut off escape routes.

"Getting tired yet, snake?" T'zar taunted, his upper right fist grazing Dernin's jaw.

Blood trickled from the cut, but Dernin didn't waste breath on a response. He coiled his tail and launched forward, driving his shoulder into T'zar's sternum. The impact sent them both crashing into the arena wall.

Two arms locked around Dernin's torso while another caught him across the throat. He twisted, breaking one hold but catching an elbow to his ribs. Pain flared, but he channeled it into determination.

He grabbed one of T'zar's wrists and wrenched it away from his throat. "My turn."

Using his tail's powerful muscles, Dernin constricted around T'zar's legs while simultaneously driving repeated strikes to the warrior's exposed sides. Each blow landed with precision, targeting nerve clusters he'd learned in his warrior training.

T'zar roared and brought all four fists down in a hammering motion. Dernin rolled, taking a glancing blow to his shoulder rather than the full force. His scales absorbed some impact, but fresh pain bloomed beneath them.

They separated, both fighters breathing heavily. Blood ran from cuts on both their bodies, staining the sand crimson. The crowd's cheering reached a fever pitch as they circled again.

"Not bad for a slave," T'zar spat.

Dernin's eyes narrowed. "I'm not a slave."

He launched another attack, this time feinting with his tail before driving in close. The fight continued, neither fighter willing to yield ground.

Blood trickled down Dernin's scales as T'zar landed another crushing blow to his ribs. His muscles screamed in protest.

"Ready to yield, snake?" T'zar's four arms whirled in a deadly pattern.

Dernin spat blood onto the sand. "A warrior never yields."

But his words carried more conviction than his body could support. His vision blurred at the edges, his legendary stamina finally failing him. T'zar's next combination sent him reeling backward, his tail barely keeping him upright.

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

The crowd's roars became a distant drone as Dernin fought to stay conscious. His opponent's multiple limbs seemed to multiply before his eyes, making it impossible to track incoming strikes. Another hit connected with his jaw, snapping his head back.

Then, through the haze of pain and exhaustion, he caught a flash of red in Fyret's viewing box. Alaysia stood at the railing, her hands pressed against the glass barrier. Their eyes met across the arena, and something ignited deep within his soul, calling to his warrior's spirit.

This wasn't just about his survival anymore. This was about freedom—hers and his. About keeping his word. About proving he was still worthy of his warrior's code.

New energy surged through his battered frame. His scales rippled as he drew himself up to his full height, his tongue flicking out to taste his opponent's growing uncertainty.

"Getting your second wind?" T'zar circled warily. "Won't help you."

Dernin's golden eyes narrowed. "Watch me."

He launched forward with explosive power, his tail propelling him faster than T'zar could react. Instead of engaging with the four arms directly, he twisted mid-strike, using his opponent's momentum against him. His tail wrapped around T'zar's legs while his arms locked around the fighter's throat.

The crowd's frenzied cheers were a distant echo in Dernin's ears, drowned out by the primal rhythm of his own heartbeat.

“This is how a true warrior fights,” Dernin snarled, his grip unyielding around T’zar’s throat. The Darzios fighter’s eyes bulged, his face purpling as he struggled for breath.

The referee’s voice cut through the haze of adrenaline, declaring the match in Dernin’s favor. He released T’zar, watching dispassionately as the four-armed fighter gasped for air.

Dernin straightened to his full height, every inch the predator he was. His scales were slick with a mixture of sweat and blood, but he felt invincible. He had faced down a formidable opponent and emerged victorious. He knew he could win this tournament now. The crowd’s roars reached a crescendo as Dernin’s name was announced as advancing to the next round.

His eyes sought out Alaysia in the private viewing box again. Her blue eyes met his, and at that moment, he felt a connection that went beyond the physical. It was as if their shared determination to escape this hellish existence had forged a bond between them, unbreakable and fierce.

He sensed the unease among his fellow fighters as they watched him from the sidelines. They had underestimated him, seeing him as nothing more than a captive fighter, but he proved them wrong.

As he descended from the arena, a figure blocked his path. Krav stood there, his reptilian eyes narrowed.

“Congratulations, snake,” Krav said, his voice a low growl. “You put on quite a show.”

Dernin’s tail twitched in irritation, but he kept his voice steady. “It’s not about the show, Krav.”

Krav's lips curled into a smirk. "You fight for something more. Don't you? I saw the way you looked at her."

Dernin shifted, but he didn't rise to the bait. "What I fight for is my concern."

"For now," Krav said, stepping aside to let Dernin pass. "But we all have our weaknesses."

Dernin ignored the veiled threat and made his way toward the fighters' quarters. His body ached from the exertion, but the pain was a welcome reminder of his victory. He would need to rest, to prepare for the next fight. But first, he needed to meet Alaysia.

Dernin's muscles protested as he turned a corner. He spotted a young slave sweeping up the sand from the fighters' tunnels. The boy's thin frame spoke of too many missed meals, but his eyes held a sharp intelligence that caught Dernin's attention.

"You there." Dernin's voice carried the authority of his warrior training. The boy's head snapped up, the broom freezing mid-sweep. "I have a message for the red-haired slave."

The boy's eyes widened with recognition. "The prize, Naga fighter?"

"Tell her Dernin wishes to meet her. She knows where." His tail shifted impatiently. "Now."

"Yes, sir." The boy scurried off, leaving his broom forgotten against the wall.

Dernin pressed a hand against his bruised ribs, willing his body to hold together just a little longer. The fight with T'zar had taken more out of him than he cared to admit. He should really just head back to the barracks and recover for tomorrow's match.

But he needed to see her, to talk about their escape plan. However, he secretly just wanted to be in her warm presence after his grueling match today.

Chapter 12

Alaysia

Alaysia's footsteps echoed through the dim corridor as she rushed past flickering torches. The coarse fabric of the borrowed kitchen dress scratched against her skin, but it served its purpose. No one spared her a second glance. She adjusted the white cap covering her telltale red hair and ducked into the hidden alcove.

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

Dernin's massive form filled the small space, his scales catching the faint torch light. Dark bruises marked his torso, and he held himself stiffly despite his attempt to appear relaxed.

"Are you all right? That last hit looked terrible." Her fingers twitched with the urge to check his injuries.

"Nothing serious." His jaw clenched, betraying the lie.

"That's not what I asked." She crossed her arms. The musty smell of the underground tunnels mixed with the metallic scent of blood. "I saw how that brute caught you in the ribs."

"A few bruises. They'll heal."

"You're a terrible liar for a warrior." The words came out sharper than intended. Her heart had nearly stopped when she'd watched him take that brutal hit. "But you fought amazingly. I'm proud of you for winning."

His golden eyes widened slightly at her praise. The surprise in his expression made her chest ache—as if no one had shown him genuine concern in far too long.

"Thank you." His voice dropped lower. "It helps, having someone to fight for."

Heat crept up her neck. She looked away, studying the rough-hewn wall. "Just...be careful. You won't do anyone any good if you get yourself seriously injured."

“I’ve survived worse.”

“That’s not as reassuring as you think it is.” She risked another glance at him. In the dim light, with his guard slightly lowered, he looked less like the fearsome warrior and more like someone who carried too many burdens alone. “Promise me you’ll be more careful?”

“I promise to try.”

She shook her head. “I suppose that’s the best I’ll get from you.”

She then drew a deep breath. Dernin’s golden scales gleamed in the torchlight as she stepped closer to him. “I think I found a way to get us both out of here.”

His tail shifted restlessly. “Tell me.”

“Marcella knows a food vendor who travels through Jorvla. She can get a message to your warriors.”

“The Niri would come.” His golden eyes blazed with newfound hope. “My commander wouldn’t abandon one of his own.”

The conviction in his tone made her heart skip. “Two days from now, the vendor will be outside by the kitchens. If we time it right, I can slip her the message while pretending to help with deliveries.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“Everything here is dangerous.” The borrowed kitchen dress scratched at her neck. “But it’s our best shot.”

“The warriors will come in force once they know where I am.”His massive frame straightened, some of the weariness falling away.“They’ll shut this whole operation down.”

“Then we both get what we want.You get your freedom back, and I don’t end up as someone’s prize.”

“You were never meant to be a prize.”The fierce protectiveness in his voice sent warmth spreading through her chest.

“Neither were you meant to be their champion fighter.”She touched his arm briefly, the scales smooth and warm beneath her fingers.

Alaysia shifted her weight as she removed her fingers from his arm.She was reluctant to leave him and the relative safety of their hidden alcove.She suddenly blurted out, “What’s it like?Nirum, I mean.I’ve never been there.”

Dernin’s expression softened.“It’s beautiful.The cities are built into living crystal mountains that catch the sunlight.At dawn, everything glows pink and gold.”

The way his eyes lit up made her lean closer.“You grew up there?”

“In the warrior district.”His tail coiled more comfortably behind him.“My first memories are of climbing the crystal spires with my clutch-mates, much to our teachers’ dismay.”

Alaysia smiled, picturing a young Dernin scaling glittering peaks.“Were you always meant to be a warrior?”

“It’s in our blood.But we train from childhood—combat, strategy, honor codes.”He gestured to a thin scar along his biceps.“Got this during my first real sparring

match. My opponent was twice my size.”

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

“Did you win?”

“Eventually.” His lips quirked up. “Took three more matches and a broken tail before I figured out how to counter his moves.”

The casual mention of such injury made her wince, but his determination sparked something warm within her. Here was someone who didn’t just survive. He thrived on challenges.

“The training grounds overlook the Valley of Mists,” he continued. “When winter comes, the fog rolls in below the peaks. It’s like floating above the clouds.”

Alaysia closed her eyes, trying to imagine such freedom. The damp underground air pressed against her skin, making the vision of open skies and crystal mountains almost painful in its beauty. When she opened them again, she found Dernin watching her with an expression that made her breath catch.

“I’d love to see it someday,” she said softly, meaning it more than she’d expected.

“What about you?” Dernin asked, his eyes fixed on her face. “Have you always lived on Jorvla?”

“Born and raised here. My mother was a house slave in the merchant district.” The familiar ache bloomed in her chest at the memory. “She taught me everything—how to read from discarded books, how to blend into the background when masters were angry, how to find joy in small things.”

Dernin's tail shifted closer, providing warmth against the underground chill. "She sounds very wise."

"She was." Alaysia leaned against the cool stone wall, fighting back tears. "We'd sneak up to the roof at night sometimes. She'd point out constellations and tell me stories about what lay beyond Jorvla. Said knowledge was the one thing they couldn't take from us."

Her throat tightened. "When I was sixteen, our master lost everything gambling. Sold us separately to cover his debts. I never saw her again."

"I'm sorry." The genuine pain in his voice caused her to look up.

"I survived. Worked in the textile district until..." She gestured at their surroundings. "Until Fyret decided I'd make a good prize."

His jaw clenched. "You're not a prize to be won."

"No?" A bitter laugh escaped her. "That's all I've ever been to them—property to be traded, sold, displayed." She straightened, meeting his gaze. "But I've never stopped dreaming of freedom. Mother always said dreams keep hope alive."

"Your mother was right." Dernin moved closer, his massive frame somehow protective rather than threatening. "I swear on my warrior's oath I'll do everything in my power to free us both."

The intensity in his golden eyes stole her breath for a moment.

"I believe you," she whispered, surprising herself with how much she meant it.

She glanced at the torch shadows creeping across the wall. "I need to get back before

someone notices I'm gone."

"Of course." He shifted his massive form to give her space. "Be careful."

"You, too. Don't let those ribs get worse." She adjusted her borrowed cap.

The walk back through the winding tunnels felt longer than before. Each step echoed off the stone walls, matching the rapid beating of her heart. The musty underground air clung to her skin, but she barely noticed it. Her mind kept drifting back to the way Dernin's eyes had lit up describing his homeland, how his voice had softened when speaking of crystal spires and misty valleys.

A guard's boots scraped against stone around the corner. Alaysia pressed herself into another alcove, holding her breath until the footsteps faded. Her pulse thundered in her ears, but was it from the near discovery or from remembering how Dernin had moved closer when she spoke of her mother?

"Foolish girl," she whispered to herself, continuing down the corridor. "He's just being kind because you might help him escape."

But that didn't explain the way her skin had tingled where their arms brushed or how safe she'd felt in his presence despite his fearsome size. She'd learned long ago not to trust easily. Survival depended on keeping others at arm's length. Yet somehow this warrior had slipped past her defenses in mere days.

The thought both terrified and thrilled her—and then terrified her more because it thrilled her.

She reached the slave quarters and slipped inside, making her way to her bunk. As she lay down, her mother's words echoed in her mind: "Guard your heart carefully, little one. It's the one thing truly your own."

But in the darkness, as sleep crept closer, Alaysia wondered if perhaps her heart had already made its choice without consulting her at all.

Chapter 13

Alaysia

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

Alaysia shifted in her plush seat. The green silk dress clung uncomfortably to her skin in the stuffy arena air. The private viewing box offered the best vantage point of the fighting ring as always, but it felt more like a gilded cage today than a privilege.

“Stop fidgeting,” Marcella whispered. “You’ll wrinkle that gorgeous dress.”

“I can hardly breathe in this thing.” Alaysia tugged at the tight bodice. “Was the plunging neckline really necessary again?”

“You know how Fyret likes to display his prize.” Marcella’s eyes darted to the arena entrance. “Though I noticed you didn’t complain this much until you knew who was fighting next.”

Alaysia’s cheeks reddened. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Of course not.” Marcella’s knowing smile made Alaysia’s cheeks burn hotter.

The crowd’s roar drew their attention as Dernin entered the ring. Alaysia’s breath caught in her chest. His golden scales gleamed brighter than ever under the arena lights, rippling across his powerful muscles as he moved. The memory of last night—his gentle voice describing his past, the warmth of his presence—made her heart flutter.

“Oh my,” she muttered, pressing her hands to her heated cheeks.

“He sure is something to look at,” Marcella said. “Especially when he moves like that.”

Dernin's opponent charged at him. But he dodged with fluid grace, his tail sweeping in a devastating counterattack. Alaysia's fingers dug into the armrests.

"I've never seen someone so big move so..." She trailed off, mesmerized by the deadly dance below.

"Gracefully?" Marcella supplied. "Though I suspect you're noticing more than just his fighting style today."

"Marcella!"

"What? I saw how you two looked at each other yesterday. And now you're practically glowing whenever he's around."

"He's just..." Alaysia swallowed hard as Dernin executed a particularly impressive maneuver. "He's different. He sees me as a person."

"And it doesn't hurt that he's absolutely gorgeous."

"That's not—" Alaysia's protest died as Dernin glanced up at their box. Their eyes met across the distance, and for a moment the rest of the arena seemed to fade away. Her heart thundered erratically in her chest.

"Not what?" Marcella asked innocently.

Alaysia sank deeper into her chair, unable to tear her gaze from the warrior below. "Oh, hush."

The match suddenly took a brutal turn as Dernin's opponent, a massive Jorvlen with arms like tree trunks, landed a devastating blow to Dernin's ribs. The crack echoed through the arena.

“No!” Alaysia’s gasp seemed to cut through the crowd’s roar. Her fingers dug further into the armrests, her knuckles turning white with tension. Every muscle in her body screamed to rush down there, to help him somehow.

Dernin staggered, his golden scales dulled with sweat and blood. His jaw clenched in that way she’d come to recognize, fighting through the pain. The sight of him hurting made her chest constrict.

“He’ll be fine,” Marcella whispered, patting her arm. “He’s taken worse hits.”

“That’s not helping.” Alaysia’s voice cracked. She couldn’t tear her eyes away as Dernin barely dodged another punch. When had she started caring so much? When had his pain become her pain?

The Jorvlen fighter took the advantage, forcing Dernin against the arena wall. Each impact made Alaysia flinch. Her heart threatened to burst from her chest.

“Come on,” she whispered, leaning forward in her seat. “Please move.”

“You really care about him. Don’t you?” Marcella’s voice was gentle.

Alaysia wrapped her arms around herself, trying to stop shaking. “I just...I can’t watch him get hurt like this. He doesn’t deserve it. None of us do.”

But it was more than that. The thought of Dernin being seriously injured made her feel sick. The way he looked at her like she mattered, how he spoke of honor even after everything he’d been through, his gentle strength when they talked in secret—it all meant more to her than she wanted to admit.

Another brutal hit landed. Blood ran from a cut above Dernin’s eye. Alaysia’s breath caught in her throat, tears threatening to spill.

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

“Please,” she whispered.

Just when it seemed Dernin couldn’t take another hit, he twisted his massive tail, sweeping the Jorvlen’s legs out from under him. The crowd roared as Dernin pinned his opponent. His muscles strained as he held the struggling fighter down with all his might until the bell rang.

Alaysia slumped in her chair, her legs weak with relief. The silk dress clung to her sweat-dampened skin as she watched Dernin bow to the judges before limping from the ring.

“Breathe,” Marcella reminded her. “He won.”

“Barely.” Alaysia’s hands still trembled. “I’ve never seen him take so much damage before.”

The walk back to their quarters felt endless. Every step reminded Alaysia of the bruises forming on Dernin’s body, the blood trickling from his wounds. She tugged at the suffocating bodice of her dress.

“I need to get out of this thing.” Her voice cracked as they entered the slaves’ sleeping area.

Marcella helped unlace the back. “You’re taking this harder than usual.”

“How can I not?” Alaysia stepped out of the silk puddle, grabbing a simple cotton shift. “He’s fighting like this because of me. Getting hurt because of me.”

“He’s fighting for his freedom, too.”

“That almost makes it worse.” Alaysia climbed onto her thin mattress, running her fingers through her tangled red hair. “What if he dies trying to protect me? I couldn’t bear—” She cut herself off, pressing her palms against her eyes.

“You care a lot for him.” It wasn’t a question.

“I shouldn’t.” The admission felt like glass in her throat. “Caring about anyone in this place only leads to pain.”

Marcella leaned in closer to her. “Sometimes caring is worth the risk.”

“Is it?” Alaysia dropped her hands, staring at the rough stone ceiling. “Every time he steps into that ring, my heart stops. Every hit he takes feels like it’s landing on me instead. I can’t... I can’t watch him die, Marcella.”

“Then we better make sure our escape plan works.” Marcella squeezed her shoulder. “Because from what I’ve seen, that warrior of yours isn’t going to stop fighting for you anytime soon.”

“He’s not my warrior,” Alaysia whispered, but her racing heart betrayed the lie.

Alaysia’s bare feet barely made a sound against the cold stone floor as she crept through the dimly lit corridors. Without her usual disguise, she felt too exposed in her simple cotton shift. But she hadn’t had time to change before slipping past the guards during shift rotation. Her heart beat faster with each step toward the fighters’ infirmary. Another slave had told her that he spotted Dernin in there.

The metallic scent of blood hit her before she reached the doorway. She paused and steadied herself against the rough wall. Through the gap in the door, she spotted

Dernin stretched out on one of the low cots.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said, spotting her in the doorway. “Especially not without your disguise.”

“Neither should you be lying here hurt.” She slipped inside, closing the door behind her. The sight of his bruised torso made her chest ache. “Let me help.”

His golden eyes fixed on her with an intensity that stole her breath. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not.” She grabbed clean cloths and a bowl of water from the nearby table. “That Jorvlen hit you hard enough to crack ribs.”

“Nothing’s broken.” He tried to sit up but winced, his jaw clenching in that familiar way.

“Stop being stubborn.” She dipped the cloth in water and approached his cot. Her hands trembled slightly as she reached for the gash above his eye. “This needs cleaning at least.”

He caught her wrist gently. “Alaysia—”

“Please.” Her voice cracked. “Let me do this. You’re getting hurt because of me.”

“Not because of you.” His thumb brushed over her pulse point. “For you. There’s a difference.”

Heat bloomed in her cheeks. She pulled her hand free and focused on cleaning the cut.

“Still.” She swallowed hard. “I hate seeing you take hits like that. When he had you against the wall, I thought—” She broke off, dabbing more carefully at the wound.

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

“You were that worried about me?” His voice held a note of wonder.

“Of course I was.” The words tumbled out. “Every time you step into that ring, I—” She pressed her lips together, focusing on a particularly stubborn spot of dried blood.

His tail shifted on the cot, slightly closer to where she stood. “I won’t lose.” He grabbed her free hand. “I promise you.”

The warmth of his grip sent tingles up her arm. She stared at their joined hands, unable to look at his face.

Chapter 14

Dernin

Dernin winced as Alaysia dabbed at the gash above his eye. The infirmary’s dim lighting faintly illuminated her face as she concentrated, working on his wound.

His tail curled slightly closer to where she stood. “I won’t lose.” He grabbed her free hand, interlocking his fingers with hers. “I promise you.”

The instant their hands interlocked, lightning coursed through his veins. His breath caught in his chest as ancient magic surged within him—the sacred mate bond awakening with devastating clarity. The world tilted on its axis as everything clicked into place. Her. It had always been her.

He looked down at their interlocked hands. Her small hand fit perfectly in his larger

one, like two pieces of a cosmic puzzle finally united. The bond hummed between them, singing through his blood with a primal recognition that shook him to his core.

His mate. Here. In danger.

Every protective instinct he possessed roared to life. His tail coiled restlessly as he fought the urge to wrap her in his arms and never let go.

“Dernin?” Her voice was soft, uncertain.

He realized he’d been staring. Carefully, he released her hand, though everything in him protested the loss of contact.

“Thank you,” he managed, his voice rougher than intended. “For helping me with my wounds.”

She nodded, tucking a strand of red hair behind her ear. “I just don’t like seeing you hurt.”

The simple admission made his heart clench.

Dernin’s scales seemed to pulse with awareness as Alaysia’s fingers traced along his ribs, wrapping a bandage with careful precision. The mate bond continued to thrum between them, making her every touch electric to him. His tail twitched, coiling and uncoiling as he fought to maintain control.

“These need to be tight,” she murmured, leaning closer. Her rose scent flooded his senses. “Tell me if it hurts.”

“Nothing hurts when you’re touching me.” The words slipped out before he could stop them.

A blush crept across her cheeks. “Don’t try to charm me, warrior. I’ve seen what happens in that ring.”

His jaw tightened at the reminder. The thought of Bariv or any other fighter claiming her made his blood boil. She was his mate—his to protect and his to cherish. The primal need to shield her from harm nearly overwhelmed him.

“No one’s going to touch you,” he blurted out. His voice dropped lower, rougher. “Not Bariv. Not Fyret. No one.”

She paused in her ministrations. Her eyes met his. “You say that like you mean it,” she responded, her voice tinged with confusion.

“I do.” His hand covered hers where it rested on his bandaged ribs.

The truth burned in his throat—that she was his destined mate, that every fiber of his being existed to protect her. But he couldn’t tell her, not here, not when they were both trapped. She needed to trust him first, to choose him of her own free will.

“There.” She secured the last bandage. “That should hold.”

His tail curled around her feet. “Thank you again.”

She smiled—a real smile that lit up her whole face—and his heart clenched. He’d fight through a thousand matches just to keep that smile safe.

Alaysia settled beside him on the narrow cot, close enough that her thigh brushed against his scales. The contact sent sparks through his entire body. His tail curled protectively around the cot’s base, creating a barrier between them and the rest of the infirmary.

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

“So, tell me about the most ridiculous thing you’ve seen in Nirum,” she suddenly said, her blue eyes sparkling with interest.

“Well, this one time my squad mate tried to impress a female by showing off his climbing skills.” Dernin’s lips quirked. “He got stuck halfway up the crystal spires and dangled there for hours.”

Her laugh was musical. “Please tell me someone rescued him eventually.”

“Eventually. After we’d all had a good laugh.” He shifted closer, drawn to her warmth. “Your turn. What’s the craziest thing you’ve done?”

“I once convinced three guards they were being haunted by spirits.” She grinned mischievously. “All it took was some string, a few cups, and perfect timing.”

“Clever and beautiful. Dangerous combination.” The words slipped out.

A fighter limped into the infirmary, eyeing them curiously. Dernin’s golden eyes narrowed, his tail tightening its protective circle. The fighter quickly found somewhere else to be.

Alaysia’s cheeks flushed pink. “Dangerous, hmm? You’re not so safe yourself, warrior.”

“Only to those who deserve it.” His voice dropped lower as he leaned in. “Never to you.”

Another fighter entered, this one sporting a black eye. One look at Dernin's territorial posture and he retreated without a word.

"My fierce protector," she teased, but her eyes were soft. "Though I notice nobody dares come near when you're around."

"Good." His scales rippled with satisfaction. "Let them stay away from you."

"But what if I want them to come near me?"

His heart thundered at her words. "Then they'll never get within ten feet of you."

She bit her lip, looking up at him through her lashes. "Just ten feet?"

"Five?" He grinned, showing sharp teeth. "One?"

Her laugh echoed through the infirmary, drawing more curious looks that Dernin quickly discouraged with a glare. His tail twitched with pleasure at making her happy, even as his protective instincts screamed to whisk her away somewhere private. Somewhere safe.

But for now, this moment was enough—her smile, her warmth beside him, and the growing trust between them.

Alaysia soon shifted on the cot, her warmth pulling away from his scales. "I should go before someone gets suspicious."

Dernin's tail tightened instinctively around the cot's base. Every primal instinct in him screamed to keep her by his side, to protect what was his. The mate bond thrummed stronger beneath his skin, demanding he tell her the truth.

“Wait—” he started, but the words died in his throat as she took his hand in both of hers.

Her soft lips pressed against his battle-scarred knuckles, sending a jolt of electricity through his entire body. His scales tingled with awareness, his muscles tensing at the intimate gesture.

Time stopped. His heart beat erratically in his chest. The mate bond surged between them, stronger than ever, screaming at him to claim her, to mark her as his own.

But before he could move, before he could tell her what she truly meant to him, she was gone. Her red hair disappeared around the corner, leaving nothing but the ghost of her kiss on his skin and the lingering scent of roses.

Dernin’s tail lashed in frustration. His fingers curled into fists, the spot where she’d kissed him burning like a brand. The warrior in him wanted to chase after her, to catch her and explain everything. To tell her she was his mate, his destiny, his everything.

But he couldn’t. Not yet. Not while Bariv and Fyret lurked like vultures. He had to win first. Had to ensure her safety before he could reveal the truth.

His chest tightened as he stared at the empty doorway where she’d vanished. Soon. Soon he would tell her everything. Soon she would know she belonged to him, just as completely as he belonged to her.

For now, though, he had a tournament to win and a mate to protect.

Dernin eased himself off the cot, his ribs protesting with each movement. The mate bond still sang through his blood, making even the pain seem distant and unimportant compared to thoughts of Alaysia. Her scent lingered on his scales where she’d touched him and kissed him, driving his protective instincts wild.

“Watch yourself, snake,” a passing fighter muttered, shouldering past him in the narrow corridor.

Page 29

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

Dernin's tail whipped out, catching the fighter's ankle. The man stumbled, catching himself against the wall. "My apologies," Dernin said, his voice low and dangerous. "My tail has a mind of its own sometimes."

The fighter scurried away, leaving Dernin to make his way to the barracks undisturbed. His thoughts drifted back to Alaysia—her soft hands on his wounds, her musical laugh, the press of her lips against his knuckles. His mate. The word echoed in his mind like a prayer.

The barracks were mercifully quiet when he arrived. He coiled his tail beneath him on his sleeping mat, letting his eyes drift closed.

Tomorrow he would be one step closer to winning her freedom. But tonight, he could rest easy knowing he'd finally found what he'd been searching for his entire life.

Sleep claimed him swiftly, and his dreams were filled with flowing red hair and the scent of roses.

Chapter 15

Dernin

The training dummies splintered under Dernin's tail strike the following morning. Wood fragments scattered across the floor as he coiled back, his muscles burning with raw power he'd never felt before. His golden scales gleamed with sweat in the dim light of the workout room.

His senses felt heightened, sharpened. Every movement, every sound, every scent registered with crystal clarity. The mate bond thrummed through his veins like liquid fire, making his strikes faster, his reactions quicker.

He grabbed another training dummy, setting it up with efficient movements. His tail whipped through the air as he circled his target, analyzing weak points. Back on Nirum, training had required intense focus. Now that focus came naturally, instinctively.

The scent of roses drifted through his mind—Alaysia. His mate. His muscles coiled tighter, power surging through him at just the thought of her. This new strength, these enhanced senses—they had to be because of the mate bond.

His fist shot out, crushing through the dummy's chest. The wood gave way like paper beneath his knuckles.

"Save some equipment for the rest of us," someone muttered.

Dernin's head snapped toward the voice, a low growl rumbling in his chest. The other fighter quickly looked away.

He returned to his exercises, but his thoughts kept drifting to Alaysia. To protecting her. To winning her freedom. Each punch, each strike, each movement was for her. The mate bond sang through his blood, driving him to be stronger, faster, better.

His tail coiled around a weight bar, lifting it with ease. Weight that would have challenged him before now felt like nothing. His body hummed with untapped potential, ready to be unleashed in the ring.

"Never seen you like this before," a passing fighter commented.

Dernin's eyes narrowed. "You haven't seen anything yet."

Sand crunched beneath Dernin's tail as he entered the ring. His opponent, a burly Velken with cybernetic arms, cracked his metallic knuckles. The sound echoed through the arena, but Dernin's focus remained razor-sharp. Yesterday's blow to his ribs might as well have never happened as his body now thrummed with raw energy.

"Ready to die, snake?" The Velken's mechanical arms whirred.

Dernin's tongue flicked out. Every sense heightened to supernatural levels. The crowd's roar faded as his gaze lifted to the private viewing box.

Alaysia.

Their eyes met across the arena. The mate bond exploded through him like lightning, setting every nerve ending on fire. Power surged through his muscles, making his scales ripple with golden light. His tail coiled with newfound strength.

"Come find out," Dernin growled.

The Velken charged. His cybernetic fist whooshed past Dernin's head, but Dernin moved like water. Each dodge felt effortless, time seeming to slow as he weaved between the mechanical strikes.

His tail swept out, catching the Velken's legs. The crowd gasped as the larger fighter crashed face-first into the sand. Dernin's fist connected with the back of the Velken's head before he could recover.

"Is that all?" Dernin's voice carried across the arena.

The Velken staggered up, spitting blood. He telegraphed his next punch so clearly,

Dernin almost laughed. He caught the mechanical arm mid-swing, crushing the metal in his grip. Sparks flew as servos ground to a halt.

One more look at Alaysia. The mate bond sang through his blood like battle drums. His tail whipped forward with devastating force, catching the Velken square in the chest. The impact sent him flying into the arena wall with a sickening crunch.

The Velken didn't get up.

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

“Victory to Dernin!” The announcer’s voice barely registered as Dernin’s gaze locked with Alaysia’s. Four wins down. The finals drew closer with each victory.

His opponent was carried from the ring, but Dernin stood tall, his golden scales gleaming with barely a scratch on him.

Dernin soon slid into position at the fighters’ viewing area and settled against the wall. His eyes fixed on the ring as Bariv strutted out to face his opponent.

“Watch and learn, snake,” Bariv called out, catching Dernin’s gaze. “This is how a real champion fights.”

Dernin’s blood boiled, but he kept his face neutral. The Jorvlen’s filaments writhed with anticipation as he squared off against a Kretian fighter.

The match started brutally. Bariv didn’t waste time with fancy footwork or strategy. He simply charged in, using his superior strength to overwhelm his opponent. The Kretian’s defense crumbled under the assault.

“He’s good,” muttered a fighter next to Dernin. “But sloppy.”

“Sloppy works when you’re that strong,” Dernin replied, studying Bariv’s movements. Every strike was designed to hurt, to dominate. No finesse, just raw power.

Blood sprayed across the sand as Bariv landed a devastating blow to his opponent’s face. The crowd roared their approval.

“That’s right!” Bariv shouted, playing to the audience.

The Kretian fighter struggled to stand, but Bariv didn’t give him the chance. A brutal kick sent him back down, and the match was called.

“Pathetic,” Bariv spat, turning toward the fighters’ area. His eyes locked with Dernin’s. “Better pray you don’t face me in the finals, snake.”

“I’m not worried,” Dernin replied flatly.

“We’ll see about that.” Bariv’s filaments twitched with amusement as he strutted past.

Watching him go, Dernin knew with certainty that it would come down to the two of them in the finals. His tail tightened its coil, his muscles tensing at the thought. When that time came, he’d be ready for him.

Dernin soon made his way back through the corridors toward the fighters’ barracks. The scent hit him before he saw the movement—that distinctive Jorvlen musk mixed with sweat and malice.

Bariv emerged from the shadows. “Nice fight today, snake. Though I’d say you’re getting soft. Must be all that time spent swooning over that human prize.”

“Move aside,” Dernin growled.

“What’s wrong? Don’t want to chat about your little redhead?” Bariv’s filaments twitched. “I’ve been thinking about all the things I’m going to do to her when I win. Maybe I’ll start by—”

The mate bond exploded through Dernin’s blood like molten steel. His tail whipped forward, slamming Bariv against the wall before he could finish his vile

suggestion. “You don’t speak about her.”

Bariv’s laugh turned into a wet cough. “Touched a nerve, did I? Wait till I tell you what position I plan to—”

Dernin’s fist connected with the wall beside Bariv’s head, leaving a crater in the stone. “Last warning.”

“Or what?” Bariv’s filaments writhed faster. “Going to disqualify yourself by fighting outside the ring? Then she’s mine by default.”

The truth in those words burned worse than acid. Dernin’s muscles coiled tightly, every fiber of him screaming to end the threat to his mate. His golden scales rippled with barely contained rage.

“Break it up!” Two guards rushed forward, weapons raised. “Back to your quarters, both of you!”

Dernin held his position for one more heartbeat, letting Bariv see the promise of death in his eyes. Then he released him, watching with satisfaction as the Jorvlen slumped slightly.

“This isn’t over,” Bariv spat.

“You’re right,” Dernin’s voice dropped to a dangerous whisper. “It ends in the finals. And I’m going to enjoy every second of it.”

The click of expensive boots on stone echoed through the corridor. Dernin tasted Fyret’s distinctive scent in the air—expensive cologne masking the stench of corruption beneath.

“Gentlemen,” Fyret’s smooth voice cut through the tension. “What did I say about damaging my merchandise outside the ring?”

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

Dernin kept his eyes locked on Bariv.

“Just having a friendly chat,” Bariv said, straightening his clothes with exaggerated care.

“Save it for the finals,” Fyret said. “Assuming you both make it there.” His sharp eyes fixed on the crater Dernin’s fist had left in the wall. “That’s coming out of your winnings, warrior.”

Dernin just gave a curt nod. The mate bond still hummed through his blood, demanding action, but he forced himself to stay still as Fyret turned to leave.

“Walk with me, Bariv,” Fyret called over his shoulder. “We have business to discuss.”

Something in their easy familiarity set off warning bells in Dernin’s mind. He watched through narrowed eyes as Bariv fell into step beside Fyret, the two of them talking in low voices as they disappeared around the corner.

Their body language spoke of long association. The way Bariv leaned in slightly as Fyret spoke, how Fyret’s hand occasionally clapped Bariv’s shoulder—these weren’t the gestures of a kingpin and his slave fighter.

“What game are you playing?” Dernin muttered.

The mate bond pulsed with renewed urgency. If Bariv and Fyret were working together somehow, it put Alaysia in even more danger.

But one thing was certain, anyone who threatened his mate would regret it.

Chapter 16

Alaysia

Alaysia's silk dress whispered against the stone barrier as she hurried through the dimly lit passageways. The jeweled necklace around her throat caught the light from scattered torches, sending tiny rainbows dancing across the rough-hewn walls. Her heart nearly stopped, partly from the urgency of her mission and partly from anticipation of seeing Dernin again.

The secret alcove lay just ahead, tucked away behind a bend in the corridor. This small space had become her and Dernin's special meeting place over the past several days.

"Come on, come on," she whispered, tapping her fingers against the wall as she waited.

A familiar sound reached her ears—the smooth slide of scales against stone. Dernin emerged from the shadows. His face lit up when he saw her, and something in her chest tightened at his expression.

"You came," she said, stepping forward.

"Of course." His tail curled slightly, and his golden eyes seemed to drink her in. "Is everything all right?"

"We need to hurry. Marcella's waiting in the kitchens." She grabbed his hand without thinking and then froze at the contact. His skin was warm against hers, and she found herself not wanting to let go.

“Lead the way,” he said softly, giving her hand a gentle squeeze.

Alaysia pulled him along the corridor, taking the twisting route she’d learned that avoided the main thoroughfares. “Watch your head here,” she warned as they ducked under a low-hanging beam.

“You’ve learned this place well,” Dernin observed.

“Had to. Knowledge is survival.” She paused at an intersection, listening for footsteps. “Besides, being the ‘prize’ means I can go almost anywhere—as long as I look decorative enough doing it.” She touched the necklace with her free hand, her lip curling in distaste.

“You’d look just as beautiful without all that,” Dernin said and then seemed to catch himself.

Heat rushed to her cheeks, and she was glad the dim lighting would hide her blush. She tugged him forward again, trying to focus on their mission rather than how natural it felt to hold his hand.

The kitchen’s service entrance smelled of spiced meats and fresh bread, making Alaysia’s stomach growl despite her nerves. Marcella stood in the shadows, her eyes darting between them and the corridor.

“About time,” Marcella whispered, motioning them closer. “The vendors are making their evening deliveries now. Kira will be at the north exit in an hour.”

Alaysia’s fingers tightened around Dernin’s hand. “Show us this exit.”

“This way.” Marcella led them past stacks of wooden crates and barrels. “The guards change shifts soon. That’s our window.”

The kitchen bustled with activity, but most of the staff kept their heads down, focused on their work. Steam rose from massive pots, and the clatter of dishes provided cover for their whispered conversation.

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

“Here.” Marcella stopped at what looked like a storage closet. She pulled a lever disguised as a broken shelf, revealing a narrow passage. “This leads to a service tunnel. Follow it north until you reach a junction marked with red paint. Take the right path.”

Alaysia peered into the darkness. “You’re sure about this vendor?”

“Kira’s solid. She’s helped slaves for years.” Marcella reassured them.

“Thank you.” Alaysia said softly.

“Just remember our deal.” Marcella’s eyes flicked to Dernin. “When the warriors come, I go free, too.”

“You have my word,” Dernin said, his tail shifting restlessly.

“Okay, go,” Marcella urged. “One hour. Don’t be late.”

Alaysia stared at the dark passage. Everything hinged on getting this message out. She took a deep breath. “Ready?” she asked Dernin.

His eyes met hers, full of determination. “With you? Always.”

The secret passage enveloped them in darkness. Alaysia’s silk dress caught on a rough stone, and she yanked it free with a quiet curse. The air grew thick and musty, carrying the scent of old stone and decay.

The service tunnel that Marcella mentioned stretched ahead, barely wide enough for Dernin's broad shoulders. Her footsteps seemed thunderous in the confined space.

"North," Alaysia murmured to herself. Her free hand traced the wall, counting the intersections they passed. One. Two. Three...

The junction with red paint appeared ahead, a splash of crimson against the gray stone. Alaysia's heart quickened. They were close.

"Right path," Dernin confirmed.

They followed the tunnel as it curved upward. The air grew fresher, carrying hints of night air. A wooden door appeared, reinforced with iron bands.

Alaysia pressed her ear against it. Nothing. She eased it open, wincing at the slight creak of hinges.

The night air hit her face, sweet and cool compared to the underground stuffiness. They emerged into a narrow alley between two buildings, where crates of produce were stacked against the walls.

A figure detached itself from the shadows. "You're the ones Marcella sent?"

Alaysia stepped forward, keeping her voice low. "We need to get a message to the Niri warriors."

The woman—Kira—crossed her arms. She was short and sturdy, with callused hands and sharp eyes that missed nothing. Her gaze lingered on Dernin.

"One of their warriors is trapped in Fyret's fighting ring," Alaysia continued. "He needs to be freed. Will you help us?"

Kira shifted her weight, glancing over her shoulder down the darkened alley. “Getting close to the warriors? That’s risky business.” She rubbed her chin. “Even if I could find them, information like that doesn’t come cheap.”

Alaysia’s fingers went to the jeweled necklace at her throat. The gems felt cold against her skin, each one worth more than she’d ever held in her life. Fyret had forced her to wear it as a symbol of her status as his prize.

“Will this cover it?” She unclasped the necklace, the weight falling away from her throat.

Kira’s eyes widened at the glinting stones. “That’ll do nicely.” She snatched it from Alaysia’s outstretched hand, tucking it quickly into a hidden pocket. “I’ll get word as close to the warriors as I can. Best I can promise.”

“Thank you,” Alaysia said, resisting the urge to rub her now-bare neck. What would she tell Fyret when he noticed it was missing? She’d have to think of something—claim it broke, maybe, or that she lost it during one of her walks around the arena.

Kira melted into the shadows without another word, leaving Alaysia and Dernin alone in the alley. The night air felt colder now, raising goosebumps on her exposed skin.

“You shouldn’t have had to give that up,” Dernin said softly behind her.

“It was never mine to begin with.” Alaysia turned to face him, lifting her chin. “Besides, I’d rather be free than decorated like some prize horse.”

His golden eyes softened, and she felt warmth bloom in her chest despite the chill.

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

Alaysia turned toward the wooden door to head back, but then she paused. The night breeze kissed her bare neck where the necklace had rested moments before, carrying the scent of freedom—street food, distant ocean salt, and possibility.

“Dernin,” she whispered, her heart racing. “We’re outside.”

His eyes met hers, understanding dawning. “We could run.”

The city sprawled before them, a maze of shadowy streets and twinkling lights. Somewhere in that labyrinth lay real freedom. Her hands grabbed at her dress.

“The guards won’t check on us for at least an hour,” she said, calculations running through her mind. “We could disappear into the crowd at the night market.”

Dernin’s tail twitched restlessly. “The city gates will be guarded.”

“We could hide until—” She stopped, reality crashing back. “Until what? We have no money, no supplies.” Her hand dropped to her side. “And I just traded away our only valuables.”

“There’s nowhere close enough to reach before they notice we’re gone,” Dernin said softly. “And when they catch us...”

Alaysia shuddered. She’d seen what happened to slaves who tried to escape. “They’d separate us. And you would never get to finish the tournament.”

“Which means Bariv would win.” His jaw clenched. “You’d be his prize.”

The thought made her sick to her stomach. She looked longingly at the city one last time, memorizing the taste of temporary freedom.

“We have no choice but to wait,” she concluded, though it pained her. “The warriors will come. They have to.”

Dernin touched her shoulder gently. “They will. My people don’t abandon their own.”

Together they slipped back into the tunnel, leaving the tantalizing promise of freedom behind. The musty underground air felt heavier now, weighted with what-ifs and almost-maybes.

“At least we got the message out,” Alaysia whispered as they navigated the darkness. But her throat felt tight, and she blinked back frustrated tears. So close. They’d been so close.

Chapter 17

Dernin

Dernin shifted restlessly as he watched Bariv’s match from the fighter’s viewing area the following afternoon. Every muscle in his body tensed with each move his rival made, cataloging weaknesses and strengths for their inevitable confrontation.

Bariv’s opponent, a seasoned fighter named Krell, had Bariv pinned against the arena wall. The crowd roared as Krell landed blow after blow.

“Getting sloppy, champion,” Krell taunted, driving his fist into Bariv’s side.

Bariv stumbled, his movements uncharacteristically sluggish. Something wasn’t right. His instincts screamed that this fight felt staged.

Above in the viewing box, Alaysia sat watching. His mate's presence made his scales bristle with protective energy.

"Watch your left side," one of the other fighters muttered as Bariv was deliberately leaving openings.

Krell soon launched a devastating combination that should have ended the match. Instead, Bariv suddenly sprang to life, countering with impossible speed. One brutal strike later, Krell lay unconscious on the arena floor.

"Victory to Bariv!" the announcer bellowed.

The crowd erupted, but Dernin's eyes narrowed on Fyret's booth. The kingpin smiled, nodding slightly at Bariv.

Dernin's scales bristled. That comeback had been too perfect, too well-timed. He remembered seeing Bariv talking with Fyret earlier, their heads close together in conversation.

"Something's wrong with this whole setup," Dernin growled.

"You're just worried about facing him," someone jeered.

Dernin's tail whipped around, nearly catching the speaker in the chest. "I don't fear that slug. But this match wasn't right."

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

“What’s that supposed to mean?”asked another fighter.

“Nothing.”Dernin straightened, his tail shifting in irritation.He couldn’t prove anything, but that comeback felt manufactured.The way Bariv had played weak and then struck with perfectly timed brutality...

“Semifinals, here I come,” Bariv crowed as he strutted past.“Hope you’re ready to lose, snake.”

“Save your breath for the ring,” Dernin snapped back.

“Oh, I’m saving something special for our match.”Bariv’s filaments twitched as his gaze drifted to the viewing box.“And for after.”

It took every ounce of Dernin’s warrior discipline not to strike him down right there.His protective instincts regarding Alaysia made his blood burn hot.

“Next match in ten minutes!”a guard called out.“Dernin, you’re up!”

Dernin pushed off from the wall.He’d win this match, and then he’d figure out exactly what game Bariv and Fyret were playing.

Dernin’s muscles coiled with anticipation as he entered the ring.His opponent, a hulking Jorvlen named Vrax, cracked his knuckles menacingly.But when Dernin looked at him, he saw Bariv’s sneering face instead, imagining those filthy hands reaching for Alaysia.

The thought set his blood on fire.

“Ready to eat sand, snake?” Vrax taunted.

Dernin’s tail whipped across the arena sand, his focus laser sharp.

The bell rang. Vrax charged forward with a roar, but Dernin was already moving. His tail swept low, forcing Vrax to jump. The moment the Jorvlen’s feet left the ground, Dernin struck. His fist connected with Vrax’s jaw, sending him staggering.

“That all you got?” Vrax spat blood.

Dernin’s tongue flicked out, tasting his opponent’s fear in the air. The mate bond pulsed fiercely in his veins filling him with primal energy. He glanced up at Alaysia in her viewing box, her red hair gleaming like fire.

Mine to protect.

Vrax landed a lucky hit to Dernin’s ribs, but the pain only fueled him. He grabbed Vrax’s arm and tossed him backward across the arena with surprising ease, the Jorvlen’s body flailing. Vrax crashed into the arena wall with a satisfying crunch.

“By the gods,” someone in the crowd whispered. “I’ve never seen him fight like this.”

Dernin advanced on his opponent, every movement calculated and lethal. His tail coiled around Vrax’s leg before he could recover, yanking him off balance. Two precise strikes to the head and Vrax lay unconscious at his feet.

The crowd erupted in cheers, but Dernin barely heard them. His focus remained on Alaysia. He watched her as she leaned forward in her seat, the relief evident on her face. The sight of her sent another surge of possessive energy through him.

The announcer soon shouted, “Dernin advances to the semifinals!”

One step closer to keeping her safe. One step closer to making her his. Dernin’s chest heaved as he left the ring, his golden scales shimmering with sweat and victory.

Fyret strutted into the ring, his gaudy suit catching the arena lights as he spread his arms wide. The crowd’s roar deepened as he gestured for the four semifinalists to join him. Dernin’s tail left smooth tracks in the sand as he slithered forward, his muscles still humming from his victory.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Fyret’s voice boomed across the arena. “Your final four!”

Dernin stood tall, his golden scales gleaming as he towered over the others. Beside him, Bariv’s filaments twitched.

“To my right, the undefeated champion himself—Bariv!”

The crowd erupted as Bariv raised his fists, feeding off their energy.

“And here stands the rising star, the fighter who’s captured all our hearts—Dernin!”

The cheers washed over him, but Dernin’s gaze sought only one face. There, in the viewing box, Alaysia leaned forward, her flame-red hair cascading over one shoulder. Their eyes met, and his chest tightened at the worry etched across her beautiful features. His mate—that word still sent thrills through his body—looked pale and tense.

He wanted nothing more than to go to her, to wrap his tail around her protectively and whisk her away from this place. To tell her that she was his, that he would die before letting anyone harm her. The mate bond burned inside him, demanding he claim her, protect her, love her.

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

“Tomorrow,” Fyret continued, “these four will battle for supremacy, for glory, and for our special prize!”

The crowd’s attention turned to Alaysia. He saw her shrink back slightly, though she kept her chin high. Pride and protectiveness warred in his chest. His mate was so strong, yet she shouldn’t have to be—not like this.

“Don’t worry, snake,” Bariv muttered under his breath. “I’ll take good care of her.”

Dernin’s tail coiled tightly, his warrior training barely containing his urge to strike. Soon, he promised himself.

Dernin’s scales whispered against the stone floor as he went to the barracks. The taste of victory still lingered, but something else caught his attention—familiar voices drifting from a shadowed alcove. His warrior instincts kicked in as he pressed himself against the wall, his golden scales shifting to match the darkness.

“The snake’s getting too popular,” Fyret’s voice carried clearly. “Bad for business when the crowd favorite isn’t our champion.”

“I’ll break him,” Bariv’s guttural tone replied. “Just like all the others.”

“See that you do. I’ve got too much riding on you staying champion. The betting odds are already arranged.”

Dernin’s tongue flicked out to taste their emotions. Greed and malice saturated the air.

“What if he gets lucky?” Bariv asked.

“He won’t.” Fyret’s silk-smooth voice hardened. “I’ll make sure the referee knows when to look the other way. And if that doesn’t work...we’ll improvise.”

“And the girl?” Bariv’s filaments twitched eagerly. “She’s still mine when I win?”

“As promised. Though try not to break this one too quickly. She’s worth more than your usual prizes.”

Raw fury surged through Dernin’s body. His tail coiled tightly, muscles bunching with the effort of restraining himself from striking immediately. These insects dared to plot against his mate? His nails dug into his palms, drawing blood.

“Don’t worry,” Bariv chuckled. “I know how to make them last.”

Dernin’s vision tinged red. Only the thought of Alaysia—of keeping her safe—kept him from revealing himself and ending both their miserable lives right there.

Dernin turned quietly and made his way to the barracks, his rage threatening to consume him. The conversation he’d overheard played on repeat in his mind. Fixed matches. Corrupt referees. His jaw clenched until pain shot through his temples.

“Getting nervous about tomorrow?” one of the other fighters called out.

Dernin’s eyes fixed on the speaker, who immediately shrank back. “I don’t get nervous.”

Dernin finally settled in on his sleeping mat, every movement deliberate and controlled despite the fury coursing through his veins. The other fighters gave him a wide berth, sensing his dangerous mood.

“They want to rig this thing?”he muttered under his breath.“Let them try.”

No matter what underhanded tactics Fyret employed, Dernin would not lose.Could not lose.

“A warrior adapts,” he reminded himself, remembering his training.If they planned to cheat, he’d simply have to be so overwhelming that no amount of corruption could stop him.

Chapter 18

Alaysia

Alaysiatuggedatthetight silk gown that clung to her curves, wishing for the hundredth time she could wear something less revealing.The private viewing box offered little comfort despite its luxurious furnishings.Below, the arena buzzed with anticipation as Fyret strutted around the ring.

“And now, your semifinalists!”Fyret’s voice boomed.

Alaysia’s stomach did flips as she watched the four fighters enter.Dernin’s golden scales caught the light perfectly, his powerful tail moving with a grace that belied his strength.Beside him stood Bariv, his bulky, slimy frame radiating menace even from this distance.

“You’re going to wear a hole in that dress if you keep fidgeting,” Marcella whispered.

“I can’t help it.”Alaysia’s fingers grabbed at the silk.“Look at the size of that Kronan fighter.And the Zentari’s supposed to be undefeated in his home rings.”

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

“Dernin has beaten tough odds before.”

“But Bariv...” Alaysia’s voice dropped lower. “Something about him feels wrong. The way he moves, how he fights—it’s like he knows he can’t lose.”

Down in the ring, Fyret clasped Bariv’s shoulder with familiar ease. The gesture sent a chill down Alaysia’s spine.

“Did you see that?” She leaned closer to Marcella. “The way Fyret touched him? Like they’re friends?”

“Hush.” Marcella’s eyes darted around. “Those kinds of observations could get you in trouble.”

Alaysia forced herself to sit straighter, adopting the demure pose expected of her. But her mind raced. The other two fighters looked formidable, yes, but Bariv was the real threat. The way he kept glancing up at her viewing box made her skin crawl.

“I hope our message reached someone,” she murmured. “If Dernin has to face Bariv in the finals...”

“Have faith,” Marcella said. “Your warrior’s stronger than you think.”

Alaysia’s cheeks warmed at “your warrior,” but she couldn’t deny how her heart leaped when Dernin’s golden eyes found hers across the arena. He gave her the slightest nod, and somehow that small gesture steadied her racing pulse.

Alaysia's high heels clicked against the stone floor as she and Marcella made their way through the dim corridors. The flickering torches seemed to mock her growing anxiety.

"What if he loses?" Alaysia blurted out.

Marcella glanced around before responding. "Don't think like that."

"I have to, though." Alaysia hugged herself, fighting a shiver that had nothing to do with the underground chill. "Bariv's connection to Fyret, the way the matches are going...something's not right."

They passed a group of guards who leered at them. Alaysia's skin crawled as she remembered Bariv's hungry stares.

"If Dernin loses..." Her voice cracked. "You know what happens to women like me in places like this. The things they do—"

"Stop." Marcella grabbed her arm, pulling her into an alcove. "Listen to me. That Niri warrior of yours is fighting like a man possessed. I've never seen anyone move like that."

"But what if it's not enough?" Alaysia pulled at her dress. "And the message... What if that worker just took my jewels and ran? Fyret will notice they're missing soon enough."

"Kira's worked with me before. She can be greedy, but she keeps her word when she's paid."

The sound of approaching footsteps made them both tense. They waited until the corridor cleared before continuing their walk back to their quarters.

“Two more days,” Alaysia whispered. “That’s all we have before the finals. The Niri warriors would have come by now if they got the message. Wouldn’t they?”

“Unless they’re planning carefully. A rescue isn’t something you rush.”

Alaysia just about threw up in her mouth at the thought of Bariv’s hands on her if he won. The way he’d looked at her earlier, like she was already his property... She’d rather die than submit to that.

“I won’t let them have me,” she said, her voice steel. “One way or another, I’m not becoming anyone’s plaything.”

Marcella squeezed her hand. “Then we better make sure Plan B is ready, just in case.”

The worn stone floors echoed with their footsteps as Alaysia and Marcella continued toward the corridor that led to the slave quarters. Alaysia’s silk dress rustled with each step, the sound making her increasingly aware of how trapped she felt in the fancy garment.

“You know, maybe we should really think about other options,” Alaysia whispered.

“Like what?” Marcella kept her voice low. “The kitchens have a delivery entrance.”

“Too many guards,” Alaysia countered. “The laundry carts?”

“They check those now. After that escape attempt last month.”

“The sewers?” Alaysia suggested half-heartedly.

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

“Sealed with iron grates.” Marcella shook her head. “And the smell would give us away before we got ten feet.”

The slave quarters came into view, the familiar heavy door a bitter reminder of her captivity. Alaysia’s chest tightened as they stepped inside. The room spun slightly, the reality of her situation crashing down around her.

“I can’t breathe.” Her hands shook as she clawed at her neck. “I can’t—what if—”

“Hey, hey.” Marcella guided her to the threadbare couch in the corner. “Sit down before you pass out.”

Alaysia sank into the worn cushions, the scratchy fabric grounding her somewhat. She focused on the familiar smell of dust and age, trying to slow her racing heart.

“Deep breaths,” Marcella said, sitting beside her. “In through your nose, out through your mouth.”

“If this doesn’t work...” Alaysia’s voice cracked. “If the message doesn’t reach anyone...”

“Then we’ll figure something else out.” Marcella covered her hand with hers.

The quiet sounds of the slave quarters—soft footsteps, hushed conversations, the distant drip of water—filled the silence as Alaysia fought to control her breathing. Her mind kept circling back to Bariv’s hungry eyes, to Fyret’s knowing smirk, to all the horrible possibilities that awaited if their plan failed.

The tears came without warning. One moment Alaysia sat there trying to breathe, and the next she was sobbing, her carefully applied makeup running down her cheeks in dark streaks.

“I can’t. I can’t do this anymore.” Her voice cracked as the words tumbled out. “If Dernin loses, Bariv will...and then I’ll be...” She put her arms around herself, shuddering. “And even if Dernin wins, what then? We’re all still trapped here. The message probably never made it out. And Dernin—” Her chest constricted at the thought of him being hurt or killed in the ring. “He’s risking everything, fighting so hard, and for what? He could die in there!”

Marcella pulled her close, stroking her hair like a mother would. The simple gesture of comfort only made Alaysia cry harder.

“What if we never get out of here?” Alaysia’s fingers clutched Marcella’s dress. “I thought I was strong enough to handle anything, but watching those fights, seeing how Fyret looks at Bariv...I’m terrified.”

“Listen to me.” Marcella pulled back, gripping Alaysia’s shoulders. “That Niri warrior isn’t just fighting for glory or freedom. I’ve seen how he looks at you. He fights like a man with something precious to protect.”

Alaysia’s heart fluttered at those words. “But what if it’s not enough? What if—”

“No more what-ifs.” Marcella’s voice was firm but kind. “You’re stronger than you know. And Dernin? That warrior has more skill and determination than anyone I’ve ever seen. Have faith in him. Have faith in yourself.”

Alaysia wiped at her tears, smearing more makeup across her face. “I just...”

Alaysia wrung her hands in her lap as she struggled to find the right words. The tears

had dried on her cheeks, leaving sticky trails she couldn't quite wipe away.

"There's something else," she whispered. "Something worse than all of this."

Marcella shifted closer on the worn couch. "What could be worse?"

"I think..." Alaysia's voice caught. "I think I'm falling in love with him."

"With Dernin?" Marcella's eyes softened. "Tell me more. What makes him so special to you?"

The question sparked something deep within Alaysia, and words tumbled out unbidden. "He looks at me like I'm the only person in the whole universe." She paused. "And he sees me for who I really am."

Her hands gestured as she spoke, becoming more animated. "And he's gentle, despite all his strength."

"Go on," Marcella encouraged.

"He makes me feel safe, but not because he's protecting me. He makes me feel like I can protect myself." Heat flooded Alaysia's cheeks. "When we talk, he actually listens. And his smile..." She touched her chest where her heart fluttered. "Oh wow, I really am in love with him. Aren't I?"

"Sounds like it." Marcella squeezed her hand. "And that terrifies you?"

"Of course it does! I've never..." Alaysia stood, pacing the small space. "I've never had a choice before. About anything. Especially not about who to give my heart to."

"Well, if you love him, truly love him, for once in your life, listen to what your heart

wants,” Marcella said gently.

Chapter 19

Dernin

SleepeludedDerninashis mind churned over Fyret's scheming.The thin mat beneath him offered little comfort against the cold stone floor.With a quiet huff, he pushed himself up.

The corridors stretched dark and empty, lit only by scattered torches that cast shadows on the stone walls.Dernin slithered silently through them, his warrior training serving him well as he avoided the guards' usual patrol routes.

"This tournament is rigged," he muttered under his breath, his tail lashing in frustration."Everything here is corrupt."

His golden scales reflected the dim torchlight as he moved past another empty checkpoint.

A soft whisper cut through the silence."Psst!Dernin!"

He whirled around, his muscles tensed for a fight, only to find Marcella emerging from the shadows.

"Someone's here to see you and Alaysia," she whispered.

Dernin's brow furrowed."At this hour?"

"Follow me."Marcella turned and headed down a narrow passage.

They wound through the underground maze until they reached the familiar alcove. Alaysia was already there, her red hair catching the light from a single torch. Her presence made his heart skip, but he forced himself to focus on the situation at hand.

“What’s going on?” he asked, positioning himself between the entrance and Alaysia out of instinct.

“Marcella wouldn’t tell me, either,” Alaysia said, crossing her arms. “She just said we needed to come here.”

“Just wait here,” Marcella said to them.

Marcella’s footsteps faded into the darkness, leaving Dernin and Alaysia alone in the dim alcove. His tail coiled protectively around the space where they stood, creating a barrier between them and any potential threats.

Alaysia shifted in the small space. “Who could possibly be here to see us?”

Dernin tasted the air for any hint of danger. Finding none, he allowed himself to relax slightly. The familiar scent of roses filled his senses. His mate’s presence both soothed and ignited him.

“We’ll know soon enough,” he said in a low voice. “Stay close to me.”

She moved nearer to him, and his muscles tensed at her proximity. Every protective instinct in his body screamed at him to wrap her in his arms and shield her from the world. But he held back, knowing she wasn’t ready for such intimacy.

“At least the guards rarely check this section,” Alaysia said, brushing a strand of red hair from her face.

Dernin nodded. “The underground’s layout works to our advantage sometimes.”

“You seem tense,” she observed, studying his face.

If only she knew how her mere presence affected him, how every fiber within him recognized her as his mate. The urge to tell her burned in his throat, but he swallowed it down. Now wasn’t the time, not with everything else at stake.

“Just staying alert,” he replied, shifting his weight to better position himself between her and the entrance. “Old warrior habits.”

She smiled, and his heart clenched. “Those habits might save our lives one day.”

“They already have,” he said softly, remembering countless fights in the ring where thoughts of protecting her had pushed him beyond his limits.

Suddenly, footsteps echoed down the corridor and Dernin’s muscles tightened, ready to strike. A cloaked figure emerged from the shadows, moving with a familiar grace that made his scales tingle with recognition. The scent hit him before the hood fell back—sand, steel, and the distinct aroma of Niri leather.

“Kress?” His old patrol partner stood before them, wearing his warrior’s uniform beneath the cloak.

“It really is you!” Kress’s green eyes widened. “When we got the message, I volunteered to verify it myself.”

Dernin shifted closer to Alaysia, his protective instincts still on high alert despite recognizing his old friend. “You got our message then?”

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

“Yes, and the warriors are mobilizing as we speak.” Kress’s gaze flickered to Alaysia and then back to Dernin. “Five days. That’s how long it will take to gather enough forces and create a solid plan of attack.”

Relief flooded through Dernin’s body, but he kept his expression neutral. “Five days. I only have one fight left before the finals.”

“You’ve fought in their rings?” Kress’s scales bristled. “That’s no place for a warrior of Nirum.”

“I did what I had to do in order to survive,” Dernin growled. “To protect what matters.”

Understanding dawned in Kress’s eyes as he observed Dernin’s protective stance. “I see you’ve found something worth fighting for beyond duty.”

Alaysia stepped forward, her shoulder brushing against Dernin’s arm. “He’s been protecting me.”

“And I’ll continue to do so,” Dernin added, his voice dropping to a low rumble.

“But what about the Council of Seven?” Alaysia suddenly asked. “Won’t they retaliate if we bring down one of their operations?”

Kress’s scales rippled with amusement. “The Council of Seven likes to pretend they don’t know about these fighting rings, but everyone knows they profit from them. Still, they’re illegal. We have every right to shut them down.”

Dernin's fists clenched as he remembered Fyret's earlier conversation with Bariv. "They're corrupt to the core. The fights are rigged."

"That doesn't surprise me," Kress said, adjusting his cloak. "The council turns a blind eye to a lot of things they shouldn't."

"And Marcella?" Alaysia pressed. "We promised to get her out, too."

"We'll get everyone out," Dernin growled, his protective instincts flaring. His tail curled closer around Alaysia without him consciously willing it. "All the slaves."

Kress nodded. "Any slaves we find will be freed. The council won't be able to object without admitting their involvement in illegal activities."

Relief washed over Dernin's body, though he maintained his guarded stance. The familiar scent of his old patrol partner brought back memories of easier days, when his biggest concern had been completing his rounds on time.

"Thank you, Kress," Dernin said, his voice rough with emotion. "You risked much coming here."

"We're brothers in arms," Kress replied. "When I heard you might be alive..." He glanced at the shadows beyond their alcove. "I have to go. Dawn approaches, and I can't be seen here."

"Be careful," Alaysia whispered.

Kress's scales shifted colors, blending with the shadows. "Five days," he reminded them and then disappeared into the darkness.

Dernin's senses remained alert, tracking his friend's departure until he could no

longer detect him. Only then did he allow his muscles to relax slightly, though he remained hyperaware of every sound and movement around them.

His tail unconsciously curled closer around Alaysia, who stood trembling slightly beside him.

“Five days,” she whispered, her voice catching. “We could actually be free.”

The hope in her voice made his heart pound faster. He turned to face her in the dim torchlight. “We will be free. The warriors of Nirum never break their word.”

“And until then?” Her blue eyes searched his face.

“Until then, I’ll keep winning.” His voice dropped lower. “No one will lay a hand on you. Except maybe me if you permit it.”

Alaysia’s cheeks reddened. “I should really get back to my quarters.”

“I’ll escort you there just to be safe.”

They soon moved through the shadowy corridors toward her quarters, Dernin’s powerful form clearing the way. His senses remained alert for any guards or unwanted attention, though his focus kept drifting to the soft sound of her footsteps beside him.

At her door, Alaysia paused, her hand resting on the cold metal. “The final fight is in two days.”

“Yes.” His scales rippled in anticipation.

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

“What if...”She bit her lip, looking down. “What if you lose?”

The mere suggestion made his jaw clench. “That won’t happen.”

“But if it does?”Her voice quavered. “Bariv—”

“Listen to me.”Dernin moved closer, his tail creating a protective semicircle around them.He took her hands in his, marveling at how small and delicate they felt. “Win or lose, I won’t let anyone harm you.I’d die first.”

Her fingers tightened around his. “I don’t want you to die, either.”

The scent of her fear mixed with something sweeter—something that made his warrior’s blood sing.He brought her hands to his lips, pressing a kiss to each one. “Trust me, Alaysia.Five days from now, we’ll both be free.”

She nodded, though worry still clouded her eyes along with a hint of something else he couldn’t quite name.Dernin forced himself to release her hands and step back, every instinct screaming at him to stay, to guard her door all night.

“Sleep well,” he murmured, watching as she slipped inside.

The metal door clanged shut, and Dernin pressed his palm against it.He allowed himself one moment of weakness before straightening his spine and heading back to his own quarters.He had a tournament to win.

Alaysia

The bluesilk gown clung to Alaysia's curves as she shifted uncomfortably in her seat, watching Fyret work the crowd below into a frenzy. The private viewing box offered the perfect view, but right now she wished she could be anywhere else.

"Ready for another exciting round of matches?" Marcella asked, standing beside her chair.

Alaysia wanted to throw up. "How can I be, knowing it's all fixed?"

"Shh." Marcella glanced around nervously. "Careful what you say up here."

Below, Fyret's voice boomed throughout the arena. "Today, we'll see which of our mighty fighters advance to tomorrow's championship!"

The crowd roared. Alaysia spotted Dernin among the four semifinalists, his golden scales shimmering under the lights. Her heart skipped looking at him and then immediately clenched with worry.

"I don't see how he can win when Fyret's determined to make Bariv the champion," she whispered.

"Remember, have faith." Marcella squeezed her shoulder. "Your warrior's clever. He's made it this far."

Alaysia nodded, though her hands still trembled slightly as she smoothed her dress. The crowd's excitement felt oppressive, pressing in on her from all sides. She caught Dernin's eye across the arena and managed a small smile, hoping he could see her faith in him despite her fears.

“Five days,” she reminded herself under her breath. “Just five days until the warriors come.”

Alaysia watched as Fyret and the four semifinalists exited into the fighters’ tunnel. The crowd’s excitement dimmed to a low murmur as workers prepared the ring for the first match. Suddenly, she felt like she was going to pass out, her throat tightening.

“Here.” Marcella pressed a cup of water into her hands. “You look like you need this.”

Alaysia sipped, grateful for the coolness against her dry throat. “Thanks.”

The arena filled with cheers as Bariv entered, his slimy skin catching the light. His opponent, a muscular fighter from the outer rings, followed shortly after.

From the first punch, the match’s outcome was painfully obvious. Bariv’s opponent stumbled at specifically timed moments, his normally precise footwork clumsy and erratic. When Bariv landed hits, his opponent dramatically flew backward while Bariv barely flinched from solid connections to his jaw.

“This is ridiculous,” Alaysia hissed. “Are they even trying to make it look real?”

“Careful,” Marcella whispered. “The walls have ears.”

The match dragged on, each moment more insulting than the last. Alaysia’s nails dug crescents into her palms as she watched Bariv’s opponent practically throw himself into a chokehold.

“And we have our first finalist!” the announcer boomed through the arena. “The undefeated champion, Bariv!”

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

The crowd erupted in cheers while Alaysia's blood boiled. She stood abruptly, the silk of her gown rustling.

"I can't watch this anymore."

"Alaysia," Marcella cautioned, "you're expected to stay—"

Reluctantly, Alaysia sank back into her seat. Her hands twisted in her lap as she fought to control her breathing. Dernin needed her here, needed to see her face in the crowd.

"His match is next," Marcella murmured, touching her shoulder. "You can do this."

The sand in the ring was smoothed out, the workers clearing away the evidence of Bariv's farce of a match. Alaysia's heart pounded as Dernin emerged from the fighters' tunnel. His opponent, a massive fighter with rippling muscles, followed closely behind.

"That's Grev," Marcella whispered. "He's never lost a match except to Bariv."

Alaysia's throat tightened again. "Is he—"

"No. He's not one of Fyret's. This will be a real fight."

The bell rang, and Alaysia leaned forward, her knuckles white against the armrests. Dernin's movements were calculated. His powerful tail gave him extra reach as he struck. But Grev was faster than his size suggested, dodging the blow and

countering with a vicious right hook.

“Come on,” Alaysia whispered, watching Dernin shake off the hit.

The fighters circled each other, trading blows that made Alaysia wince. Neither seemed to have the advantage. Dernin’s tail swept Grev’s feet, but the larger fighter rolled with the movement, coming up swinging.

“He’s wearing himself out,” Marcella observed as Dernin took another hit.

“What?” Alaysia’s voice cracked with worry.

“Watch. Grev’s breathing is heavy. Dernin’s pace is steady.”

Sure enough, Grev’s movements were slowing. Dernin must have noticed too and lunged forward quickly. He landed a series of quick strikes that had his opponent stumbling backward. The crowd roared as Dernin’s tail coiled around Grev’s throat.

“Please,” Alaysia breathed, barely aware she was standing. “Please win.”

Grev struggled, his face turning red as he tried to break free. His legs kicked out, catching Dernin in the ribs. But Dernin held on, his muscles straining as he maintained the hold.

Finally, Grev’s hand slapped the ground three times. The bell rang.

“Dernin is the winner!” the announcer boomed.

Alaysia collapsed back into her chair, tears of relief streaming down her face. Below, Dernin raised his chin in victory and then turned to look directly at her. She pressed her hand to her heart, hoping he could see how proud she was of him.

“He did it,” she whispered. “He’s in the finals.”

Alaysia’s heart raced as she watched Dernin in the ring below, his golden scales gleaming with sweat under the harsh lights. Blood still trickled from the cut above his eye, but his posture remained proud and strong. He’d proven himself against one of the toughest fighters in the ring and had done it fairly.

“Look at him,” she breathed, unable to tear her eyes away. “He fought with such honor, such skill.”

Marcella leaned against the railing of their private box. “The way he used his opponent’s strength against him? Brilliant. And did you see how he kept his composure even after taking that hit to the face?”

“He’s incredible.” Alaysia pressed her hand to her chest, feeling her rapid heartbeat through the silk of her gown. Below, Dernin’s powerful tail moved with fluid beauty as he made his way to the edge of the ring. “Not just his fighting style, but his spirit.”

Marcella’s knowing smile made Alaysia’s cheeks warm. “I’ve seen plenty of fighters come through these rings, but something’s different about him. The way he carries himself, how he treats others—even his opponents.”

“He’s a true warrior.” Alaysia watched as Dernin paused at the ring’s edge, his golden eyes finding hers once more. Her breath caught as he gave her a slight nod before disappearing into the fighters’ tunnel.

“And that’s why your heart chose him,” Marcella said softly.

Alaysia turned to her friend, surprised. “What do you mean?”

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

“After what you told me about your feelings for him?” Marcella raised an eyebrow. “It makes perfect sense. Your heart recognized something special in him—his strength, his honor, his kindness. You don’t often find those qualities in this place or anywhere, for that matter.”

“I just...” Alaysia twisted a strand of her red hair on her finger. “I never expected to feel this way about anyone. Especially not here.”

“The heart wants what it wants.” Marcella squeezed her shoulder. “And yours picked someone worthy of it.”

Alaysia smiled. “He makes me feel safe but not trapped. Protected but not owned. I’ve never experienced that before.”

“Then hold on to that feeling,” Marcella replied softly.

Alaysia soon traced her fingers over the spots where Dernin’s lips had pressed against her knuckles the night before. The memory sent shivers through her body, warming her from the inside out. She’d never felt anything like it—the gentle pressure of his kiss, the way his golden eyes had locked with hers, filled with such tenderness and protection.

“You’re doing it again,” Marcella said, interrupting her thoughts.

“What?” Alaysia dropped her hands to her lap, her cheeks flushing.

“Touching your hands and smiling like you’ve got a secret,” Marcella said. “Want to

talk about it?”

“He kissed my hands last night. Just...so gentle. Like I was something precious.”

“And?”

“And I realized I love him.” The words fell from her lips. “Not just attraction or gratitude. Real love.” Her voice cracked. “The thought of him getting hurt tomorrow in that ring tears me apart inside.”

“Oh, dear.” Marcella wrapped an arm around her shoulders.

“I’ve never felt this vulnerable before.” Alaysia leaned into her friend’s embrace. “Is that crazy?”

“No,” Marcella squeezed her shoulders. “That’s love.”

Alaysia closed her eyes, remembering how safe she’d felt in Dernin’s presence. “I want a future with him. A real one, where we can be together openly. Where I don’t have to watch him fight for his life.”

“Hold onto that dream,” Marcella said. “It’ll give you strength for whatever comes next.”

Chapter 21

Dernin

Dernin circled the ring after his victory in the semifinal match. He acknowledged the crowd’s roars with a warrior’s composure. His tail swept gracefully behind him as he moved, and his muscles rippled under his golden scales.

Fyret soon strutted into the ring toward the center of it, his gaudy clothes catching the lights overhead. “Ladies and gentlemen, your finalists!”

Bariv walked out to join them, his filaments quivering with each thunderous step. The crowd’s cheers intensified.

“Tomorrow night, these two champions will battle for the ultimate prize!” Fyret gestured up toward the viewing box where Alaysia sat.

Dernin gritted his teeth as he caught the smug look Bariv and Fyret exchanged. The memory of their secret conversation made his blood burn hot in his veins. But beneath his stoic exterior, a new power thrummed through him, the growing connection to his mate strengthening his resolve.

“Who will claim victory?” Fyret worked the crowd. “Our reigning champion?” He gestured to Bariv, who raised his arms triumphantly. “Or our rising star?”

Dernin stood tall, his eyes finding Alaysia. The sight of her fueled the warrior’s spirit that coursed through his blood. Let them think they had this fixed. They didn’t understand the power of a mating bond, how it enhanced his natural abilities with each passing hour.

“Tomorrow night, we will find out!” Fyret declared.

“Looking forward to it,” Bariv growled, stepping into Dernin’s space. “Hope you’re ready to lose, snake.”

Dernin met his gaze coolly. “We’ll see who’s standing at the end.”

The threat in Bariv’s answering smile confirmed everything Dernin had overheard. But Dernin felt the surge of strength flowing through him, drawn from

Alaysia.His mate filled him with purpose beyond mere victory.

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

They had no idea what they were truly up against.

The celebration hall buzzed with activity, filled with the wealthy elite of Jorvla's underground betting on tomorrow's championship match. Dernin's tail twitched with irritation as another group of gamblers approached him, their eyes roving over his form like he was livestock at auction.

"Look at those big muscles." One bettor whistled. "The scales alone must give him incredible defense."

"But Bariv's got more experience," another argued. "Plus, he's never lost a championship."

Dernin's jaw clenched as he stood stoically, forced to endure their assessment. A server passed by with a tray of exotic delicacies that probably cost more than he earned in a year.

"Care to give us a demonstration of your strength?" A drunk patron swayed closer. "Just a little show?"

"No," Dernin growled, his golden eyes flashing.

The drunk patron backed away, but others continued to circle and stare. His muscles coiled with tension beneath his scales. He hated being displayed like this, being treated as property rather than the warrior he was.

Then his thoughts turned to Alaysia. This was her life—constantly on display,

objectified, seen as nothing more than a prize. His mate had endured this treatment her entire existence yet still maintained her fierce spirit. If she could endure it, so could he. For her.

“That’s some fire in those eyes,” a bettor observed. “Might put my money on this one after all.”

Dernin straightened to his full height, letting his warrior’s presence fill the space. But his breath caught in his chest as Alaysia entered the celebration hall.

Her black satin dress clung to every curve of her body, the neckline dipping low to reveal her creamy skin. Her red hair cascaded in waves down her back.

Her blue eyes sought his across the crowded room, and his blood surged hot through his veins. The mating bond roared between them, making his scales ripple with barely contained need. His tail lashed behind him as he watched other males’ gazes follow her movements. A low growl built in his chest.

She walked past him, close enough that her scent of roses filled his senses. Their eyes locked for a heated moment.

“You look beautiful tonight,” he said.

A blush crept across her cheeks. “Thank you,” she whispered, her gaze drinking him in.

The wealthy patrons continued to circle them both, but Dernin focused only on her. The way the dress hugged her hips as she walked. How her throat moved when she swallowed. The slight tremble in her hands that told him she felt this too—this primal pull between them tonight.

As the night wore on, Dernin's tail wound up with tension as he watched another drunk patron stumble too close to Alaysia. His mate handled herself with grace, but the protective instinct within him surged. The celebration hall had grown rowdier by the hour, the air thick with smoke and the sharp scent of expensive liquor.

He tracked Alaysia's movements through the raucous crowd, noting how she navigated the space with careful precision. Her black dress caught the light as she moved, drawing more unwanted attention. His scales rippled with agitation each time someone's gaze lingered too long.

He couldn't fight back his protective urges anymore. He needed to whisk her away from this charade.

"Getting crowded in here," Marcella appeared at his side, her voice low. She carried a tray of empty glasses, playing her role perfectly.

"I need your help."

"Oh?" She raised an eyebrow, collecting another empty glass from a nearby table.

"Create a distraction. Something to draw attention away from the main hall." His eyes never left Alaysia. "I need to get her somewhere private."

"To talk strategy for tomorrow?" Marcella's knowing smile made his tail twitch.

"Among other things." He crossed his arms over his chest, muscles flexing. "Can you do it?"

"Please." Marcella balanced her tray expertly. "I've been causing diversions in this place since before you got here."

“So, you’ll do it?”

“Give me fifteen minutes. When you hear the commotion, head for the east corridor.”

He watched Marcella disappear into the crowd and then made his way closer to where Alaysia stood. His height allowed him to tower over the other patrons, clearing a path through the drunken masses. The mating bond pulled at him, growing stronger with each step closer to her.

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

Every instinct screamed at him to simply grab her right this moment and carry her away from all these leering eyes. But he'd learned patience in his warrior training. Fifteen minutes. He could wait fifteen minutes to get his mate alone.

A crash echoed through the celebration hall, followed by shouts and the sound of breaking glass. Dernin's keen hearing picked up Marcella's voice rising above the chaos, directing servants to clean up what sounded like an entire cart of expensive liquor.

He seized his chance, moving swiftly through the crowd to Alaysia's side.

His tail swept a protective arc behind them as he leaned down to whisper in her ear, "Come with me."

Alaysia's breath hitched, but she gave a slight nod. Dernin guided her with a light touch at the small of her back, steering them away from the commotion and through a set of ornate double doors.

The hallway beyond dripped with wealth—gold-threaded tapestries lined walls covered in deep red silk. Their footsteps were muffled by thick carpeting that probably cost more than most homes back on Nirum. Crystal sconces cast intimate pools of light every few feet.

"We shouldn't be here," Alaysia whispered, though she didn't pull away from his touch.

"I'll protect you." His voice rumbled low in his chest as they passed beneath a

glittering chandelier. The scent of her—roses and feminine warmth—filled his senses, making his scales rise with need.

They turned down another corridor, this one lined with carved wooden doors. Dernin's warrior instincts mapped each turn, each potential escape route. But the mating bond thrummed stronger with every step closer to her, threatening to overwhelm his tactical mind.

“Wait.” Alaysia pressed closer as voices echoed from around the corner. Dernin's tail curled protectively around her waist, drawing her against his chest as they waited in the shadows.

Two drunk patrons stumbled past, oblivious to their presence. Dernin held perfectly still, hyperaware of Alaysia's curves pressed against him, her pulse racing beneath her skin.

“We need to go somewhere more private,” he said once the coast was clear. His hands tightened possessively on her hips.

“There's a parlor just ahead,” she breathed, tilting her face up to his. “I saw it earlier when they were showing me around.”

Dernin tasted the air, checking for any other approaching threats as they continued down the hall. His warrior's discipline warred with the primal need to claim his mate, to keep her safe, to...

Footsteps approached from another direction. They needed to find that parlor. Now.

Chapter 22

Alaysia

Alaysia and Dernin hurried down the plush carpeted hallway. The black satin of her gown whispered against her legs with each quick step. Behind them, footsteps echoed off the ornate walls.

“In here,” she whispered, spotting the parlor room she’d noticed earlier.

Dernin slithered quickly inside after her, his powerful tail making barely a sound on the floor. He grabbed a pool cue from the nearby billiards table and threaded it through the door handles.

“That should keep them out,” he said, his golden eyes reflecting the warm lamplight.

Alaysia pressed her back against the wood-paneled wall, catching her breath. The thrill of sneaking away from the celebration made her feel lightheaded, or maybe it was the way Dernin had watched her all evening.

“I couldn’t stand another minute of that spectacle,” she said, smoothing down her dress. “The way they all stare...”

“You shouldn’t have to endure that,” Dernin replied. “Being put on display like some trophy.”

“At least I’m not the only one they’re ogling tonight.” She gave him a small smile. “I saw how uncomfortable you were with all the attention.”

“I’d rather face three opponents in the ring than deal with those vultures.” He moved closer, his presence making her pulse quicken.

The fireplace crackled invitingly as Alaysia turned and moved closer, grateful for its warmth against her exposed skin. The black satin gown Fyret had chosen left little to the imagination, with its plunging neckline and form-fitting cut. She caught Dernin’s

gaze dropping to her cleavage and felt heat rise to her cheeks that wasn't because of the fire.

“So, tell me,” she said quickly, settling down on the leather couch, “what’s the most embarrassing thing that happened during your warrior days?”

His golden eyes snapped back to her face. “Besides getting captured?”

“That’s not funny.” But she found herself laughing anyway, and the tension eased.

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

“This one time during stealth training,” he said, coiling his tail beneath him as he settled nearby. “I was so focused on being quiet that I didn’t notice I camouflaged myself to match a patch of pink flowers.”

Alaysia burst out laughing. “No! You didn’t!”

“My commander couldn’t stop laughing. Said I made a lovely garden decoration.”

“I wish I could have seen that.” She pulled her legs up under her, getting comfortable. The way he smiled at her made her stomach flutter.

“What about you?” he asked. “Any embarrassing moments?”

“Well, one time I accidentally dyed all the master’s undergarments pink in the wash...”

His rich laugh filled the room, and Alaysia found herself mesmerized by the way his scales caught the firelight. She’d never felt so at ease with anyone before, especially not a male. The conversation flowed naturally between them, punctuated by shared laughter and meaningful glances.

“You know,” she said softly, “I never thought I’d find someone in this awful place who could make me laugh.”

“I never thought I’d find someone who’d make me want to.” His voice had dropped lower, more intimate, and the look in his eyes made her breath catch.

The crackle of the fire filled the comfortable silence between them, and Alaysia realized she'd never felt safer than she did right now, with him.

The warmth of laughter soon faded, and cold reality crept back into Alaysia's thoughts. Tomorrow's championship fight loomed like a dark cloud, threatening to steal away these precious moments. Her hands twisted in the black satin of her gown as she watched the firelight dance across Dernin's scales.

"I'm terrified about tomorrow," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the crackling flames.

Dernin's eyes met hers. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"That's not what I'm afraid of." She took a shaky breath. "I'm afraid of losing you."

The words hung in the air between them. Alaysia's heart beat faster as she pushed herself to continue.

"I know we haven't known each other long, but you've shown me more kindness than anyone ever has." She stood, unable to stay still, and paced toward the fireplace. "You make me feel safe, respected...and seen."

Her hands trembled as she gripped the ornate mantelpiece. "I've spent my whole life being treated like property, but you...you treat me like a person. Like I matter."

"You do matter," Dernin said softly.

Alaysia turned to face him, her blue eyes bright with unshed tears. "I think I'm falling in love with you. And it terrifies me because tomorrow you could..." Her voice caught. "If something happens to you..."

She hugged herself, suddenly feeling exposed in ways that weren't due to her revealing gown. "I just needed you to know. Before whatever happens tomorrow. I couldn't bear the thought of never telling you that."

The silence stretched between them, broken only by the pop and hiss of burning wood. Alaysia's chest felt tight, her confession hanging in the air like smoke. She'd never been so vulnerable before, never allowed herself to be. But something about Dernin made her want to risk it all.

Dernin moved closer, his tail making a soft whisper against the carpet. "Alaysia." His voice was rough with emotion. "From the moment I saw Bariv harassing you, I knew you were different. Special."

The warmth in his golden eyes made her knees weak. She gripped the mantelpiece tighter to steady herself.

"At first, I told myself I was just doing my duty as a warrior," he continued. "But it's more than that. So much more." He reached for her hand, his touch sending sparks through her skin. "You're the strongest person I've ever met. Your spirit, your determination...you take my breath away."

Alaysia's chest tightened as tears threatened to spill. No one had ever spoken to her like this before.

"I've fallen in love with you, too," he admitted, his thumb tracing circles on her palm. "Every moment we're apart, I think about you. When I'm fighting, you're what keeps me going. The thought of protecting you, of being worthy of you..."

She lifted her free hand to his face, tracing a small scar on his cheek. "You already are."

“I want to give you the freedom you deserve,” he said. “I want to show you everything beyond these walls. I want...” He pressed his forehead to hers. “I want to spend every day making you smile the way you did earlier.”

A tear slipped down Alaysia’s cheek as joy bloomed in her chest. She’d never dared to hope for this kind of love, never thought she deserved it. But here it was, offered freely by this incredible warrior who looked at her like she was his greatest treasure.

“Kiss me,” she whispered.

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

The firelight danced across his golden scales as he leaned down, his warm breath ghosting across her lips. Her heart thundered against her ribs, every nerve ending alive with anticipation. When his mouth finally met hers, the world tilted on its axis.

His lips were softer than she'd imagined, moving against hers with a gentleness that made her knees weak. Heat bloomed in her chest, spreading through her limbs like wildfire. She'd been kissed before, but never like this—never with such tender reverence that made her feel precious instead of possessed.

“Alaysia,” he breathed against her mouth, his voice thick with emotion.

She wrapped her arms around him, pressing closer. The hard planes of his chest met the soft satin of her gown, and she gasped at the contact. Dernin took advantage of her parted lips, deepening the kiss. His tongue swept into her mouth and Alaysia's mind went blank with pleasure.

His strong hands slid down her back, leaving trails of fire in their wake. She arched into his touch, wanting more, needing more. The kiss grew heated, desperate. Years of holding herself apart from others, of protecting her heart, melted away under the onslaught of sensation.

“I never knew,” she whispered between kisses, “it could feel like this.”

Dernin's response was a low growl that vibrated through her body. His tail curled around her legs, supporting her as her knees threatened to give out. The possessive gesture should have frightened her, but instead it made her feel safe, cherished.

Her fingers traced the scales at the nape of his neck, drawing another growl from him. The sound sent shivers down her spine, awakening a hunger she'd never experienced before. She pressed even closer, wanting to dissolve into him completely.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing heavily, Alaysia's world had shifted irreversibly. She looked up into Dernin's golden eyes, dark with desire, and saw her own feelings reflected back at her.

"That was..." She trailed off, unable to find words adequate enough.

"Perfect," he finished for her, pressing his forehead to hers.

Chapter 23

Dernin

The fireplace in the parlor room crackled, casting a warm glow over Alaysia's features. Dernin's eyes locked with hers, a silent exchange of desire passing between them. The energy in the room was palpable, a testament to the bond they shared, one that had grown despite the chaos that surrounded them.

Dernin's gaze drifted to her lips, slightly parted in anticipation. His hand reached out, gently cradling her neck as he leaned in, pressing a tender kiss to the hollow of her throat. She let out a soft sigh, her body leaning into his touch, seeking more.

"Is this okay?" Dernin asked.

"Yes," Alaysia breathed out.

His fingers deftly found the ties of her black satin dress, loosening them with reverence. The fabric slipped from her waist, pooling at her feet, revealing the curves

of her body in the firelight. Her naked breasts rose and fell with each breath, her nipples hardening under his intense gaze.

Dernin's control was a thin veil, threatening to tear at any moment, but he held it together for her. He lowered his head, his lips and tongue exploring the soft mounds of her breasts, lavishing attention on each peak until her breath hitched and a moan escaped her lips.

The mate bond surged between them, a current of electricity that needed no words. Alaysia's fingers threaded through his hair, pulling him closer, her body arching into his touch. He felt her arousal, a mirror of his own, a tangible force that bound them together.

His hands trailed lower, tracing the contours of her stomach before his fingers hooked into the waistband of her panties. He looked up at her, seeking permission with his eyes. At her nod, he slowly drew them down her legs, leaving her completely exposed to his gaze.

With a gentleness that belied his warrior's strength, Dernin guided Alaysia down to the plush carpet beside the fire. The heat from the flames licked at their skin, adding to the warmth that blossomed within them. He settled between her thighs, his eyes drinking in the sight of her, laid bare before him.

He began a slow descent, his lips leaving a trail of fire down her stomach. When he reached the apex of her thighs, he paused, looking up to meet her gaze once more. The anticipation hung heavily in the air, a silent question lingering between them.

"Please," Alaysia whispered, her voice laced with need, giving him the final encouragement he needed.

Dernin's mouth found her center, his tongue delving into her folds with deliberate

slowness. He explored her with a singular focus, each lick and kiss designed to stoke the flames of her desire higher and higher.

Alaysia's responses were like music to his ears, her soft cries and gasps guiding his movements. He felt the tension building within her, the mate bond amplifying every sensation that coursed through her body.

As her orgasm approached, her fingers gripped his hair tighter, her body tensing beneath him. And then, with a final flick of his tongue, she shattered.

Dernin's eyes darkened with desire as he watched Alaysia's body shudder and quake. Her orgasm was a symphony, each moan and gasp a note that resonated within him, stirring his own desire. He felt the coil of need tightening in his lower abdomen, his throbbing member aching for release, but his focus remained solely on her pleasure.

With gentleness, Dernin slid his hands beneath her and lifted her hips to meet his descending mouth once more. His tongue danced over her sensitive nub, eliciting a sharp intake of breath from her. He reveled in her reactions, each one spurring him on and driving him to new heights of need.

His fingers teased the slick entrance of her core, gently probing and seeking entrance. As he eased two fingers inside her, Alaysia's body welcomed him with a fresh wave of moisture, her inner walls clenching around his digits in a desperate embrace.

“Dernin,” she breathed out his name.

He moved his fingers, stroking the bundle of nerves within her, each thrust in sync with the movements of his tongue. The dual assault was relentless, pushing her closer and closer to the edge once more.

Alaysia’s hands found his hair again, her fingers tugging at the strands as she writhed beneath him. “I’m...I’m going to—”

Her words were cut off as another orgasm ripped through her, her body arching off the floor as she cried out her release. Dernin’s gaze remained locked on her face, the sight of her ecstasy fueling his own arousal to near-unbearable heights. His member throbbed painfully beneath his garment, demanding to be set free, to claim what was his.

As her tremors subsided, Dernin withdrew his fingers, watching as she collapsed back onto the carpet, her chest heaving with exertion.

He moved up to lie beside her, propping himself up on one elbow, his other hand tracing lazy circles on her stomach. Her skin was flushed, a soft sheen of perspiration making it glow in the firelight.

Alaysia turned her head to look at him, a small, sated smile playing on her lips. “I’ve never felt like this before,” she admitted, her hand reaching up to touch his cheek.

Dernin captured her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm. “I will always provide for you,” he vowed.

She reached for him then, her fingers deftly working the ties of his garment, and he knew that the time for words had passed. With a groan of surrender, Dernin allowed her to undress him, revealing the full extent of his desire.

Her eyes widened at the sight of him, and for a moment, he felt a flicker of vulnerability. But then she reached out, her hand encircling his girth, and any doubt he might have harbored was incinerated by the heat of her touch.

“I want you, Dernin,” Alaysia said, her voice steady and sure. “All of you.”

With a low growl of need, Dernin positioned himself over her, the blunt head of his large member nudging against her slick entrance. He entered her slowly, giving her body time to adjust to his size. The mate bond between them flared to life, a tangible connection that bound their souls together as closely as their bodies.

As he moved within her, each thrust punctuated by the soft cries that escaped her lips, Dernin knew he was exactly where he was meant to be. With every stroke, he claimed her as his mate, a fierce possessiveness mingling with the tender emotions that threatened to overwhelm him.

They moved together, each rhythmic thrust bringing them closer to the brink. And when Alaysia’s body clenched around him, her orgasm triggering his own, Dernin knew he would do whatever it took to keep her by his side for all the days of his life.

As their bodies cooled and their breathing evened out, Dernin gathered Alaysia into his arms, her head resting against his chest. He felt the steady thrum of her heartbeat, a perfect counterpoint to the low purr of contentment that rumbled through his own chest.

Dernin soon helped Alaysia lace up her dress, his fingers lingering on each tie. The satin whispered against her skin as he worked, and he fought the urge to pull her back

into his arms. Her scent, mixed with his own, marked her as his mate, sending a primal surge of satisfaction through him.

“Your hair’s a mess,” he murmured, running his fingers through the tangled red waves.

“And whose fault is that?” Alaysia shot back, a playful gleam in her eyes as she attempted to smooth it down.

They crept through the carpeted hallways, Dernin’s keen senses alert for any approach. His tail moved silently across the soft floor as he guided Alaysia past ornate tapestries and gilded mirrors. The sounds of the celebration grew louder as they neared the main hall.

At the entrance to the celebration hall, Alaysia straightened her dress one final time. Dernin’s eyes tracked a bead of sweat trailing down her neck, disappearing beneath the neckline of her gown. He growled low in his throat.

“Behave,” she whispered, though her pupils dilated at the sound. “We can’t give ourselves away.”

“I don’t care. Let them see,” Dernin replied, his voice rough with possession. But he knew she was right. They couldn’t risk discovery right now, not with their freedom so close at hand.

They reluctantly separated, entering the celebration hall from different directions. Dernin watched as she gracefully rejoined the crowd like nothing ever happened.

Chapter 24

Alaysia

Slave attendants fussed over Alaysia's appearance the next morning, their hands working through her red waves with practiced efficiency. She stared at her reflection in the polished metal mirror, barely recognizing herself beneath the elaborate styling and shimmering fabric they draped her in.

"Hold still," one attendant muttered, weaving golden threads through her hair.

Alaysia's stomach knotted with each passing minute. The championship match loomed closer, and with it, her fate hung in precarious balance. She closed her eyes, trying to steady her racing heart.

"Arms up," another attendant commanded, cinching the silk dress tighter around her waist.

The fabric whispered against her skin, reminding her of softer touches from the night before. Heat crept into her cheeks as fragments of memories drifted through her mind—Dernin's gentle hands, his whispered promises, the way he'd looked at her as if she was precious beyond measure.

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

“Your hair is particularly vibrant today,” an attendant remarked, pinning another section in place. “The champion will be pleased.”

Alaysia’s jaw clenched. “The champion hasn’t been decided yet.”

“The way you’re fidgeting, one might think you have a preference,” another attendant said with a knowing smirk.

She forced herself to remain still as they continued their work, though her mind raced with possibilities. What if Dernin lost? What if Bariv won?

Alaysia took a deep breath, trying to focus on the memory of Dernin’s promise: “I won’t let anything happen to you.” His words from last night echoed in her mind.

The attendants stepped back to admire their work. Alaysia didn’t recognize the woman in the reflection—dressed in flowing golden silk, hair cascading in perfect waves adorned with golden threads, skin practically glowing. She looked every inch the prize she was meant to be.

But underneath all the finery, her heart pounded with equal measures of hope and fear for what the day would bring.

The door suddenly burst open, and Marcella stepped into the room, her presence commanding immediate attention. “Out,” she ordered the attendants, who scattered like startled birds. “Now.”

Alaysia caught Marcella’s conspiratorial wink as she held the door, and then Dernin

slipped inside. Her heart leaped as he walked toward her, his golden scales shimmering in the lamplight.

“You shouldn’t be here,” she whispered, even as she moved toward him. “If they catch you—”

“I’m not worried.” His tail curved protectively around her as he drew her close, his warmth enveloping her. His fingers traced the elaborate styling in her hair. “They’ve sure made you look like a prize.”

“I hate it,” she admitted, leaning into his touch. “All this finery feels like chains.”

He tilted her chin up, his golden eyes intense. “You’re just as beautiful without their decorations.”

He leaned down and kissed her. Alaysia melted into him, clutching the fabric of his fighter’s tunic. The silk of her golden dress rustled between them as she pressed closer, trying to memorize every detail of this moment.

Breaking away, she rested her forehead against his chest. “Please be careful today. Bariv fights dirty, and after what we overheard...” Her voice caught. “I couldn’t bear it if—”

“Shh.” His thumb brushed her cheek. “I can’t promise to be careful. A careful fighter is a dead fighter.” His jaw clenched in that way she’d come to recognize. “But I can promise you this: I intend to win.”

“Dernin...” She traced one of the scars on his arm, fear knotting in her stomach again. The championship match started soon, and she couldn’t shake the dread that had settled in her bones.

He reached for her hand and pressed his lips to her knuckles. “Trust me.”

Alaysia nodded, trying to draw strength from his certainty. The golden silk dress suddenly felt too tight, too confining, like her anxiety had taken physical form.

Dernin reached for her other hand, his warm grip enveloping both of hers. The touch sent tingles up her arms as he drew her closer.

“Four days,” he murmured, his voice low and intimate. “In four days, we’ll both be free of this place.”

Alaysia’s heart fluttered at the conviction in his tone. “If the warriors come when they’re supposed to.”

“They will.” His thumbs traced circles on her palms. “And when they do, I want to show you everything you’ve ever been denied. First, I’ll take you to the crystal falls of Nirum.”

She nodded, the golden threads in her hair catching the light.

“The water cascades down cliffs of pure crystal. When the sun hits it just right, it creates rainbows that dance through the mist.” His eyes grew distant with memory. “Next, the floating gardens of Veridia—they hover above the ground, supported by nothing but air currents. The flowers there bloom in colors you’ve never imagined.”

The tension in Alaysia’s shoulders eased as she lost herself in his descriptions. She stepped even closer to him, drinking in every word.

“What about the sea?” she asked. “I’ve never seen it.”

“I’ll take you to the Sapphire Coast,” he promised. “The water there is so clear, you can see straight to the bottom, even in the deepest parts. And at night, the waves glow with bioluminescent creatures.”

“It sounds beautiful.” She leaned into him, picturing the places he described. When Dernin spoke about Nirum, freedom felt tangible, like something she could reach out and grasp. “Tell me more?”

“There’s a city built entirely in the trees,” he continued. “The buildings are connected by bridges made of living vines. And the night markets in the desert cities—they only come alive after dark, when the heat fades. The air fills with spices and music...”

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

His words painted pictures in her mind, replacing her fears with dreams of possibilities. For these precious moments, she wasn't a prize to be earned—she was a woman planning her future with the Naga she loved.

Her fingers traced the elaborate jewels adorning her neck, a painful reminder that nothing she wore truly belonged to her in this place. Her gaze drifted up to Dernin, standing tall and powerful before her, and her heart ached to give him something meaningful before his fight.

“I wish I had something of mine to give you,” she whispered. “For luck.”

Dernin's tail shifted closer to her. “You don't need to—”

“Wait.” An idea sparked in her mind. She reached up, her fingers finding a section of her red hair near the nape of her neck, hidden beneath the elaborate styling. “This, at least, is mine to give.”

She pulled small scissors from the wooden dresser drawer. With a quick snip, she cut free a lock of her flame-colored hair.

“Here.” She wound the silken strands around his wrist, knotting and tying them securely. The red gleamed against his golden scales. “So you'll remember what you're fighting for.”

Dernin touched the makeshift bracelet with reverent fingers. “As if I could forget.”

The door creaked open and Marcella's head poked in. “Guards are coming this way on

their rounds.”Her eyes darted between them.“If you don’t want to be caught...”

“Just a moment,” Alaysia pleaded, turning back to Dernin.Her heart hammered in her chest as she reached up to touch his face.

He leaned down and captured her lips in a fierce kiss that left her breathless.When they parted, she pressed her forehead to his chest again.

“I’ll win.”His voice held the same unwavering certainty she’d come to rely on.“I promise.”

“Go,” Marcella hissed from the doorway.

Dernin squeezed Alaysia’s hand once more before slipping away, his movements fluid despite his size.As he disappeared through the door, Alaysia’s fingers went to her lips, still tingling from his kiss.

The lock of hair around his wrist might not have been much, but it was hers to give—perhaps the only thing that had ever truly belonged to her.She prayed it would be enough to bring him luck in the fight ahead.

Marcella dabbed a final touch of shimmer to Alaysia’s cheekbones.The familiar scent of rose water lingered in the air of the small preparation room.

“There.”Marcella stepped back, examining her work.“You look absolutely perfect.”

Alaysia studied her reflection one last time.The silk dress hugged her curves, its golden fabric making her red hair stand out even brighter down her back.One section remained slightly shorter where she’d cut the lock for Dernin.The memory of tying it around his wrist brought warmth to her chest.

“You seem different,” Marcella observed, adjusting a fold in the dress. “More...settled.”

“I am.”

“Well, whatever the reason is, it suits you.” Marcella helped her stand. “Now come on. They’ll be expecting you in the viewing box shortly.”

Chapter 25

Dernin

The arena pulsed with the crowd’s cheers as Dernin and Bariv stood on opposite sides of the fighting ring. Spotlights swept across them while Fyret worked the spectators into a frenzy.

“Our reigning champion, the unstoppable Bariv!” Fyret’s voice boomed.

Bariv raised his arms, drinking in the adulation. His filaments rippled in a display of dominance that made Dernin’s scales itch with disgust.

“And the challenger—the unknown fighter who’s fought his way to the top—Dernin!”

Dernin kept his posture straight and proud, channeling every bit of his warrior training. He gave a single, dignified nod to the crowd while his tail coiled with a burning rage. The sight of Fyret’s smug expression made his stomach turn.

“This is what you’ve all been waiting for!” Fyret proclaimed. “The match to determine our champion!”

“Prepare to lose, snake,” Bariv sneered across the ring.

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

Dernin met his gaze coolly. “I don’t lose to cheaters.”

“What did you say?” Bariv’s filaments bristled.

“You heard me.”

The spotlights continued to sweep across them as Fyret detailed their fighting records to the crowd.

“When I win,” Bariv growled, “I’m going to make sure you watch while I claim my prize.”

Dernin’s tail lashed against the ground. “Touch her and it’ll be the last thing you do.”

“Big words from someone about to lose.”

“This circus act ends today.” Dernin’s eyes narrowed.

His gaze drifted to where Alaysia sat. This wasn’t about some rigged championship. This was about protecting what was his.

The announcements reached their crescendo as attendants entered to prepare the ring. Dernin maintained his stoic facade, but inside his warrior’s heart burned with purpose. He wasn’t fighting for their entertainment, the corrupt games, or even his own survival anymore. He was fighting for Alaysia’s future.

Fyret gestured for both fighters to come to the center of the ring. Dernin’s tail moved

with grace as he approached. The noise of the crowd faded as he focused on maintaining his composure. His warrior's training demanded honor, even in this corrupt arena.

An attendant presented ornate crystal glasses filled with deep red wine. "A toast!" Fyret's voice cut through the din. "To our champions!"

"To glory," Bariv sneered, raising his glass.

Dernin took his glass, his eyes fixed on Bariv. "To honor," he countered, voice low and controlled. The irony of toasting to honor in this dishonorable place wasn't lost on him.

"Drink, fighters!" Fyret commanded.

Dernin watched Bariv drain his glass without hesitation. The wine in Dernin's own glass swirled as he pretended to take a long sip, letting most of it run inconspicuously down his scales instead.

"May the strongest fighter prevail," Fyret proclaimed, stepping back.

"Getting nervous yet, snake?" Bariv's slimy skin gleamed under the lights.

"No, but you should be," Dernin replied.

They circled each other as attendants cleared the ring. Dernin's tail glided across the ground in smooth, controlled movements. He caught a hint of Alaysia's rose scent lingering on his skin. His mate. The thought steeled his resolve.

"Remember the rules," Fyret announced. "Fight continues until submission or unconsciousness. No killing—these fighters are valuable property."

Property. The word made Dernin sick. He focused on Bariv, studying his opponent's stance. The Jorvlen was already showing signs of whatever had been in his wine—his movements were more aggressive, less controlled.

The bell hadn't rung yet, but tension crackled between them like lightning before a storm.

Fyret sauntered out of the ring, leaving Dernin and Bariv to face each other. The arena lights cast harsh shadows across Bariv's bulging muscles, his filaments wiggling with unnatural energy.

The bell rang.

Bariv charged forward uncontrollably with a roar. Dernin's warrior instincts took over as he pivoted, his tail providing perfect balance as Bariv's wild swing missed by inches.

"Stand still and fight!" Bariv's voice carried a slurred edge.

Dernin responded with a swift combination—two strikes to Bariv's torso followed by a tail sweep. "A true warrior doesn't need enhancements to win."

Bariv staggered but recovered quickly, his enhanced strength evident as he shrugged off blows that should have dropped him. His filaments whipped through the air, trying to entangle Dernin's arms.

Dernin weaved around the attack, his movements fluid and controlled. The warrior training of his homeland guided every motion. He landed a solid hit to Bariv's jaw, satisfaction coursing through him as the Jorvlen's head snapped back.

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

But Bariv barely seemed to notice. Whatever concoction Fyret had given him worked. The Jorvlen's strikes became faster and stronger, though increasingly erratic.

A glancing blow caught Dernin's shoulder. The impact reverberated through his body, but he maintained his stance.

"Getting tired?" Bariv taunted, though his words slurred slightly more. "Your pretty little pet is watching."

Dernin's scales rose at the mention of Alaysia. He channeled his anger into precision, ducking under another wild swing and countering with a powerful strike to Bariv's solar plexus.

The crowd's roars faded as Dernin focused on the fight, watching Bariv's increasingly uncoordinated movements. The drug made him stronger, yes, but it also affected his judgment. Dernin could use that.

"What's wrong, champion?" Dernin's voice carried across the ring as he deflected another attack. "Don't know which way you're swinging?"

Bariv's response was an incoherent growl as he charged again, his enhanced strength making the ground shake with each step.

Suddenly, the world shifted sideways as Dernin's vision blurred. His tail, usually a perfect counterbalance, wavered beneath him. The drug he suspected was in his wine somehow seeped through his scales, spreading like poison through his bloodstream.

“What’s wrong, snake? Not so graceful anymore?” Bariv’s massive fist connected with Dernin’s jaw.

The impact sent him reeling. His warrior instincts screamed at him to maintain form, but his body refused to comply. The arena lights stretched into long, disorienting streaks.

“Damn it,” Dernin muttered, trying to shake off the fog. He tasted the metallic tang of blood in his mouth. “Should’ve known they’d find a way through my scales.”

Bariv’s filaments whipped across Dernin’s chest, leaving stinging welts. “Getting sloppy! Maybe your little human will enjoy watching you fall.”

The mention of Alaysia sparked rage through Dernin’s drugged haze. He managed to dodge Bariv’s next swing, but his movements felt sluggish, like fighting underwater.

“Keep her name out of your filthy mouth,” Dernin snarled, attempting to strike back. His fist barely grazed Bariv’s shoulder.

“Look at the mighty warrior now!” Bariv’s enhanced strength drove another punch into Dernin’s ribs. “Can’t even stand straight!”

Dernin’s tail lashed out instinctively, but the usually precise movement went wide. The drug spread faster, making his muscles feel like lead. He tried to focus on Bariv’s form but saw three overlapping images instead.

“Cowards,” Dernin spat, blocking another hit with his forearm. “Need drugs to win your fights.”

Bariv grabbed Dernin’s arm, using his drug-enhanced strength to throw him across the ring.

Dernin's back slammed against the arena wall, knocking the air from his lungs. He struggled to rise, his warrior's pride refusing to stay down. But his body betrayed him, moving in slow motion while Bariv advanced.

"I'm going to enjoy this," Bariv sneered, cracking his knuckles as he approached. "And then I'm going to enjoy my prize even more."

Dernin's vision swam as Bariv's vile words about Alaysia cut through the drug-induced haze. Dernin's muscles felt like lead, his reactions sluggish. The ground beneath his tail seemed to shift and roll.

"After I win, she'll experience what a real champion feels like inside of her." Bariv snickered.

Dernin's hand brushed against his wrist, feeling the silken strands of Alaysia's red hair wound there. Her scent, still lingering on the strands, filled his senses—sweet roses. It sparked something deeply primal within him.

Last night flooded back to him—her trust, her touch, her declaration of love. The memory ignited his warrior's blood. Heat surged through his veins, burning away the drug's fog.

His vision snapped into crystal clarity. His muscles pulsed with a newfound power beyond measure, every scale electrified with an energy he'd never felt before. The warrior teachings spoke of this—the moment when a Niri warrior claimed his true mate, unlocking power beyond normal limits.

"You will never touch her." Dernin's voice resonated with authority as he straightened to his full height.

Bariv faltered, sensing the change. "What the—"

“She’s mine to protect.”Dernin’s eyes blazed.“My mate.”

The drug that had clouded his mind moments ago evaporated completely, replaced by razor-sharp focus.Every movement felt charged with lightning as he squared off against his opponent.

“Impossible,” Bariv growled.“The drug—”

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

“Cannot match a warrior’s mate bond.” Dernin’s scales rippled with power. “You want to see a real champion? Let me show you.”

Chapter 26

Alaysia

Alaysia gripped the railing of the viewing box, her knuckles white as she watched Dernin stumble forward. His movements were sluggish, uncoordinated—nothing like his usual grace. Her heart pounded as Bariv landed another brutal hit.

“Something’s wrong,” she whispered to Marcella. “Look at how he’s moving.”

Marcella leaned forward, eyes narrowing. “The wine. They must have drugged his glass.”

Below, Dernin’s tail lashed out, but the strike missed Bariv by inches. The crowd roared as Bariv countered with impossible speed, his muscles rippling with an unnatural sheen.

“And look at Bariv,” Alaysia hissed through clenched teeth. “He’s moving faster than ever. They enhanced him too. Didn’t they?”

“Wouldn’t put it past Fyret.” Marcella’s voice dripped with disgust. “He’s got too much riding on this fight to leave it to chance.”

Dernin swayed, barely dodging a punch that would have knocked him

unconscious. Alaysia's stomach twisted into knots as she spotted blood trickling from gashes above his eyes. Those same eyes that had looked at her with such tenderness last night now seemed glazed and unfocused.

"We have to do something," Alaysia said, starting to rise from her seat.

Marcella grabbed her arm. "And what exactly would that be? Get yourself killed trying to stop the fight?"

"I can't just watch them destroy him!" The words came out as a choked whisper. "After everything he's done, everything we've..." She touched her lips, remembering their kiss from that morning.

Below, Bariv slammed Dernin against the wall of the ring. The impact echoed through the arena, drawing cheers from the bloodthirsty crowd.

"Come on, Dernin," Alaysia murmured, pressing her hands together. "Fight it. Please fight it."

She watched in horror as Bariv's enhanced strength sent Dernin reeling again. Fyret stood at the edge of the ring, a satisfied smirk playing across his face. The sight made her want to tear him apart.

"Bastard," she spat.

Suddenly, Alaysia noticed Dernin pushing himself away from the wall, his golden scales glinting under the arena lights. Something had shifted in his stance. Gone was the drugged stumbling, replaced by a deadly focus. His hand brushed against his wrist where her hair was tied, and his jaw set with renewed determination.

"Look!" She grabbed Marcella's arm. "He's fighting it off!"

Dernin's tail whipped out, catching Bariv mid-stride. The Jorvlen stumbled, his enhanced strength working against him as he overbalanced. Dernin lunged forward, moving with calculated precision rather than brute force.

"That's it!" Alaysia jumped to her feet, no longer caring about proper decorum. "Show him what a real warrior can do!" she screamed.

Below, Bariv lunged with his artificially enhanced speed, but Dernin was ready. He twisted aside, using Bariv's momentum to send him sprawling. The crowd's roar grew deafening.

"You're supposed to remain neutral," Marcella reminded her, though her eyes sparkled with approval.

"To hell with that." Alaysia leaned over the railing. "Come on, Dernin!"

Her heart soared as Dernin executed a complex series of strikes, each one precisely targeted at Bariv's weak points. He wasn't just fighting anymore. He was strategizing.

Bariv's enhanced strength sent Dernin skidding back several feet, but he recovered instantly, his tail coiling beneath him for support. Blood still trickled from his wounds, but his golden eyes burned with clarity.

"He's wearing Bariv down," Alaysia whispered, hope blooming in her chest. "Look how he's making him waste energy."

She caught Fyret's scowl from his viewing box and felt a fierce satisfaction. Let him witness his plans crumbling. Let him watch as Dernin proved stronger than any drug.

"Fight, my love," she murmured, pressing her hand to her heart. "Fight."

Alaysia held her breath as Dernin's tail swept Bariv's legs out from under him. Bariv crashed to the ground with a resounding thud that echoed through the arena. Before he could recover, Dernin pinned him, his muscled arms holding Bariv down while his powerful tail coiled tightly around Bariv's legs.

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

“Yield,” Dernin commanded, his voice carrying clearly.

Bariv struggled, his enhanced muscles straining, but Dernin’s hold was unbreakable. After several tense moments, Bariv slowly slapped the ground three times—the signal of surrender.

The crowd erupted into deafening cheers. Alaysia squealed with joy, throwing her arms around Marcella and bouncing on her toes. She didn’t care about maintaining a dignified appearance anymore.

“He did it! He actually did it!” Alaysia’s heart felt like it might burst from her chest. Her eyes stayed fixed on Dernin as he rose, his golden scales reflecting the light. Despite the blood and bruises marring his skin, he stood tall and proud.

“Well, would you look at that,” Marcella said, squeezing Alaysia’s shoulders. “Your warrior pulled through.”

“My warrior,” Alaysia repeated softly, savoring the words. She watched as Dernin bowed to the crowd, his movements still graceful despite his injuries. Pride swelled in her chest at how he’d overcome the drugged wine through sheer determination and skill.

The referee raised Dernin’s arm in victory, and Alaysia noticed him touch the strands of her hair still tied around his wrist. Her heart melted at the gesture.

“I can’t believe we’ll actually be together now,” she whispered, more to herself than Marcella. Tears of joy pricked at her eyes. “After everything they tried to do to stop

him...”

“He fought for you,” Marcella said, smiling knowingly. “Love’s a powerful motivator.”

“It is.” Alaysia touched her lips. Now she could kiss him whenever she wanted, hold him close without hiding. The thought made her giddy with happiness.

Dernin’s golden eyes found hers across the arena. Even at this distance, she could see the warmth in his gaze, the silent promise in his slight smile. He had won her freedom—their freedom to be together—through courage, honor, and an unbreakable spirit.

Alaysia’s gaze then drifted to Fyret’s private viewing box. Satisfaction flooded through her at the rage contorting his features. His knuckles whitened against the railing as he glared down at the ring where Dernin stood victorious. The kingpin’s usual smug composure had cracked, revealing the petty tyrant beneath.

“Look at him squirm,” she whispered to Marcella, unable to keep the smile from her voice. “All that planning, all those tricks, and Dernin still won.”

Marcella clicked her tongue. “Don’t get cocky. Fyret’s not one to take defeat gracefully.”

“What can he do? The whole underground saw Dernin win fair and square—well, more than fair considering they drugged him.” Alaysia smoothed the silk of her dress, relishing how the kingpin’s carefully orchestrated spectacle had backfired.

Below, attendants helped Bariv limp from the ring while Dernin accepted the victor’s wreath. The contrast between them couldn’t have been starker—Bariv defeated despite his chemical advantages, Dernin standing tall through skill and determination

alone.

“A true warrior indeed,” Alaysia murmured, watching Dernin’s golden scales shimmer in the light. Her heart swelled with pride and something deeper, warmer.

“You’re glowing,” Marcella observed.

Heat crept up Alaysia’s neck. “I’m just happy justice prevailed.”

“Mhmm.” Marcella’s tone dripped with skepticism. “Nothing to do with those heated looks you two keep sharing?”

Alaysia’s gaze returned to Fyret’s box, where the kingpin now conferred intensely with his advisors, his face dark with fury. She should have felt afraid of his obvious anger, but all she felt was triumph. Even with all his power and influence, he couldn’t stop what was meant to be.

“Time to get you ready.” Marcella tugged at Alaysia’s arm. “We need to head down to the fighters’ tunnel.”

Alaysia’s heart fluttered as they descended the narrow stone steps. The musty air of the underground carried the metallic scent of blood mixed with sweat. Usually, these smells made her stomach turn, but today they reminded her of Dernin’s victory.

“Here, let me fix your hair.” Marcella pulled a comb from her pocket. “Can’t have the champion’s prize looking disheveled.”

Alaysia stood still as Marcella worked, but her mind wandered to Dernin. His determination, his strength, the way he’d fought through the drug’s effects. A smile tugged at her lips. Everyone thought she was the prize, but they had it backward. Dernin was her prize... from the universe.

“What’s that look for?” Marcella’s fingers worked swiftly through her red waves.

“Just thinking how wrong Fyret got everything.” The torchlight cast shadows on the tunnel walls. “He thought making me a prize would break my spirit. Instead, it led me to someone who actually sees me as valuable.”

Marcella secured the last strand of Alaysia’s hair. “Well, don’t let anyone else see you looking at Dernin like that until after the ceremony. We still need to play our parts.”

“I know.” Alaysia straightened her shoulders, adopting the demure pose expected of a prize.

The sounds of the crowd above filtered down through the stone as they chanted Dernin’s name. Her champion. Her warrior. Her true prize.

Chapter 27

Dernin

Dernin stood tall in the center of the ring, his golden scales gleaming with sweat under the harsh lights of the arena. Blood trickled from cuts above his eyes, but he kept his stance proud and unwavering. The crowd's cheers echoed off the stone walls. Their enthusiasm for his victory was palpable.

Fyret sauntered into the ring from the fighters' tunnel and took his position next to Dernin. His face was a mask of barely concealed rage as he approached.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Fyret's voice boomed across the arena. "I present to you your new champion!"

He raised Dernin's arm in victory, his grip unnecessarily tight. The kingpin's fingers dug into Dernin's scales.

"A magnificent display of skill and power," Fyret continued through clenched teeth. "Truly worthy of the title."

Anger and irritation rolled off Fyret in waves. The man had lost more than just money on this fight. He'd lost face.

"Thank you for this honor," Dernin replied, his voice carrying across the arena. He met Fyret's gaze steadily, refusing to be intimidated.

Fyret leaned in close, speaking low enough that only Dernin could hear. “Don’t get too comfortable with your victory. Champions come and go in this arena.”

“Is that a threat?” Dernin’s tail shifted slightly, coiling with tension.

“Consider it a reminder of your place,” Fyret said under his breath. “Now bow to your audience.”

Dernin complied, scanning the crowd as he did so. Four days. He just needed to survive four more days until his fellow warriors arrived. He touched the strands of red hair tied around his wrist, drawing strength from thoughts of Alaysia. Whatever Fyret was planning, Dernin would be ready.

The kingpin’s barely contained fury told him all he needed to know. The man was dangerous when crossed, and Dernin had just cost him dearly. But a warrior didn’t back down from a fight, and Dernin had too much at stake to show weakness now.

“And now,” Fyret announced, his voice dripping with false sweetness, “your champion’s prize.”

Alaysia emerged from the fighters’ tunnel, her red hair cascading down her back in elegant waves. The golden dress she wore caught the light, making her shimmer with each graceful step. Dernin’s breath hitched at the sight of her, just as it had that morning in her chambers. She was his mate, his to protect, and now he could show it.

The crowd’s whistles and cheers echoed off the arena walls as she approached. Dernin’s protective instincts flared at their hungry gazes. He extended his hand to her, drawing her close to his side. Her smaller frame fit perfectly against him.

Fyret gave them both a cold smile and departed, leaving them alone in the center of the ring.

“Are you all right?” Alaysia whispered, her blue eyes scanning the cuts and bruises marking his torso. Her fingers ghosted over a particularly nasty gash on his ribs. “That was a terrible fight.”

“Better now,” Dernin rumbled, his tail curling around them both. The lingering effects of whatever they’d put in his wine made his head swim, but her presence grounded him. “Nothing that won’t heal.”

“You’re sure?” Alaysia pressed.

“I won. Didn’t I?” His eyes met hers as he captured her hand in his, bringing it to his lips. The crowd roared their approval as he kissed her knuckles.

A blush colored her cheeks as she smiled up at him. Dernin’s chest swelled with pride. She was his, and everyone would know it. He kept her hand in his as he led her toward the exit, his powerful tail clearing their path. Let them look. Let them see. He’d won her fairly, but more importantly, she’d chosen him, too.

The celebration pulsed with energy around them, but Dernin’s focus remained solely on Alaysia. Her red hair caught the light of the hanging lanterns as she laughed at something he’d said. The sound of her joy made his chest tighten with pride.

The other fighters kept approaching to congratulate him, but he barely registered their words. His tail created a protective half-circle behind Alaysia, keeping others at a respectable distance while still maintaining the appearance of sociability.

“You’re quite popular tonight,” Alaysia teased, taking a sip from her glass. “The mighty champion.”

Dernin’s lips curved into a smile. “They’ll find a new champion to fawn over soon enough.” He leaned closer, breathing in her scent. “I’m more interested in my prize.”

The music shifted to something slower, more melodic. Dernin extended his hand to her. "Dance with me?"

Her blue eyes sparkled as she placed her hand in his. "I should warn you. I'm not very good at it."

"Trust me." He led her to a clearer space, his tail smoothly clearing their path. Drawing her close, he placed one hand at her waist while keeping the other clasped with hers. "Just follow my lead."

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

They moved together, his powerful form guiding her smaller frame through the steps. The height difference might have been awkward with anyone else, but they fit together perfectly. His tail provided additional balance and support as they swayed to the music.

“This is nice,” Alaysia murmured, resting her head against his chest. “Almost feels like...”

“Freedom,” he finished for her, his voice low and intimate.

She nodded against him, and he tightened his hold slightly. Around them, the celebration continued, but at that moment, they’d created their own private world. Her hair tickled his scales where it brushed against him, and he memorized every detail—the way she felt in his arms, the subtle floral scent that clung to her skin, the trust she showed by letting him hold her so close.

“You know,” she said, looking up at him with a smile, “for such a fierce warrior, you’re quite the dancer.”

Dernin rumbled a laugh. “We Niri are full of surprises.”

Dernin held Alaysia close as they swayed to the music, his powerful tail creating a protective barrier around them. The mate bond thrummed between them like a living current, growing stronger with each passing moment. His scales tingled where her soft skin pressed against him.

The truth of what she meant to him burned in his chest, demanding to be spoken. But

not here, not in this crowded celebration with prying eyes and listening ears. Later tonight, when they could be alone, he'd tell her that she was his destined mate. His heart thundered at the thought.

He pictured them together on Nirum, far from the stench and darkness of these fighting rings. She'd love the crystal spires of his homeland, the way the twin moons painted everything in silver light. He'd show her the sacred pools where young warriors trained, teach her to navigate the hanging gardens that connected the upper levels of the city. Their children would have her fierce spirit and perhaps her striking red hair.

The thought jolted him. Children. Already his mind raced ahead to their future together. But first, he had to tell her what she truly meant to him. His jaw clenched as doubt crept in. Humans didn't have mate bonds like the Niri did. Would she understand? Accept it? She'd given herself to him freely last night, trusted him with her body and heart. But this was different. This was forever.

Alaysia shifted in his arms, fitting her head perfectly under his chin. The simple gesture of trust made his chest fill with pride and possessiveness.

Four more days until the warriors came. Four days to find the right moment to tell her. Four days to prove to her that being his mate meant freedom, not another form of chains.

"Pardon the interruption," Marcella said with a knowing smile. "Your private chambers have been prepared in the east wing."

Heat rushed through Dernin's body at the memory of last night in that hastily chosen parlor in the east wing. He smelled the spike in Alaysia's arousal, matching his own rising desire.

“Thank you, Marcella,” he rumbled, his voice deeper than usual. His tail tightened possessively around Alaysia’s waist.

Marcella nodded and melted back into the crowd. Dernin looked down at Alaysia. The golden dress she wore clung to her curves, making his hands itch to explore.

“Shall we retire for the evening?” he asked, though it wasn’t really a question. His warrior instincts screamed at him to claim his mate properly, in a real bed this time.

Alaysia’s blue eyes darkened as she nodded. “Lead the way, champion.”

Dernin guided her through the crowd. The other revelers parted before them, some offering congratulations that he barely acknowledged. His focus remained entirely on the petite redhead at his side and the promise of what awaited them.

Chapter 28

Alaysia

Dernin’s strong hand enveloped Alaysia’s, leading her through the throng of revelers. The air thrummed with the pulse of victory, but all she could focus on was the weight of his touch, the promise of seclusion. They slipped away from the celebration, their escape as swift and silent as a shadow fleeing the light.

The corridor to the east wing stretched before them, a path of whispered secrets and stolen moments. Alaysia’s breath hitched as they passed the parlor room, its memories of their night of passion lingering like a sweet, unspoken melody. Yet, the champion’s suite beckoned them now, a sanctuary of opulence reserved for the victor and his prize.

The door closed behind them with a soft, definitive thud, sealing them in a realm far

removed from the chaos outside. The suite unfolded in a tapestry of luxury, with a grand four-poster bed that seemed to invite them under its canopy of velvet and gold. A small fireplace crackled with a welcome warmth, casting dancing shadows upon the plush furniture that adorned the room.

In the heart of the bedroom, the air grew thick with desire, a tangible force that wrapped around them. Dernin's lips found hers with a fierceness that stole her breath, a kiss that spoke of triumph and a hunger that could only be quenched by each other.

Her golden silk gown soon fell away under his skilled fingers, pooling at her feet. Alaysia's hands trembled as she returned the favor, peeling away the layers of his ceremonial garb to reveal the hard planes of his chest, the sculpted contours of his arms, and the trail of scales that shimmered in the firelight.

Alaysia's gaze dropped to the evidence of his arousal, the sight of him, large and throbbing with need, sent a surge of feminine power coursing through her veins. She wanted to worship him, to pleasure him as no one else could. With a sultry smile playing upon her lips, she sank to her knees before him, her eyes never leaving his.

"Alaysia," he breathed, a note of reverence in his voice that caressed her soul.

She placed a finger to her lips, silencing him, her intention clear. "Let me," she whispered.

Her hand explored the length of him with a tender reverence. She leaned forward, her tongue darting out to taste him, a teasing flick that drew a sharp intake of breath from him. Encouraged by his response, she took him into her mouth, her lips sealing around his girth as she began to move.

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

The taste of him was intoxicating, a heady mix of salt and raw masculinity that made her ache with need. She worked him with a rhythm born of instinct and desire, her hand and mouth moving in unison, each stroke, each caress designed to drive him wild.

Dernin's fingers tangled in her red waves, his body trembling with the effort of maintaining control. "Alaysia," he groaned, the word a testament to her skill.

Her heart swelled with pride, knowing she could bring this formidable warrior to the brink with nothing but her touch. She reveled in the power she held over him.

Alaysia's breath came in short, sharp gasps as she took him deeper into her mouth, the salty essence of him coating her tongue. But just as she felt the coil of his release tighten beneath her touch, he pulled away, leaving her momentarily bereft.

"Dernin," she whispered, a question hanging on the edge of his name.

He lifted her from the floor, cradling her against his chest as he carried her to the bed. The cool sheets against her bare skin were a stark contrast to the heat that emanated from his body. As he laid her down, the hunger in his golden eyes spoke volumes, promising her a pleasure that was worth the wait.

"I want to savor every inch of you," he murmured.

His lips trailed a path of fire down her neck, each kiss a deliberate tease that left her arching into his touch. His hands soon explored her with a reverence that bordered on worship. He cupped her breasts, his fingers rolling and pinching her pebbled nipples

until she was a writhing mess of need.

Alaysia's thoughts scattered, her world narrowing to the sensation of his mouth on her skin, the relentless pursuit of his hands awakening every nerve ending in her body.

And then his mouth was on her where she was slick and aching for him. His long, agile tongue traced her delicate folds with an expertise that left her trembling. He lapped at her, each long lick a warm, electric sensation that had her moaning his name.

"Dernin, please," she begged, not quite knowing what she was asking for, only that she needed more.

He groaned in response, the vibration sending shockwaves of pleasure rippling through her. His fingers joined the assault, one, then two, sliding into her with ease, curling in a way that had her seeing stars. The pressure built within her, a tide of ecstasy that threatened to sweep her away.

Her release came crashing down on her, a tempest of sensation that tore a cry from her lips. Wave after wave of pleasure washed over her as he continued to circle her clit with his tongue. Her body convulsed around his fingers, her soul momentarily shattering under the onslaught of her orgasm.

As the tremors subsided, Dernin withdrew his mouth, his lips glistening with the evidence of her desire. He moved to lie beside her, his eyes dark with unfulfilled need, but the satisfaction there mirrored her own.

With a voice that resonated with an authority that thrilled her, Dernin murmured, "On your hands and knees, my fierce beauty." His words sent a shiver down her spine, a command that was both a surrender and an invitation to something wild and untamed.

She complied, her body moving with grace. The cool air of the room kissed her heated skin, and she felt exposed, vulnerable, yet powerful in her vulnerability.

Dernin's hands explored the curves of her body, his touch igniting a fresh wave of desire. He positioned himself behind her, the heat of his body radiating against her supple flesh. She held her breath, anticipation coiling tightly within her.

With a slow, deliberate thrust, he entered her, his large member filling her completely. A gasp escaped her lips, the sensation overwhelming yet exquisite. He began to move, each stroke measured and deep, a rhythm that built gradually, like the rising swell of an oncoming tide.

Her mind was unable to grasp anything but the feel of him inside her, the intoxicating rhythm of their union. She felt the scales of his tail brush against her legs, a reminder of his otherness, a thrilling contrast to her own soft skin.

Dernin soon reached around, his skilled fingers finding her sensitive nub. He massaged her with maddening precision, each touch sending jolts of pleasure coursing through her. The world around them faded into nothingness, their bodies locked in a rhythm designed just for them.

As his need for release grew stronger, he moved faster and faster, gripping her hips tighter. His thrusts became forceful and deep, a relentless pounding that stoked the fire within her to an unbearable intensity.

"Dernin," she cried out, her voice a mixture of awe and desperation. She was teetering on the edge, her body strung taut.

His only response was a low, guttural growl, a sound that seemed to come from the very depths of his being.

Alaysia felt the world shatter around her. Her orgasm crashed over her like a tidal wave, a force so potent it left her breathless, her body convulsing with the intensity of it.

And then, with a final powerful thrust, Dernin's own release followed swiftly on the heels of hers. With a primal roar, he drove himself as deep as he could into her, his body shuddering as he came powerfully, his seed spilling into her in hot, surging waves.

For a moment, they remained locked together, their bodies slick with sweat and their hearts pounding in unison. Slowly, Dernin withdrew from her, and they fell back onto the bed, their breaths mingling in the quiet aftermath of their lovemaking.

Alaysia turned to look at him, her eyes meeting his in a silent communion of hearts and souls. She knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that she had found something rare and precious in the depths of her captivity—a love that was fierce and untamed, a love that had the power to set them both free.

As they lay there, the outside world and its troubles seemed a lifetime away. At that moment, there was only Dernin, the promise of a future filled with hope, and the sweet, undeniable joy of being truly and madly in love.

Chapter 29

Dernin

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

Dernin traced the curve of Alaysia's shoulder as sunlight streamed through the high windows. Her red hair spread across the pillow, and the sight of her peaceful face made his chest tighten.

"Good morning, champion." Her blue eyes fluttered open.

"The only prize worth winning." He pulled her closer, breathing in the sweet rose scent of her hair.

A knock at the door interrupted their moment. Two servants entered with silver trays laden with fresh fruit, pastries, and steaming tea.

"The champion's breakfast, as requested by Kingpin Fyret." The servants set down the trays and scurried out.

"Quite the upgrade from your fighter's quarters." Alaysia sat up, wrapping the silk sheet around herself.

"The food might actually be edible." Dernin selected a ripe peach and offered it to her.

His fingers brushed against hers as she took the fruit. The simple touch sent electricity through his scales. Every instinct screamed to let her know she was his mate, but the timing wasn't right.

"Three more days," Alaysia reminded him. "Then the warriors come."

"Three days too many." His tail coiled protectively around her. "I should take you far

from here now.”

“We discussed this. We need to be patient.”

The warrior in him bristled at waiting, at leaving his mate in danger for even one more moment. But she was right. They needed the backup of his fellow warriors to ensure their escape.

“At least now we don’t have to hide.” She leaned against his chest, and his arms encircled her automatically.

The morning sun caught the copper highlights in her hair, and Dernin’s heart swelled. Soon he would take her home to Nirum, and soon she would know everything—that she was his mate, his perfect match, his future.

But for now, he simply savored this moment as they feasted like royalty in the champion’s suite.

He watched with satisfaction as Alaysia popped the last grape into her mouth. The empty breakfast trays littered the bed around them, and the silk sheets draped loosely across their bodies. Her bare shoulder pressed against his scales sent waves of contentment through him.

“We should really get dressed,” she said, though she made no move to leave his side.

“Mmm.” He nuzzled her neck, inhaling her sweet scent. The urge to confess to her that she was his mate nearly overwhelmed him, but he held back. Not yet.

Finally, they reluctantly separated to dress. Dernin’s muscles flexed as he pulled on his ceremonial garments. He couldn’t keep his eyes off Alaysia as she slipped back into her elaborate gown from the night before.

“Let’s get you something more comfortable to wear,” he said, offering his arm.

The underground corridors parted before them as they made their way to the slave quarters. Where before leers and whistles had been directed at Alaysia, now she only received respectful nods. Everyone knew she belonged to the champion now.

At the slave quarters, he stood guard while she changed, his imposing presence ensuring privacy. When she emerged in a simple dress, her red hair falling loose around her shoulders, his breath caught. She was beautiful in anything.

“Much better,” she said, twirling once. “Though I’ll miss some of those fancy dresses.”

“When we’re free, I’ll get you all the dresses you want.” He pulled her close, not caring who saw. Let them look.

She laughed and placed her hands on his chest. “I don’t need dresses. Just you.”

His heart almost burst at her words. Three more days.

Dernin soon guided Alaysia through the underground’s winding corridors. The champion’s privileges meant they could roam freely, and he intended to show her every corner that wasn’t completely miserable.

“Look at this.” He led her to an often-overlooked alcove where crystal formations caught the light from above, sending rainbow refractions dancing across the walls.

“It’s beautiful.” Alaysia reached out to touch one of the crystals, her delicate fingers tracing its facets. “How did you find this place?”

“I explored every inch of this prison while planning escape routes.” He wrapped his

arms around her waist from behind, pulling her against his chest. “Now I get to share the few beautiful things I found with you.”

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

She leaned back into his embrace. “Even in the darkest places, there’s always something beautiful worth seeing.”

The scent of her hair filled his senses, making his warrior’s heart race. The urge to say she was his mate burned in his throat, but he swallowed it down. Soon.

Later that night, Dernin settled beside Alaysia near the fireplace of the champion’s suite. Her head rested against his shoulder, her red hair spilling like silk across his golden scales. The peaceful moment made his chest tight with longing.

“Can I ask you something?” Her fingers traced the scales on his arm.

“Anything.”

“This feeling between us...are you sure it’s real? That it will last?”

The hesitation in her voice pierced his heart. He shifted to face her, taking her delicate hands in his. “What I feel for you is more real than anything I’ve ever known.”

“But how can you be so certain? It’s barely been a week.”

This was it—the moment to tell her. His warrior’s heart thundered. “Because you’re my mate, Alaysia. My true mate.”

Her blue eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“Among my people, we’re blessed with the ability to recognize our perfect

match—our destined mate through the mate bond. The moment I first saw you, something inside me changed. Every instinct screamed that you were mine.” He brushed his thumb across her cheek. “That’s why I had to protect you. Why being near you feels like coming home.”

“Mate bond?” Her voice trembled.

“It’s a sacred bond, deeper than marriage or love alone. You’re the other half of my soul.”

Tears sparkled in her eyes as she smiled. “That’s why everything felt so intense so quickly. Why I trusted you when I’ve never trusted anyone.”

“Yes.” He pulled her into his arms, breathing in her sweet scent. “You’re mine, Alaysia. And I’m yours. Forever.”

She pressed closer, her joy radiating through him. “I love you, Dernin.”

The words made his heart soar. He’d been right to wait for this perfect moment to tell her. Now nothing could tear them apart.

“I love you, too, Alaysia.”

Dernin leaned in, claiming Alaysia’s lips in a searing kiss. It was a promise, a declaration, a bond that transcended the physical realm, sealing their fates together as true mates. Her response was fervent, her hands fisting in his tunic, pulling him closer as if she couldn’t get enough of him.

The world around them faded into insignificance, the only reality the two of them and the passion that ignited between them. His tail wrapped around her, a silent testament to his unwavering commitment and the alpha within that would protect her at all

costs.

Suddenly, the tender moment was shattered by the sound of a door crashing open. A flood of guards stormed into the room, their armor clanking.

“What’s going on?” Dernin’s voice thundered, his body shifting instinctively to shield Alaysia from the intruders. His muscles tensed, ready to defend his mate with every ounce of his being.

“You’re coming with us,” the lead guard snarled, his hand reaching for Dernin.

“Touch her and you die,” Dernin growled, his eyes flashing with a dangerous light. His warrior instincts kicked into overdrive, his senses heightened, ready to strike.

But the guards were relentless. They swarmed, their hands grabbing, pulling, trying to pry Alaysia from his embrace. Dernin’s tail lashed out, a powerful weapon that sent one guard flying across the room. His fists connected with another, the satisfying crunch of bone beneath his knuckles fueling his resolve.

“Dernin!” Alaysia’s voice pierced through the chaos, her eyes wide with fear and confusion.

“I’ll protect you,” he assured her. He would not let them take her, not after they had just found each other.

Yet, for every guard he took down, another took its place. They were like a neverending tide, and despite his strength and training, the odds were insurmountable. A sharp pain exploded at the back of his head, stars bursting across his vision as he staggered forward.

Through the haze, he saw Alaysia being dragged away, her screams echoing in his ears. His heart clenched, a primal roar tearing from his throat as he fought against the darkness that threatened to consume him.

“Alaysia!” Her name was a plea, a vow, a battle cry on his lips as the world faded to black.

Chapter 30

Alaysia

Alaysia's head throbbed as consciousness returned. Cold stone pressed against her cheek, and the musty scent of underground tunnels filled her nostrils. Her eyes fluttered open to dim torchlight filtering through iron bars.

"Dernin?" She pushed herself up, relief washing over her as she spotted his scales gleaming in the low light. He lay sprawled across the floor of their cell, already stirring.

"I'm here." His tail coiled around her as he sat up. "Are you hurt?"

She shook her head, taking in their surroundings. "Just a headache."

The cell was barely large enough for Dernin's massive frame, with rough stone walls on three sides and iron bars at the front. "This looks like..."

"The holding cells. Where they first brought me." Dernin's fists clenched at his sides. "Fyret must be furious that I won instead of his champion."

Dernin tested the bars, his muscles straining, but they held firm.

A chill ran down Alaysia's spine as another possibility occurred to her. "What if...what if they found out about our plan?" She lowered her voice to barely a whisper. "About the message we sent?"

Dernin's golden eyes widened slightly. "We were careful." But Alaysia noticed the hint of uncertainty in his eyes. "We just need to hold out two more days."

"If they don't already know." Alaysia wrung her hands in her lap, her mind racing through possible explanations. Had someone overheard them? Had their message carrier betrayed them? Or was this simply Fyret's wounded pride seeking revenge?

"Even if they do know, help is still coming," Dernin reassured her.

But Alaysia couldn't shake the dread settling in her stomach. Something about this felt wrong—more calculated than a simple angry response to losing a fight. Fyret wasn't the type to act purely on emotion. There had to be more to it.

Heavy footsteps approached from down the corridor. The iron door soon creaked open with a metallic groan. Alaysia's heart pounded harder as Fyret's tall frame blocked the dim torchlight from the corridor. Bariv loomed beside him, his filaments squirming with anticipation.

"My dear champions." Fyret's silk-smooth voice sent chills down Alaysia's spine. "Did you really think I wouldn't find out?"

Dernin's tail tightened around her waist. "Find out what?"

"I have eyes and ears all over Jorvla." Fyret's rings clinked against the cell bars. "Word travels fast about escape plans from my fighting ring."

Alaysia kept her face carefully blank, though her mind raced. How much did he know? Had someone seen them with the messenger?

"I don't know what you're talking about," Dernin said flatly.

Bariv's fist shot forward, connecting with Dernin's face. The crack echoed off the stone walls. "Wrong answer."

Blood trickled from Dernin's split lip, but he remained silent. His golden scales gleamed in the torchlight as he straightened, positioning himself between Alaysia and their captors.

"Come now," Fyret purred. "Make this easier on yourselves. Tell me about your little plan."

"The only plan I had was to win your tournament," Dernin replied. "Which I did, fairly, despite your interference."

Another blow from Bariv landed on Dernin's ribs. Alaysia bit her tongue to keep from crying out, her nails digging into her palms. She couldn't give them anything to work with, couldn't let them see her panic. She'd learned long ago that showing weakness only made things worse.

"Interesting theory." Fyret's eyes narrowed. "But I know there's more. My sources are never wrong."

"Your sources?" Alaysia found her voice, keeping it steady despite her racing pulse. "The same ones who helped you drug Dernin's wine?"

"Clever girl. But cleverness won't save you from what's coming if you don't start talking."

Fyret leaned closer to Dernin's face. "We know the Niri warriors are coming. And what a coincidence—we have our very own Niri warrior right here."

Alaysia's breath stuck in her throat. Her fingers found Dernin's tail, still wrapped

protectively around her waist, seeking reassurance from his warmth.

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

“Your logic is flawed,” Dernin said, his voice steady despite the blood trickling from his split lip. “Why would I risk everything now, after winning?”

Bariv’s fist connected with Dernin’s jaw again. Alaysia bit the inside of her cheek until she tasted copper, forcing herself to remain still.

“Because you’re one of them,” Fyret said. “Once a warrior, always a warrior, right? Did you really think we wouldn’t notice the messengers moving through our territory?”

Another blow landed on Dernin’s ribs. He grunted but remained upright.

Two days. They just needed to hold out for two days. Alaysia’s mind raced through possibilities, each more desperate than the last. The cell was too small for Dernin to properly defend himself. His muscles tensed under her touch with each hit, but he didn’t strike back.

“Nothing to say?” Bariv’s filaments writhed as he landed another punch. “No clever denials?”

Blood dripped onto the stone floor. Alaysia’s heart clenched, but she kept her face carefully blank. Any reaction would only make things worse. She’d learned that lesson well over years of slavery. Show nothing, reveal nothing, survive.

“You’re wasting your time,” Dernin said, spitting blood onto the floor. “I won your tournament. That’s all.”

“We’ll see about that.”Fyret’s smile turned cruel.

Bariv’s next blow sent Dernin stumbling back against the wall.His tail tightened around Alaysia, shielding her from the impact.

Each blow that followed sent waves of nausea through Alaysia’s stomach.Blood dripped from his nose and his split lip, forming dark patterns on the stone floor.Her fingers dug into her palms hard enough to leave crescent marks as she watched Bariv’s fist connect with Dernin’s ribs again and again.

“The warriors.”Fyret’s voice dripped honey-sweet poison.“When are they coming?”

Dernin spat more blood onto the floor.“There are no warriors.”

Another punch.Alaysia’s control finally snapped.

“Stop!”She lurched forward, only Dernin’s tail around her waist keeping her from throwing herself between them.“Please, just stop!”

Fyret’s attention shifted to her like a predator scenting fresh prey.“Ah, the prize speaks.”He pulled something from his belt, and a metallic gleam caught the torchlight.A knife.“Perhaps you’d like to share what you know?”

“I don’t know anything.”The lie tasted bitter on her tongue.

Fyret pressed the knife under her eye.The cold metal bit into her skin.“Such pretty blue eyes.It would be a shame to have to dig them out.”

“Don’t.”Dernin’s voice was rough.“Leave her—”

“Stop.”Alaysia cut him off, meeting Fyret’s gaze despite the blade against her

skin. Her heart thundered erratically but her voice remained steady. "Do what you want to me. I won't tell you anything because there's nothing to tell."

"Alaysia..." Dernin tried again.

"No." She didn't look at him, couldn't bear to see the pain in those golden eyes. If he tried to protect her now, everything would be ruined. "I've survived worse than you, Fyret. Do your worst."

The knife pressed harder, drawing a warm trickle of blood down her cheek. Alaysia didn't flinch. She'd learned that showing fear only made things much, much worse. Two days. They just had to last two days. She could handle anything for two days.

"Such spirit." Fyret sneered. "Let's see how long that lasts."

The cold steel bit deeper into Alaysia's cheek as Fyret pressed the blade closer to her eye. She refused to look away from his cruel smile, refused to give him the satisfaction of her fear. More blood trickled down her face.

A sharp crack split the air. Fyret's eyes widened in shock. The knife clattered to the ground as he stumbled forward, revealing a spreading dark stain on his chest. Another crack echoed through the cell, and Bariv dropped beside him, his filaments twitching once before going still.

Dernin's tail whipped around Alaysia's waist, yanking her against his chest as he pressed them both into the corner of the cell. His body shielded around her, protecting her from any additional gun fire.

"Are you hurt?" His breath was warm against her ear.

“Just scratches.” Alaysia pressed closer to him. “What’s happening?”

“Stay down.” Dernin’s muscles tensed around her. “Someone’s out there.”

Page 61

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

Alaysia peered past Dernin's shoulder at the two bodies sprawled across the cell floor. Fyret lay face-down, blood pooling beneath him. The knife he'd held to her face lay just inches from his outstretched hand. Bariv's filaments had stopped moving entirely.

More footsteps echoed down the corridor, but the angle of the cell prevented her from seeing who approached. Dernin shifted to better shield her with his body despite his injuries.

"Keep your head down," he whispered. "We don't know if they're friendly."

Chapter 31

Dernin

Heavy boots echoed through the underground corridor, sending vibrations through the stone floor. Dernin shifted to better shield Alaysia with his body despite his injuries. Blood trickled down his temple from Bariv's beatings, but his warrior instincts remained razor-sharp.

"Stay behind me," he whispered, his muscles tensing as the footsteps grew closer.

A familiar silhouette soon emerged from the shadows. Commander Thex's green scales gleamed in the dim light, his armor bearing the marks of recent combat.

Dernin's heart leaped. "Commander? You're early."

“When Kress confirmed that you were here, we doubled our pace.”Thex’s eyes narrowed at Dernin’s injuries.“We’ve searched high and low for you since you disappeared.Then miraculously, your message reached us through Kira’s network.”

Sounds of combat echoed through the underground complex—metal clashing against plasma gun fire, shouts and orders being called out.

“The compound is not secure yet,” Thex said.“Our warriors are clearing each level.”

“Commander,” Dernin straightened despite his wounds, “This is Alaysia.She needs your protection.”

Thex’s expression softened slightly.“Any ally of yours is under our protection.”

Dernin gave a nod and then turned to Alaysia.“Are you okay to walk?”Dernin asked her gently.

She nodded, though her face was pale, and dried blood stained her cheek.“I’m fine.You’re the one who’s hurt.”

“It will take more than Bariv’s fists to keep me down.”Dernin managed a grim smile, his protective instincts surging as another explosion rocked the complex.“We need to move.Now.”

Thex handed Dernin a blade.“Welcome back to the warriors, brother.Let’s get you both out of here.”

Dernin gripped the familiar weight of the blade, its balance perfect in his hand.The weapon felt like coming home after months of fighting with nothing but his bare hands.He kept Alaysia close behind him as Commander Thex led them through the corridors.

“Watch your step,” Dernin whispered to Alaysia as they passed Fyret’s lifeless body. The smell of plasma discharge hung thick in the air as they moved away from the underground holding cell.

The underground passages twisted like a maze, but Thex moved with purpose, checking each intersection before motioning them forward. Distant explosions shook loose dirt from the ceiling.

“The main force is keeping their guards occupied upstairs,” Thex said over his shoulder. “We’ll take the service tunnel.”

Dernin’s muscles ached from Bariv’s beating, but adrenaline kept him sharp. Every shadow could hide an enemy. He sensed Alaysia’s rapid heartbeat behind him and felt her fingers grip his free arm.

“Stay close,” he murmured. “Almost there.”

They emerged into a wider tunnel where the sounds of battle echoed more clearly from above. Plasma fire and shouts filtered down through the ceiling. Dernin’s warrior instincts screamed to join the fight right now, but Alaysia’s safety came first.

“Three more turns,” Thex said, checking a digital map. “Our exit point is—”

A door burst open ahead. Two of Fyret’s guards stumbled through, their weapons raised.

“Down!” Dernin shoved Alaysia behind a support pillar as Thex’s plasma rifle flashed. The guards dropped before they could fire.

“Nice shot, commander,” Dernin said, scanning for more threats.

“Still got it.”Thex gestured them forward.“Exit is just ahead.Ready yourself.The main level is chaos.”

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

They climbed a narrow stairwell and emerged into the compound's ground floor. Through the archways, Dernin saw Niri warriors engaged with Fyret's guards.

Through the chaos of battle, Dernin spotted Krav and Vrax—fellow arena fighters he'd trained and fought with—huddled behind an overturned table. Their eyes held the same desperate look he had seen in the ring. His warrior blood surged. These men deserved freedom as much as he did.

“Brothers!” Dernin's voice cut through the noise of combat. “Take up arms! Fight with us!”

Krav's head snapped up, recognition dawning. “Champion?”

“The Niri warriors have come. This is our chance!” Dernin tossed Krav his spare blade. The weapon sang through the air as Krav caught it.

“I'm going to help the other slaves.” Alaysia squeezed his arm. “Marcella knows all the hiding spots. We can get them out of here safely.”

Every instinct screamed to keep her close, but Dernin knew she was right. He pulled her close and captured her lips in a fierce kiss.

“Be careful, mate. I'll clear you a path.”

She gave him a determined nod before darting to go help her fellow slaves. Dernin's tail lashed as he watched her go and then turned back to his fellow fighters.

“Who else stands with us?”

More faces emerged from the shadows—arena fighters he’d battled beside and against. They grabbed fallen weapons from Fyret’s guards, falling into fighting stances that spoke of years of training.

“For freedom!” Dernin roared, leading the charge toward a group of guards blocking the main corridor. His blade found its mark as muscle memory from his warrior training took over. Behind him, he heard the satisfying sounds of his fellow fighters joining the fray.

A guard’s plasma shot sizzled past his ear. Dernin’s tail whipped out, sweeping the man’s legs from under him. The guard hit the ground hard as Vrax finished him with a decisive blow.

“The south passage!” Dernin called out, catching glimpses of Alaysia leading groups of slaves toward safety. “Keep it clear!”

His heart swelled with pride as his makeshift army of fellow fighters battled with renewed purpose. They weren’t just fighting for sport anymore. They were fighting for their lives and their freedom.

Plasma fire sizzled through the air as Dernin led his group through the compound’s main hall. His tail whipped a guard across the chest while his blade found another’s throat. The familiar dance of combat sang in his blood, but his eyes kept darting to where Alaysia had disappeared.

“Push forward!” he commanded, his deep voice carrying over the chaos. The former arena fighters moved as one unit now, their years of combat experience showing in their coordinated attacks.

Commander Thex's warriors pressed in from the other side, their superior weapons and training overwhelming Fyret's remaining guards. The acrid smell of plasma discharge mixed with sweat and blood.

"Champion!" Krav called out. "The south passage is clear!"

Dernin's muscles ached from exertion and pain, but satisfaction coursed through him as he watched more slaves emerge from hiding, guided by Alaysia and Marcella. His mate's fierce determination made him proud.

A desperate guard charged at him. Dernin caught the man's wrist, crushing it in his grip before slamming him into a wall. The guard crumpled, his weapon clattering to the ground.

"The compound is secured," Commander Thex announced, his green scales gleaming with sweat. "Well fought, brothers."

Dernin's fellow fighters cheered, their voices echoing off the blood-spattered walls. Victory tasted sweet after six months of captivity. He scanned the room, counting heads. All his fighters had made it.

"Dernin!" Alaysia ran to him, her red hair wild around her face. He caught her in his arms, his protective instincts finally settling as he held her close.

"Are all the slaves safe?" he asked against her hair.

"Safe. We got everyone out of harm's way."

Dernin cupped her face in his battle-worn hands, his chest flooding with pride as he looked down at his fierce mate. Her determination, her strength in the face of danger—she embodied everything a warrior should be.

“You protected them all,” he said, his deep voice rough with emotion. “Even after everything you’ve endured, you put their safety before your own.”

“Someone had to.” Alaysia’s blue eyes blazed with that inner fire that had first drawn him to her.

“A true warrior protects those who cannot protect themselves.” His thumb traced her cheekbone. “You may not have been trained in combat, but your heart is that of a warrior.”

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

Her hands pressed against his chest. "I learned from watching you in the arena."

"And now you've proven yourself my equal." His tail curled possessively around her waist. "My mate in every way."

The sounds of battle were replaced by the organized movements of Thex's warriors securing the compound. But Dernin's focus remained on Alaysia, on the way she'd fearlessly led others to safety while plasma fire rained around them.

"We're warriors, you and I," he said. "Different kinds, perhaps, but warriors nonetheless."

A smile curved her lips. "Is that why you chose me as your mate?"

"I chose you because your spirit burns brighter than anyone I've ever known." He put his forehead on hers. "And I'll spend the rest of my life making sure you never lose that fire."

Chapter 32

Alaysia

The fighting ring, once filled with the roars of bloodthirsty crowds, now echoed with the soft murmurs of healing. This place that had seen so much intentional harm was being used to mend those who were harmed. The sand that had soaked up blood now cushioned makeshift pallets for the injured.

Alaysia knelt beside a wounded fighter, carefully cleaning a gash on his arm.

“This might sting a little,” she warned, applying the antiseptic solution. The fighter winced but remained still.

Across the arena, Marcella organized the distribution of medical supplies. “We need more bandages over here!”

Alaysia finished wrapping the wound and moved to the next person in need. Her hands worked steadily, remembering the healing skills she’d learned from her mother.

“Get those Fyret loyalists secured in the holding cells,” Commander Thex’s voice rang out. Two Niri warriors marched past with a struggling guard between them.

“Here.” Alaysia handed a water skin to an elderly slave woman. “Small sips.”

Her muscles ached from the constant movement since the battle ended, but Alaysia felt more alive than she had in years. This was her purpose—not being used for a prize but using her hands to ease others’ suffering.

“Need help with that one?” Marcella appeared at her side, nodding toward a fighter with a deep shoulder wound.

“Yes, hold him steady while I clean it out.”

Together they worked through the afternoon, treating wounds, offering comfort, and organizing the chaos into something resembling order. Every person she helped felt like another small victory against everything Fyret stood for.

“You’re pretty good at this,” Marcella observed as they took a brief break to drink

some water.

“Maybe this is what I was meant to do,” Alaysia said softly. “Help people who can’t help themselves.”

“Well, you’re certainly making a difference now.” Marcella gave her a warm smile.

The soft scrape of scales against sand made Alaysia look up from bandaging a wound. Dernin approached, his golden eyes warm as he watched her work. Her heart beat faster when she looked at him, still amazed they were both truly free now.

“I think you’ve found your calling,” he observed. “Healing suits you far better than being someone’s prize.”

Alaysia tied off the bandage. “These people need help. After everything they’ve been through...”

“And that’s what makes you extraordinary. After fighting for and getting your own freedom, your first thought is for others.”

Heat crept up her cheeks. The raw tenderness in his voice forced her to pause her work. She stood, brushing sand from her knees.

He reached out and touched her cheek, his eyes met hers. “I love you, Alaysia.” His words carried the weight of absolute certainty. “Not just because you’re my mate, but for who you are.”

“I love you, too, Dernin.” The words came easily now.

“Come to Nirum with me. We could build a life there,” Dernin urged.

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

Her chest tightened. The thought of leaving with him, starting fresh in a new place, called to her deepest wishes, but her gaze drifted to the wounded scattered across the arena floor. Marcella was directing care with quiet authority.

“I...” The words caught in her throat. “These people still need my help. How can I abandon them right now?”

A cry of pain drew her attention. Another wounded slave needed care. Her heart pulled her in two directions—toward the future with Dernin and toward those who still needed her here.

Alaysia dabbed at the slave’s wound with gentle hands, her fingers steady despite her inner turmoil. The cotton swab came away pink with blood, but the cut wasn’t as deep as she’d feared.

“Commander Thex requests a word with you.”

She looked up to find one of the Niri warriors hovering nearby. Rising from her crouch, she gave the wounded slave a reassuring pat. “I’ll be right back to finish that bandage.”

The commander’s scales gleamed in the arena’s harsh lighting as he pulled her aside. His expression held an unusual warmth.

“The council has just made their ruling.” He kept his voice low. “Due to Fyret’s death and his numerous criminal dealings, his property holdings are dissolved. Every slave and fighter here are now legally free.”

The words hit her like a physical force. Her knees went weak, and she grabbed the nearest pillar for support. “All of them?” Alaysia asked, her voice barely a whisper.

“All of them. And Nirum extends an invitation to any who wish to make sanctuary there.”

Tears pricked at her eyes. The solution to her dilemma had just fallen into her lap. She could have both her future with Dernin and help these people find their own fresh start. Her chest felt like it might burst with overwhelming joy.

“When can we tell them?” She fought to keep her voice steady, though her hands trembled.

“I just received confirmation that the compound is fully secured. So, I don’t see why we can’t tell them as soon as possible.”

Alaysia’s heart thundered as she stepped onto the raised platform where Fyret had once lorded over them all. The irony of using his stage to announce their freedom wasn’t lost on her. Hundreds of faces turned toward her—fighters and slaves—all waiting.

Her fingers trembled, but her voice rang clear across the arena. “We’ve all lived under Fyret’s control. Been treated as property, as things to be bought, sold, or even stolen.” She swept her gaze across the crowd, meeting their eyes. “That ends today. The council has dissolved Fyret’s holdings. We are all free now.”

The silence lasted three heartbeats before someone whooped. Then another. The sound swelled until the arena echoed with cheers and sobs of joy.

“Furthermore,” she continued, raising her voice above the celebration, “Nirum offers sanctuary to any who wish to start a new life there effective immediately.”

Marcella rushed forward, tears streaming down her face. “We’re really free?”

“Yes.” Alaysia grabbed her friend’s hands. “All of us.”

The crowd surged forward. People hugged and danced. Some fell to their knees weeping. An elderly fighter who’d been there longer than anyone lifted a small slave girl onto his shoulders as she laughed.

Alaysia felt tears spill down her own cheeks as she watched families reunite and friends embrace. The joy was infectious, spreading through the arena like wildfire. Someone started singing an old freedom song, and others joined in, their voices rising to the rafters.

“You did this,” Dernin said, appearing at her side. “You helped make this happen.”

She shook her head. “We did.”

A group of young slaves rushed past, their faces glowing with possibility for the first time. Alaysia watched them go, her chest tight with emotion. This was what freedom looked like—not just the absence of chains, but the presence of hope.

The celebration continued to build around them, turning the arena that had seen so much pain into a place of joy.

The last of the wounded had been moved to proper beds, leaving the arena eerily quiet after hours of celebration. Alaysia’s muscles ached from the constant work, but satisfaction warmed her chest. She found Dernin waiting by one of the stone pillars.

Her bare feet whispered against the sand as she approached him—the same sand where he’d fought for both their freedoms, where everything had changed.

“I’ve made my decision,” she said, her heart fluttering as his eyes fixed on her. “I want to go to Nirum with you.”

His tail shifted in the sand, creating soft patterns. “You’re certain? You seemed torn earlier about leaving.”

“These people have a chance now. They’re free to choose their own paths.” She gestured to the empty arena. “And I’m choosing mine.”

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

Dernin's powerful arms encircled her, pulling her close. The familiar scent of his skin filled her nose. "I'm going to show you everything." His voice dropped lower. "Even the secret places where warriors go to be alone with their mates."

Heat bloomed in her cheeks. "I'd like that." She traced one of the scars on his chest, remembering how close she'd come to losing him. "When can we leave?"

"Commander Thex says we can depart with the first group tomorrow if we want." His fingers tangled in her red hair. "Though if you need more time—"

"No." She pressed closer, feeling the steady thrum of his heartbeat. "I've spent my whole life waiting. I don't want to wait anymore."

His laugh rumbled through his chest. "Then tomorrow we'll start our new life. Together."

Chapter 33

Dernin

The crystal spires of Niri pierced the violet sky as Commander Thex's ship touched down on the landing pad. Dernin's chest swelled with pride as he watched Alaysia press her hands against the viewport, her blue eyes wide with wonder.

"Welcome to my homeland." The word rolled off his tongue, perfect and right.

"It's magnificent." Alaysia's breath fogged the glass. "The way the moons reflect off

everything...”

Silver light from Niri’s twin moons bathed the crystalline architecture in an ethereal glow. The city stretched up the mountainside in graceful tiers, each level connected by shimmering bridges that caught and scattered moonbeams like scattered diamonds.

“Your new home.” Dernin wrapped his tail around her waist, pulling her close. The scent of her hair filled his senses—his mate, finally safe in his territory. “That tower there, with the spiral design? That’s where we’ll live.”

“In that beautiful place?”

“Nothing but the best for my mate.” His fingers traced the curve of her hip. Six months in that fighting ring seemed worth it now, leading him to her.

The ship’s ramp lowered with a soft hiss. Cool mountain air rushed in, carrying the sweet scent of night-blooming flowers that grew in the crystal formations.

“The air here...” Alaysia took a deep breath. “It tastes like freedom.”

Dernin guided her down the ramp, his tail maintaining its possessive hold. Other Niri warriors gave respectful nods as they passed. His mate had already impressed them with her courage in the underground ring.

The crystalline path leading to their new home sparkled with each step. Dernin watched Alaysia’s face, memorizing every detail of her wonder-struck expression. This was what he’d fought for—not just escape but giving her a real home, a place worthy of her strength and beauty.

“Those flowers growing from the crystal...” She pointed to delicate blooms sprouting from seemingly solid stone. “How is that possible?”

“The crystals here are alive in their own way. They nurture life rather than hindering it.” Like how she had brought life back to his warrior’s spirit when he’d thought it dead.

Dernin pressed his palm to the crystal door, which hummed in recognition and slid open with a musical chime. His tail curled around Alaysia’s waist as he guided her inside their new home.

“This is all...ours?” Alaysia’s voice trembled as she took in the sweeping main room. Moonlight filtered through the crystalline walls, casting rainbow patterns across the polished stone floors.

Dernin beamed as he watched her. “Every inch of it.” His golden scales caught the light as he moved deeper into the space. “The living quarters span three levels.”

Alaysia drifted toward the window wall overlooking the city below. Her red hair blazed like fire against the backdrop of Niri’s ethereal nightscape. “I never dreamed I’d live somewhere so beautiful.”

“You deserve this and more.” Dernin joined her at the window, his massive frame dwarfing her smaller one. The thought of her previous life as a slave made his jaw clench. Never again would anyone treat her as less than the treasure she was.

“Look at this.” She ran her fingers along intricate carvings in the crystal walls—ancient Niri symbols telling stories of warriors past. “What do these mean?”

“Protection. Strength. Honor.” He traced the symbols with her. “Values every Niri warrior lives by.” His voice dropped lower. “Values I’ll uphold in keeping you safe.”

Alaysia turned to face him, her blue eyes bright with unshed tears. “I still can’t believe this is real. That we’re really free.”

“Believe it.”He cupped her face in his large hands.“You’re home now.No one will ever harm you again.”

The crystal walls seemed to pulse with a soft light, responding to their presence.Dernin felt the rightness of having her here, in his territory, under his protection.The warrior in him settled, satisfied at last to have his mate safe where she belonged.

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

Dernin's tail swished with satisfaction as he led Alaysia through the crystal archway into the floating gardens of Veridia the following morning. The platforms of earth and foliage hung suspended in mid-air, defying gravity as they drifted on invisible currents. He soared with pride at her gasp of wonder.

"How is this possible?" Alaysia's fingers clutched his arm as she peered over the edge of their platform at the hundred-foot drop below.

"Ancient magic." He wrapped his tail around her waist, anchoring her safely against him. The scent of her hair mingled with the garden's exotic blooms. "The founders of Niri discovered how to harness the air currents."

Luminous flowers in impossible shades of blue-gold and violet-silver swayed in the breeze. Crystal vines spiraled up through empty air, creating natural archways between the floating islands. A nearby blossom unfurled its petals, releasing a shower of rainbow-hued pollen that sparkled as it drifted past.

"I've never seen colors like this." Alaysia reached out to touch a flower with petals that shifted from deep crimson to molten gold. "They're like living jewels."

"These gardens are one of Niri's greatest treasures." Dernin guided her across a bridge of woven light connecting two garden platforms. "But they pale in comparison to you."

Her blue eyes met his, filled with a joy that made his warrior's heart sing. "This feels like a dream. Yesterday I was a slave, and now..." She gestured at the floating paradise around them. "How can this be my life?"

“Because you’re meant to be here.” He pulled her close. “With me.”

A flock of crystal-winged birds swooped past, their ethereal songs echoing through the garden. Alaysia’s delighted laugh as she watched them made Dernin’s chest tighten. He’d dreamed of this in those dark days in the fighting ring—showing her the wonders of his world, keeping her safe, making her happy.

“Thank you for bringing me here.” She leaned into him, trusting and warm against his chest. “For giving me a real home.”

Later that afternoon, Dernin guided Alaysia along the crystal-lined path. The rushing sound of water grew louder with each step. He savored her small gasps of wonder as Crystal Falls came into view—a massive cascade of pure water tumbling down cliffs of translucent crystal.

“This is magnificent,” Alaysia breathed, her blue eyes wide.

“Wait until sunset,” Dernin said, leading her to a private overlook he’d scouted earlier. His scales gleamed golden in the fading light as he positioned them perfectly to catch the coming display.

The sun began its descent, and the crystal cliffs caught fire with color. Hundreds of rainbows exploded through the mist, turning the falls into a kaleidoscope of shifting light. Dernin watched Alaysia’s face, memorizing how the colors played across her features and set her red hair ablaze.

His heart thundered in his chest. This was the moment. He unwound his tail from her waist and moved to face her.

“Alaysia.” His voice was rough with emotion. She turned to him, still caught in the wonder of the falls. “You are my mate, my heart, my everything. I want to spend the

rest of my life showing you wonders like this.”He sank down and produced a ring of pure crystal that caught and scattered the rainbow light.“Will you be my wife, my mate for all time?”

Alaysia’s hands flew to her mouth, tears sparkling in her eyes.“Yes,” she whispered.“Yes, of course, yes!”

Dernin slipped the ring onto her finger and then pulled her into his arms.The crystal had cost him a small fortune when he’d ventured out at dawn to have it made, but seeing it sparkle on her hand made it worth every coin.

“I love you,” he murmured against her hair as the rainbows danced around them.“My mate, my wife-to-be.”

Alaysia responded by crashing her lips against Dernin’s with fierce passion, stealing his breath away.His tail coiled possessively around her, pulling her closer, and deepening the kiss.The thundering falls behind them scattered light in every direction, casting dancing rainbows across her pale skin and his golden scales.

Her fingers traced the muscled planes of his chest, making his scales ripple with pleasure.The warrior in him growled with satisfaction.His mate had accepted him, chosen him.The crystal ring on her finger caught the light, sending prismatic reflections across their faces.

“Mine,” he growled low against her lips, one large hand tangling in her flame-red hair.

The mist from the falls settled on their skin, making Alaysia’s exposed shoulders glisten.Dernin traced the droplets with his fingertips, marveling at how perfectly she fit against him.

Chapter 34

Alaysia

The crystal walls caught the light, sending rainbow prisms dancing across Alaysia's white gown. Her fingers traced the delicate beadwork at her waist, still unable to believe this moment was real. Two weeks ago, she'd been a slave. Now she stood in the sacred sanctuary of Niri, about to marry the warrior who'd saved her life.

"Stop fidgeting or you'll wrinkle the silk." Marcella adjusted the gossamer veil, its iridescent threads shimmering.

"What if I trip? Or say the wrong words?"

"You won't." Marcella's hands were steady as she wove crystal beads through Alaysia's red waves. "Though I never thought I'd see you this nervous. Where's that defiant slave girl who stood up to Fyret?"

"She fell in love." The words came out soft, almost reverent.

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

“And found her freedom doing it.” Marcella stepped back to survey her work. “There. Perfect.”

Alaysia turned to the mirror. The white dress hugged her curves before flowing out like water. Tiny crystals caught the light with every movement, making her sparkle like the sacred walls around them. Her hair fell in loose curls down her back, woven through with beads that matched the ones adorning the sanctuary’s pillars.

“Do you think Dernin will like it?”

“That warrior would think you were beautiful in rags.” Marcella squeezed her shoulder.

A knock echoed through the chamber, causing Alaysia’s heart to leap into her throat.

“Not yet,” Marcella called out. “The bride isn’t ready.”

“Take your time.” The deep voice belonged to the temple priest. “We have all day for this sacred union.”

Alaysia closed her eyes, breathing in the sweet incense that filled the air. After years of having no control over her life, this choice—this love—was entirely hers. The thought steadied her trembling hands.

“Ready?” Marcella asked.

“I’ve been ready since the moment he stood up for me in that corridor.”

The crystal chimes tinkled overhead as Alaysia took her first step down the aisle. Her heart pounded in her chest, but her steps remained steady. The gathered crowd faded away until only Dernin remained in focus at the altar.

Golden scales gleamed across his broad chest where ceremonial armor had been fitted. His tail coiled with restrained power, yet his hands trembled at his sides. When their eyes met, a small tear slipped down his cheek.

The sight nearly stole her breath. This fierce warrior who'd fought through brutal matches now crying at the sight of her. Heat bloomed in her chest, and her own vision blurred.

"You're beautiful," he mouthed silently.

A crystal hanging caught the light, sending rainbow fragments dancing across his scales. The effect transformed him from a warrior to something ethereal—a being of light and power who'd chosen her, a former slave who'd once been nothing more than a prize.

"I love you," she whispered back, though the space between them was still too great for him to hear.

His smile widened as if he'd heard anyway. His tail swayed, betraying his eagerness to close the distance between them. The gesture was so endearingly him that Alaysia had to press her lips together to keep from grinning like a fool.

The aisle felt endless. Each step brought fresh details into focus—the way his ceremonial braids caught the light, how his chest rose and fell with quickened breaths, the tender vulnerability in his golden eyes that he showed to her alone.

This was real—this moment, this choice, this love, all of it real and freely given. No

more chains.No more fighting rings.No more being displayed as a prize.Just her warrior, looking at her like she'd hung the moons themselves.

Alaysia reached the altar where Dernin waited.His tail curled around her protectively as the priest raised his hands.

“In the sacred tongue of our ancestors,” the priest intoned in Niri, the melodic language washing over her like water, “we bind these two souls as one.”

The ancient words floated through the chamber.Though Alaysia couldn't understand them all, their power resonated in her chest.She caught fragments—“eternal bond,” “sacred union,” “two hearts joined.”Dernin's hand found hers, his warm scales brushing against her palm.

“Speak your vows,” the priest said in common tongue.

Dernin's golden eyes locked with hers.“Alaysia, my warrior heart recognized you from the moment I saw you.Not as something to be won, but as the other half of my soul.I vow to protect you, cherish you, and fight beside you until my last breath.”

Her throat tightened.They'd practiced the traditional responses, but looking into those eyes that had captivated her that first day in that corridor, different words spilled forth.

“Dernin, you saw me when I was invisible.Defended me when I was helpless.Loved me when I was afraid to love myself.I vow to stand with you, fight for you, and cherish every moment of freedom by your side.”

Another tear slipped down his cheek.

The priest spoke again in Niri, his voice rising and falling in the rhythmic cadence of

the ancient blessing. Rainbow light danced across their joined hands as he wound a crystal-studded cord around their wrists.

“Two souls,” he said, “now bound as one.”

Alaysia’s heart swelled. The cord around their wrists sparkled—not a chain of slavery, but a bond freely chosen. She’d never felt more powerful, more whole, than in this moment with her warrior.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

Dernin leaned down, his golden eyes blazing with an intensity that made Alaysia lose her breath. His warm palm cupped her cheek, his scales smooth against her skin. The tender gesture brought tears to her eyes—so different from the brutal fighting moves she'd first witnessed from him in the ring.

His lips met hers, gentle at first, like the brush of silk. He drew her closer as the kiss deepened. Heat bloomed in her chest as she pressed closer, her fingers sliding over the golden scales of his chest.

The crystal-studded cord around their joined wrists sparkled as rainbow light danced across them. The sacred walls seemed to pulse with energy, or maybe that was just her racing heart. Either way, Alaysia had never felt more alive, more cherished, than in this moment.

She barely registered the priest's final blessing or the cheers from their gathered friends. All that existed was Dernin's kiss, his protective embrace, and the knowledge that she'd never be a slave or a prize again. She was his equal, his mate.

When they finally broke apart, Dernin rested his forehead on hers. "I love you, my fierce mate."

"And I love you, my warrior," she whispered back, her voice trembling with joy.

Crystal lanterns cast their rainbow glow across the garden paths as Alaysia twirled in Dernin's arms. The sweet scent of night-blooming flowers mingled with the spiced wine warming her blood. Her wedding gown sparkled with each movement, catching fragments of light like stars.

“To the happy couple!” Marcella raised her glass, her voice carrying across the gathered crowd.

“To freedom,” another former slave called out.

“To love,” added one of Dernin’s fellow warriors.

The cheers echoed through the crystal gardens. Alaysia’s heart swelled as she looked around at all the faces—humans and Naga alike, celebrating together as equals. No more masters, no more chains. Just friendship and joy.

“Dance with me again?” Dernin extended his hand to Alaysia.

“Always.”

He swept her into another dance, his movements fluid and graceful despite his warrior’s build. Here in the crystal gardens, with rainbow lights dancing across his golden scales, he moved like poetry.

“What are you thinking about?” His voice rumbled low, just for her ears.

“How different this is from where we met. How far we’ve come.”

“From prize fighter and slave to warrior and mate.” His hand tightened on her waist.

The music shifted to a traditional Niri melody, its haunting notes drifting through the garden. Around them, other couples joined the dance—Marcella with one of the warriors who’d helped free them, former slaves with their newfound loves.

Crystal wind chimes tinkled overhead, their delicate music mixing with laughter and conversation. Alaysia leaned her head against Dernin’s chest, breathing in his familiar

scent.His heartbeat thrummed steady and strong beneath her cheek.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“For what?”

“For seeing me.The real me.Even when I was just supposed to be a trophy.”

His tail tightened around her waist as he pressed a kiss to her hair.“I saw my mate.My warrior.My queen.”

Chapter 35

Dernin

The sun dipped below the horizon, painting the sky in hues of fiery orange and deep purple.Dernin stood behind Alaysia, his arms wrapped around her as they watched the spectacle unfold.The air was thick with the scent of blooming night flowers, and the gentle rustle of leaves in the evening breeze was the only sound that accompanied the quiet symphony of colors.

“It’s beautiful,” Alaysia murmured.

“Not as beautiful as you,” he said in her ear.

She turned in his arms, her blue eyes locking on to his and a soft smile playing on her lips.“You always know what to say.”

With a gentle squeeze, Dernin guided her toward the secluded bathing pool, its surface shimmering under the caress of the setting sun.The water, heated by natural thermal springs, emitted a gentle mist that danced in the air.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“Our own private oasis,” he declared, his voice brimming with pride. He had chosen this place with care, wanting their honeymoon to be a testament to the beauty and peace he wished for their future together.

Alaysia’s smile broadened as she took in the sight. “It’s perfect, Dernin.”

He led her to the pool’s edge, the water lapping gently at the stone-lined banks. With deliberate care, he undressed her, his fingers deftly unfastening the delicate clasps of her garments. Each piece of clothing that fell away revealed more of her soft, creamy skin, and his heart thrummed with a primal possessiveness. She was his, and the thought sent a surge of warmth through his veins.

“Let me take care of you,” Dernin whispered, his hands tracing the skin of her body with reverence.

“Always,” she replied, her voice breathy with anticipation.

He undressed himself, his eyes never leaving hers. Naked, he stepped into the pool, the water enveloping him in its soothing warmth. He held out his hand, and Alaysia took it, allowing him to guide her in.

The water reached her waist, and she let out a soft sigh of contentment. Dernin moved behind her, his hands gliding over her hips, pulling her against him. She felt the evidence of his desire pressing firmly against her back, a silent promise of the pleasure to come.

With a growl of longing, Dernin turned her to face him. His mouth found hers in a

searing kiss, a mingling of tongues that had them gasping. He explored her body with a mix of tenderness and fervor, his hands cupping her breasts as his thumbs teased her nipples into hard peaks.

Alaysia moaned into the kiss, her fingers digging into the scales on his shoulders. Dernin broke the kiss and then lifted her up, setting her on the edge of the pool. Within seconds, he was before her in the water, his hands parting her thighs. He tasted her, his long tongue delving into her core with skilled precision. Alaysia's head fell back, her cries of pleasure echoing into the night.

His hands gripped her hips, holding her steady as he worshipped her with his mouth, his agile tongue expertly coaxing waves of ecstasy from her willing body. He was relentless, his own need driving him to bring her to the brink again and again.

"Dernin, please," she begged, her voice ragged with desire.

He looked up at her, his golden eyes dark with lust. "Come for me, my mate," he commanded.

Her body shuddered as she surrendered to the pleasure, her cries of release a symphony to his ears.

Emerging from the water, Dernin's muscular form glistened under the twilight. She watched him, drinking in the sight of his naked body as the water beaded on his scales, the strength evident in every line of his warrior's physique.

He sat beside her, the stone cool against his skin, a stark contrast to the heat that radiated from within.

"Come and straddle me," he commanded, his voice a low rumble dripping with desire.

Alaysia complied, her movements deliberate and laced with anticipation. She positioned herself over him, her hands resting on his broad shoulders for balance. Dernin's hands grabbed her hips, guiding her as she slowly lowered herself onto his waiting erection.

The feeling of her warmth enveloping him was exquisite torture. He filled her completely, the fit snug and perfect. A groan escaped him as she began to move, her rhythm slow and deep, each undulation of her hips a dance of sensuality that threatened to unravel his tightly wound control.

Her breasts were at eye level, and he could not resist the temptation they presented. He cupped the soft mounds, his fingers teasing her nipples into tight buds. The sensation drew a gasp from her, her pace faltering momentarily before resuming with renewed vigor.

Dernin's desires ran wild, the alpha within him demanding more. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her flush against him. With a primitive growl, he took control, driving into her with powerful, deep thrusts.

The sound of their lovemaking filled the air, a symphony of moans, gasps, and the wet slap of skin against skin. Her eyes fluttered shut, her head thrown back in ecstasy. Dernin watched her, his own pleasure heightened by the sight of her abandon.

He felt her muscles tightening around him, her climax building.

"Come for me," he urged, his voice barely recognizable, so thick with desire.

Her body convulsed around his, her cries of release filling the night. The sight of her undoing was his undoing. With a final, deep thrust, he let go, his orgasm crashing over him like a wave, powerful and unrelenting.

His growl of pleasure echoed through the night as he spilled himself inside her, the intensity of their shared release binding them together in a moment of pure bliss.

Breathless, they clung to each other, their bodies slick with sweat and the remnants of their lovemaking. Dernin's heart beat vigorously in his chest, his thoughts a whirlwind of satisfaction and a profound sense of rightness.

As their breathing slowed, Dernin pressed a tender kiss to Alaysia's forehead.

He then picked Alaysia up and carried her over the threshold of their private cottage. The soft glow of the hearth fire cast a warm light over the room. It was a place of quiet solitude, a haven where they could revel in each other's company.

He had intended to lay her down on the bed to make love to her with tenderness and patience. But the moment he set foot inside, the scent of her arousal and the feel of her body against his ignited a primal need within him—a need that could not be ignored.

With a low growl of desire, Dernin pressed Alaysia's back against the nearest wall, his hands gripping her waist as her legs instinctively wrapped around him. The heat of her core brushed against his abdomen, eliciting a sharp hiss of pleasure from his lips.

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 6:19 pm

“Dernin,” she breathed, her voice a mixture of surprise and desire.

He captured her mouth with a demanding kiss, his tongue delving into her sweetness as he ground his hips against hers. The friction sent shivers cascading down his spine, and he knew he had to have her again—now.

Her fingers threaded through his hair as she pulled him closer, which was all the encouragement he needed. In one fluid movement, he entered her, burying himself to the hilt in her welcoming warmth. Her gasp of pleasure echoed in his ears, a testament to the bond they shared.

He set a relentless pace, each thrust driven by an insatiable hunger that only she could fulfill. The sound of their bodies colliding filled the room. He felt the pressure building within him, a rising tide that threatened to sweep him away.

“Come with me, Alaysia,” he urged, his voice a guttural plea.

Her response was a wordless cry as she clung to him, her body quivering on the brink of release. He tightened his grip on her hips, his own climax barreling toward him with the force of a runaway freight train.

With a final, powerful thrust, he tumbled over the edge, his roar of fulfillment mingling with her cries of ecstasy. The world around them seemed to dissolve, leaving nothing but the two of them joined.

As the aftershocks of their passion subsided, Dernin gently disentangled himself from Alaysia, lowering her to the ground with a tenderness that belied his formidable

strength.He pressed a kiss to her forehead, his heart swelling with an emotion so profound that it threatened to overwhelm him.

“You are my heart, Alaysia,” he murmured, his voice thick with the depth of his feelings for her.

She had claimed a piece of his soul from the very start, and he would spend the rest of his days proving to her that she was the most precious being in his world.