



Naga General's Mate (Nagas of Nirum #2)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Dahlia Skysinger has managed to survive the underworld of Astera her whole life through clever deals, selling her voice, and never staying in one place too long. When her little brother is caught stealing from the crown, Lia is forced to make a cruel bargain with the royals.

Her life for his.

To regain her freedom, Lia must impersonate the princess, marry the monstrous frost giant king, then spy on and . . . kill him.

Taking a human bride is King Neve's last chance to secure peace for his people. Promised a frail mortal princess he could lock away and forget about, the last thing he expects is a woman with a sharp tongue and a reckless amount of courage. Lia might be the key to avoiding war, but he doesn't trust a single word that falls from her pretty lips.

And so the wicked game of trickery and survival begins.

But what happens when an assassin starts to have feelings for her target, and a king's icy heart begins to melt for his little human bride?

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Brivul

The target lock alert chimed through the Niri warship. Brivul's blue scales glinted under the red emergency lights as he coiled his massive serpentine tail around the command chair. The pirate vessel grew larger on the viewscreen.

"Weapons status," Brivul barked, his violet eyes fixed on the threat.

"All systems charged and ready, General." Cantos's fingers flew across the tactical console.

Brivul's jaw clenched. The civilian transport's distress beacon pulsed on his readout—over two hundred souls aboard, easy prey for the pirates closing in on them.

"Not on my watch," Brivul muttered. He rose to his full height, towering over his crew. "Nia, status of their weapons?"

"Reading multiple missile batteries powering up. They're prepping to disable the transport's engines."

"Kev, get me a targeting solution on their weapon systems."

"Already done, sir."

The ship hummed with tension. Brivul's tail tip twitched—the only outward sign of his contained fury. These pirates had grown bold, thinking the shipping lanes around Nirum were easy pickings.

“Fikleio, push more power to forward shields. When they realize we’re here, they’ll try to run.”

“Shields at maximum, General.”

“Sir, they’re launching missiles at the transport,” Cantos called out.

“Not today.” Brivul’s voice carried an edge of steel. “All batteries, target those missiles.”

The crew’s movements sharpened, each member operating with practiced precision. This was why Brivul had chosen them—the best of the best, ready to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves.

“Weapons locked, General,” Cantos confirmed.

“On my mark,” Brivul instructed. His muscles coiled, ready for action. The civilian transport’s scared transmissions filled the comm channel. Time to remind these pirates why the name General Brivul still commanded respect.

“Fire!” The command rolled from Brivul’s throat as his ship’s weapons blazed to life.

Energy beams lanced through space, intercepting the pirates’ missiles in a spectacular display of precision.

“Direct hits on all missiles,” Kev reported. “Transport is safe for now.”

“Now for the hunters.” Brivul’s tail coiled tighter around his command chair. “Target their engines. Let’s see how they like being helpless.”

The pirate vessel banked hard, finally aware of the predator in their midst. Their

shields flickered to life—too late.

“They’re making a run for the atmosphere,” Nia called out.

“Perfect.” A cold smile spread across Brivul’s face. “Follow them in. Lors, calculate their descent trajectory.”

The chase led them into Nirum’s upper atmosphere. The pirate ship’s engines left a trail of plasma, their desperate attempt to escape only making them more vulnerable.

“They’re losing altitude control,” Cantos reported. “That last hit damaged their stabilizers.”

Brivul watched the tactical display with satisfaction. The pirates would have to land—or crash. Either way, this ended on the ground.

“Sir, the civilian transport is following our descent vector,” Nia said.

“Good.” Brivul straightened further.

The planet’s surface rushed up to meet them, forests and mountains taking shape through the clouds. The pirate vessel wobbled, smoke trailing from its wounded engines.

“They’re setting down in the Kiral Valley,” Lors announced.

“Prepare ground teams.” Brivul’s eyes narrowed. “These pirates thought they could prey on our people. Time to show them the error of their ways.”

The ship’s internal comm crackled. “Ground teams standing by, General.”

Brivul felt the old familiar surge of pre-battle focus sharpen his senses. “I’ll lead the assault myself.”

“Just like old times, sir?” Cantos grinned.

“Better.” Brivul checked his weapon. “This time we know exactly where our enemy is.”

The drop ship’s bay doors hissed open and released the scent of Nirum’s pine forests into the cabin. Brivul slithered down the ramp, his tactical armor gleaming in the planet’s twin suns. The crashed pirate vessel lay ahead with smoke curling from its engines.

“Nia, take the left flank. Lors, right. Keep them boxed in,” Brivul commanded.

“The civilian transport landed too close,” Kev reported through the comm. “Two hundred meters from the pirate vessel.”

Brivul’s jaw tightened. These pirates had forced his hand—no orbital strikes with civilians that close.

“Cantos, get your demo team in position. When I give the signal, breach their cargo bay.”

“Copy that, General.”

The forest’s undergrowth crushed beneath Brivul’s powerful tail as he led the advance. His body moved with practiced efficiency, each muscle coiled and ready. The familiar weight of his plasma rifle settled against his shoulder.

“Contact!” Fikleio’s voice crackled. “Pirates deploying defensive positions!”

Energy bolts sizzled through the air. Brivul dove behind a fallen tree trunk, bark splintering around him as return fire peppered his position.

“Suppress that turret,” Brivul commanded. His eyes narrowed as he tracked movement near the pirate ship’s boarding ramp. “Lors, two tangos trying to flank your position.”

“Already on it, sir.”

Lors’s rifle cracked twice. Two pirates dropped.

“Nia, status on the civilian transport?”

“Passengers are secure but scared. Pirates can’t reach them through our covering fire.”

Perfect. Brivul raised himself up, towering over the battlefield. His blue scales caught the sunlight as he unleashed a burst from his rifle, forcing a group of pirates back into cover.

“Cantos, now!”

The explosion rocked the pirate vessel’s cargo bay. Through the smoke, Brivul spotted his demo team rushing the breach. The pirates’ organized defense began to crumble.

“Push forward!” Brivul’s voice carried across the battlefield.

His team responded with skilled precision, years of fighting together evident in their coordinated advance. Brivul watched his team push forward, forcing the pirates to retreat deeper into their damaged vessel.

“We’ve got them cornered,” Lors called out. “They’re falling back to—”

Something felt wrong. The pirates didn’t fight like cornered animals. Brivul’s combat instincts, honed over countless battles, screamed a warning.

Movement caught his eye. A flash of metal through the trees—a smaller ship, barely visible behind the main vessel. His senses registered the threat a heartbeat too late.

“Secondary vessel!” he roared. “Get those civilians—”

Suddenly, a missile streaked across the clearing from the smaller ship. Brivul’s tail whipped forward as he launched himself toward the civilian transport, knowing even as he moved that he couldn’t reach it in time. The world slowed around him. Each millisecond burned into his memory.

The missile struck. The civilian transport erupted into a fireball that lit up the surrounding forest. The shock wave knocked Brivul back, his scales scraping against rough bark. Heat washed over him as secondary explosions tore through the civilian vessel.

“No!” The word tore from his throat. Two hundred souls. Families. Children. Gone in an instant.

Through the ringing in his ears, he heard Nia’s voice crack over the comm. “General... there’s no... there’s no survivors.”

Smoke and ash filled Brivul’s lungs as he stared at the flaming wreckage. His tail went slack against the forest floor, the fight draining from his muscles. The acrid stench of burning metal and flesh coated his tongue.

“General, your orders?” Cantos’s voice crackled through the comm.

Brivul's fingers crushed the grip of his rifle, his fury no longer contained. Two hundred innocent lives. His responsibility. His failure.

"Secure the area. Round up any surviving pirates," Brivul ordered.

"And the civilian transport, sir?"

"There's nothing left to save."

His crew moved with seasoned efficiency, but Brivul barely registered their actions. The flames from the transport danced before his eyes, each flicker another accusation. He'd led them right into this trap.

"Sir, we found the pirate captain." Lors approached, dragging a bound figure. "What do you want us to do with him?"

The pirate spat at Brivul's feet. "The great General Brivul. Not so mighty now. Are you?"

Brivul's hand shot out, lifting the pirate by his throat. His eyes blazed as he brought the struggling man close to his face.

"Two hundred civilians. Children."

"Casualties of war, snake."

Brivul's grip tightened. One squeeze would end this worthless life. But the dead wouldn't care. Their screams still echoed in his mind.

He dropped the pirate. "Take him to the brig."

“General?” Lors asked, his voice tinged with doubt.

“I said take him to the brig.”

Brivul slithered away from the wreckage and boarded the warship. Each movement felt heavy and weighed down by the souls he’d failed to protect.

Back in his quarters, he stripped off his tactical gear. The insignia of general caught the light, mocking him. He’d worn it with pride, but now it felt like a brand of shame.

His terminal chirped with an incoming message from command. They’d want a report, explanations, justifications. He had none to give.

Brivul’s fingers soon moved across his keyboard. His resignation would be on their desks by morning. Let someone else wear these stars. Someone who wouldn’t lead innocent lives to their death.

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Mila

The metal bucket clanked against Mila's knee as she scrubbed the floor of Kurg's grand hall. Her knuckles burned from the caustic cleaning solution, but she kept her movements steady and methodical. Head down. Invisible.

"Move faster. The master expects this done before the gathering." The overseer's boots stopped inches from her bucket.

"Yes, sir." Mila shifted to the side, careful to keep her eyes on the ornate floor tiles.

The boots moved away, and she released her breath. Another day of staying beneath notice. The less attention, the better chance of protecting Priscilla.

A door slammed somewhere above, followed by Kurg's distinctive heavy footsteps. Mila grabbed her bucket and pressed herself against the wall, making herself as small as possible. The kingpin's bulk filled the hallway as he descended the stairs.

"Get this place spotless," he barked at no one in particular. "I want it perfect for tonight's party."

Perfect meant hours more work, but Mila kept her face carefully blank. The less she reacted, the less likely she'd draw attention. She'd learned that lesson young, watching others who spoke up disappear.

When Kurg passed without a glance in her direction, Mila allowed herself a small breath of relief. She dunked her rag back in the bucket, ignoring the sting of

chemicals on her raw skin. Tonight's gathering meant more mess to clean, more chances to overhear dangerous secrets, and more reasons to stay invisible.

But staying invisible kept her alive and kept Priscilla safe. That was worth any amount of scrubbing.

Later that evening, crystal glasses clinked as Mila refilled wine for the seventh time. The sickly-sweet scent of expensive Jorvlen wine mixed with the heavy perfumes of Kurg's guests made her stomach turn.

"Another successful venture." Kurg's laugh boomed across the dining hall. "The council will be pleased with our progress."

The other kingpins raised their glasses. Their jeweled rings caught the light of the chandeliers, making Mila's eyes water. Or perhaps it was the smoke from their cigars that curled through the air.

"To progress," the guests echoed.

A drop of wine splashed onto the pristine tablecloth as Mila's hand trembled, and the overseer's eyes narrowed from across the room. She steadied herself, moving to the next guest.

"The shipping routes are secured then?" A woman in a crimson dress tapped her long nails against her glass.

"More than secured." Kurg leaned back, his chair creaking. "Those meddling Niri won't be a problem anymore."

"And their... cargo?"

“Dealt with. Permanently.”

Laughter rippled around the table. Mila’s grip tightened on the wine pitcher. The same hands that ordered deaths now lifted delicate forks to their mouths, sampling the roasted meats and exotic fruits she’d helped prepare.

“Girl.” Kurg’s voice cut through her thoughts. “More wine.”

Mila approached his chair, keeping her eyes down. His cologne assaulted her senses—spice and leather barely masking something rotten underneath. Just like everything else about him.

“Careful now.” His hand brushed against hers as she poured.

The touch sent ice through her veins, but she kept pouring. Steady. Invisible. The wine reached the rim of his glass.

“Good girl.”

The words dripped like poison. Mila retreated, forcing her feet to move slowly, naturally. Not to run. Never to run.

“Speaking of cargo,” one of the kingpins said, “I hear you’ve got quite the collection of house slaves.”

“Only the best.” Kurg’s gaze swept the room, passing over Mila like she was furniture. “Though they’re all replaceable.”

The conversation moved on to trade routes and profit margins. Mila circled the table, pouring wine, collecting plates, existing in the spaces between their words. Each step brought fresh horrors to her ears, wrapped in pleasant dinner conversation.

The wine pitcher grew lighter with each pour. Three more glasses until she could retreat to the kitchen.

The market run tomorrow morning beckoned like a siren's song—no guards, no oversight, just a simple delivery list and enough credits to cover the purchases. Freedom lay just beyond these compound walls.

“Where’s that pretty sister of yours?” The woman in crimson peered at Mila through her wine-hazed eyes.

Mila’s hand trembled. “In the kitchens, my lady.”

The memory of Priscilla’s face this morning flashed through Mila’s mind—dark circles under her eyes from another sleepless night but still managing a smile as she braided her golden hair. So much like their mother.

“More wine here.” A meaty hand waved an empty glass.

The market square would be busy tomorrow. Busy enough to disappear into the crowd, to blend with the masses of free citizens going about their day. The spaceport wasn’t far. She’d mapped the route a hundred times in her head during previous errands.

But Priscilla would still be here, alone. Vulnerable.

The thought of her sister facing Kurg’s wrath, bearing the punishment for Mila’s escape, turned her stomach more than the kingpin’s cologne. They’d learned young what happened to slaves who ran—or worse, to those left behind.

“Getting slow, girl.” The overseer’s voice carried across the room.

Mila quickened her steps, the familiar mask of subservience settling back into place. The dream of freedom dissolved like sugar in tea, leaving only the bitter dregs of reality. She couldn't abandon Priscilla. Not to this.

Her sister's voice echoed from this morning: "At least the kitchen work isn't so bad."

Sweet, innocent Priscilla. Still finding light in the darkness. Still worth protecting at any cost.

The wine pitcher emptied. Mila backed away from the table, her head bowed and thoughts locked safely behind carefully blank features. Tomorrow would bring another market run, another chance at freedom that she couldn't take. Another day of surviving, of keeping Priscilla safe.

Steam billowed as Mila pushed through the kitchen's swinging door. The familiar clatter of dishes and hiss of water greeted her, along with Priscilla's quiet humming. Her sister stood at the wash basin, her golden hair escaping its braid as she scrubbed at a particularly stubborn pot.

"Here, let me help with that." Mila grabbed a cloth and stepped beside her sister.

"The overseer won't like you leaving the hall."

"They're too drunk to notice." Mila's fingers brushed Priscilla's as she took the pot.

"Your hands are raw enough."

"So are yours." Priscilla touched the red patches on Mila's knuckles.

"I'm used to it." The metal pot's burned bottom yielded under Mila's stronger scrubbing. "Did you eat anything?"

“There’s some bread left from breakfast.”

“That’s not enough.” Mila glanced at the platters of half-eaten delicacies waiting to be cleared. “Take some of the roasted vegetables when you wrap the leftovers.”

“But if they catch me—”

“They won’t.” Mila rinsed the pot and stacked it with the others.

Priscilla’s stomach growled, betraying her hunger. She ducked her head, her cheeks flushing pink. The gesture reminded Mila so much of their mother, it hurt.

“The gathering should end soon.” Mila dried her hands and started organizing the cleaning supplies. “I’ll help you finish here.”

“You don’t have to take care of me all the time.”

“Of course I do.” Mila tucked a loose strand of hair behind Priscilla’s ear. “That’s what big sisters are for.”

They worked in comfortable silence, moving around each other with practiced ease. Mila kept one ear tuned to the hall, alert for any approaching footsteps. Her muscles ached from the day’s labor, but she pushed through it. Every dish cleaned was one less for Priscilla’s tender hands.

“There.” Mila hung the last pot on its hook. “Much better.”

“Thank you.” Priscilla’s smile brightened her tired features. “You always make everything easier.”

The words squeezed Mila’s heart. If only she could make everything easier. If only

she could give Priscilla the life she deserved, free from fear and hunger and endless work.

But for now, all she could do was this—steal moments of kindness between the cruelties, share what little comfort they had, and keep her sister's spirit from breaking.

Back in the dining hall, the alcove's marble floor reflected the dim evening light as Mila wiped away the last traces of spilled wine. Her knees protested each movement, the long day taking its toll. But the sooner she finished, the sooner she could return to Priscilla.

A shuffle of boots against stone made her pause. Kurg's distinctive gait echoed down the hallway, accompanied by lighter footsteps. Mila pressed herself deeper into the alcove's shadows.

Soon, Kurg and a council member's assistant stopped just past her hiding spot, their heads bent close together. Their whispers carried an edge of urgency that made Mila's skin prickle.

She should leave. Nothing good ever came from overhearing Kurg's private conversations. But something in their tense postures, the way they kept glancing over their shoulders, held her in place.

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Mila

Mila pressed her crouched body against the curtained wall, her cleaning rag forgotten in her tight grip. The shadows wrapped around her like a protective cloak as Kurg's cologne wafted through the air, making her nose twitch.

"The transfers need to be smaller," the council member's assistant whispered. "The council's accountants are suspicious."

"Those paper-pushing idiots wouldn't know embezzlement if it bit them in the ass." Kurg's gravelly laugh sent a shiver down Mila's spine. "Besides, I've got three of them on my payroll."

"Still, fifty thousand credits at once is too noticeable."

"Fine. Break it into five transfers of ten each. Route them through the mining operations on sector four."

Mila's heart hammered against her chest. The Council of Seven controlled everything on Jorvla, including the slave trade that kept her and Priscilla in chains. If Kurg was stealing from them...

"And the documentation?" The assistant's boots scraped against the floor.

"Already taken care of. The manifests show equipment purchases for the mines. No one questions mining equipment costs these days."

“Smart. But what about—”

“Shh.” Kurg’s voice dropped lower. “These walls have ears.”

Mila held her breath, willing herself to become one with the shadows. Her muscles screamed from staying perfectly still, but she didn’t dare move. One wrong shift of weight, one tiny sound, and she’d be discovered.

“Let’s continue this in my office,” Kurg said. “More private there.”

Their footsteps faded down the corridor. Only when silence returned did Mila allow herself to breathe again.

Mila’s mind raced. Her thoughts were a whirlwind of fear and possibility. The weight of the information she’d overheard pressed down on her like the heavy chains that bound her to this life. Kurg, the Jorvlen who held her and her sister’s lives in his meaty hands, was embezzling from the most powerful entity on Jorvla. The implications of such a revelation made her dizzy.

If she found a way to expose Kurg’s schemes, perhaps the council would see fit to grant her freedom.

“Freedom,” she whispered to herself, the word tasting both sweet and bitter on her tongue.

But the risk... was monumental. If she was caught, the punishment would be severe, and she feared what they might do to Priscilla in retaliation.

Mila closed her eyes, taking slow, measured breaths to calm her racing heart. The cool air from the alcove did little to soothe the heat of anxiety that flushed her cheeks.

“Think, Mila,” she chastised herself quietly. The names of the council members’ assistants she’d overheard during the dinner party echoed in her mind. Could she trust any of them with this information?

The sound of soft footsteps approached, and Mila quickly schooled her features into the mask of indifference she’d worn for years. She picked up her cleaning supplies and stepped out of the alcove, nearly colliding with Priscilla.

“Mila, there you are!” Priscilla’s voice was a hushed whisper of urgency. “Kurg is looking for you. He wants the main hall spotless by morning.”

Mila’s stomach clenched at the mention of Kurg’s name. “I’ll get to it right away,” she replied, her voice steady despite the turmoil within.

Priscilla’s brow furrowed with concern. “Are you all right? You look flushed.”

“It’s just the heat from the kitchens,” Mila lied, avoiding her sister’s gaze. She couldn’t involve Priscilla in this. The less her sister knew, the safer she’d be.

As they walked together, Mila’s mind spun with the possibilities of what she’d learned. The thought of taking her chances and remaining silent was almost as terrifying as the thought of speaking out. But the chance to change their fate, to free not just herself but her sister as well, was a tempting siren call she couldn’t silence.

She glanced at Priscilla, her sister’s face a mixture of innocence and the hard-earned wisdom of their shared experiences. Mila knew she had to tread carefully. One wrong move could spell disaster for them both.

The rest of the evening passed in a blur of polishing and sweeping, the mundane tasks providing a welcome distraction from her tumultuous thoughts. As the moon rose high in the night sky, casting long shadows through the windows of the main hall,

Mila realized she stood at a crossroads. She could remain a slave, cowering in the shadows and cleaning up the messes of those more powerful, or she could take a leap of faith.

The corridor to the sleeping quarters stretched before Mila like an endless tunnel. Her footsteps echoed softly against the polished floor as she walked past the guards, keeping her eyes down.

“Haven’t finished the comm room yet,” she muttered to herself, just loudly enough for the nearest guard to hear. She turned around, clutching her cleaning supplies closer.

The guard barely spared her a glance. Perfect. Just another invisible slave doing menial work.

Mila’s heart pounded as she approached Kurg’s private communications room. She opened the door slowly, being careful not to make a sound. The room smelled of leather and wood with hints of Kurg’s cologne still lingering in the air.

She pulled out her cleaning rag and wiped down surfaces while making her way to the communication terminal. The screen’s soft blue glow illuminated her face as she pressed her palm against the console.

“Please don’t be biometric,” she whispered. The screen flickered to life. No security prompt appeared. Why would there be one? Slaves weren’t supposed to know how to read, let alone operate technology. But her mother had made sure she learned these skills, albeit in secret long ago.

Her fingers flew across the holographic keyboard, navigating through folders, and the terminal hummed softly as she worked.

“Come on... Where are you?”

A file caught her eye—dated communications with timestamps matching the conversation she’d overheard. Mila inserted a data chip she’d palmed from one of Kurg’s drunk associates during the dinner party. It was one of many various items she’d secretly collected over the years. She never knew when one of these items might come in handy.

The progress bar crawled across the screen. Every second felt like an eternity.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. Mila held her breath. She grabbed her cleaning supplies and dropped to her knees, scrubbing the floor near the terminal.

The footsteps passed.

The transfer completed with a soft chime. Mila pocketed the chip and reset the terminal display. She gave the room one final wipe-down, ensuring everything looked exactly as she’d found it.

As she stepped into the hallway, a guard rounded the corner.

“Finished in there?” he asked.

“Yes, sir.” Mila kept her voice steady despite her racing heart. “Just heading to quarters now.”

The guard nodded and continued his patrol. Mila walked away, the data chip burning a hole in her pocket. With each step, the weight of what she’d just done sat heavily on her shoulders. There was no going back now.

Mila’s bare feet padded across the cold stone floor of the sleeping quarters. The data

chip pressed against her hip in her pocket. Her earlier triumph dissolved into a knot of dread in her stomach.

“What was I thinking?” The words escaped in a harsh whisper.

Priscilla’s familiar form curled up on the bottom bunk, her golden hair spilling across her thin pillow.

Mila climbed onto her top bunk, the metal frame creaking. The ceiling loomed close enough to touch as she lay down. The evidence sat useless in her pocket. Who would listen to a slave? The council members wouldn’t give her the time of day. Their assistants were all in Kurg’s pocket.

“Should have thought this through better.” She pressed her palms against her eyes.

The guard’s boots echoed down the hallway on his nightly rounds. Mila held her breath until the sound faded.

Her mind spun through scenarios. If she approached the wrong person, they’d turn her over to Kurg. If she tried to bypass the proper channels, she’d be dismissed as a lying slave. Either way ended badly.

“Mila?” Priscilla’s voice drifted up from below. “You’re thinking so loudly, I hear you tossing and turning.”

“Go back to sleep, Cilla.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just... thinking about tomorrow’s duties.”

The lie tasted bitter. Priscilla's steady breathing eventually returned but sleep eluded Mila. She'd acted on impulse, drunk on the possibility of freedom. Now that possibility felt more like a noose around her neck.

Dawn would bring new problems. Could she keep hiding the chip unnoticed? How long before Kurg discovered the copied files? The questions chased each other through her mind as exhaustion finally pulled her under into uneasy dreams of chains and running without getting anywhere.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Brivul

Brivul coiled his massive frame against the clinic's sterile white wall, his blue scales gleaming under the harsh fluorescent lights. Another day, another shift of watching desperate humans shuffle through the doors of the surrogacy clinic with hollow eyes and empty pockets.

"Papers." His deep voice echoed through the reception area. The slender woman before him clutched her documents, her hands trembling.

The scent of antiseptic burned his nostrils as he inspected her papers. Back on Nirum, surrogacy clinics smelled of healing herbs and hope. Here, the stench of fear and desperation clung to every surface.

"Move along." He waved her through, his violet eyes scanning the waiting room. Three more candidates huddled in the corner, whispering among themselves. Their fear-sweat made his tongue flick in distaste.

A year ago, he'd commanded armies. Now he checked paperwork and broke up the occasional fight between desperate surrogates and entitled clients. His muscles ached for real action, for the weight of a plasma rifle instead of this standard-issue stunner on his belt.

"Sir?" One of the clinic staff approached. "Dr. Voss needs you to escort a problematic client out."

"Again?" Brivul growled, towering over the nervous attendant. "Third one this

week.”

The same dance, different day. He’d sworn not to interfere in Jorvlen matters, but watching the corruption eat away at these humans gnawed at his conscience. Back home, surrogacy was sacred. Here, it was just another commodity to exploit.

His tail slithered against the polished floor as he made his way to the doctor’s office. The sound echoed through the empty hallway, a hollow reminder of how far he’d fallen—from leading charges against pirates to playing bouncer in a shady clinic.

“You can’t do this to me!” A man’s voice carried through the door. “I paid good money!”

Brivul’s jaw tightened. The scar there pulled tightly—a reminder of battles that actually meant something. He squared his shoulders and pushed open the door, ready for another meaningless confrontation in an endless string of meaningless days.

Hours later, at lunch time, Brivul slithered through the nearby bustling market, his tongue flicking to taste the mix of spices and sweat in the air. His security uniform felt restrictive after a morning of dealing with entitled clinic patients. His stomach growled at the scent of grilled meat wafting from a nearby stall.

A flash of movement caught his eye. A human woman with long black hair stood at a produce vendor’s stall, her chin raised. Something about her posture spoke of contained strength.

“These vegetables are half-rotted,” she said, her voice steady. “I won’t pay full price for produce that won’t last two days.”

The vendor, a pot-bellied Jorvlen, leaned over his counter. “Pretty thing like you should worry less about prices and more about pleasing your master.”

Brivul's scales bristled. His claws dug into his palms, but he held his position momentarily.

"My price is fair considering the quality," the woman countered, ignoring the lewd comment. A birthmark decorated her temple, catching the light as she sorted through the wilting produce.

"Maybe we could work out another form of payment." The vendor's tongue darted across his lips. "Something more... personal."

The woman's spine stiffened, but she didn't back down. "Three credits for the lot, or I'll take my master's business elsewhere."

Brivul found himself admiring her composure. Most slaves he'd encountered kept their eyes down, their spirits broken. This one had fire in her green eyes, even as she maintained a facade of deference.

The vendor made another crude suggestion, and Brivul's tail twitched with suppressed anger. His warrior instincts screamed to intervene for some reason he didn't quite understand.

Brivul quickly slithered forward, his massive frame casting a shadow over the vendor's stall. The rancid smell of rotting vegetables mixed with the vendor's fear-sweat as Brivul rose to his full height.

"The lady offered three credits." His deep voice cut through the market noise. "A generous price for your subpar goods."

"This is none of your business, Niri ." The vendor's fingers trembled as he adjusted his collar.

“Everything in this district is my business,” Brivul hissed, even though he knew that was a lie. His eyes narrowed, his jaw tightening. “Shall we discuss your permit violations?”

The woman kept her gaze down, but Brivul caught the slight upturn of her lips.

“Three credits it is.” The vendor snatched the money from her outstretched hand and shoved the vegetables into her basket.

“Thank you, sir.” Her voice stayed soft, demure—a perfect slave’s response. But those green eyes flashed with triumph as she bowed her head to Brivul.

His warrior’s instinct recognized that carefully hidden strength. The way she gripped the basket spoke of controlled power, not submission.

“My pleasure.” Brivul’s scales rippled as he maintained his intimidating posture over the vendor’s stall.

Brivul suddenly plucked the heavy basket from her hands. “Allow me.”

Her shoulders tensed, but she didn’t pull away. “I can manage.”

“A security officer’s duty includes protecting people from unscrupulous vendors and their rotting produce,” he joked.

A ghost of a smile crossed her face. The scent of jasmine and vanilla drifted from her skin, cutting through the market’s aroma.

“I’m Mila,” she said shyly, although her voice carried a hint of warmth.

“Brivul.” His tail swayed as they moved between the stalls. “You handled that vendor

well.”

“Practice.” She paused at a spice merchant’s display. “Though I appreciate the backup.”

His scales tingled as she selected fragrant herbs, her movements precise and graceful. No ordinary slave, this one. The way she carried herself, the sharp intelligence in those green eyes—she was dangerous. And fascinating.

“The cinnamon’s fresh today.” The words tumbled out before he could stop them. “From the southern provinces.”

“You know your spices?”

“My mother was a healer. The scents bring back memories.”

Her fingers traced the edge of a jar. “What brought you to Jorvla?”

“A change of scenery.” The half-truth tasted bitter on his tongue.

They fell into an easy rhythm, moving from stall to stall. She asked about Niri customs, and he found himself sharing stories of his homeland’s festivals and traditions. Her laughter at his description of a disastrous harvest celebration loosened something in his chest.

Too soon, her basket brimmed with purchases. “I should return.” She reached for her goods.

Their hands brushed. Lightning shot through his scales. His mating instincts roared to life, demanding he claim this female who smelled of spice and strength. His tail coiled tightly as ancient Niri instincts warred with rational thought.

“Thank you.” She pulled back, a flush coloring her cheeks. “For everything.”

Brivul forced his claws to release the basket, every muscle screaming in protest. The warrior in him recognized a worthy mate, but she was human and a slave.

Completely forbidden.

Brivul watched Mila disappear into the market crowd, his claws flexing with the need to chase her. Her scent lingered—jasmine, vanilla, and something uniquely her that called to his most primitive instincts.

“Mate.” The word slipped out in a low growl. His tail lashed against the dusty ground.

A group of market-goers scattered at his display of agitation. Brivul forced his muscles to relax, though every fiber of his being screamed to follow her trail.

“She belongs to someone else,” he reminded himself.

His warrior’s pride rebelled at the thought. Back on Nirum, he’d have claimed her without hesitation. But here? He was nothing but a failed general playing security guard.

The market sounds faded as memories of the civilian ship’s explosion flashed through his mind. More lives he’d failed to protect. Just like he couldn’t protect Mila now.

“Everything all right, sir?” a vendor called out.

“Fine.” Brivul hissed, letting his intimidating presence silence further questions.

He slithered back toward the clinic, his movements stiff with frustrated tension. The

rational part of his mind knew pursuing her would only bring trouble. She was property here—the thought made his scales crawl—and he had no right to interfere.

But his instincts refused to accept it. They demanded he track her, claim her, protect her. The way she'd stood up to that vendor with quiet strength only proved what a worthy mate she'd be.

“Enough.” He pressed his claws against the clinic's outer wall, leaving shallow grooves in the metal.

He didn't even know which household owned her. Didn't know if he'd ever see her again in this sprawling city. The thought sent another wave of possessive anger through him, but he forced it down.

Some battles couldn't be won. He'd learned that lesson the hard way.

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Mila

Mila clutched her heavy basket closer, its contents shifting against her hip as she padded down the dusty street. The sun beat down on her neck, but she barely noticed the heat. Her thoughts kept drifting back to those violet eyes.

“Get it together,” she muttered, adjusting her grip on the basket. “He’s just another Niri.”

A Niri who’d stood up for her. Who’d haggled with that leering vendor without expecting anything in return. The memory of his deep voice sent an unexpected shiver down her spine.

The evidence chip pressed against her other hip through the pocket in her dress. That was what mattered right now. Not some handsome security guard with kind eyes.

“Focus on what’s important.” Her voice came out shakier than intended.

She turned the corner and picked up her pace toward Kurg’s compound. Yet as she strode down the road, her thoughts wouldn’t stop drifting back to Brivul. How his scales had gleamed in the sunlight. The way he moved, so fluid and powerful... No. She couldn’t afford to think about him. Not with Priscilla’s safety hanging by a thread. Not with stolen data burning a hole in her pocket.

But his gentle touch when their hands had brushed...

“Stop it,” she hissed, forcing her feet to keep moving forward. “You’re not some

lovesick teenager.”

The market crowd thinned as she approached the compound’s sector. Soon she’d need to put on her invisible mask again. Head down, eyes lowered, spirit crushed—everything the perfect slave should be.

So why couldn’t she stop thinking about how he’d looked at her like she was worth something?

The kitchen’s familiar warmth enveloped Mila as she pushed through the service entrance. Steam rose from copper pots on the stove, carrying the scent of tonight’s dinner preparations.

Priscilla’s face lit up at her entrance. “Did you get the spices?”

“Everything on the list.” Mila set her basket on the worn wooden counter. “Even managed to get fresh herbs.”

“Show me.” Priscilla’s fingers danced over the purchases, sorting them into neat piles. “Oh, these basil leaves are perfect.”

The evidence chip weighed heavier than ever in Mila’s pocket as she watched her sister’s enthusiasm. The council would surely reward someone exposing corruption—maybe even with freedom papers. But if Kurg discovered who had betrayed him...

“You’re quiet today.” Priscilla muttered, interrupting Mila’s thoughts. “Something happen at the market?”

“Just tired from carrying that basket.” The lie tasted bitter. “These need to go in the cold storage.”

“I’ll take the meat down. You handle the spice cabinet?”

The sisters worked in silence, their movements a well-practiced dance around each other in the cramped space. Every clink of jars being arranged reminded Mila of the chip. Every step across the stone floor echoed with possibilities and dangers.

“Remember when we used to play hide and seek down here?” Priscilla’s voice drifted up from the storage cellar.

“Until that time you knocked over an entire shelf of preserves.”

“Worth it, though. Your face when you found me...”

The memory of her sister’s giggles twisted something in Mila’s chest. One wrong move, and she’d never hear that sound again. But staying silent meant staying slaves forever.

“Did you hear about Tenna?” Priscilla emerged from the cellar. “They sold her yesterday. Just like that, gone.”

The words hung in the air between them—another reminder of how precarious their lives were. How easily they could be separated.

“At least we’re still together.” Priscilla squeezed her hand.

Mila squeezed back, the evidence chip burning against her leg. She had to find a way to use it without risking Priscilla. She had to.

Later that day, the marble floor gleamed under Mila’s brush strokes, her knees aching against the hard surface. Sweat trickled down her back as she worked.

Heavy boots echoed down the corridor. Strange—the guards never patrolled this wing during cleaning hours.

“You. Get up.”

The gruff voice made her stomach clench. Three of Kurg’s personal guards loomed over her, their faces twisted in identical sneers.

“Is something wrong?” Mila kept her voice steady, careful to maintain her submissive pose.

“Master Kurg wants to see you.” The tallest guard grabbed her arm, yanking her to her feet. The brush clattered to the floor.

“Wait, I need to finish—”

“Shut up.” His claws dug into her skin.

The second guard seized her other arm. Their grip crushed her biceps as they marched her down the corridor, her feet barely touching the ground.

“Please, what’s this about?” Her heart hammered against her ribs.

A sharp shake made her teeth rattle. “Said shut up, slave.”

They dragged her past startled house servants and through winding hallways she’d never seen before. The opulent décor grew more elaborate with each turn—crystal chandeliers, gilt-framed mirrors, plush carpets that swallowed their footsteps.

Did he know? Had someone seen her in the comm room? The chip felt like it was burning through her dress.

The third guard walked behind them, his presence a looming threat. “Boss says this one’s been snooping around.”

Mila’s blood turned to ice.

They turned down another corridor, this one lined with security cameras tracking their progress. The grip on her arms tightened until she couldn’t feel her fingers.

“Almost there, little spy.” The guard’s breath was hot against her ear. “Master Kurg’s been wanting to chat with you.”

The guards shoved Mila through ornate double doors into Kurg’s office. The scent of expensive cigars and leather assaulted her nose. Behind a massive desk carved from rare bloodwood, Kurg’s bulk filled an oversized chair.

“So.” Kurg’s voice cut through the silence. “Care to explain why you accessed my private communication terminal?”

Her mouth went dry. “Master, I-I was just cleaning the comm room—”

“Don’t lie to me.” His fist slammed the desk. “The logs show someone accessed restricted files.”

“The screen lit up when I was dusting.” Mila kept her eyes on the plush carpet. “I must have brushed against something. I didn’t mean—”

“You expect me to believe that?”

Cold sweat trickled down Mila’s back. The guards’ grip tightened on her arms.

“I would never dare to—” Her voice cracked. “Please, master. I’m just a helpless

slave.”

Kurg’s chair creaked as he leaned forward. “A helpless slave who’s suddenly very interested in my private affairs.”

“No, master.” The words tumbled out. “I only clean where I’m told. I don’t know anything about—”

“Enough.”

Mila’s heart hammered so hard she feared it would burst. One wrong word and Priscilla would pay the price. The thought of her sister gave her strength to keep her voice steady.

“I swear on my life, master. It was an accident.”

Kurg studied her, his yellow eyes narrowed. The silence stretched until Mila’s legs trembled from the effort of standing still.

“Teach her a lesson.” Kurg’s words suddenly pierced through the silence.

The first blow caught Mila in the stomach. Air rushed from her lungs as she doubled over. The second strike snapped her head back, copper flooding her mouth.

“What did you see in those files?”

“Nothing.” Blood dripped down her chin. “I swear—”

A boot connected with her ribs. Pain exploded through her chest as she crumpled to the floor. The plush carpet did nothing to cushion her fall.

“Still playing stupid?” Kurg’s voice floated above her. “Hit her again.”

Knuckles crashed into her jaw. Stars burst behind her eyes. The evidence chip pressed against her hip, a reminder of why she had to endure this.

“Master, please.” Each word sent daggers through her ribs. “It was just an accident.”

“Wrong answer.”

More blows rained down. Her world narrowed to pain and the taste of blood. Priscilla’s face flashed through her mind. She had to protect her sister, had to keep quiet.

“You’ll regret the day you were born, slave.” Kurg’s boots appeared in her blurred vision. “Take her away.”

Rough hands seized her arms again. Her feet dragged across marble floors and then concrete. Cool night air hit her face as they emerged outside.

Metal scraped against metal. They tossed her into what felt like a cargo hold. Her shoulder slammed into something hard. The doors clanged shut, plunging her into darkness.

The engine rumbled to life. Every bump sent fresh waves of agony through her battered body. She tried to track their direction, but pain made it impossible to focus.

Priscilla would be waiting in the kitchen, wondering where she was. The thought hurt worse than any blow.

The vehicle lurched to a stop, and footsteps approached the back doors.

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Brivul

The night shift dragged on at the clinic. Brivul coiled his tail beneath him, his scales scraping against the polished floor as he adjusted his position. The scent of antiseptic filled his nostrils, but underneath it lingered something sweeter—a phantom trace of jasmine and vanilla on his skin from the market.

“Sir?” One of the clinic workers approached. “Everything all right?”

“Fine.” His jaw clenched. The memory of her green eyes flickered through his mind, the way they’d sparked with defiance when that vendor tried to cheat her.

The worker scurried away. Brivul rolled his shoulders, trying to shake off the tension that had built since their encounter.

“You’re being ridiculous,” he muttered to himself. “One conversation doesn’t make her your mate.”

But his primal instincts suggested otherwise. The brush of her fingers against his at the market had sent electricity through his entire body.

Yet she was a slave. His mate was a slave, and he had no way to find her.

He pushed away from the wall. The corridor stretched empty before him as he began his rounds. Each slither brought fresh torment—imagining her smile, the way her black hair had fallen across her face, how she’d lifted her chin when speaking to him. No meek slave, that one. A fighter.

His tail lashed in frustration. Even if he did find her, what then? He couldn't claim her while she belonged to another.

A flash of movement caught Brivul's eye. Through the clinic's windows, a convoy of sleek black vehicles pulled up, their engines purring like predatory beasts. His scales bristled at the sight of the Jorvlen kingpin's crest emblazoned on their sides.

"Here comes trouble." Brivul's tail coiled tighter beneath him as he watched guards pour out of the vehicles.

The clinic's glass doors slid open with a hiss. The kingpin strutted in, his bulk taking up most of the doorway. Gold chains draped his neck, clinking with each step.

"Kingpin Kurg." The receptionist's voice wavered. "We weren't expecting—"

"A man of my status doesn't need appointments," Kurg snarled. "I've brought fresh merchandise for your facility."

Brivul's claws dug into his palms. The word "merchandise" made his stomach turn. Through the windows, he spotted guards yanking women from the cargo holds like cattle.

"Of course, sir. How many surrogates this time?"

"Seven." Kurg's lips curved into an oily smile. "All prime breeding stock."

Blood roared in Brivul's ears. His warrior instincts urged him to intervene, to tear the smug look off Kurg's face. But the vow of noninterference burned in his mind like a brand.

"Just sign here." The receptionist pushed forward a datapad.

Kurg's jeweled fingers tapped the screen. "Have them processed quickly. My clients are eager."

Brivul forced his breathing to steady as he watched the exchange between the receptionist and Kurg.

"Security." Kurg's eyes suddenly landed on Brivul. "Ensure my property is handled with care."

Brivul stepped closer to Kurg, towering over the kingpin. "That's not my job."

"Everything in this clinic is your job," Kurg hissed. "Or should I speak with your superiors about your attitude?"

The former general in Brivul wanted to show this pompous slimeball what real attitude looked like. Instead, he gave a curt nod and eased aside.

The line of women shuffled through the doors with their heads bowed. Then Brivul's heart stopped. That familiar scent of jasmine and vanilla cut through the antiseptic air.

Finally, he spotted her. Her black hair hung loose, partially obscuring her face. But those fierce green eyes, now rimmed with purple bruises, were unmistakable. His claws extended involuntarily.

"Move faster." Kurg's hand shot out, catching Mila across the face.

Red filled Brivul's vision. His tail whipped forward, inserting itself between Kurg and Mila before another blow could land.

"These women are meant to carry children," Brivul said, his voice steady despite his

rage. “Damage them, and your investment becomes worthless.”

Mila’s head lifted slightly. Blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. Fresh rage surged through Brivul as he cataloged her injuries—fingerprint bruises on her throat, welts visible beneath her torn sleeve.

“The security guard has opinions now?” Kurg’s laugh echoed off the clinic walls. “Perhaps you’d like to purchase her services yourself?”

Brivul’s scales bristled on his arms, every protective instinct screaming to snatch her away immediately. The mating bond thrummed between them, demanding action.

“I simply ensure the clinic’s interests.” He kept his voice steady despite the fury coursing through his veins.

Mila’s eyes met his for a fraction of a second. Recognition flickered there, along with something else. Hope? Fear? He couldn’t tell through the haze of his own rage.

Kurg’s laughter grew louder. Then his lips curled into a sneer. “Maybe I won’t rent this one out after all. Trash is where disobedient slaves belong.”

His fist connected with Mila’s jaw. The crack echoed through the clinic’s sterile halls as blood sprayed across the white tiles.

Brivul’s claws dug even deeper into his palms. The scent of her blood filled his nostrils, stoking the inferno building in him.

Another blow landed. Mila’s head snapped back, but she didn’t cry out. Her eyes flickered with defiance even as tears streaked down her bruised cheeks.

“Nothing to say?” Kurg grabbed her throat. “No more clever words?”

Blood dripped from Mila's split lip now. Her gaze found Brivul's, holding steady despite the pain. The mating bond pulsed between them, each beat of her heart echoing in his chest.

Kurg's rings left fresh cuts across her face. "Worthless human filth."

The beast inside Brivul roared. His scales rippled with barely contained rage as Mila stumbled backward. The vow of noninterference warred with every instinct demanding he tear Kurg limb from limb.

"Look at her trying to stay strong." Kurg's boot caught Mila's ribs. "Proud little thing. Aren't you?"

A whimper escaped Mila's lips as she curled in on herself. The sound sent shockwaves through Brivul's body. His vision flared bright red, his scales bristling as his tail coiled tighter.

"Should have learned your place." Another kick. Another muffled cry of pain.

Brivul's fangs extended fully. The general in him calculated exactly how many seconds it would take to end Kurg's miserable existence. The mate in him demanded blood.

Something inside Brivul snapped. The sound of Mila's cries shattered the last threads of his control. His tail whipped forward, catching Kurg across the chest and sending him flying into the clinic's wall.

"Touch her again and die." The words emerged as a guttural snarl.

Guards rushed forward. Brivul's warrior instincts took over. His tail swept two off their feet while his fist connected with a third's jaw. Bones crunched. The guard

dropped.

“Kill him!” Kurg bellowed from the floor.

Brivul moved like liquid death, each strike precise and lethal. His claws raked across throats. His tail crushed windpipes. The scent of blood filled the air as bodies hit the floor.

A blade flashed. Brivul caught the wielder’s wrist, snapped it, and used the guard’s own knife to end him. More guards poured through the doors.

“Mine.” The word rumbled from deep in his chest as he scooped Mila into his arms. Her slight weight felt right against his scales, even as she trembled.

Glass shattered as Brivul crashed through the clinic’s window. His tail propelled them forward, carrying them into the neon-lit streets of Jorvla’s night. Shouts and footsteps echoed behind them.

“After them!” Kurg’s voice carried over the chaos.

Brivul wove through the crowded streets, his powerful tail launching them over vendor carts and through narrow alleys. Plasma bolts sizzled past his head. One scorched his scales, but he barely felt it. His entire world had narrowed to the precious bundle in his arms.

The sound of pursuing boots grew closer. Brivul ducked into a side street, his heart pounding. Mila’s breath came in short gasps against his chest. The bruises on her face made his blood boil anew.

“Hold tight.” He clutched her closer as he scaled the wall of a nearby building, claws finding purchase in the rough stone.

More shots rang out. Brivul's tail lashed, knocking a shooter off balance as they reached the rooftop. He sprinted across it, leaping the small gap to the next building. The city spread out before them, a maze of shadows and artificial light.

The guards' shouts grew fainter, but Brivul didn't slow. He couldn't. Not while his mate's blood still stained his scales. Not while Kurg still breathed.

The mating bond thrummed stronger with each passing second. Every protective instinct roared at him to get her somewhere safe, to heal her, to kill anyone who dared harm her again.

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Brivul

Brivul's tail propelled them down the side of the building, each movement calculated to avoid jostling Mila's injuries. Her shallow breaths against his chest drove spikes of rage through his heart. The mating bond pulsed with her pain.

Neon signs cast purple and red shadows across the grimy streets. The stench of rotting food and unwashed bodies assaulted his nostrils as he wove through the market district's back alleys.

"Stay with me." His voice rumbled deep in his chest as Mila's head lolled against his shoulder.

A group of drunken Jorvlen stumbled into their path.

"Watch where you're—"

Brivul's snarl cut through their complaints. The scales on his arms bristled as he drew himself up to full height, his tail coiling protectively around Mila. The group scattered.

Blood dripped from Mila's split lip onto his scales. Each crimson drop fueled the murderous rage burning in him. He'd tear Kurg apart for this. Later. First, she needed safety.

The crowds thinned as he entered the industrial sector. Steam hissed from rusted pipes overhead. The acrid smell of chemicals burned his throat. His warrior instincts

mapped escape routes as he moved, noting which shadows could provide cover.

Footsteps echoed behind them. Brivul's muscles tensed. A patrol of Kurg's guards rounded the corner ahead, plasma rifles raised.

"There!"

Brivul spun into a side alley, shielding Mila with his body as shots sizzled past. His tail swept a stack of crates into the guards' path. Their curses faded as he sprinted deeper into the maze of warehouses.

Mila whimpered softly, her fingers weakly gripping his shirt. The sound tore at something primal inside him. His mate was hurting. She needed protection. Everything else—his vow, his duty, his past failures—meant nothing compared to that truth.

"I've got you." He pressed his lips to her temple, tasting blood and tears. "No one will touch you again."

Brivul finally found refuge in the shadows of an abandoned warehouse, its towering walls of corroded metal a fortress against the chaos of the chase. He eased Mila onto a crate once inside, her body a fragile thing in the darkness. The scent of her blood, metallic and warm, mingled with the dampness of the building. Her eyes found his as he tended to her wounds with the same focus he once applied to battlefield triage.

"You've only made things worse for me," she finally murmured, her voice strained with pain yet laced with a fierce resolve that tugged at his core. "Kurg will make an example of me."

He tore a piece of fabric from his own garment, the ripping sound echoing through the empty warehouse. "I will keep you safe," he said, his words a solemn vow. "No

matter the cost.”

She winced as he dabbed at the cut on her lip, her breath hitching ever so slightly. “Do you remember me?” he asked, his voice but a whisper.

Her gaze softened, a flicker of recognition igniting in her green eyes. “Yes, I remember you,” she admitted softly.

His attraction to her, already potent, intensified. Each touch, each careful examination of her wounds, stoked the fire within him. Her skin, pale and smooth, was a canvas of pain and beauty, a testament to her endurance.

“Good,” he said. His hands, once instruments of war, now gentle as they moved over her.

Brivul’s fingers, deft despite their size, traced the line of Mila’s jaw, his touch as light as a feather. The pad of his thumb gently wiped away the blood from her chin. The heat of her skin seared into his own, the mating bond between them pulsing with an intensity that threatened to consume him.

He was a fugitive now, an outcast by his own choice. The realization settled over him like the darkness of the abandoned warehouse, heavy and unyielding. He had broken his vow of noninterference for her. Yet as he gazed into her eyes, he found no regret within him, only a fierce determination to keep her safe.

“I am bound by no vow stronger than the one I make to you now,” Brivul declared, his voice a deep resonance that seemed to vibrate through the very air around them.

Mila’s eyes widened and then softened into something tender, something that mirrored the raw need coursing through Brivul’s veins. “You hardly know me,” she whispered, a note of wonder in her voice.

“I know enough,” he said, his tone leaving no room for argument. “You’re in my care now, and I will move the stars themselves to ensure your safety.”

The words hung between them. He was no longer the general who had led countless soldiers into battle nor the security guard who had watched the world pass him by. He was a protector, a guardian, bound by a force far greater than any oath of noninterference.

As he continued to care for her wounds, the warmth of her body beckoned to him, a siren’s call that ignited a flame deep within his core. His senses were awash with her scent, a heady mix of sweat and the sweet undertones of her natural perfume. It was intoxicating, a reminder of the primal connection that bound them.

His gaze dropped to her lips, full and inviting despite the injuries that marred them. The urge to claim her, to brand her as his own, was almost overwhelming. But he would not rush her, not when she had been through so much. She deserved tenderness and patience. She deserved the world.

At that moment, nestled in the protective embrace of the abandoned warehouse, Brivul knew his life had irrevocably changed. He had found his purpose, his reason for being. And he would do whatever it took to ensure that Mila was safe.

Mila’s green eyes, clear and determined despite the bruises, soon locked on to his. “Do you have a plan?” she suddenly asked, her voice a mixture of desperation and resolve.

Brivul’s hand stilled on the makeshift bandage, his mind racing. He had been a general, a master of strategy and tactics, but now, his only plan was to protect her. “My plan is to keep you safe,” he said, his voice rumbling with the weight of his commitment.

Her lips, swollen and cracked, parted in a soft sigh. “That’s not a plan, Brivul. Kurg has eyes and ears everywhere. We need to disappear for a while.”

Brivul hesitated for a moment and then nodded, recognizing the truth in her words. “You’re right,” he admitted. “We’ll need to move carefully, blend into the shadows of this city.”

Her eyes lit up, a spark of hope in their depths. “The underworld of Jorvla is vast and treacherous, but I’ve come to know it well,” she said, her voice gaining strength. “If we can find allies there, we might stand a chance.”

Brivul’s mind was already sifting through potential contacts, old war buddies who had fallen from grace and slipped into the criminal world. “We’ll need to be cautious. Trust doesn’t come easily in the underworld.”

Mila nodded, her fingers gently squeezing his arm. “I trust you, Brivul. You’ve already risked everything for me.”

Her trust was a precious gift, one he intended to honor. “I will navigate the labyrinth of the underworld with you, Mila. We will find our way.”

They fell into a tense silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Brivul’s gaze swept over the desolate surroundings, the echoing whispers of the forgotten warehouse pressing in on them. He felt the pulse of the city, a monster lurking in the darkness, waiting to devour them. But he would not let it claim his mate.

“We should move soon,” Mila said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Kurg’s men won’t give up easily.”

Brivul straightened to his full height, the coil of his tail steadying him against the cold concrete. “I’ll scout ahead, make sure the path is clear,” he said, his warrior instincts

surging to the forefront.

Mila's eyes held a gratitude that warmed him, a silent acknowledgment of the role he had chosen for himself—her protector, her shield against the darkness.

“Wait here,” he instructed. He moved to the entrance of the warehouse, peering into the shadow-drenched alleyways. The night was alive with danger, but he would face it head-on for her.

Brivul felt the weight of his decision settle upon his shoulders. He had abandoned his post, broken his vow, all for the woman who had ignited a fire within him. That fire would light their way through the darkness, a beacon of hope in a world that seemed determined to extinguish it.

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Mila

Mila's heart thrummed in her chest. She sat huddled in the shadows of the abandoned warehouse, the cold of the concrete seeping through her thin dress and chilling her to the bone. Her eyes darted to the entrance every time the wind whistled through the broken windows, half-expecting Kurg's guards to materialize from the darkness.

The warehouse was filled with rusted machinery and splintered crates, a relic of Jorvla's thriving past, now a hollow shell. This place of hiding provided a temporary refuge from the dangers that lurked beyond its walls. Mila wrapped her arms around herself, trying to contain the shiver that ran down her spine. The pain from her wounds served as a constant reminder of Kurg's fury that had been unleashed upon her for daring to dream of freedom.

Yet here she was, free, thanks to the Niri who had charged into her life like a warrior from the old tales. Brivul. The name rolled around in her mind, as foreign and thrilling as the concept of freedom itself. She had seen the protective fire in his violet eyes, felt the commanding strength in his voice as he stood up to Kurg. His strength promised safety.

But at what cost? Her sister, Priscilla, was still trapped within the confines of Kurg's stronghold. The thought of her sister's delicate face contorting in fear, the sound of her name being called out in the dead of night, was a blade twisting in Mila's heart. She had sworn to protect Priscilla, to keep her from harm's way. Now she was miles away, and the weight of her absence was a heavy one.

Mila's mind raced with the events that had led her here. The encounter with Brivul at

the market, his unexpected chivalry, and the spark of connection that had ignited between them—it all seemed like a strange twist of fate. Of all the places he could have worked, why the surrogacy clinic? Had destiny entwined their paths not once but twice?

She let out a long, slow breath, trying to calm the storm of thoughts and emotions that raged within her. The silence of the warehouse was broken only by the distant hum of Jorvla's nightlife.

The sound of someone approaching pulled Mila from her thoughts. She tensed, ready to bolt at the first sign of danger. But then she saw him—the blue scales of Brivul glinting in the faint light that filtered through the grime-covered windows. His towering form was a reassuring presence, and the worry lines that creased his brow eased slightly as his eyes met hers.

“It's clear,” Brivul said, his voice a low rumble that resonated deep within her. “For now.”

Mila let out a sigh of relief, her shoulders sagging as the tension melted away.

Mila and Brivul soon slipped out of the abandoned warehouse and set out for the train that would take them to the district where the underworld was.

“We should take the maintenance tunnels,” Mila whispered, her ribs protesting as she crouched behind a stack of empty crates. “Fewer guards down there.”

“The tunnels are a death trap. One way in, one way out.” Brivul peered around the corner of the warehouse. “The rooftops give us more escape routes.”

“And make us visible to every guard tower in the district.”

Brivul's jaw clenched. The scar there caught the dim light from the street lamps. Mila pressed her palm against her side, willing the throbbing to subside. Her dress stuck to her skin where Kurg had drawn blood.

"The market district has plenty of cover," Brivul said. "If we time it right—"

"The market's crawling with Kurg's informants." Mila knew every face that reported back to her former master. "But there's a service entrance to the tunnels two blocks from here. The lock's broken."

His tail coiled tight. "How do you know that?"

"I make deliveries there. Made." The word tasted strange on her tongue. Freedom was still too new, too fragile to feel real.

His eyes softened. "The tunnels it is then. But we do this my way. I take points. You stay close."

"I know these streets better than you do."

"And I know combat tactics that'll keep us both alive."

The distant whine of a patrol speeder cut through the night. Mila's heart jumped to her throat. She pressed herself against the wall, counting her breaths until the sound faded.

"Fine." She nodded toward a gap between buildings. "That alley connects to the maintenance district. We'll have to time it between patrols."

Brivul touched her shoulder, his skin cool against hers. "Ready?"

There was no going back now. “Ready.”

Mila crept through the narrow alley, keeping to the shadows cast by the towering buildings. Brivul’s massive form blocked what little starlight filtered down between the structures. His tail made soft slithering sounds against the dusty ground as they moved.

A question nagged at Mila with each step. Why had he really helped her? No one on Jorvla did anything without expecting something in return. The kindness in the marketplace could have been genuine, but throwing away his position at the clinic? Breaking laws to save a slave? It made no sense.

Her wounds throbbed as they navigated the alleyways. The pain kept her alert, watching not just for patrols, but for any sign Brivul might turn on her. She had no weapons, no friends, nowhere to run.

“Wait.” Brivul held up his hand.

Mila pressed herself against the grimy wall, barely daring to breathe. Heavy footsteps echoed from the cross-street ahead. Guard patrol.

His body curled protectively around her, his scales gleaming in the dim light. The gesture seemed instinctive rather than calculated. Still, she couldn’t afford to trust it completely.

“Why are you really helping me?”

His violet eyes fixed on her face. “Because it’s right.”

“Nothing’s that simple on Jorvla.”

“I’m not from Jorvla.”

The patrol passed. Mila’s heart still raced, but not just from fear of discovery. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

“You want to know what I want from you?” His jaw tightened. “Nothing. I saw someone in trouble, and I acted. That’s all.”

The sincerity in his voice made her want to believe him. But a lifetime of slavery had taught her better. Everyone wanted something.

“The entrance is just ahead.” She gestured to a rusted maintenance door half-hidden behind stacked shipping crates. “If you’re planning to turn me in, now’s your chance.”

“I’m not going to hurt you, Mila.”

The way he said her name sent an unexpected shiver through her. But she couldn’t let her guard down.

Suddenly, a shout pierced the night. “There! By the maintenance door!”

Mila froze. Three of Kurg’s guards emerged from the shadows, their weapons glinting under the street lamps.

“Run!” Brivul grabbed her arm.

Pain shot through her ribs as they sprinted down the street. The thunder of boots behind them echoed off the metal walls. Her lungs burned with each breath, her wounds screaming in protest. But the alternative was worse.

“Left!” She tugged Brivul toward a narrow passage between buildings.

Plasma bolts sizzled past them, leaving scorch marks on the walls. The acrid smell of burnt metal filled her nostrils. Her legs trembled with exhaustion, but terror drove her forward.

“Stop or we’ll shoot to kill!”

“They’re bluffing.” Mila’s voice came out ragged. “Kurg wants me alive.”

Brivul’s tail whipped out, knocking over a stack of crates behind them. The crash and cursing told her it had bought them precious seconds.

“The market’s ahead.” She pointed to where neon signs cast multicolored shadows.

“We can lose them in the crowd.”

“Too many civilians.”

“Better than getting caught in these alleys.”

More shots flew past. One grazed Mila’s arm, sending sharp pain through her shoulder. She stumbled, but Brivul caught her before she fell.

“Keep moving.” His voice was steady despite their pace. “I won’t let them take you back.”

The sincerity in his words struck deeper than her wounds. Why did he care so much? She pushed the thought aside—survival first, questions later.

They emerged onto a wider street. The night market sprawled before them, a maze of stalls and bodies. Perfect for hiding, if they could reach it. But her strength was

fading fast, each step harder than the last.

The guards were gaining ground. Mila heard their heavy breathing, the click of weapons being reloaded. Her heart pounded so hard, she thought it might burst.

“Almost there.” Brivul squeezed her hand. “Just a little further.”

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Brivul

Plasma fire sizzled past Brivul's head as he pulled Mila behind a row of market stalls. The acrid smell of burnt synthetics filled the air.

"This way." He led her through a narrow gap between vendor carts.

"They're gaining on us." Mila stumbled, clutching her wounded arm. Blood seeped between her fingers.

Brivul's jaw clenched at the sight. He scanned the bustling marketplace, mapping escape routes in his mind. A fruit cart provided temporary cover as more plasma bolts scorched the air.

"Under here." He lifted the edge of a heavy canvas awning.

Mila ducked beneath without hesitation. The tight space smelled of spices and dried herbs. Brivul's bulk barely fit as he crouched beside her.

"Let me see that arm."

"It's fine—"

"It's not fine." He gently but firmly took her arm, examining the plasma burn. The wound wasn't deep, but it needed treatment. He ripped a strip from his shirt.

"You're destroying your clothes."

“They’re not that important.” He wrapped the makeshift bandage around her biceps with practiced efficiency. “Too tight?”

“No.” Her voice wavered slightly. “Thank you.”

Heavy boots thundered past their hiding spot. Brivul tensed, ready to fight if needed. His body curved protectively around Mila’s smaller frame.

“You’re good at this,” she whispered.

Their eyes met in the dim light. The fierce determination in her gaze stirred something within him. His mate was a fighter.

“We need to move soon.” He finished securing the bandage. “Can you run?”

“Yes.”

The guards’ footsteps faded. Brivul peered out from their hiding spot, his battle-trained senses alert to any threat. The market bustled with its usual activity, no sign of Kurg’s men.

“Now.” He gripped Mila’s hand and pulled her through the crowd. She ran behind him to keep up with his speed.

The press of bodies provided cover as they darted between stalls. Sweet-scented smoke from food vendors masked their scent. His muscles coiled tightly, ready to fight at the slightest provocation.

“Left.” Mila tugged his arm toward a narrow alley. “The transport station’s this way.”

Smart woman. He followed her lead through the maze of back streets. Rust-stained

walls towered above them, blocking out most of the artificial light. The stench of decay and refuse filled his nostrils.

“Down.” He pushed her behind a dumpster as voices echoed ahead.

Two station guards passed. Brivul’s hand stayed firm on Mila’s shoulder until the sound faded.

The transport station loomed ahead, its gleaming facade a stark contrast to the grimy surroundings. Security cameras swept the main entrance in regular patterns.

“Service entrance.” Mila nodded to a small door half-hidden behind cargo containers. “Less security.”

They slipped inside. The service corridor hummed with machinery. Brivul guided them through the maintenance tunnels, avoiding the passenger terminals entirely.

“Here.” He pulled her into a maintenance closet as footsteps approached.

The tiny space pressed them close. Mila’s breath tickled his chest and sent heat radiating through him.

“The cargo hold’s our best bet.” Mila’s whisper broke through his thoughts. “They load the trains at night.”

“Agreed. We’ll need to time it right.”

“A schedule’s posted near the loading dock.”

His lips curved. “You’ve thought this through.”

“Had to. Been planning an escape for years.”

The fierce pride in her voice made his chest tighten. His mate was not just beautiful but clever—a dangerous combination.

Brivul pressed against the cold metal wall, scanning for threats as they exited the maintenance closet. The corridor stretched ahead, harsh fluorescent lights casting strange shadows. His warrior instincts screamed at how exposed they were.

“Clear.” He guided Mila forward.

They rounded the corner. His breath caught. Their faces stared back from every display screen—his stern expression, Mila’s defiant gaze. The bounty numbers scrolled beneath.

“That’s... a lot of credits.” Mila’s voice wavered.

From former general to wanted criminal, he thought. The irony twisted his mouth into a bitter smile. One choice had erased decades of service.

He’d do it again.

“Loading dock schedule’s there.” Mila pointed to a terminal.

The schedule glowed on the screen. Next cargo load—midnight. One hour.

A door slammed nearby. Brivul yanked Mila behind a storage container as heavy boots marched past.

“Kurg’s men.” Her whisper brushed his scales.

Two guards stopped at the wanted poster screens. Their weapons gleamed under the harsh lights. After a few moments, the guards moved on. Brivul's muscles unclenched slightly.

"Midnight," Brivul said in a low voice. "We need somewhere to lay low until then."

"Service shaft access is through there." Mila gestured to a narrow door. "Nobody checks them."

His mate's quick thinking sparked pride in him. She'd survived this long through wit and will. Now she had his strength to protect her, too.

They slipped through the door into darkness. The shaft's metal walls pressed close, barely wide enough for his shoulders. Perfect defensive position.

Midnight brought the deep thrum of the cargo train's engines. Brivul guided Mila through the shadows between towering cargo containers, his body coiled with tension at every sound.

"Quick." He lifted her into a narrow gap between crates.

The metal walls pressed cold against his scales as he wedged himself in beside her. Her warmth radiated through his chest, her scent filling his lungs with each breath—jasmine, vanilla, and something uniquely her.

"Security sweep." Heavy boots clicked against the cargo hold floor.

Brivul pulled Mila closer, shielding her with his bulk. Her small form molded perfectly against him. His mate. The thought burned through him.

"Check behind those containers."

Light swept across their hiding spot. Brivul pressed them deeper into the shadows, his arm tightening around Mila's waist. Her breath hitched. The scent of her fear mixed with something else—attraction? His blood heated at the possibility.

“Nothing here.” The guard's voice echoed. “Moving to sector four.”

The footsteps faded. Mila's fingers unclenched from his shirt, but she didn't pull away. The press of her body against his sent fire racing through his veins. He wanted to taste her, mark her, claim what was his.

No. Not yet. Not while danger still stalked them.

“You okay?” His whisper brushed her ear.

“Yes.” Her voice trembled slightly. “Though I might have permanent bruises from your muscles.”

The teasing note in her voice filled him with awe. His mate was strong enough to joke even while running for her life.

“I'll make it up to you when we're safe.”

The words slipped out before he could stop them. Too much, too soon. But Mila just huffed a quiet laugh.

“Promises, promises.”

The train lurched into motion. Brivul steadied Mila as the cargo hold swayed. Soon they'd be far from Kurg's reach. Then he could tell her everything—about mates and about the bond already forming between them.

The rhythmic sway of the train settled into a steady pattern. Brivul scanned the shadows between the cargo containers, his warrior instincts still on high alert.

“You need rest.” His voice rumbled low in his chest. “The exhaustion’s clear on your face.”

“I’m fine.”

“Lean against me. I’ll keep watch.”

Mila hesitated, her green eyes searching his face. The bruises on her skin made his blood boil with renewed anger.

“You can’t stay awake forever.”

She shifted and then carefully settled her weight against his chest. The sweet jasmine scent of her hair filled his lungs with each breath.

“Sleep. You’re safe with me.”

Her muscles slowly relaxed as exhaustion won out. Her small frame soon nestled closer to him as her breathing deepened and evened out. The complete trust she showed by falling asleep against him stirred something primal in his core.

The weight of her head on his chest sent waves of possessiveness through him. His mate, allowing him to protect her. His arms tightened instinctively around her smaller form.

A lock of dark hair fell across her face. Without thinking, he brushed it back, his fingers lingering on the soft skin of her cheek. The contact sent electricity jolting through his veins.

She murmured something in her sleep and pressed closer. Her hand curled into the fabric of his shirt. The innocent gesture nearly undid him. Every protective instinct in his body screamed to never let her go.

The train's vibrations rumbled through the metal floor. Brivul adjusted his position to better shield her from the cold walls of their hiding spot. She fit so perfectly against him, as if she'd been made to rest in his arms.

His military training kept his senses sharp, monitoring their surroundings even as his thoughts centered on the sleeping woman in his arms. No one would harm her again. He'd kill anyone who tried.

Mila

Mila's eyes fluttered open, the gloom of the cargo hold pressing against her senses. The train's rhythmic clatter had lulled her into an uneasy sleep, but a harsh jolt now woke her with a start. Her body, still nestled against the firm warmth of Brivul, tensed instinctively. She felt the steady thrum of his heartbeat against her ear, a reminder of the sanctuary she had found in his arms—a sanctuary she could scarcely afford to acknowledge right now.

She pulled away from him gently, feeling the cool air rush in to fill the space where their bodies had been entwined. The scent of him—a heady mix of leather and something uniquely him—lingered, making her strangely aware of her own heart's erratic pace. Flustered, she pushed the thoughts aside. Now was not the time for such distractions.

The cargo hold, dimly lit by the occasional flicker of a faulty light, was a labyrinth of crates and shadows. Mila's gaze darted around, assessing their surroundings. The train's constant sway hinted that they were still en route.

Brivul stirred beside her, his violet eyes gleaming in the darkness as he pushed himself up straighter. "We're not there yet," he murmured, his voice a soothing balm in the uncertain quiet.

Mila nodded, her voice just above a whisper. "I know. Just a bad dream, I guess." It was a lie, but one she hoped would suffice.

He regarded her for a moment, as if weighing her words against the worry etched in

the lines of her face. “You’re safe with me, Mila,” he said, his tone resolute.

She offered him a small, grateful smile, though safety was a commodity she had yet to fully trust.

They fell into a companionable silence as Mila’s mind raced with the enormity of their situation. She was a runaway slave, on the run with a security guard who had thrown away his life for her sake.

The train shuddered again, a metallic groan echoing through the hold. Brivul’s hand found hers in the dark, a silent reassurance. “We’ll make it to the underworld,” he said, as if reading her thoughts.

Mila’s breath caught in her throat. Priscilla. The thought of her sister, still trapped under Kurg’s thumb, was a constant ache in her heart. “And what then?” she asked, her voice tinged with a mix of hope and apprehension.

Brivul hesitated. “We’ll figure it out together,” he said finally, the determination in his voice a steadying force.

Together. The concept was so foreign to Mila, yet at that moment, it was a lifeline she clung to with desperate hope.

The train lurched to a halt with a screech of metal on metal. Mila’s heart hammered against her ribs as she crept behind Brivul through the shadows of the cargo hold. The acrid stench of fuel and decay wafted through the air. This was definitely the underworld district.

“Stay close to me,” Brivul whispered, his tail sliding silently across the grimy floor.

Mila followed him down a rusty ladder into a maze of narrow alleys. Neon signs cast

sickly purple and red glows across the crumbling walls. The few people they passed kept their heads down, their faces hidden beneath hoods and masks. Her skin crawled at the thought of what kind of desperate souls ended up here.

“We need somewhere to hide out,” she murmured, scanning the decrepit buildings. “But I don’t trust any of these places.”

“Agreed. Keep moving.”

They ducked into a wider street lined with vendors hawking questionable wares. The press of bodies made Mila’s chest tighten. Any one of these people could recognize them and report them to Kurg for credits. She instinctively touched the data chip hidden in her pocket—the evidence that had started this whole mess.

A group of drunk Jorvlen stumbled past, forcing Mila to press against a grimy wall. The rough stone scraped her already bruised back, making her bite back a hiss of pain.

“You okay?” Brivul asked, his violet eyes concerned.

“Fine. Just...” She swallowed hard. “What if we can’t find anywhere safe here?”

“We will.” His confidence should have been reassuring. Instead, it made her wonder what he wasn’t telling her.

They turned down another alley, this one eerily quiet compared to the main street. Pools of stagnant water reflected the dim lights above. Mila wrinkled her nose at the musty smell of mold and rot.

“I used to dream about escaping one day,” she whispered. “But not like this. Not running blindly into...” She gestured at their bleak surroundings.

“Sometimes the only way forward is through the dark,” Brivul said, his tone resolute.

Mila wished she could share his certainty. But with every shadow that moved, every echoing footstep behind them, her nerves frayed further. They needed a real plan, and soon. Before Kurg’s men caught up with them. Before her sister paid the price for her escape.

Suddenly, movement flickered at the edge of Mila’s vision. Three figures emerged from the shadows, their boots scraping against broken pavement. The tallest one, a scarred human with yellow teeth, leered at her.

“Well, what do we have here? A pretty little thing like you shouldn’t be wandering these parts alone.”

“She’s not alone.” Brivul’s tail coiled protectively around her feet.

The second man spat on the ground. “A Niri? Didn’t know they let your kind slither down here.”

“Come on, sweetheart.” The third man stepped closer. “Ditch the snake. We’ll show you a better time.”

Mila’s stomach churned. The way they looked at her—like she was meat—reminded her too much of Kurg’s parties. But before she could respond, Brivul rose to his full height, his massive form blocking her from view.

“Back off.” His voice carried the edge of command that spoke of authority.

The men hesitated, clearly reassessing their odds against an angry Niri. After a tense moment, they melted back into the shadows with muttered curses.

Mila released a shaky breath. “Thank you.”

Brivul turned to her, concern etched in his features. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, but her mind raced. Why was he protecting her really? The thought of Niri reproduction issues crossed her mind. She’d heard whispers among Kurg’s associates about how desperate some Niri were for human surrogates. Was that what Brivul wanted from her?

But no, he could have simply bought her contract at the clinic. Instead, he’d thrown away his position, broken laws, and was now hiding in this cesspit with her. His actions spoke of something deeper than mere biological necessity.

His eyes met hers, filled with genuine worry. “We should keep moving.”

As they turned down another street, a flickering sign marked “Trade Goods” caught Mila’s attention. Through the grimy window, she spotted racks of worn clothing. Perfect for blending in.

“We need to change,” she whispered to Brivul. “These clothes scream ‘fugitive.’”

The shop’s bell chimed as they entered. Musty fabric and stale incense assaulted her nose. An elderly Jorvlen woman barely glanced up from her datapad.

“Just browsing,” Brivul said, his tail sweeping aside a fallen hanger.

Mila peered through the racks, selecting a threadbare gray tunic and loose pants. The fabric felt rough against her fingers, but it would help her fade into the shadows.

“This should work.” She held up a hooded cloak large enough for Brivul’s broad shoulders.

His eyes crinkled. “Planning to make me look mysterious?”

“Better than looking like a security guard.”

The shop owner rang up their purchases without comment. As they stepped back into the dim alley, Mila caught herself studying Brivul’s profile.

“So, what made you choose security work?” The question slipped out.

“Needed a change.” He adjusted his new cloak. “What about you? Before...”

“Before being a slave?” The words tasted bitter. “I was born to it.”

Silence stretched between them as they walked. Their footsteps echoed off the crumbling walls of the buildings surrounding them.

“I’m sorry,” he said finally. “That’s not right.”

“Life rarely is,” she said softly. “But sometimes it surprises you. Like random acts of kindness from strangers.”

A laugh rumbled from deep in his chest. “I’m hardly a stranger now.”

“No,” Mila agreed, warmth blooming in her chest despite her attempts to stay detached. “I suppose you’re not.”

They wandered deeper into the maze of alleys, but the tension had eased. Their conversation drifted to lighter topics like favorite foods and the worst weather they’d experienced. His dry humor drew genuine smiles from her, something she hadn’t expected.

Maybe, just maybe, she could trust him after all.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Brivul

The neon sign of the Desert Rose Inn flickered against the perpetual twilight of the underworld. Brivul's tail muscles ached from slithering through the maze of streets, but he kept his posture rigid as he approached the front desk. The clerk's eyes widened at his impressive height.

"Two beds." Brivul dropped a stack of credits on the counter. "Ground floor."

"Of course, sir." The clerk's hands trembled as he processed the payment.

Brivul's protective instincts flared as he guided Mila down the dim hallway. Her slight limp hadn't escaped his notice.

"You should rest." He unlocked their room, scanning for threats before letting her enter.

"I'm fine." Mila's chin lifted in that defiant way that made his chest tighten.

The room smelled of synthetic cleaner and old carpet. Two narrow beds rested against the wall, separated by a scratched nightstand. Not ideal but better than the streets.

"Take whichever bed you want." Brivul positioned himself by the window, watching the shadows in the alley.

Mila perched on the edge of her chosen bed, her fingers twisting in the thin blanket.

“I have a friend who runs a hotel in the lower district.”

Brivul’s scales rippled with interest. “How far?”

“A day’s walk. Maybe less.” She glanced at the door for the tenth time in as many minutes. “They’ll help us. Give us shelter while we figure things out.”

The mattress creaked as Brivul settled his weight on it, positioning himself between Mila and the door. Her constant vigilance, the way she flinched at every footstep in the hallway, made his protective instincts surge.

“No one’s getting through that door.” His tail coiled closer to her bed.

Her voice dropped to barely a whisper. “This place... these kinds of hotels...”

“Look at me.” He waited until those green eyes met his. “Anyone who tries to harm you will have to get through seven feet of angry Niri first.”

She soon curled up under the blanket, but her muscles remained tense. Brivul kept his position, his violet eyes fixed on the door, every sense attuned to potential threats.

Mila’s quiet sobs soon pierced the darkness. Brivul’s tail twitched, every protective instinct demanding he comfort his mate.

“I left her there.” Mila’s voice cracked. “My sister, Priscilla.”

Brivul’s eyes narrowed. A sister. The revelation explained the haunted look in Mila’s eyes since their escape.

“She’s still his slave. What if he hurts her because of what I did?”

“Kurg was going to kill you.” The memory of that bastard’s hands on Mila made Brivul’s muscles tense. “I saw it in his eyes.”

“But Priscilla—”

“Would want you alive.” His voice dropped lower, commanding. “You can’t help her if you’re dead.”

The mattress springs squeaked as Mila sat up. Even in the dim light, Brivul caught the determined set of her jaw.

“We have to go back for her.”

“Not yet.” The warrior in him assessed their situation with brutal clarity. “We’re being hunted. No resources. No allies. Walking back into Kurg’s stronghold now would be suicide.”

“So, I just abandon her?”

“No.” Brivul’s tail swept across the floor in agitation. “We get safe. Get stronger. Then we strike back—smart.”

Mila’s fingers clutched the thin blanket. “What if it’s too late by then?”

“Kurg’s too smart to harm her.” The words tasted bitter, but Brivul forced them out. “She’s valuable property to him. He’ll keep her safe to maintain control over you.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I know how men like him think.” Brivul shifted closer. “Trust me. We’ll free her, but we do it right.”

The silence stretched between them, heavy with unspoken fears. Mila nodded, though her shoulders remained tense.

Her voice cut through the tension, soft but clear. “I had it all planned out, you know. Every detail.”

Brivul’s scales rippled with interest as he watched her silhouette in the dim light.

“A freight ship makes supply runs to the outer colonies. The security’s minimal.” Her fingers traced patterns on the thin blanket. “I memorized their schedule, their routes.”

“Smart.” His tail shifted closer to her bed, his protective instincts urging him to guard her as she revealed her vulnerabilities.

“I wanted to study xenobiology. Learn about different species and their cultures.” A wistful note entered her voice. “One university on Nirum accepts refugee students.”

The thought of his mate achieving her dreams made his chest swell with pride. Her intelligence and determination only confirmed what his instincts already knew. She was perfect for him.

“But every time I got close...” Her voice cracked. “Kurg would parade Priscilla in front of me. Remind me what he could do to her.”

Brivul’s jaw clenched, rage burning through his veins at Kurg’s manipulation. “He won’t control you anymore.”

“I used to hide books under my mattress. Technical manuals, star charts.” She let out a bitter laugh. “Stupid, really. As if reading about freedom would somehow make it real.”

“Not stupid,” Brivul said in a low voice. “You were preparing. Building strength here.” He tapped his temple.

The mattress creaked as she shifted. In the dim light, he caught the shine of unshed tears in her eyes. His protective instincts roared to life, demanding he eliminate every threat to her happiness.

“I just wanted...” She swallowed hard. “I wanted to be more than someone’s property.”

“You are.” The words came out as a growl.

Mila’s jaw suddenly cracked with a wide yawn, her eyelids drooping despite her obvious attempts to stay alert.

“Sleep. I’ll keep watch.” Brivul’s tail shifted closer, creating a protective barrier between her and the door.

“But—”

“That wasn’t a suggestion.” His voice carried the same commanding tone he’d used with his soldiers, though gentler.

She settled back against the thin pillow, her breathing gradually evening out. Brivul studied her face in the dim light filtering through the grimy window. Even bruised, she radiated a quiet strength that called to something primal within him.

The way she’d planned her potential escape showed remarkable intelligence—memorizing schedules, mapping routes, studying technical manuals. Yet she’d stayed, enduring slavery to protect her sister. That level of loyalty and sacrifice struck a chord deep in his warrior’s heart.

His mind drifted to his own soldiers: Cantos, Lors, Nia, Kev, Fikleio. They'd trusted him with their lives, followed his commands without question—the bond between warriors who'd faced death together. Mila possessed that same fierce devotion, that willingness to sacrifice everything for those she protected.

She mumbled something in her sleep, her face pinching with worry, even in rest. His tail twitched with the urge to comfort her, to wrap around her protectively until those lines of stress smoothed away.

Most slaves would have seized freedom the moment it appeared, yet here she was, already planning how to save her sister. The tactical part of his mind admired her strategic thinking while his protective instincts surged at her vulnerability.

With each passing hour as he watched her sleep, the primal bond between them grew stronger. Her courage, her loyalty, her fierce intelligence—everything about her called to his very essence.

Exhaustion finally won out as Brivul's eyelids grew heavy. His tail remained coiled protectively around Mila's bed even as sleep claimed him.

In his dreams, sunlight streamed through tall windows in his home on Nirum. The sweet scent of morning blooms drifted in on the breeze. Mila stood at the window, her black hair loose and flowing, unmarred by bruises or fear. She turned to him with a radiant smile that made his chest ache.

The scene shifted to them walking through Nirum's famous crystal markets, her hand tucked safely in his. No one dared look at her with anything but respect. Here, she was his equal, his cherished mate. Her eyes sparkled as she examined the intricate craftsmanship of the stalls.

"This would look lovely in the study," she mused, holding up a delicate crystalline

sculpture.

“Then it’s yours.” In his dreams, he could give her everything she deserved.

The dream dissolved into domestic bliss—quiet evenings spent reading together, her laughter echoing through their home, the simple joy of watching her pursue her passions without fear.

A loud thump from the hallway jolted Brivul awake. His muscles tensed as reality crashed back. They weren’t on Nirum. They were still fugitives in a seedy hotel, and Mila still bore the marks of her captivity.

His eyes found her sleeping form, peaceful despite their circumstances. The dream’s warmth lingered in him. Someday, he vowed silently, he would make that dream real. She would know freedom, safety, and the respect she deserved.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Mila

The rusty bell above the shop door chimed as Mila stepped inside. Brivul ducked his massive frame through the doorway behind her. The early morning sun filtered in through the windows. Stale air and musty shelves filled her nostrils. The suspicious glare of the shopkeeper followed them as they headed toward the back of the shop.

“Water first.” Mila grabbed a few bottles from a dusty shelf. Her muscles ached from yesterday’s beating, but she refused to show weakness. “And protein bars.”

Her fingers brushed against a small medkit, and she added it to their pile. The bruises on her ribs screamed at the movement.

The shopkeeper’s tongue flicked out, tasting the air. Mila kept her head down, but her skin crawled. One word to Kurg’s people and they’d be done for.

“That’ll be fifty credits.” The shopkeeper’s voice rasped.

Brivul placed the credits on the counter. His massive form blocked most of Mila’s view, but she caught the shopkeeper’s eyes lingering on her.

“Let’s go.” She tugged at Brivul’s arm, eager to leave the shop’s oppressive atmosphere.

Outside, the air tasted of metal and decay. “This way.” She led them down a narrow alley where pipes leaked steam from overhead vents. “I know of a maintenance tunnel entrance two blocks down.”

Mila's boots splashed through shallow puddles as they made their way through the dimly lit maintenance tunnels. The occasional flicker of ancient light panels cast dancing shadows on the curved metal walls.

"My mother used to sing to me and Priscilla," Mila blurted out. Strange how comfortable she felt sharing with him now.

"What kind of songs?"

"Old Earth lullabies. She learned them from her mother." The damp air carried the scent of rust and mildew. "What about your family?"

"Just me and my father. My father trained soldiers."

"Is that why you became a security guard?"

He paused. "Something like that."

Their footsteps echoed off the walls in a rhythmic pattern that reminded her of her mother's songs. The ache in her chest had nothing to do with her bruises.

"What's your favorite food?" Brivul's question pulled her from darker thoughts.

"Fresh fruit. Real fruit, not the synthetic stuff Kurg fed us." She stepped over a broken pipe. "I had a real apple once. A trader snuck it to me."

"Just wait until you try Niri oranges."

The way he said it, like her freedom was certain, made her heart skip. "You have oranges on Nirum?"

“Whole orchards. The trees reach higher than this tunnel.”

A rat scurried across their path, but Mila barely flinched. She’d seen worse in Kurg’s kitchens.

“What about you? Favorite food?”

“My mother’s spice bread.” His voice softened. “She passed when I was young, but I still remember the smell.”

The conversation flowed easier now, filling the oppressive tunnel with something warmer than shadows. Strange how she’d known him barely two days, yet talking with him felt as natural as breathing.

“Look.” She pointed ahead where the tunnel split into three paths. “We take the right fork here. My friend’s place is about six hours ahead.”

“Tell me about this friend?”

“Her name’s Ellri. She escaped Kurg years ago.” Mila touched the wall for balance as they turned the corner. “She owns a hotel now. Helps others like me when she can.”

The maintenance tunnel’s dim lighting cast long shadows across Brivul’s scales as he walked beside her. Mila caught herself studying the way they shifted, gleaming even in this murky light.

“Your sister—what’s she like?”

The question caught her off guard. Most people didn’t care enough to ask. “Priscilla’s gentle. Too gentle for a place like this. She cries when the kitchen rats get caught in traps.”

“We’ll get her out.”

The certainty in his voice made her chest tight. Hope was dangerous. She’d learned that lesson young. Yet something in the way he said it made her want to believe.

“What will you do?” His voice echoed softly. “Once your sister’s safe?”

“I’ve never let myself think that far ahead.” The admission tasted bitter. “Dreams are dangerous things to have when you’re property.”

“You’re not property anymore.”

Her heart stuttered at the fierce protectiveness in his tone. She snuck another glance at him, wondering how someone so powerful could be so gentle. The scar on his jaw caught the light, a reminder that he too had fought his own battles.

“Three more hours.” She pointed ahead where the tunnel curved. “There’s a rest stop with clean water soon.”

His tail brushed against her as they walked, and she didn’t pull away. For the first time in her life, she felt safe walking beside someone stronger than her. The feeling terrified her almost as much as it thrilled her.

The rest stop emerged from the gloom—a small alcove carved into the tunnel wall. Clean water trickled from a filtered pipe into a shallow basin. Mila’s parched throat ached at the sight.

“We should rest here.” She slid down against the cool metal wall, her bruises protesting the movement.

Brivul settled beside her, his tail curling protectively around their supplies. The

protein bars crinkled as he passed one to her.

“The seal’s intact.” He’d checked the wrapper carefully.

The processed food tasted like cardboard, but Mila’s empty stomach didn’t care. She watched Brivul take measured bites of his own bar, his movements precise and controlled.

The data chip pressed against her thigh through her pocket. Its weight seemed to grow heavier with each passing moment. Here was someone who could actually help her expose Kurg’s corruption, someone with connections to legitimate authorities.

“Something on your mind?”

Mila startled at his question. “Just thinking about Priscilla.”

The lie tasted bitter, but trust was a luxury she couldn’t afford yet, no matter how safe she felt in his presence. One wrong move and everything would collapse.

“Here.” He offered her the water bottle. Their fingers brushed as she took it.

The filtered water tasted sweeter than anything Kurg had ever provided. Mila closed her eyes, savoring each sip. When she opened them again, she caught Brivul watching her with an unreadable expression.

Her hand drifted to her pocket again. The evidence could free them all—or doom them if handled wrong. Not yet, she decided. She needed to be sure. Needed to know his true motivations for helping her.

“We should get moving.” She pushed herself up, ignoring the protest of her muscles.

“Ellri’s place isn’t far now.”

Stale air gave way to the smell of rain as Mila and Brivul emerged from the maintenance tunnels. The neon signs of the lower district painted blue and yellow streaks across puddles dotting the cracked pavement.

“Ellri’s is just around that corner.” Mila pointed to a street lined with defunct shops.

A flash of movement caught her eye. Three of Kurg’s guards stood at the intersection, scanning the area.

“Back.” Mila pressed against the wall, her heart hammering.

Brivul moved beside her, his bulk shielding her from view. “How many alternate routes?”

“Two, but they’ll be watching those, too.” Mila’s mind raced through possibilities. Her gaze landed on a pile of discarded crates. “The delivery entrance. If we time it right...”

“Lead the way.”

They crept between shadows, Mila’s steps silent from years of practice. Brivul matched her movements perfectly somehow.

A guard’s head turned their direction. Mila froze. Brivul’s tail curled protectively around her waist, steadying her as they pressed into an alcove.

“Now.” Mila darted forward when the guard looked away, Brivul right behind her.

They reached the crates. Mila’s bruised ribs protested as she squeezed through a narrow gap. The guards’ voices carried on the damp air.

“Delivery’s late again.”

“Check the back entrance.”

Brivul touched her shoulder, pointing to a stack of empty bottles. Mila nodded, understanding his plan. He knocked them over with his tail, the crash echoing through the alley.

The guards rushed toward the noise while Mila and Brivul slipped behind them, their footsteps masked by the commotion. Her pulse raced at their coordinated movements, the way they anticipated each other’s actions without words.

They reached Ellri’s back door just as shouts erupted behind them. Mila punched in the code with trembling fingers, impressed by how Brivul positioned himself to block any line of sight to her.

The door clicked open. They ducked inside as heavy footsteps approached, the guards rushing past their hiding spot.

“That was...” Mila caught her breath, studying Brivul’s face in the dim light. His eyes held a fierce pride that made her chest tight.

“Impressive.” He finished her thought. “The way you moved through those shadows.”

Heat crept up her neck at his praise. She’d never had anyone look at her with such open admiration before.

Mila

The scent of spiced tea and warm bread wafted through the dimly lit service corridor of Ellri's hotel. Mila's steps echoed against worn floorboards as she led Brivul toward the front desk, her heart still racing from their narrow escape.

"Ellri?" Her voice cracked.

A stooped figure emerged from behind stacks of paper ledgers. Ellri's weathered face broke into a broad smile, her silver hair catching the light of old-fashioned oil lamps.

"Mila, dear!" Ellri's eyes widened at Mila's bruised face. "What happened to you?"

"Kurg." The name tasted like poison on her tongue. "He found out I—" She glanced at Brivul, swallowing the truth about the data chip. "He tried to kill me. Brivul saved my life."

Ellri's gaze shifted to Brivul, measuring him with shrewd calculation. "A Niri protector. Interesting."

"We need somewhere to hide." Mila touched the worn desk, her fingers tracing the wood. How many times had she dreamed of reaching this sanctuary? "Just for a little while."

"Of course you'll stay." Ellri reached across the desk, her papery hands clasping Mila's. "That monster won't find you here."

Relief flooded through Mila's chest. She'd gambled everything on Ellri's loyalty, on years of shared secrets and small kindnesses.

"Thank you." The words felt inadequate.

"Don't thank me yet." Ellri pulled out a thick registry book. "Kurg's people have been sniffing around these parts. We'll need to be careful about where we put you."

Mila's stomach clenched. She hadn't considered that Kurg's influence might reach even here. A warm pressure against her back made her start. Brivul moved closer, his presence oddly reassuring.

"We can handle careful." His deep voice resonated through her bones.

Ellri's knowing smile made Mila's cheeks heat. "I'm sure you can. Now, let me think where to place you two..."

Ellri led them up creaking stairs to a hidden corner of the hotel. The room she unlocked took Mila's breath away. Rich tapestries adorned the walls, and a massive four-poster bed dominated the space. One bed. Heat crept up her neck.

"The shower's through there." Ellri pointed to an ornate door. "No one will find you here."

Once Ellri left the room, Mila headed through the ornate door to freshen up. Soon, the hot water of the shower washed away days of grime and fear from Mila's skin. Steam curled around her as she stepped out, wrapping herself in the softest towel she'd ever touched. Her muscles finally relaxed, though her bruises still ached.

"Your turn." She emerged fully dressed from the bathroom to find Brivul waiting.

Mila busied herself combing out her wet hair, trying not to think about sharing that single bed. The bathroom door clicked open.

Her comb clattered to the floor.

Brivul remained coiled in the doorway, water droplets trailing down his bare chest. The towel rode low on his hips, showing off carved muscle that rippled with each movement. The blue scales on his arms caught the lamplight, gleaming like precious metal. A drop of water traced down his abdomen, drawing her gaze lower...

“Sorry.” His deep voice snapped her back to reality. “I forgot my clothes.”

Mila spun around, her face burning. “It’s fine.” Her voice came out higher than intended.

The rustle of fabric behind her sent shivers through her. She shouldn’t have reacted this way. She barely knew him.

“You can turn around now.”

She did, relieved and oddly disappointed to find him fully dressed. The memory of those water droplets on his skin lingered, making her pulse race. What was wrong with her? They were running for their lives, and here she was acting like some lovesick fool.

A knock at the door made Mila jump.

“Who’s there?” Brivul asked through the door.

“It’s me,” Ellri said softly through the other side of the door.

Brivul slowly opened the door. Ellri bustled in with a tray laden with steaming dishes that made Mila's mouth water. The rich aroma of roasted meat and fresh bread filled the room.

"Eat up, dears. You both look famished."

The door clicked shut behind Ellri, leaving them alone with enough food for four people. Mila's stomach growled at the sight of glazed vegetables and some kind of cream sauce she'd only seen served to Kurg's special guests.

"I think she's trying to fatten us up." Brivul settled his long form beside the small table.

"You could use it. All muscle can't be healthy." The words slipped out before she could stop them. Heat crept up her cheeks.

His violet eyes sparkled. "Been noticing my muscles, have you?"

"Hard not to when you parade around half-naked." She stabbed a piece of meat with more force than necessary.

"I didn't hear any complaints." His expression held no malice, just warmth and something that made her pulse quicken.

"The food's getting cold," she muttered, focusing on her plate.

"It's delicious." He took a bite of bread. "Almost as sweet as your blushing."

"I don't blush." But her cheeks burned hotter.

"No? Must be the lighting then."

Their eyes met across the table. His lips curved into a smile that did dangerous things to her insides. She should look away. But his gaze held her captive.

“You have sauce on your chin.” His voice dropped lower.

“Where?” Her hand flew up.

“Other side.” He leaned forward, reaching across the table. His thumb brushed the corner of her mouth, lingering a moment too long. “Got it.”

The simple touch sent electricity through her veins. She grabbed her cup, needing something to do with her hands. The spiced tea scalded her tongue, but she welcomed the distraction.

This was madness. He’d saved her life, yes, but that didn’t mean she should trust him with her heart. Even if his smile made her forget how to breathe.

Mila set down her empty cup, savoring the last hints of the rich meal. Her muscles ached less now, wrapped in the comfort of good food and relative safety.

“We should get some rest.” Brivul gathered their plates. “I’ll take the floor.”

“The floor?” The massive bed could easily fit three people. “That’s ridiculous.”

“I insist.” He pulled extra blankets from the wardrobe. “I’ve slept in worse places during my time as a general.”

The casual mention caught her attention. “General?”

His shoulders tensed as he arranged the blankets. “Yes, on Nirum.”

“Did something happen?”

“A civilian transport. Pirates.” Pain etched across his features. “We thought we had them cornered. My team was exceptional. We forced the pirates to land.”

The blankets forgotten, he stared into the distance. “The fight moved to the ground. We were winning. Then...” His fists clenched. “One of their ships launched a missile. Hit the civilian transport. All those people...”

Mila’s chest tightened at the raw anguish in his voice. This explained so much—his protective instincts, his willingness to help her.

“You couldn’t have known.”

“I was their general. Their safety was my responsibility.” He shook his head. “I resigned the next day. Couldn’t bear to wear the uniform anymore.”

“Is that why you came to Jorvla and took a job at the clinic?”

“Seemed fitting. A failed protector guarding a shady clinic.” His bitter laugh held no humor. “At least until I met you.”

Heat bloomed in her cheeks. She watched him settle onto his makeshift bed, struck by how much trust he’d just shown her. Maybe she wasn’t the only one learning to open up.

The dim lamplight cast shadows across his face. Her heart ached at his self-loathing. This warrior who’d risked everything to save her saw himself as a failure?

“You’re wrong, you know.” Her voice came out softer than intended. “About being a failed protector.”

His eyes met hers, questioning.

“Look what you did for me.” The words tumbled out, fueled by the need to chase that darkness from his expression. “That’s not failure. That’s exactly what a true warrior would do.”

“Mila—”

“No, listen. You might not wear a general’s uniform anymore, but that nobility, that need to protect—it’s still there. I see it every time you look at me.”

Heat rushed to her cheeks at that admission, but she pressed on. “You’re still every bit the warrior you were before. Maybe even more so because now you’re fighting for what you believe in, not just following orders.”

The change in his expression stole her breath. His features softened, replaced by something warmer, more vulnerable. He sat up straighter, some of that military bearing returning to his posture.

“Thank you.” His deep voice wrapped around her like a caress. “I needed to hear that.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Brivul

Brivul lifted another massive crate of supplies. The musty scent of the hotel's storage room tickled his nose. His muscles flexed, blue scales shining in the dim light as he arranged the boxes with military precision.

"You'll strain something showing off like that," Mila called from the doorway.

The sound of her voice sent a pleasant shiver through him. "A few boxes won't break me."

"Right. Because you're so tough." She stepped into the room, her green eyes dancing with amusement.

The sight of her made his chest tighten. Three weeks of close quarters with Mila had only intensified his mate-bond response. Every smile, every casual touch, set his blood on fire.

"Someone has to do the heavy lifting around here."

"And you volunteered out of the goodness of your heart?"

"Exactly." He shifted another crate, deliberately flexing. The way her gaze lingered on his arms sent satisfaction coursing through him.

Mila rolled her eyes, but her lips curved upward. "Ellri needs help in the kitchen. Think you can tear yourself away from reorganizing the entire storage room?"

“For you? Always,” Brivul replied.

A blush colored her cheeks as she turned away.

He followed her through the narrow hallway, ducking his head under the low ceiling. The hotel’s worn carpets and peeling wallpaper weren’t much, but they’d become home. Here, hidden in plain sight among the outcasts and drifters, he felt more himself than he had in years.

Strange how being a fugitive could feel so right. But then, everything felt right with Mila nearby. Even simple tasks like inventory and maintenance gave him purpose—protecting her, providing for her, watching her grow stronger each day as the fear in her eyes slowly faded.

Later that afternoon, the market buzzed with activity, a kaleidoscope of colors and scents that assaulted Brivul’s senses. He kept close to Mila, his tail creating a protective half-circle around her as they navigated the crowded stalls.

“What’s next on Ellri’s list?” His violet eyes scanned the crowd for threats.

“Spices.” Mila waved the list. “Though I’m not sure why we need so many. The food’s already good.”

A vendor called out prices for fresh produce. Brivul steered Mila away from his overpriced goods toward a better stall he’d spotted earlier.

“This way. Better quality, lower prices.”

“Look who’s becoming an expert shopper.” Her eyes sparkled with amusement.

“I have many hidden talents.”

“Oh, really?” She raised an eyebrow. “Like what?”

The teasing lilt in her voice made his blood heat. “I could show you sometime.”

A blush crept across her cheeks. She turned to examine some dried herbs, but not before he caught her smile.

The spice merchant’s stall filled the air with exotic aromas. Brivul watched as Mila haggled skillfully, her chin lifted in that defiant way he loved.

“Your mate drives a hard bargain,” the merchant said in Niri.

Before Brivul could correct him, Mila had already secured their purchase at half the asking price. He couldn’t help but admire how she’d transformed from the frightened slave he’d first met into this fierce, capable woman.

“What did he say to you?” Mila asked as they moved away from the stall.

“Nothing important.” He shifted the bags to one arm, using his tail to clear a path through the crowd.

Movement flickered in Brivul’s peripheral vision as they turned down the narrow alley that led back to Ellri’s. Five figures detached from the shadows, blocking their path. His battle instincts surged.

“Well, what do we have here?” A scarred Niri slithered forward.

Brivul shifted the bags to one arm and angled his body between Mila and the thugs. His tail coiled tightly, ready to strike. “Back off.”

“Or what, pretty boy?” The leader’s forked tongue flicked out. “Hand over the girl

and your credits.”

The old familiar battle-calm settled over Brivul. These weren't trained soldiers. Their stances were sloppy, weapons held wrong.

“Last warning.”

A knife glinted as one of the thugs lunged. Brivul's tail whipped out and caught the attacker's wrist with a satisfying crack. The knife clattered to the ground.

“Behind you!” Mila's warning gave him time to dodge as another thug swung a metal pipe.

Brivul spun, using his momentum to slam his elbow into the pipe-wielder's throat. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Mila grab one of their shopping bags and swing it like a flail, catching a third attacker in the face. Pride surged through him. His mate was no helpless damsel.

The leader charged. Brivul caught his wrist, twisted, and used the thug's momentum to throw him into his remaining companion. They crashed into a stack of crates with a satisfying crunch.

“You're going to regret this,” the leader snarled, struggling to his feet.

Brivul bared his fangs in a predatory grin. “I already don't.”

Two more figures appeared at the alley's entrance, fresh muscle joining the fight. The leader's confidence returned as his reinforcements approached.

“Still feeling brave?”

Brivul's blood sang with battle-joy. He might not be a general anymore, but he was still a warrior. And now he had something worth fighting for.

"Stay close," he murmured to Mila.

"Not going anywhere." She pressed her back against his, her makeshift weapon ready.

The new arrivals drew closer, and Brivul tensed for the next round.

The two new thugs charged forward with raised weapons. Brivul's battle instincts took over as he tracked their movements. Sloppy form, untrained strikes—these were street fighters, not soldiers.

"Left!" Mila shouted.

Brivul's tail whipped out, catching the first attacker in the chest. The thug crashed into the alley wall with a satisfying crunch. Pride surged through him as Mila ducked under the second attacker's wild swing and drove her elbow into his gut.

The leader lunged at Brivul from behind. Something stung his side, but adrenaline pushed the sensation away. His focus stayed locked on Mila as she fought beside him.

"Getting tired yet?" The leader sneered.

"Just getting started." Brivul turned, seized the leader's arm, and twisted. The knife clattered to the ground.

Mila snatched up a fallen pipe and swung it into the back of the leader's knees. The thug collapsed with a howl of pain. Brivul delivered a final strike to the leader's head, sending him sprawling unconscious.

The remaining thugs backed away, their eyes wide with fear as they saw their leader's broken form.

"Anyone else?" Brivul bared his fangs.

They fled, dragging their wounded with them. The alley fell silent except for Brivul and Mila's heavy breathing.

The rush of battle soon faded, replaced by a sharp, burning pain in Brivul's side. His scales felt wet—too wet. The knife must have slipped between them. He pressed his hand against the wound, his fingers coming away crimson.

"Damn lucky shot." The edges of his vision wavered, the alley's shadows stretching longer than they should.

"Brivul?" Mila's voice sounded distant despite her standing right beside him.

His tail scraped against the ground as he tried to maintain his balance. No way in hell would he show weakness, not when Mila needed him strong. But his upper tail wouldn't cooperate.

"It's nothing." The words came out slurred. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth.

"You're hurt!" Mila's hands pressed against his side, her touch sending sparks through his nerve endings even amid the pain. "This is really bad!"

"Just need to catch my breath." He tried to straighten up, to show her he was still in control. His knees buckled.

Mila caught him before he could fall, her small frame somehow supporting his

massive weight. The scent of her—jasmine and determination—anchored him as the world spun.

“Stop being stubborn.” Her voice cracked with worry. “Let me help you.”

The former general in him wanted to refuse, to maintain the image of the invincible protector. But his mate’s concern penetrated even his thick skull.

“Maybe sitting would be good.” He slid down the wall, his tail curling protectively around them both, even as pain lanced through his side.

Blood seeped between his fingers despite the pressure he maintained on the wound. Not good. The knife must have gone deeper than he’d realized during the fight.

Brivul clenched his jaw against a groan. Even dying, he’d be damned if he showed that much weakness. But darkness crept at the edges of his vision, and keeping his head up became harder with each passing second.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Mila

Blood spread between Brivul's fingers where he clutched his side, staining his tunic dark. His massive form slumped against the alley wall, his violet eyes unfocused.

"No, no, no." Mila's heart hammered. She'd seen wounds like this before. Slaves who'd crossed Kurg rarely survived them. But Brivul couldn't die, not after everything he'd done for her. "Stay with me. We need to get back to Ellri's."

"Just... need a minute." His words slurred together.

"We don't have a minute." She ducked under his arm, bracing herself against his weight. Her muscles screamed in protest—even half-conscious, he was still mostly serpent and pure muscle. "Up. Now."

He rose slowly, his scales scraping against the wall. His tail dragged limply behind them as they stumbled forward.

"Almost there." The lie tasted bitter. The hotel was still three blocks away.

Blood dripped onto the pavement with each step. Mila's arms shook from supporting him. If they were spotted now...

"Should leave me." His head lolled against her shoulder.

"Shut up." She hitched him higher, ignoring the wet warmth seeping into her clothes.

"You didn't leave me with Kurg. I'm not leaving you."

The hotel's faded sign appeared ahead. Just a few more steps. Brivul's breathing grew more labored.

"Ellri!" Mila's voice cracked as they entered the hotel. "Help!"

Brivul went completely limp, his massive form pulling her down as his eyes rolled back. They crashed to the floor together in a tangle of limbs and scales.

"Someone help me!" The words tore from her throat. She pressed her hands against his wound, blood welling between her fingers. "Please don't die. Please."

For the first time since she'd known him, Brivul looked small. Vulnerable.

"I can't lose you." The whispered words surprised her. When did he become so important?

Ellri's footsteps thundered down the stairs. "What happened?"

"Street thugs." Mila's hands trembled against Brivul's wound. "Help me get him up. He's losing too much blood."

Together they lifted him with all their effort, his scales scraping across the floor. His massive tail dragged behind them as they half-carried, half-dragged him up the stairs. Mila's arms burned with the effort, but she refused to let go.

"Almost there." Ellri kicked open their room door.

They maneuvered him onto the bed. His blood soaked into the sheets, turning them crimson. Mila ripped open his shirt, exposing the wound. The gash ran deep along his side where scales met flesh.

“Get me hot water and clean cloths.” Mila pressed her hands against the wound. She’d treated countless injuries at Kurg’s—broken bones, knife wounds, whip marks—but nothing this severe.

Ellri rushed back with supplies. Mila cleaned around the wound, her movements precise despite her shaking hands. The blade had gone deep, too deep.

“I need a needle and thread.”

“Will that be enough?” Ellri’s voice quivered.

Mila wiped sweat from her brow, leaving a streak of blood across her forehead. “It has to be.”

Brivul’s chest rose and fell in shallow breaths. His usual blue scales had taken on a sickly pale hue. This proud warrior who’d risked everything for her now lay helpless.

“Stay with me.” She pressed a clean cloth against the wound. “You’re not allowed to die. You hear me? Not now.”

His only response was the raggedness of his breathing.

Hours blurred together as Mila worked tirelessly to save Brivul’s life. Her fingers cramped from holding needle and thread, stitching the wound closed with careful precision. The metallic scent of blood filled her nostrils as she cleaned and bandaged, checking his breathing, monitoring his pulse.

Ellri brought fresh water and bandages throughout the night. “You should rest.”

“I can’t.”

As dawn approached, Mila's bones ached from sitting in the same position for hours. She gripped Brivul's hand tightly, his scales cool against her palm. His chest rose and fell in steady rhythm now, no longer the shallow gasps from before.

The first rays of sunlight spilled through the window, casting golden light across his face. His fingers twitched in her grip. Mila's heart skipped as his eyes fluttered open, revealing familiar violet irises.

A weak smile curved his lips. "You look terrible."

Tears spilled down Mila's cheeks before she could stop them. She hadn't even realized she was crying until Brivul lifted his hand, brushing them away with gentle fingers.

"Don't move." Her voice cracked. "You'll tear your stitches."

"Worth it." His thumb traced her cheekbone. "You stayed."

"Of course I stayed." The words came out fiercer than intended. "Someone had to keep you alive."

His smile widened. "My warrior."

Heat bloomed in her chest at the possessive tone. She squeezed his hand, unable to form words around the lump in her throat. He was alive. That was all that mattered.

Mila dabbed the cool cloth across Brivul's scales, watching the rise and fall of his chest. Three days had passed since the attack, yet her hands still trembled each time she changed his bandages. The wound looked better, the angry red fading to pink around the careful stitches she'd placed.

“You don’t have to hover.” His eyes followed her movements. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Someone needs to make sure you don’t try getting up again.” She wrung out the cloth, focusing on the task rather than the way her pulse quickened when he looked at her.

“That was one time.”

“One time too many.”

His tail shifted on the mattress, scales gleaming in the afternoon light. “You need rest, too.”

“I’m fine.” The lie came easily, though the dark circles under her eyes told a different story. Sleep had become a luxury she couldn’t afford—not when every labored breath from him sent fear coursing through her veins.

“Stubborn woman.” His hand caught hers as she reached to adjust his bandage. The touch sent warmth spreading up her arm. “At least sit down.”

She perched on the edge of the bed, hyper-aware of his thumb tracing circles on her wrist. No one had ever touched her with such gentleness before. It stirred something deep in her chest, unfamiliar yet welcome.

“Tell me a story.” His voice was rough with fatigue. “Anything to pass the time.”

“I don’t know many stories.” But she found herself talking anyway, sharing memories of quiet moments with Priscilla. He listened intently.

The afternoon light faded to dusk as she talked. Mila’s throat grew hoarse, but she

couldn't bring herself to stop. Every smile, every quiet laugh from him eased the knot of worry in her chest. He had become her anchor in the storm. When had that happened?

His eyes drifted closed, breaths evening out into sleep. She should move, check his bandages again, but his hand still held hers. Just a few more minutes, she told herself. Just to make sure he was really okay.

Mila watched Brivul's chest rise and fall in steady rhythm, so different from the labored breathing of days past. His scales had regained their healthy sheen, no longer the sickly pallor that had terrified her.

The evidence against Kurg pressed against her hip where she'd sewn it into her pants pocket—her constant reminder of why they were here in the first place.

"I should've told you sooner," she whispered, knowing he couldn't hear her. "About everything. The real reason Kurg wanted me dead."

The late afternoon sun painted shadows across his sleeping form. Even in rest, his massive tail curled protectively around her where she sat on the bed's edge. She'd grown used to his presence, the way he made her feel safe without trying.

Her voice caught. "I've been keeping secrets."

A gentle breeze stirred the curtains, carrying the scent of rain. Perfect weather for confessions, she thought with a wry smile. Her hand found his, his warm scales beneath her fingers.

"When you wake up, I'll tell you everything." The promise felt right, settling something restless in her chest. "About the evidence, about Kurg's embezzlement. Maybe together we can figure out how to use it."

Thunder rumbled in the distance. Mila pulled the blanket higher over his chest, careful not to disturb his bandages. Trust was a foreign concept after years of slavery, yet somehow this warrior had earned hers completely.

“You’ll probably tell me I was foolish to steal the evidence.” She smoothed a wrinkle from the blanket. “But you’ll help anyway. Won’t you? Because that’s who you are.”

The thought warmed her. For the first time since finding the evidence, hope flickered in her chest. With Brivul at her side, maybe they could actually bring Kurg down. Maybe they could save Priscilla from him.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Brivul

Sunlight filtered through the thin curtains, casting warm patterns across the bed. Brivul shifted, testing his muscles. The wound in his side pulled, but the searing agony from days past had dulled to a manageable ache.

“Don’t you dare try to get up.” Mila’s scent reached him before he saw her—jasmine and determination.

“I’ve had worse.”

“Of course you have, mighty warrior.” She crossed the room with a fresh bandage in hand. “Now stay still.”

Her fingers brushed his scales as she checked his wound. His tail twitched at her touch, and he fought down the urge to wrap it around her waist and pull her closer.

“The bleeding’s stopped.”

“Then I can get up.”

“Not yet.” She pressed her palm against his chest, and heat bloomed beneath her touch. “Doctor’s orders.”

“Since when are you a doctor?”

“Since you decided to play hero with those thugs.”

Brivul caught her wrist as she withdrew. Her pulse jumped beneath his thumb. “I’d do it again.”

“I know you would.” She didn’t pull away. “That’s what worries me.”

The morning light caught her face, illuminating the determined set of her jaw along with the spark of intelligence in her eyes.

“You should rest more.” Her voice softened. “Build up your strength.”

“I’ve been resting for four days.”

“And you’ll rest more if I have to sit on you to keep you down.”

His scales rippled at the thought. “That’s not much of a threat.”

A blush crept across her cheeks, but she held his gaze for a moment. She then turned and left him to rest longer.

Later that afternoon, Mila returned with a steaming bowl that filled the room with hints of ginger and herbs. “Here. Ellri’s special recipe.”

Brivul propped himself up against the headboard, his muscles protesting. The spoon trembled in his grip.

“Let me.” Mila sat beside him, her hip brushing his scales. She took the spoon, and the simple act of her feeding him sparked something primal in him.

“I can feed myself.”

“And risk spilling this all over the clean sheets? Not happening.”

The warm broth slid down his throat. His tail curled with pleasure at the taste—or perhaps at her proximity. The scent of jasmine wrapped around him like a blanket.

Each time she leaned forward, her hair brushed his chest. His scales tingled at the contact. He'd faced down pirates and criminals without flinching, but this small human reduced him to a mess of sensations.

“Tea next.” She set down the empty bowl. “And don’t give me that look. You need fluids.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Her fingers grazed his as she passed him the cup. The warmth spread through him, and it wasn’t from the tea. How had he survived before her? Before her quiet strength and sharp wit?

“You’re staring.”

“Hard not to.”

Pink colored her cheeks again. “Drink your tea.”

His wound might still ache, but her presence soothed something deeper—a loneliness he hadn’t even recognized until she filled it.

Mila soon twisted her fingers together, a nervous gesture Brivul had come to recognize. The tea cooled in his hands as he watched her internal struggle play across her face.

“I need to tell you something.” Her voice dropped low. “About why Kurg really wanted me dead.”

His scales bristled at the mention of that name. “Tell me.”

“I found evidence. Kurg’s been embezzling from the Council of Seven.”

Brivul set his cup down with a sharp click. “You what?”

“I downloaded proof from his terminal. Communications, transfer records—everything.” She pulled a small data chip from her pocket. “That’s why he wanted to kill me. He suspected I knew something, but I never admitted it.”

Pride swelled in his chest. His clever, brave mate had outmaneuvered a kingpin. “You’ve been carrying this the whole time?”

“Are you angry I didn’t tell you sooner?”

“Angry? This is perfect. The council takes embezzlement seriously. With evidence like this, they’ll arrest him immediately.”

“And then we can get Priscilla out more easily.”

“Exactly.” His mind raced with possibilities. This changed everything. “No guards, no security. Just walk right in and take her.”

“You’re really not mad I kept this from you?”

He caught her chin between his fingers, tilting her face up. “You survived. You protected yourself and your sister. That’s what matters.”

The tension melted from her shoulders. “I wasn’t sure how to tell you. Trust isn’t... easy for me.”

“But you’re telling me now.”

Her eyes met his, determination replacing uncertainty. “Yes. I am.”

Silence settled over the room. Brivul watched Mila’s fingers trace patterns on the bedsheet. The data chip sat between them, a tiny thing to hold such power.

“Thank you.” Her voice came soft but steady. “For believing me. For helping me to take down Kurg.”

“He’ll pay for what he did to you.”

“But we need a solid plan first.” She pressed her palm against his bandaged wound. “And you need to heal.”

The warrior in him wanted to protest, to declare himself fit for battle. But the warmth of her touch grounded him, reminding him that rushing in half-healed would only put her at risk.

“A few more days of rest won’t change anything.”

“Exactly.” Her smile carried a hint of victory. “Kurg’s not going anywhere, and neither is Priscilla. We do this right, or we don’t do it at all.”

We. Such a simple word, yet it carried the weight of her trust, her faith in him. After a year of questioning his own judgment, this remarkable woman put her life—and her sister’s—in his hands.

“You’re right.” The admission came easier than he expected. “We plan first. Then we strike.”

Her shoulders relaxed, tension he hadn't noticed until it disappeared. "Good. Because I'm not letting you out of this bed until that wound closes properly."

"Is that a promise?"

Pink dusted her cheeks, but she didn't look away. "Don't push your luck."

Night crept across the room as Mila adjusted Brivul's pillows for the tenth time. Her scent wrapped around him and made his scales tingle.

"The pillows are fine."

"You keep shifting." She tucked the blanket around him. "Does it still hurt?"

His wound barely registered compared to the ache in his chest whenever she touched him. "I'm a warrior. Pain means nothing."

"Right. That's why you winced when I changed the bandage earlier."

"I did not wince."

"Of course not. Big strong Niri warriors never wince." Her fingers traced the edge of his bandage.

Heat rushed through him at her touch. How had this tiny human wormed her way past his defenses? He'd been lost, purposeless. Now everything made sense.

Brivul grabbed her hand. Her pulse raced under his fingers, matching his own thundering heart. Time seemed to stop as she met his gaze.

"Thank you." The words felt inadequate.

“For torturing you with pillow adjustments?”

“For giving me purpose again.”

Her cheeks reddened. “I didn’t—”

“You did.” He tugged her closer, his tail wrapping loosely around her waist. “I was just existing before. Going through the motions. Then you appeared in that market, arguing with a vendor twice your size.”

“He tried to cheat me.”

“You were magnificent.” And she had been—all fire and determination despite her lowered eyes and meek posture. “Still are.”

She ducked her head, but he caught the smile she tried to hide. His chest filled with warmth. His mate. His warrior queen disguised as a humble slave. Every protective instinct in him roared to keep her safe and close.

As the night wore on, the dark shadows under Mila’s eyes betrayed her exhaustion, though she tried to mask it with determination. Her movements had grown slower, less precise as she fussed with his bandages.

“Come here.” Brivul patted the space beside him on the bed. When she hesitated, he added, “You need rest, too.”

She bit her lip, considering. The sight made his skin tingle. Finally, she climbed onto the bed, careful of his injury. As she settled against his chest, his tail wrapped around her waist, anchoring her to him.

Her jasmine scent enveloped him, mixing with the herbal tang of healing salves. The

weight of her body against his felt right, natural, like she belonged there. His muscles relaxed, tension he hadn't realized he carried melting away.

"Is this okay?" Her voice came soft, uncertain.

"Perfect." He stroked her hair, marveling at its silken texture.

Her breathing gradually slowed, deepened. Each exhale ghosted across his scales, sending pleasant shivers through him. Nothing compared to the contentment of this moment.

"Sleep," he murmured.

She mumbled something unintelligible and nestled closer. His protective instincts purred with satisfaction. This was what he was meant for—not just fighting but protecting. Cherishing.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Mila

Hot water cascaded down Mila's back as steam swirled around her in the small shower stall. Her fingers traced the worn tiles, but her mind drifted to that night—to strong arms wrapped around her waist and the heat of his scales against her skin.

“This is ridiculous.” The words echoed off the shower walls.

But the memory persisted. The way Brivul had pulled her close, his chest rising and falling with each breath. The subtle scent of leather that clung to him.

She ducked her head under the spray, letting water run down her face. Five days. Five days since she'd woken up in his warm, comforting embrace.

“He's just protecting you,” she muttered, reaching for the soap. “Don't read more into it than that.”

But her traitorous mind replayed the gentle way his fingers had traced patterns on her arm, how his tail had curled protectively around her legs.

The soap slipped from her grasp, clattering against the floor. “Perfect. Just perfect.”

She bent to retrieve it, remembering how Brivul had looked at her that morning—his violet eyes soft with something more than mere duty. The way his voice had roughened when he'd whispered good morning.

A knock at the door startled her from her thoughts.

“Mila? You’ve been in there a while. Everything all right?”

Her heart skipped at the sound of his voice. “Fine! Just... washing my hair.”

“Breakfast is ready whenever you are.”

“Be right out.”

She pressed her forehead against the cool tile, trying to steady her racing pulse. This was dangerous—these feelings, these thoughts. She had to focus on rescuing Priscilla and exposing Kurg. Not on how perfectly she fit in Brivul’s arms or how his smile made her forget every horrible thing she’d endured.

But as she stepped out of the shower and wrapped herself in a towel, she couldn’t shake the warmth that bloomed in her at the thought of him waiting for her outside.

Mila picked at her breakfast, watching Brivul stretch his massive frame across the room. The scales on his bare chest caught the morning light streaming in from the window.

“See? Good as new.” He rose to his full height, his muscles rippling beneath his skin.

“Sit down before you tear your stitches.” Her cheeks flushed as he twisted, showing off the defined planes of his chest.

“The stitches are fine. Watch this.”

He dropped into a fighting stance, executing a series of precise movements that made her breath catch. His tail swept in an elegant arc, and she forced herself to look away.

“Impressive. Now eat your breakfast before it gets cold.”

“You don’t sound convinced.” He slithered closer, and her pulse quickened. “Need another demonstration?”

“What I need is for you to stop being ridiculous.” The words came out breathier than she intended.

Brivul leaned over her, reaching for the juice pitcher. His arm brushed her shoulder, sending electricity dancing across her skin. The spicy-sweet scent of him filled her lungs.

“Your face is red.” His voice dropped low, teasing. “Worried about me?”

“I just don’t want to have to drag your body back to bed again.”

The moment the words left her mouth, she realized how they sounded. Brivul’s eyes darkened, and her stomach did a slow flip.

“Back to bed, hmm? ”

She shoved her chair back, needing space between them before she did something stupid like trace the scar on his jaw with her fingers. Suddenly, the data chip felt heavy in her pocket, a constant reminder of everything at stake.

“Now that you’re healed, we need to figure out what to do next,” Mila blurted out.

Brivul settled into a more comfortable position. “Well, the evidence you have on the data chip could bring Kurg down permanently.”

“If we can get it to the right people.” She traced the rim of her cup with her finger. “The council would never grant us an audience. Not with both our faces plastered across every security terminal in the city.”

“What about Kurg’s enemies?” Brivul’s eyes gleamed. “Someone who’d love to see him fall?”

The name hit her like a bolt of lightning. “Talis.”

“Another kingpin?”

“Yes, a rival. She and Kurg have been at each other’s throats for years.” Memories of heated arguments and thinly veiled threats flooded back. “He always said she was trying to steal his territory.”

“Would she help us, though?”

“Maybe. We’d still need to sneak into her estate, but...” Mila’s mind raced with possibilities. Breaking into Talis’s compound would be dangerous but not nearly as impossible as reaching the council. “It could work.”

“Tell me about her compound.”

“I’ve only seen it from the outside. High walls, armed guards.” She closed her eyes, picturing the sprawling estate. “But nothing like the council’s security.”

“And you’re sure she’d want to take Kurg down?”

“The last time they met, she promised to destroy everything he held dear.” A bitter smile tugged at her lips. “She just needs the right ammunition.”

The data chip seemed to burn through her pocket now. Evidence that could change everything—or get them both killed.

Mila spread the worn transit map that Ellri gave her across the table. Her fingers

traced the faded lines that wound through Jorvla's districts. The evening sun cast long shadows through the hotel window, painting stripes across the weathered paper.

"The cargo train leaves at dawn." She tapped a station marked in faded red. "It runs straight through to the outer districts where Talis's estate sits."

"Same trick as before?" Brivul leaned close, his scales shining in the dying light.

The warmth radiating from his body made it hard to focus on the map. "Similar. But security will be tighter this time. The outer districts are..."

"More dangerous?"

"More exclusive," she replied. "Rich people don't like uninvited guests."

His tail shifted, brushing against her leg. "Good thing we're not planning to stay long."

The contact sent sparks dancing across her skin. She stepped away, pretending to study another section of the map. "We should pack light. Just essentials."

"Already sorted." He gestured to two small bags in the corner. "Ellri helped me gather supplies while you were checking the train schedules."

The thoughtfulness of the gesture made her chest tight. When was the last time anyone had thought ahead for her?

"Thank you," she managed.

Mila rolled the map carefully, her fingers smoothing the worn edges. The paper crackled beneath her touch as she secured it with a piece of twine.

“Mila.” Brivul’s voice carried a weight that made her pause. “You know Talis might not see you differently than Kurg does.”

“You mean she’ll see me as just another slave.”

“She could sell you. Or worse, send you back to Kurg.”

Metal clinked against metal as Mila tucked the map into one of their bags. “I know that.”

“And you’re still willing to take that risk?”

She turned to face him, lifting her chin. The evening light caught his violet eyes, making them glow with concern. “For Priscilla? For a chance at real freedom? Yes.”

His tail shifted restlessly against the floorboards. “There might be safer ways—”

“There aren’t.” She touched the pocket where the data chip rested. “And even if there were, we don’t have any more time. Every day we wait is another day Kurg could grow impatient and hurt my sister.”

Brivul’s massive frame seemed to deflate slightly. “I just don’t want to see you back in chains.”

The genuine worry in his voice made her heart ache. She stepped closer, close enough to catch that familiar scent that clung to him. “Thank you. For everything you’ve done. For caring about what happens to me.”

“I have no regrets.” His hand reached out, but then he hesitated and dropped it back to his side. “I’d do it all again.”

Mila's heart thundered against her ribs. The certainty in Brivul's voice and the unwavering devotion in those violet eyes cracked something deep inside her. A lifetime of keeping her emotions locked away shattered in an instant.

"You shouldn't say things like that." Her voice trembled slightly.

"Why not?"

Because it made her want impossible things. Because every protective gesture, every gentle touch, every concerned look had carved a space for him in her heart. Because she'd never meant to fall in love with him, but here she was, terrified and exhilarated all at once.

"Because I believe you." The words scraped her throat.

Brivul

The predawn air carried a chill as Brivul and Mila stood with Ellri outside her hotel. The street lamps cast long shadows across the empty streets, their dim light barely penetrating the darkness.

“You’ve done more for us than we could ever repay,” Brivul said, towering protectively near Mila.

Ellri waved her hand. “Just promise to take care of each other.” She pointed to an approaching delivery truck. “That’s your ride. Quick now.”

Brivul helped Mila into the back of the truck before sliding in himself. The cargo space smelled of fresh bread and cleaning supplies. He positioned himself between Mila and the door, ready to defend her against any threat.

“This shortcut better work,” he whispered as the truck lurched forward.

“Ellri knows what she’s doing,” Mila replied, her shoulder brushing against his arm.

The truck stopped after twenty minutes. Brivul peered out, scanning for danger before helping Mila down. They slipped into a narrow alley that twisted through the underbelly of the city.

“Stay close,” he said, leading the way through the labyrinth of passages Ellri had detailed.

The shortcut took them through abandoned buildings and beneath crumbling infrastructure. Brivul's warrior instincts remained on high alert, his body coiled and ready to strike at a moment's notice.

"Look," Mila pointed ahead where the transport station's massive structure loomed. "We made it in half the time."

"Ellri's directions were perfect." Brivul surveyed the station entrance. "Now comes the tricky part."

They crouched behind a stack of cargo containers, watching the station's security patterns. The morning shift was just starting. Brivul pressed closer to the containers, his scales scraping against the metal as he pulled Mila behind him. Two of Kurg's guards passed within arm's reach, their boots crunching on loose gravel.

"The cargo manifest shows three trains heading out," one guard said. "We'll need to check them all."

Brivul's muscles tensed. They needed to move now while the guards were distracted. He caught Mila's eye and gestured toward the nearest freight car. She nodded, understanding his silent command.

"Stay behind me," he whispered, his warrior instincts taking over as they crept from shadow to shadow.

The early morning bustle of dock workers provided cover as they darted between crates and pallets. Brivul kept Mila tucked behind his back.

"There," Mila pointed to an open cargo door. "That's our train."

A guard's voice rang out behind them. "Hey! You there!"

Brivul quickly spun around, raising himself to his full height as he shielded Mila from view. The guard's eyes widened in recognition.

"It's the—"

Brivul struck him before he could finish, his fist connecting with precision. The guard crumpled without a sound.

"Move," he ordered, boosting Mila into the cargo hold before following. The space was cramped with crates, leaving barely enough room to maneuver.

"Behind those boxes," Mila whispered, pointing to a dark corner.

They squeezed into the tight space just as boots thundered past their car. Brivul wrapped himself around Mila, using his larger frame to conceal her completely. Her breath came in quick bursts against his chest.

"Clear here," a voice called from outside. "Check the next car."

The footsteps faded. Brivul allowed himself to relax slightly, though he kept Mila secured in his protective embrace. The train lurched forward, metal wheels grinding against the tracks.

"That was too close," Mila said, her voice barely audible over the growing rumble of the engine.

"We made it, though," Brivul replied, fighting the urge to tighten his hold on her. "That's what matters."

The train's rhythm steadied into a gentle sway, and Brivul finally loosened his protective hold around Mila. His scales caught the dim light filtering through the

cargo car's ventilation slats as he shifted away, though he kept one hand braced against the wall near her head.

"I can't believe we actually pulled that off," Mila whispered, a nervous laugh escaping her.

Brivul felt his own tension dissolve at the sound. "That guard never knew what hit him." He allowed himself a small grin, his violet eyes meeting hers in the shadowy space.

"You moved so fast." Mila's shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. "Did you see his face when he recognized you?"

"Right before I knocked him out? Priceless." Brivul chuckled, the deep sound rumbling in his chest.

The close quarters amplified his awareness of her—the slight tremor in her breathing, the warmth radiating from her body, the way her black hair caught the sparse light.

"We make quite the team," she said, brushing dust from her sleeve. "Though I thought my heart would stop when those boots went past."

"I wouldn't have let them find you." The words came out more intensely than he'd intended, but he meant every syllable. His warrior instincts had merged with his need to protect his mate, even if she didn't know that part yet.

"I know." Her voice softened, and something in her expression made his heart swell.

The train curved around a bend, causing Mila to stumble slightly. Brivul steadied her with a hand at her waist, his touch lingering longer than necessary.

“At least this cargo car smells better than the last one,” he said, trying to distract himself from how perfectly she fit against him.

“You mean you don’t miss that lovely combination of fish and industrial cleaner?” Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

Before long, the gentle sway of the train created a cocoon of privacy around them in their shadowy corner. Brivul watched Mila settle more comfortably against a crate, her movements graceful despite their cramped quarters.

“I was cleaning that alcove when I overheard Kurg,” she said, her voice soft but steady. “For years, I’d kept my head down, trying to be invisible. But that moment changed everything.”

Brivul nodded, remembering his own turning point. “I was just going through the motions at that clinic. Every day felt hollow.” He shifted. “Then you walked into that market.”

“I remember thinking you were different from the other Niri I’d encountered.” A small smile played on her lips. “Most wouldn’t have bothered helping a slave.”

“I was dead inside before that day,” he admitted, his eyes fixed on her face. “That mission, losing those civilians... it broke something in me. I couldn’t lead anymore, couldn’t trust my own judgment.”

Mila’s hand found his in the darkness. “Yet you didn’t hesitate to help me at the clinic.”

“Because for the first time since that mission, I knew exactly what I needed to do.” His fingers curled around hers, protective and possessive. “Watching Kurg hurt you... everything became crystal clear.”

“We were both lost,” she mused. “Trapped in our own ways.”

“And now?” His voice deepened with emotion.

“Now we have a purpose. A chance to take down Kurg and free my sister.” She squeezed his hand. “Hope.”

Brivul drew her closer, his warrior’s instincts singing with the rightness of having her near. “We’ll succeed,” he promised, his tone leaving no room for doubt. “Together.”

Brivul watched Mila as she soon laid her head against his shoulder. His heart ached to tell her the truth about their connection.

“You should rest, too,” she murmured, her eyes still closed.

“Someone needs to keep watch.” His thumb traced circles on her hand where their fingers remained intertwined. The simple contact sent sparks through him.

She shifted, looking up at him with those striking green eyes. “You’re always watching out for me.”

“That’s not going to change.” His voice dropped lower, more intimate. The confined space amplified the warmth of her body against his.

“Why?” The question hung between them, loaded with meaning.

Brivul tightened his grip on her hand. Soon, he would tell her everything—about mates, about the instant connection he’d felt in that market. But not yet. Not while they were still fugitives on a cargo train.

“Because you’re worth protecting,” he said instead, his violet eyes intense. “Because

you're brave and clever and stronger than anyone gives you credit for."

A blush colored her cheeks, but she didn't look away. "You make me feel safe," she admitted. "I haven't felt safe in... ever."

His chest swelled with pride and possession. "Good." He drew her even closer, his massive frame curling protectively around her smaller one. "That's exactly how it should be."

The intimacy of the moment wrapped around them like a cocoon. Brivul knew, with bone-deep certainty, that this woman was meant to be his. Every protective urge, every instinct to shelter and defend her—it all made perfect sense. Soon, when they were truly safe, he would explain everything. For now, he was content to guard her sleep and plan their future.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Mila

Mila's heart pounded as the train screeched to a halt. The cargo hold's metal walls vibrated, sending a shiver through her bones. She pressed against the crates, watching Brivul peer through a gap in the door.

"Clear?" The whisper escaped her lips.

"Wait for the guards to pass."

Crystal chimes echoed from somewhere beyond their hiding spot. The outer district—she'd only glimpsed it before when running errands for Kurg. Marble columns and gold-trimmed archways, nothing like the grimy underworld they'd left behind.

Brivul slid the door open with ease. "Now."

They darted between shadows cast by ornate buildings. The sweet scent of night-blooming flowers filled the air, so different from the acrid smoke of the lower districts. Mila's replacement clothes marked her as an outsider here, where even the servants wore silk.

"Behind the fountain." Brivul guided her toward an elaborate water feature.

Water tinkled over carved stone nymphs. Mila crouched behind the fountain and scanned the nearby street. A group of Jorvlen nobles glided past, their robes adorned with precious stones.

“We need better clothes.” Her fingers found the rough hem of her shirt. “We stand out too much.”

“Agreed. We also need shelter for the night.”

The cobblestone streets wound between towering mansions. Gardens dripped with exotic flowers, their perfume almost overwhelming after years of musty slave quarters.

A patrol of guards rounded the corner. Mila pressed against Brivul, holding her breath as boots clicked against stone. Her skin tingled where it met his scales.

“This way.” He pulled her into an alcove lined with potted plants.

The guards passed, their weapons glinting in the lamplight. Mila’s heart refused to slow.

“The boarding houses should be near the market district,” she whispered, forcing herself to focus. “Merchants stay there when they come to trade.”

“Lead on.” His violet eyes crinkled at the corners. “You know more about this place than I do.”

They wove through the streets, keeping to the shadows. Everything here screamed wealth—even the street lamps were worked in precious metals. It made her skin crawl, knowing how many slaves had suffered to build this luxury.

A gleaming storefront caught Mila’s eye. Through polished windows, silk robes in jewel tones beckoned. Perfect.

“In here.” She tugged Brivul toward the entrance. “Quick, before someone sees us.”

The shop's interior smelled of sandalwood and fresh fabric. Racks of finery stretched into shadowed corners. A bored-looking clerk barely glanced up from her datapad.

"May I help you?"

"Just browsing." Mila affected the dismissive tone she'd heard countless nobles use.

She selected a deep purple gown with gold embroidery while Brivul found formal robes in midnight blue. The fabric whispered against her skin as she changed in the fitting room, so different from her rough slave clothes.

"You look..." Brivul's eyes widened when she emerged.

"Like I belong here?" She smoothed the silk, wondering if he could hear her thundering pulse.

"Beautiful."

Mila's cheeks flushed. She busied herself adjusting the golden sash at her waist.

The clerk processed their payment without question. Outside, the evening air had cooled. Mila's new shoes clicked against cobblestones as they made their way toward the boarding houses.

The Gilded Rose Inn rose before them, its windows warm with lamplight. Inside, dark wood panels lined the walls and plush carpets muffled their footsteps.

"One room." Brivul placed more credits on the counter. "Two beds."

The innkeeper handed over an ornate key without comment. Their fine clothes had worked. No one looked twice at them.

Their room was small but clean, with views over the market square below. Mila sank onto one of the beds, finally letting her shoulders relax.

“We did it.” She couldn’t quite believe they’d made it this far. Tomorrow they’d seek out Talis.

“Get some rest.” Brivul settled onto the other bed. “You’re safe here.”

Safe. The word felt foreign on her tongue. But as she lay in the darkness listening to Brivul’s steady breathing, she allowed herself to believe it might be true.

Dawn’s pale light filtered through gauzy curtains as Mila smoothed her new silk gown. The purple fabric felt so soft against her skin. She traced the golden embroidery at her sleeve, remembering all the times she’d watched nobles wear such finery while she scrubbed the floors.

“Ready?” Brivul asked, adjusting his midnight blue robes.

“As I’ll ever be.” She pulled Ellri’s map from her sleeve, the paper worn soft from constant handling. “Talis’s estate should be past the merchant quarter.”

They slipped into streets already bustling with early morning activity. Servants hurried past with baskets of fresh bread and flowers. The scent hung heavily in the air.

“Left here.” Mila guided them down a boulevard lined with towering white columns. Each step brought them closer to Talis’s estate, and her heart raced in her chest.

The morning sun climbed higher, glinting off gilded domes and crystal windows. They passed through the merchant quarter where silk banners snapped in the breeze. Finally, the estate’s high walls rose before them, crowned with delicate spires.

“There.” Mila pressed against a shadowed alcove, Brivul close beside her. The evidence against Kurg felt heavy where it was hidden in her bodice. “That’s Talis’s estate.”

Armed guards patrolled the perimeter. Somewhere inside was their only chance at justice—and Priscilla’s freedom.

“Second thoughts?” Brivul’s eyes searched her face.

“No.” Mila squared her shoulders, though her hands trembled. “This is our best chance to take down Kurg and free my sister.”

“Then let’s do this right the first time.” His tail curled protectively around her.

Mila nodded, drawing strength from his presence. The weight of what they were about to attempt pressed down on her, but there was no turning back. Not when they’d come so far.

Mila slipped from shadow to shadow along the estate’s perimeter, her silk skirt whispering against the cobblestones. Years of avoiding notice as a slave had taught her how to move unseen.

Two guards patrolled the main gate, their weapons glinting in the morning sun. She counted their steps, noting the precise thirty-second gap between passes.

The eastern wall caught her attention. Thick vines crawled up the stone, providing potential handholds. A service entrance sat partially hidden behind a cluster of fragrant jasmine bushes.

The service entrance saw steady traffic—servants coming and going with baskets and parcels. Each was checked, but the guards seemed bored with the task.

She completed her circuit and returned to where Brivul waited in the shadowed alcove.

“The east wall has the weakest security.” She smoothed her skirt. “There’s a service entrance where servants deliver supplies. Guards check papers, but they’re sloppy about it.”

“How many guards?”

“Two at each entrance, rotating every hour. But the ones at the service door are distracted. They barely glance at the servants’ papers.”

“Patrol timing?”

“Thirty seconds between passes at the main gate. Forty-five at the service entrance.” She touched the evidence hidden in her bodice. “The vines on the east wall could work too, if we need another way in.”

“Good work.” His eyes gleamed with approval. “Anything else?”

“The servants wear purple sashes. We’ll need those to blend in once we’re inside.” She glanced back at the estate.

Mila traced their planned route in the air, her finger following invisible paths. “If we time the guard rotation right, we can slip through the service entrance during shift change. The new guards always take an extra few minutes getting settled.”

“And the purple sashes?” Brivul kept his voice low, his scales gleaming in the shadows of their hiding spot.

“There’s a laundry line in the garden. Two sashes hanging right there.” She pointed to

where fresh linens danced in the breeze. The memory of hanging similar items during her years as a slave made her stomach clench.

“Once we’re inside?”

“The servants use the back corridors. I’ve seen them through the windows. If we keep our heads down and walk with purpose, no one will question us.” Her heart raced at the thought. How many times had she used that same technique to avoid Kurg’s attention?

Brivul nodded, his eyes scanning the perimeter. “And Talis’s office?”

“Second floor, east wing. The windows have gold trim.” She’d spotted the ornate room during her surveillance.

“If we’re caught—”

“We won’t be.” Mila touched his arm. “I spent years learning how to be invisible. Trust me.”

“I do.” The simple words made her chest tighten.

She outlined the final details of their plan. They’d wait for the next guard rotation, grab the sashes during the changeover, and then slip in with a group of returning servants. Simple. Direct. And terrifying.

Brivul

Brivul pressed against the sun-warmed stone wall, his scales scraping the rough surface. The guards' boots crunched on gravel as they made their rotation. His muscles tensed, ready to move.

"Now." Mila's whisper brushed his ear.

He slithered forward, keeping to the shadows. The purple sashes fluttered on the line, rich and vibrant against the stark white of the other linens. His fingers closed around the silk, and the fabric whispered as he pulled it free.

"Here." He handed one to Mila, wrapping the other around his waist.

A cluster of servants rounded the corner, their heads down and shoulders slumped from morning duties. Mila stepped into their midst, her movements precise and measured. Brivul followed, forcing his warrior's stance into a servant's slouch.

The service entrance loomed ahead, its metal door propped open to catch the morning breeze. Sweat beaded on his scales. One wrong move would give them away.

"Did you see what Lady Talis wore yesterday?" one servant whispered.

"Shh. Back to work," another answered.

The group shuffled through the door. Cool air washed over them, heavy with the scent of cooking spices. Brivul's tongue flicked, tasting the air for threats.

“This way.” Mila gestured toward a narrow corridor.

“Wait.” Brivul caught her arm as voices echoed from around the corner. He pulled her into an alcove, his body curling protectively around her smaller form.

Two guards passed, their boots clicking against the polished floor. Mila’s breath hitched. The sound sent heat coursing through his veins. Later.

“Clear.” He released her.

They continued down the corridor, passing storage rooms and washing stations. Every step brought them closer to Talis’s private office—and closer to danger. But he’d face down an army to keep Mila safe and help her save her sister.

One audience with Talis could change everything. If they survived getting caught.

“Someone’s coming,” Mila whispered.

Brivul yanked Mila behind a massive stone pillar as footsteps approached. A guard patrol—not the usual servants. His instincts screamed danger.

“Lady Talis requests all servants report to the main hall,” a guard’s voice boomed through the corridor.

Mila’s eyes met his. They couldn’t blend in with the servants now. They’d be discovered instantly. His muscles coiled, ready to fight their way out if needed.

“The cleaning supplies.” Mila pointed to a cart laden with rags and buckets.

Perfect. Brivul grabbed a mop while Mila seized some cloths. They rounded the corner just as the guards appeared.

“You two. Main hall. Now.”

“Apologies, sir.” Mila kept her eyes down. “Lady Talis specifically requested we finish cleaning the east wing first.”

“Her exact words were ‘not a speck of dust anywhere,’” Brivul added, matching her submissive pose while scanning for escape routes.

The guard’s hand drifted to his weapon. “Show me the work order.”

“Right here, sir.” Mila pulled out a piece of paper Ellri had given her. Brivul’s heart stopped.

But she only pretended to read it and then tucked it away before the guard could see. “Signed by the head housekeeper this morning.”

The guard grunted. “Get it done quick.”

Brivul released a slow breath as the patrol moved on. That woman was brilliant. He’d never seen anyone think so fast on their feet—not even his best soldiers.

“Nice save with the paper.”

“Nice backup with the exact words.” A smile played on her lips. “We make a good team.”

They did. Every move, every response—they anticipated each other perfectly. Like they’d fought side by side for years instead of weeks. His mate indeed.

“The office should be this way.” Mila gestured down the hall.

Brivul followed, admiring how naturally she adapted to each situation. Together, they might actually pull this off.

Two servants hurried past, their voices low but urgent.

“Lady Talis moved her morning appointments to the Silver Conference Room.”

“All of them? That’s unusual.”

Brivul’s hand tightened on Mila’s arm, pulling her closer as the servants rounded the corner.

“Change of plans.” He kept his voice soft. “We won’t go to her office if she’s not there.”

“The Silver Conference Room.” Mila’s brow furrowed. “That’s where she holds meetings with her most important associates I’ve overheard in the past.”

“How long do these meetings usually last?”

“Hours sometimes. Especially if she’s negotiating trade deals.” Mila thought about Kurg’s similar business meetings at his estate.

Brivul led Mila slowly through the winding corridors. Footsteps echoed ahead—multiple guards approaching fast.

“In here.” He yanked open a storage closet door and pulled Mila inside.

The space was tiny, barely large enough for his serpentine form. Mila pressed close against his chest, her breath warm on his scales. The scent of her flooded his senses. His arms tightened instinctively around her waist.

“Sorry,” she whispered.

“Don’t move.” The words came out rougher than intended.

Her fingers splayed across his chest, steadying herself as boots thundered past their hiding spot. The touch sent lightning through his blood. His mate, so close, so perfect. Every instinct screamed to claim her, mark her right here.

“They’re gone.” Mila’s voice wavered.

Focus. The mission came first. He couldn’t let his mating drive cloud his judgment, no matter how right she felt in his arms.

“Let me check.” He cracked the door, scanning the hall. “Clear.”

They slipped out, and Brivul immediately missed her warmth. But the loss helped clear his head. They had a job to do.

“The conference room should be around the next corner,” Mila whispered.

Brivul nodded, forcing his thoughts away from the closet and how perfectly she’d fit in his arms.

“Stay behind me.” He slithered forward, every sense alert for danger. The sooner they delivered the evidence, the sooner he could tell her about the future they could have together.

If she’d have him.

The ornate double doors of the Silver Conference Room loomed ahead, voices murmuring behind the thick wood.

Before long, Brivul watched the last of Talis's associates file out of the conference room, their silk robes rustling against the marble floor. He cataloged each exit along with the weight of the knife against his scales. Only Talis remained inside at the long obsidian table.

"We could rush her now." Mila suggested. "While she's alone."

The touch sent electricity through his blood, but he forced himself to focus. A direct confrontation could end badly—for Mila especially.

"Or we track her to her office." He kept his voice low, tasting the air for approaching threats. "More private. Less chance of guards interrupting."

"But more time for something to go wrong."

She had a point. His military training screamed at him to control the situation, choose the battlefield. But this wasn't war. This was infiltration. One poor choice, and Mila would pay the price.

Through the door, he watched Talis gather her papers that were scattered across the table. The kingpin moved with calculated grace, her skin gleaming in the afternoon light. No weapons were visible, but that meant nothing in these circles.

"If we wait, we risk losing her." Mila shifted closer, her warmth distracting. "She might have another meeting."

"If we rush in, we risk everything." His tail coiled tighter, combat-ready. "One shout brings every guard running."

A servant entered the conference room, head bowed. "Lady Talis, your afternoon appointments await."

“Tell them I’ll be there shortly.”

Brivul’s muscles tensed. Time was running out. He could grab Mila and flee, find another way to save her sister. But the fierce determination in her eyes told him she wouldn’t run. His mate was no coward.

Suddenly, heavy boots thundered around the corner, closing in on their position. Without another conscious thought, Brivul yanked Mila through the conference room doors, his combat instincts taking control. His tail wrapped protectively around her smaller form as they burst into the room.

Talis’s head snapped up from her papers, her blue eyes widening. Her fingers froze mid-motion over the documents on the obsidian table. The afternoon sun streaming through tall windows caught the jewels adorning her elaborate headdress, casting rainbow prisms across her startled face.

Brivul’s muscles coiled tight, ready to strike if needed. He positioned himself between Mila and the kingpin, his height allowing him to tower over the seated woman. His tongue flicked, tasting the air. No guards approached behind them, but that could change in seconds.

The silence stretched, broken only by the rustle of silk as Talis slowly straightened in her chair. Her gaze darted between them, calculating, assessing—the kind of look that had likely ended many lives.

Behind him, Mila’s breath came in short bursts, her heart racing against his scales where she pressed close. No matter what happened next, he would keep her safe.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Brivul

“We come seeking alliance.” Brivul kept his voice steady and firm, his tail still coiled protectively around Mila. The scent of Talis’s expensive perfume filled the air—citrus and something darker, more exotic.

“Bold words from wanted fugitives breaking into my conference room.” Talis’s lips curved into a dangerous smile.

“You know who we are?”

“The former Niri general and the slave who escaped Kurg’s estate?” Talis leaned back, her jewels glinting in her elaborate headdress. “Your faces are plastered across half the district.”

Brivul felt Mila tense against him. His protective instincts screamed, but he forced them down. This was delicate territory.

“Then you know Kurg wants us captured.”

“Indeed.” Talis’s sapphire eyes narrowed. “He’s offering quite the reward.”

“We have something better to offer.” Brivul shifted his weight, ready to move if needed. “Information that could destroy him.”

Talis’s smile widened, showing perfect white teeth. “Now, that does interest me. That pompous slimeball has been a thorn in my side for far too long.”

“Then we share common ground.”

“Perhaps.” Talis drummed her fingers on the obsidian table. “Though I wonder why you’d risk coming to me rather than going to the authorities.”

“Because you hate him as much as we do.” Mila spoke up from behind Brivul. “And you have the power to actually do something about it.”

Talis studied them both for a long moment.

“You might be right.” She gestured to the chairs across from her. “Sit. Tell me what you know about our mutual enemy.”

Brivul kept his body angled between Mila and Talis as they took their seats, every muscle coiled and ready. The obsidian table reflected their faces like dark water, its surface cool and smooth beneath his fingertips.

“Kurg has been stealing from the Council of Seven.” Mila’s voice carried strength despite her fear. “He’s been laundering money through fake accounts.”

“Bold accusation.” Talis’s jeweled fingers tapped against the table. “Proof?”

Mila pulled out the data chip. Brivul tensed as she slid it across the obsidian surface. If Talis decided to betray them, that chip was their only leverage.

The holoscreen flickered to life, bathing them all in its blue glow. Numbers and transmissions scrolled past, each one more damning than the last. Brivul watched Talis’s face, noting how her eyes widened slightly at certain figures.

“This is…” Talis leaned forward. “These transmissions are authentic?”

“Downloaded directly from his private terminal.”

Talis’s smile turned predatory. “No wonder he wants you back so badly.”

A growl rumbled in Brivul’s chest before he could stop it. The thought of Kurg getting his hands on Mila again made his blood boil.

“The question is,” Mila continued, “what will you do with this information?”

Talis’s fingers danced over the holoscreen, examining more details. “Oh, I can think of several delicious possibilities. The council takes a dim view of theft, especially from their own kingpins.”

Talis then tapped a manicured nail against the data chip. “These transmissions could be fabricated, though.”

Brivul’s muscles tensed. The familiar weight of failure pressed against his chest. He should have known it wouldn’t be this easy.

“How do I know this isn’t just some desperate ploy?” Talis’s gaze fixed on Mila. “A slave trying to buy her freedom by framing her master?”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop. Brivul’s tail tightened protectively around Mila’s waist.

“I could just send you back to Kurg,” Talis said with a cruel smile. “The reward money would be substantial.”

The warrior in Brivul snapped to attention. His body shifted, rising to his full height as he placed himself between Mila and Talis. The scar on his jaw pulled tightly as his teeth bared.

“Anyone who tries to lay a hand on her answers to me.” His voice dropped to a dangerous growl. The general he used to be, the warrior he still was, blazed in his eyes. “And I promise you won’t enjoy that conversation.”

The obsidian table reflected his towering form. His hands curled into fists at his sides, every scale on his body rigid with tension.

“My, my.” Talis leaned back, though her smile faltered. “Quite protective of your little slave. Aren’t you, General?”

“She’s not a slave.” The words ripped from his throat. “She’s under my protection.”

Mila stood up and stepped forward, her chin lifted in defiance. Pride swelled in Brivul’s chest at her courage. His mate was no cowering slave. She was a warrior in her own right.

“Think about it logically.” Mila’s voice rang clear and strong. “Kurg claims to be the wealthiest kingpin on Jorvla, yet his market control is fractional compared to yours.”

Brivul’s tail remained coiled protectively around her waist, but he let her take the lead. The fierce intelligence in her eyes reminded him why he’d fallen for her.

“His wealth doesn’t match his influence.” Mila gestured to the scrolling data. “The numbers don’t add up unless he has another source of income.”

Talis’s jeweled fingers stilled on the obsidian table. Her sapphire eyes narrowed as she studied the figures with new interest.

“The council’s funds.” Talis tapped a particularly large transfer. “That would explain how he outbid me on the spice trade routes.”

“Exactly.” Mila’s voice gained confidence. “He’s using stolen money to create the illusion of legitimate business success.”

Brivul watched Talis’s expression shift from skepticism to calculation. His warrior instincts told him they’d struck a chord. The rival kingpin’s pride wouldn’t let this slight go unchallenged.

“Your markets are three times the size of his,” Mila pressed. “Yet somehow he claims double your profits? The math doesn’t work.”

A slow smile spread across Talis’s face. “No, it certainly doesn’t.”

The tension in the room shifted. Brivul felt it in his scales. They’d convinced her. His muscles remained coiled, ready to protect Mila if needed, but hope flickered in him.

“Well then.” Talis leaned back, her jewels catching the light. “Perhaps we should discuss how to use this information to our mutual benefit.”

Talis’s fingers traced the edge of the data chip. “I must say, I’m impressed. Not many would dare bring such evidence to me directly at such great risk.”

Brivul kept his protective stance, his tail still wrapped around Mila.

“I’ll take this to the council myself.” Talis tucked the chip into her elaborate robes. “Kurg’s been strutting around like he owns half of Jorvla. Time someone clipped his wings.”

Relief flooded through Brivul’s chest, though he didn’t let his guard down.

“And our freedom?” Mila’s voice carried steel beneath its softness.

“Once Kurg falls—and he will fall—I’ll ensure both your names are cleared.” Talis’s jewels caught the light as she inclined her head. “You’ll be free to go wherever you wish.”

The tension in Brivul’s shoulders eased slightly. The thought of Mila finally free, no longer having to look over her shoulder, made his heart swell. She deserved that and more.

“You have my word as a kingpin.” Talis rose from her seat, her robes whispering against the floor. “And unlike some, I keep my promises.”

Brivul dipped his head in acknowledgment. “We appreciate your assistance.”

“Oh, the pleasure will be all mine.” Talis’s smile turned sharp. “I do so enjoy watching the mighty tumble from their pedestals.”

Talis swept from the room in a whisper of silk and jewels. The moment the door clicked shut, Mila spun toward Brivul, her green eyes bright with triumph.

“We did it!”

Her joy hit him like a physical force. Brivul pulled her close with his tail, drinking in her radiant smile. The sweet scent of her filled his senses.

“You did it,” he corrected. “That was brilliant, breaking down the numbers for her.”

“We make a pretty good team.” Mila’s hands came to rest on his chest, and his heart thundered beneath her touch.

His mate was not only beautiful but brilliant. The way she’d handled Talis, showing such strength and intelligence under pressure, made his chest burst with pride.

“A very good team.” His voice dropped low as he gazed down at her upturned face.

Her lips parted slightly, and the urge to claim them nearly overwhelmed him. His tail tightened around her waist, drawing her even closer. The heat of her body pressed against his scales sent sparks of electricity through his blood.

But no. Not here, not now. Their first kiss wouldn't be in some kingpin's conference room while they waited to see if their gamble would pay off. His mate deserved better than that.

With heroic effort, Brivul loosened his hold slightly, though he couldn't bring himself to let go completely. The disappointed flash in Mila's eyes made his resolve waver, but he held firm.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Mila

The servant's footsteps echoed against the polished marble floor as she led them down the winding corridors of Talis's estate. Mila's heart soared with each step, the weight of the past weeks lifting from her shoulders. The data chip was out of her hands now—safely in Talis's possession.

“This way, please.” The servant gestured toward an ornate archway.

Mila's fingers brushed against the intricate wall carvings as they walked. Such luxury. Such freedom to simply exist without fear. Soon she might know what that felt like.

The marble floors gleamed under the crystal chandeliers, so different from the grimy corridors of Kurg's stronghold. No more scrubbing floors until her hands bled. No more ducking her head when he passed.

Her steps quickened. “We could actually do this. Take him down.”

“You did this. Your courage got us here.” Brivul's eyes met hers.

Her cheeks warmed at his praise. The way he looked at her made her chest tight in the best way.

The grand foyer opened before them, sunlight streaming through stained glass windows and painting the floor in jewel tones. Mila breathed in deeply. For the first time since she'd stolen those transmissions, possibility stretched out before her like

an endless horizon.

Priscilla would be free, too. They could build real lives, go to school, work real jobs. No more chains.

“You’re smiling.” Brivul’s tail curled closer.

“Because for once everything’s going right.”

The servant cleared her throat. “Lady Talis will be with you shortly.”

Talis soon swept into the foyer, her skin shimmering in the afternoon light. Her presence commanded attention, but unlike Kurg’s oppressive aura, hers carried an air of refined authority.

“Your evidence will serve nicely,” Talis said with a satisfied smile.

Mila’s heart skipped. Everything she’d risked—the beatings, the fear, running for her life—hadn’t been for nothing.

“My servants will provide you with supplies.” Talis gestured to attendants who carried in bags laden with goods. “Consider it a down payment on my gratitude.”

The scent of fresh bread and spiced meats made Mila’s mouth water. Packages of dried fruits, nuts, and preserved delicacies filled ornate boxes. Fine clothing in rich fabrics spilled from the bags.

“This is too much,” Mila said.

“Nonsense. Kurg’s fall will be worth far more.” Talis’s sapphire eyes gleamed. “Take what you need for your journey. My guards will ensure you leave the premises

safely.”

“Thank you,” Mila said, her voice thick with emotion.

“No need for thanks. You’ve given me exactly what I wanted,” Talis replied. “Now I must go.” She turned and walked down a nearby corridor.

Brivul helped gather their newfound bounty while Mila selected practical items for their journey. Her hands trembled as she packed away food that would have fed her and Priscilla for months in their old life. Soon her sister would taste freedom, too.

The hotel’s crystal chandeliers cast rainbow prisms across marble floors that put even Talis’s estate to shame. Mila’s fingers tightened around the strap of her new bag as the desk clerk processed their credits.

“Your suite is ready.” The clerk handed over an ornate key card. “Top floor.”

The elevator whispered upward, all gleaming gold and mirrors. Mila caught glimpses of herself—no longer in rags but dressed in fine clothes that actually fit. The woman in the reflection looked like a different person entirely.

“You okay?” Brivul’s violet eyes met hers in the mirror.

“Better than okay.”

The suite doors parted to reveal a sprawling paradise of cream and gold. Plush carpets sank beneath her feet as she wandered inside. Through gossamer curtains, the city lights sparkled like fallen stars.

“This can’t be real.” Mila ran her hand along the intricate golden wallpaper.

“Very real.” Brivul set their bags down. “You deserve this.”

The massive bed dominated the space, draped in silks finer than anything she’d ever touched. Her cheeks warmed as she realized there was only one bed—and for the first time, the thought didn’t make her nervous at all.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful.” She sank onto the edge of the mattress, running her fingers over the embroidered duvet.

“I have.”

She looked up to find Brivul watching her with an intensity that made her breath catch. The space between them crackled with possibility.

Brivul then blurted out, “We should really sample some of Talis’s generosity.” He gestured to the packages of food. “Seems a shame to let it go to waste.”

The rich aroma of spiced meats and fresh bread made Mila’s mouth water again. She helped Brivul spread the feast across the low table near the couch. Her fingers trembled as she unwrapped each delicacy—foods she’d only glimpsed while serving at Kurg’s parties.

“I’ve never tasted anything like this.” Mila savored a bite of honey-glazed fruit. Sweetness burst across her tongue.

“The look on your face.” Brivul’s tail swished with amusement. He settled beside her on the plush couch, close enough that his scales brushed her arm.

Heat bloomed in her cheeks. “What about my face?”

“Pure joy. It suits you.”

They sampled their way through exotic delicacies, trading bites and commentary. Mila found herself laughing more than she had in years. The weight of constant fear had lifted, replaced by something light and effervescent.

“Try this.” Brivul offered her a piece of perfectly seasoned meat.

Their fingers brushed as she accepted it. The casual touch sent tingles up her arm. When had she started noticing how his violet eyes caught the light? How his deep laugh made her stomach flutter?

“Your turn.” She held out a morsel of sweet bread.

He leaned closer, his presence warm and solid beside her. “Delicious.”

The city lights twinkled through the gossamer curtains, casting them in a dreamy glow. Mila tucked her feet under her, shifting closer to him on the couch until their shoulders touched.

“You’re remarkable. You know that?” His tail curled around her waist.

Their eyes met. The air between them hummed with possibility. Mila’s heart thundered in her chest as Brivul’s hand found hers on the couch cushion.

Her pulse raced beneath his touch. The warmth of his hand against hers sent tingles throughout her whole body. All her carefully constructed walls crumbled with a single caress.

“I think I’m falling for you,” she whispered.

His eyes softened. “I fell for you that first day in the market.”

The confession hung between them for a heartbeat before Brivul leaned forward. His lips brushed hers, gentle and questioning. Heat surged through her as she pressed closer, answering his unspoken question.

The kiss deepened, and the world fell away. His scales were smooth beneath her fingertips as she traced his jaw. His tail coiled tighter around her waist, drawing her nearer until she was practically in his lap.

Time stretched like honey, sweet and endless. Every brush of his lips sent sparks dancing across her skin. His hand cradled the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her hair.

At this moment, Mila felt complete. No fear. No doubts. Just the perfect rightness of being exactly where she belonged.

When they finally broke apart, she couldn't stop smiling. Brivul pressed his forehead to hers, his breath mingling with hers.

"I've wanted to do that for weeks," he murmured.

"Why didn't you?"

"I was afraid you'd run."

She laughed softly. "I'm done running."

Mila's heart raced as she looked into Brivul's eyes. The tenderness in his gaze made her breath catch. She'd never felt so cherished, so wanted.

His scales shimmered as he traced her cheek with gentle fingers. "You're trembling."

“Good trembling,” she whispered, leaning into his touch.

Their lips met again, and this time there was no hesitation. Heat blazed through her body all over again as his mouth moved against hers with increasing urgency. His tail wrapped around her waist tighter, drawing her closer until she was fully in his lap.

His hands tangled in her hair even tighter as the kiss deepened. The solid warmth of his chest pressed against hers, and she couldn’t get enough of the sensation of smooth scales beneath her exploring fingers.

“Mila,” he breathed against her lips.

She’d never heard her name spoken with such reverence. Such desire. She pressed closer, wanting to memorize every detail of this perfect moment—the way his muscles flexed beneath her hands, the taste of honey still on his tongue, the sounds he made when she nipped at his lower lip.

In his arms, she wasn’t a slave or a fugitive. She was simply a woman being thoroughly, passionately kissed by the Niri she had fallen for.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Mila

Brivul laid Mila back on the plush couch, his violet eyes dark with desire. The cool air of the room tickled her skin as he trailed his lips down her neck, each gentle press of his mouth sending ripples of warmth through her. His fingers deftly worked the ties of her silk dress, the fabric whispering against her body as it fell away.

She felt exposed, vulnerable, but the reverence in his gaze as he took in the sight of her naked form chased away any fear.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured, his voice a deep rumble that resonated within her.

Mila’s heart fluttered, her nerves jangling with a mix of excitement and trepidation. She had never been with anyone like this before, let alone a Niri. His alien beauty, the sheer power coiled within his form, was both intimidating and thrilling.

Brivul seemed to sense her unease, his touch becoming even more gentle as he explored her body. His hands roamed over her curves with a tenderness that belied their strength, each caress a question, a request for permission.

“Is this okay?” he asked, his breath hot against her skin.

She nodded, her voice caught in the tightness of her throat. His fingers traced the contours of her large breasts, his thumbs circling her nipples until they pebbled under his touch. A soft moan escaped her lips, the sound surprising her with its need.

Brivul's eyes flicked up to meet hers, a silent check to ensure she was still with him. Encouraged by her response, he lowered his mouth to her breast, his long tongue flicking out to taste her. The sensation was electric, sending jolts of pleasure straight to her core.

Mila's fingers threaded through his hair, her body arching into his touch. His scales were cool against her heated skin, a contrast that only heightened the intensity of his ministrations.

"Brivul," she gasped.

He released her nipple, his gaze once again meeting hers. "Tell me what you need," he said, his voice laced with desire.

She blushed, suddenly shy. "I... I don't know," she admitted.

A soft chuckle rumbled in his chest. "Then let's explore it together," he said, his hand drifting lower, tracing the line of her hip before dipping between her thighs.

Mila's breath hitched as his fingers found her center, the heat of his touch igniting a fire that threatened to consume her. His movements were slow, deliberate, each stroke designed to draw out her pleasure.

She clung to him, her body moving in sync with his rhythm. The world around them faded into nothingness, leaving only the two of them and the exquisite sensations that danced along her nerve endings.

"I want you to come for me, Mila," Brivul whispered against her ear, his voice a command that her body could not ignore.

With a cry, she shattered, her body convulsing with the force of her release. Brivul

held her through it all, his arms a safe haven as she rode the waves of her climax.

As the tremors subsided, Mila found herself wrapped in Brivul's embrace, her head resting against his chest.

Brivul's voice, deep and resonant, washed over her. "This is just the beginning," he promised, his words igniting a fresh spark of anticipation within her.

He lifted her from the couch, her naked body cradled against his chest. The world around her blurred as he carried her across the room. The soft rustle of silk sheets against her skin as he laid her on the bed was a sensual prelude to what was to come.

Mila's heart raced, her breaths shallow as she watched him, his eyes alight with a hunger that both thrilled and unnerved her.

Positioning himself between her legs, Brivul looked up at her, a silent question in his gaze. She nodded, her cheeks flushed with a mix of embarrassment and desire.

His tongue, long and supple, flicked out, tasting her with a reverence that made her feel worshipped. A soft, surprised gasp escaped her lips as he began to lap at her, his movements slow and deliberate. The sensation was unlike anything she had ever experienced, a delicate dance of pleasure that left her aching for more.

"Brivul," she whispered, "that feels amazing."

He responded with a hum of satisfaction, the vibration sending shivers through her. His pace increased, the pressure of his tongue growing firmer as he sought to coax her toward the edge once more.

Mila's fingers tangled in the cool silk sheets, her body arching instinctively toward the source of her bliss. His scales, contrasting with the heat of his mouth, added an

extra layer of sensation that heightened her arousal. She was adrift on a sea of pleasure.

She felt another orgasm building within her, a tightening coil that threatened to snap at any moment.

“I’m... I’m...” she stammered, her body tensing as the first tremors of her release rippled through her.

With a final, intense flick of his tongue, he sent her spiraling over the edge. Mila cried out, the sound echoing off the walls as her body convulsed with the force of her climax. She was lost in ecstasy.

As the waves of her orgasm began to ebb, Brivul gently withdrew his tongue, his lips glistening with the evidence of her desire. He crawled up the bed to lie beside her, his eyes gleaming.

Mila turned to face him, her body still thrumming with the aftershocks of her release as she reached out to trace the line of his jaw.

Mila felt the heat of Brivul’s gaze as he looked upon her. The thin silk of his robes did little to conceal the firm evidence of his desire, and a nervous flutter danced in her stomach at the sight of it.

He untied the sash of his robes, letting the silken fabric fall away to reveal his naked form. Mila let out a soft gasp as she took in the sight of him. His blue scales gleamed in the soft light, and the sight of his large, throbbing members made her heart race.

“It’s... they’re big,” she whispered, her eyes wide.

A soft chuckle escaped Brivul as he leaned in to press a kiss to her forehead. “We

were made to fit together perfectly,” he assured her. “And I promise, I’ll make it good for you.”

Mila believed him. She allowed him to guide her, his hands sure and steady as he positioned her above him.

“Just take it at your own pace,” he instructed, his voice a low, comforting murmur.

With a deep breath to steady herself, she lowered herself onto his primary shaft, feeling the stretch and burn as her body adjusted to his girth. Brivul watched her closely, his hands resting lightly on her hips.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his voice strained with the effort of holding back.

“Yes,” she breathed, the initial shock giving way to a warm, full sensation that was surprisingly pleasant. “It’s... it’s really intense.”

“Just let yourself feel,” he said, his thumbs tracing soothing circles on her skin. “Let your body tell you what it needs.”

Mila listened to his words, closing her eyes and focusing on the sensations coursing through her. She moved, tentatively at first, but soon found a rhythm that felt right. Brivul matched her pace, his own movements restrained but powerful. Each thrust sent waves of pleasure radiating through her.

Their bodies soon moved together at an urgent pace as their arms wrapped tightly around each other. The coil of tension within her tightened once more, the pressure building with each stroke of Brivul’s length inside her.

“Brivul... I think... I’m going to...” She gasped, her voice trailing off as the world around her shattered into a thousand points of light.

“That’s it,” Brivul groaned, his own climax swiftly following hers. “Let go.”

Mila cried out as her orgasm crashed over her, the intensity of it leaving her breathless and trembling. She collapsed onto Brivul’s chest, her body still spasming with the aftershocks of her release.

They lay together in the quiet aftermath, their hearts beating in sync as they both struggled to catch their breath. Brivul’s arms were wrapped tightly around her.

“That was... magical,” Mila murmured, her face buried in his chest.

“It was,” Brivul agreed, his voice hoarse with emotion. “Because it was with you.”

As they basked in the glow of their shared experience, Mila knew she had found something truly special with Brivul. It wasn’t just the mind-blowing orgasms, though those were certainly unforgettable. It was the tenderness, the connection, and the sense of belonging she felt when she was with him.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Brivul

Sunlight filtered through the gauzy curtains of the luxury suite. Brivul watched the golden rays dance across Mila's peaceful face as she slept curled against his chest. Her dark hair spilled across the silk pillows, and her steady breathing matched the rhythm of his heartbeat.

"Mine," he whispered, running his fingers through her silken strands. The word felt right on his tongue.

He breathed in her sweet scent, memorizing every detail of this moment. The warmth of her pressed against his scales. The way her hand rested over his heart. The slight smile that curved her lips even in sleep.

His warrior's instincts remained alert, but for the first time since leaving his post as general, he felt at peace. Complete. The emptiness that had haunted him vanished the moment she'd intimately accepted him.

A lock of hair fell across her face. Brivul brushed it back, his touch feather-light to avoid waking her. She deserved her rest after everything she'd been through. Everything they'd been through together.

"I'll always keep you safe," he promised in a low whisper.

The morning sun caught the birthmark on her temple, highlighting it like a crown. His fierce, brilliant mate who'd survived so much and still maintained her fire. Who challenged him and matched him step for step.

He tightened his hold on her ever so slightly, his protective instincts surging. The thought of anyone trying to take her from him now made his blood boil. But she wasn't some damsel to be coddled. She was his equal, his partner.

A soft sigh escaped her lips as she snuggled closer in her sleep. Brivul smiled, his violet eyes soft as he watched over her. For the first time since that failed mission, he felt like himself again.

Mila soon stirred in his arms. The moment her eyes opened, she stiffened and pulled away slightly. Brivul's chest tightened at her retreat.

"Good morning." His voice came out rougher than intended.

"Morning." She clutched the silk sheet to her chest, not meeting his gaze.

The distance between them felt like a physical wound. Had he misread everything? His instincts screamed at him to pull her back, to claim her properly, but he forced himself to remain still.

"Something troubles you."

"I just..." She twisted the sheet between her fingers. "What happens now?"

"What do you mean?"

"Was this just..." Her voice cracked. "I know Niri need breeders. And I'm a human, so maybe you thought—"

A growl rumbled in his chest before he could stop it. The mere suggestion that he'd use her like that made his scales bristle.

“I’ve heard stories.” She raised her chin, that familiar fire sparking in her eyes despite her vulnerability. “About Niri taking human women just to breed them. Last night meant something to me, Brivul. It wasn’t just...” She swallowed hard. “It wasn’t just pleasure or convenience. And if that’s all it was to you—”

His muscles coiled with the need to show her exactly how wrong she was, but he held back.

“I gave myself to you because I wanted to. Because I felt...” She pressed her lips together, clearly struggling for words. “I felt safe. Special. Like I mattered beyond my usefulness.”

The raw honesty in her voice struck him like a physical blow. His fierce little mate, laying her heart bare despite her fears.

“I need to know if it meant anything to you.” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Or if I’m just another human to warm your bed until something better comes along.”

“You’re my mate.” The words burst out of Brivul’s mouth, his voice rough with emotion. “From the moment our hands touched in that market, my soul recognized yours.”

Mila’s eyes widened. “What?”

“A mate bond. The most sacred connection for my kind.” His fingers traced the curve of her cheek. “That’s why I couldn’t leave you with Kurg. Why every instinct screamed to protect you.”

“But I’m human.”

“The bond doesn’t care about biology. It’s deeper than that, a spiritual connection

that can't be forced or denied." His thumb brushed across her lower lip. "When our hands touched, everything in me shifted. Like finding a piece of myself I never knew was missing."

"Is that why you helped me?" Her voice trembled.

"I helped you because you deserved it. The mate bond just gave me the courage to finally act." He pressed his forehead to hers. "You're not some breeder to me, Mila. You're my equal. My partner. The other half of my soul."

"So, what do mates mean to a Niri, traditionally speaking?"

"It means I'll protect you with my life. Stand by your side through any battle." His eyes blazed with intensity. "It means you'll never be alone again."

A smile curved her lips. "I felt something, too, that day in the market. Like I could trust you, even though everything in my life taught me not to trust anyone."

His heart almost burst out of his chest. His clever mate had sensed their connection, even without knowing what it meant. He gathered her closer, his powerful tail curling around them both.

"The bond grows stronger over time," he explained.

"That sounds absolutely wonderful and beautiful." She traced patterns on his arms. "When did you plan to tell me?"

"I wanted to wait until you felt completely safe with me. Until you knew you could trust me without the bond influencing your choice."

Mila leaned forward, her lips brushing against his with a tenderness that made his

heart stutter. Brivul growled low in his throat, one hand sliding into her hair while the other pulled her closer against his chest.

The sweet taste of her nearly drove him mad. His mate. His to protect, to cherish, to love. Every protective instinct inside him roared to life as she melted into his embrace.

He deepened the kiss, claiming her mouth with passionate possession. Her fingers traced patterns along his scales, sending shivers down his spine. The mate bond hummed between them, a symphony of belonging and rightness.

“I’ll never let anyone harm you again,” he promised between kisses. His tail coiled tighter around them both, creating a protective cocoon.

She pulled back just enough to meet his gaze, her green eyes bright with emotion. “I know.”

Her fingers found the scar on his jaw, tracing it with gentle curiosity. The touch sent sparks through his entire body. He captured her hand, pressing a kiss to her palm.

“My warrior,” she whispered.

Yes, he was her warrior. And she was his mate. Nothing would ever change that.

Brivul rose from the bed, his form towering and commanding, yet he moved with a grace that belied his size. He extended a hand to Mila, his voice a deep rumble. “Join me in the shower?”

Her hand slipped into his, and the rightness of it made his heart clench. Her touch was electric, sending jolts of awareness up his arm and down his spine. Together, they padded across the plush carpet to the bathroom.

Soon under the cascade of water, Brivul looked at Mila, her curves slick and glistening. He reached for the washcloth, lathering it with the hotel's scented soap—a blend of citrus and vanilla. Her breath hitched as he approached, her eyes locking on to his with an intensity that matched his own.

He began at her shoulders, the cloth gliding over her skin in slow, deliberate strokes. His movements were tender yet firm, a testament to his strength and his restraint. Every inch of her was a territory he was privileged to explore, to care for, and to know.

His hands traveled lower, washing her arms, her chest, her stomach, each pass a silent vow of protection and devotion.

When her fingers took the cloth from him, it was her turn to explore, to claim ownership over his body as he had done with hers. Her touch was light, tentative at first, but growing bolder as she traced the contours of his muscles, the ridges of his scales.

Brivul could hardly contain the rumble of satisfaction that built within him. To be touched by one's mate was to be known, to be accepted without reservation. He had never anticipated such intimacy yet now could not live without.

Their eyes met, and in that shared gaze, they communicated without words. This was not the fiery passion of the night before but something deeper, a quiet communion of souls.

Mila

The silk dress whispered against Mila's skin as she walked beside Brivul down the sunlit street. Crystal-paned shopfronts sparkled, so different from the grimy markets she'd known all her life. A breeze carried the scent of fresh bread and grilled meat from nearby cafes.

"You're staring at that bakery like you want to rob it," Brivul said.

"I've never seen pastries that fancy." Mila gestured at the delicate confections in the window. "Look at those little sugar flowers."

"Let's get some."

"We should save the money Talis gave us."

"For what? Being miserable?" Brivul guided her toward the shop door. "You deserve nice things."

The words settled warm in her chest. No one had ever told her that before.

Inside, glass cases displayed rows of colorful treats. The shop owner, a portly Niri with green scales, greeted them with a respectful bow—the kind reserved for wealthy patrons. Mila had to stop herself from bowing back out of habit.

"The raspberry tarts are divine," the owner said. "Fresh from the oven."

“We’ll take four,” Brivul said.

“Two is plenty.”

“Four.” He winked at her. “Trust me.”

They found a quiet table in the corner of a nearby cafe. Mila sank into the plush velvet chair, still not used to such luxury.

“I keep expecting someone to chase us out,” she whispered.

“No one will. You look like you belong here.” Brivul reached across the table and squeezed her hand. “Because you do belong here. With me.”

Her heart fluttered. She still couldn’t quite believe this powerful warrior was her mate. That the universe had chosen her—a former slave—for him.

“What’s that smile about?”

“Just thinking how different everything is now.” Mila took a bite of the tart, closing her eyes as sweetness burst across her tongue. “Just a few weeks ago I was scrubbing Kurg’s floors. Now I’m eating fancy pastries with my mate.”

“Speaking of mates...” Brivul leaned closer, his voice dropping low. “Have I mentioned how beautiful you look in that dress?”

Heat crept up Mila’s cheeks. She dropped her gaze to the half-eaten tart, pushing crumbs around the delicate china plate. “Do you think Talis has already taken the evidence to the council?”

“Eager to change the subject?” A playful smirk tugged at Brivul’s lips.

“I just keep thinking about Kurg getting what he deserves.” The sweet raspberry taste turned bitter in her mouth at the thought of her former master. “After all these years of watching him hurt people.”

“The council moves slowly, but they hate being stolen from more than anything.”

“How long do you think it will take?”

“A few days to verify the evidence. Another week for deliberation.” Brivul’s tail shifted against the cafe’s polished floor. “The council likes their procedures.”

Mila’s fingers twisted in her napkin. A week felt like forever when Priscilla was still trapped in that monster’s clutches. “And you’re sure they’ll arrest him?”

“Embezzlement from the council? They’ll strip him of everything.”

The image of Kurg in chains made her heart soar. Freedom for all his slaves, not just her. Justice at last. She straightened in her chair. “I hope they make it public. I want to see his face when they drag him away.”

“There’s my fierce mate.” Brivul reached across the table and covered her hand with his. His scales were warm against her skin. “Though I’d rather keep you far from him.”

“I’m not afraid anymore.” The words rang true as she spoke them. Somehow this powerful Niri warrior had helped her find her own strength. “I just want it done so we can get Priscilla out.”

“We will. I promise.” The certainty in his violet eyes made her breath catch.

Before long, Mila pushed away the half-eaten tart, her appetite vanishing as thoughts

of Priscilla consumed her. Her sister would love these delicate pastries. She'd always had a sweet tooth. The image of Priscilla's face, drawn and tired from endless work in Kurg's kitchens, twisted like a knife in her chest.

"You're thinking about her again." Brivul's tail curled around her chair leg.

"I keep seeing her alone in that kitchen." Mila's fingers traced the delicate china pattern. "She must think I abandoned her."

"Or she's relieved you escaped Kurg's punishment."

The memory of Kurg's fury made her shudder. "What if he takes it out on her?"

"He won't risk damaging valuable property before his trial."

"She's not property." The words came out sharper than she'd intended.

"You know that's not what I meant." Brivul's eyes softened. "I'm saying she's safer than you think."

Mila's hands clenched in her lap. The silk dress suddenly felt too fine, too indulgent while Priscilla wore rags. "I should be there with her."

"And what good would that do? You'd both be trapped."

"At least she wouldn't be alone."

"Or we can wait for Talis to bring down Kurg properly. Then all his slaves go free." His scaled hand covered hers. "Including Priscilla."

Logic warred with the ache in her heart. "I know you're right. I just miss her so

much.”

“Tell me more about her?”

“She’s quiet, but she notices everything. Always knows exactly what someone needs before they ask.” A fond smile tugged at Mila’s lips. “She used to sneak extra portions to the younger slaves, even when it meant going hungry herself.”

“Sounds a lot like her sister.”

“I promised to protect her.” Mila blinked back tears. “Now I’m sitting in fancy cafes while she suffers.”

“You’re fighting for her freedom. That’s protection, too.”

Mila and Brivul soon stepped out of the cafe into the afternoon sun, her new dress catching the light. The weight of their conversation about Priscilla still hung heavily in her chest, but they had work to do. Brivul’s tail brushed against her leg as they walked, a subtle reminder that she wasn’t alone anymore.

“We should get supplies before heading back,” Brivul said.

The market district sprawled before them, stalls overflowing with fresh produce and dried goods. So different from the meager portions she’d survived on as a slave. “I know just what we need.”

They wove through the crowd, Mila leading them to a vendor selling dried meats and preserved fruits—the kind of food that would last during their journey. Her fingers traced over packets of jerky, remembering how she’d once dreamed of having enough to eat.

“Get whatever you want,” Brivul said.

“That’s dangerous to tell a former kitchen slave.” She selected several packets of the best cuts.

The vendor wrapped their purchases in brown paper. Mila added dried fruit and hard cheese—things that wouldn’t spoil quickly.

“You’re efficient,” Brivul said as they moved to the next stall.

“Had to be.” She examined a loaf of dense bread. “When you’re feeding a household of slaves on scraps, you learn what keeps.”

His tail twitched. She was learning to read his subtle reactions. “That’s not your life anymore.”

“No.” She smiled, adding the bread to their growing collection. “Now I’m shopping like a proper lady in her fine dress.”

“A proper lady who knows exactly what she’s doing.”

They filled their bags with enough supplies to last several days. The weight of real food, bought with honest money, felt foreign yet wonderful against Mila’s hip as they walked. She’d never been able to simply buy what she needed before.

“The transport station is this way,” Brivul gestured down a wide street lined with gleaming buildings.

Brivul’s tail stiffened beside Mila as they finally approached the transport station’s gleaming entrance. She recognized that tension as the same coiled readiness she’d seen in him during their first escape from Kurg.

“Don’t look back right away,” Brivul whispered. “But we’ve got company.”

Mila’s heart hammered in her chest. She counted to ten before casually glancing over her shoulder, pretending to adjust her dress. Three of Kurg’s guards pushed through the crowd behind them. She recognized Vex’s distinctive red scales and Torm’s bulky frame. The third was new, but the matching black uniforms marked them all as Kurg’s men.

“How did they find us?” The words came out barely audible.

“Someone must have recognized us at the market.” Brivul’s hand brushed her lower back, guiding her toward a different entrance. “This way.”

The massive transport station stretched before them, its crystal dome catching the sunlight. On any other day, Mila would have marveled at the architecture. Now all she saw were the shadows between columns where guards could hide and the corridors they could get cornered in.

“The cargo entrance,” she suggested, remembering their previous escape. “They’ll expect us to go to the passenger platforms.”

“Smart thinking.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Mila

Mila's heart dropped as she spotted more of Kurg's guards near the cargo entrance. Their black uniforms stood out against the station's pale walls.

"Run!" Brivul grabbed her hand.

They sprinted across the polished floor, her new dress whipping around her legs. The sound of pursuit echoed behind them—heavy footfalls and shouted commands that made her skin crawl with memories of punishment.

"This way!" She tugged Brivul toward a maintenance corridor she'd noticed earlier. Years of navigating Kurg's stronghold unseen had taught her to spot escape routes.

A guard lunged for her. Brivul's tail whipped out, hitting the man in the chest. The guard stumbled back with a grunt.

They rounded a corner into a bustling lobby. Mila ducked and weaved through the crowd, pulling Brivul along. His larger frame made it harder for him to slip through the gaps, but he managed to keep up.

"Stop them!" Vex's voice carried over the crowd.

Mila's lungs burned as they sprinted down another corridor. The weight of their supplies bounced against her hip with each step, but she refused to drop them. They'd need these supplies later.

Two more guards appeared ahead. Brivul pushed her behind him and engaged them, his movements fluid and precise. The guards' weapons clattered to the floor.

"Nice work," Mila panted as they ran past the groaning guards.

"Had lots of practice." Brivul checked over his shoulder. "More coming."

They ducked into a storage room, pressing themselves against the wall. Mila's heart raced as boots pounded past their hiding spot. The familiar fear of being caught twisted in her gut, but she pushed it down. She wasn't that helpless slave anymore.

Mila pressed her ear against the storage room door, counting footsteps as they faded. Her heart still raced from their sprint through the station. The metal shelving behind her dug into her back, but she didn't dare move.

"The cargo train's not an option anymore," she whispered.

"Agreed. Too many guards." Brivul's tail twitched. "We need another way out."

Through the small window, Mila spotted the station's main entrance. "The front exit. If we blend with the crowd—"

"Ready when you are."

They slipped out, keeping their heads down. Mila's fingers intertwined with Brivul's as they merged into the flow of travelers. The station's vaulted ceiling stretched above them, morning light streaming through stained glass windows.

Every black uniform made her pulse spike. She forced herself to walk normally, though her instincts screamed at her to run. The exit beckoned, just fifty feet ahead. Thirty. Twenty.

Fresh air hit her face as they stepped outside. For one glorious moment, relief flooded through her.

Then she saw them.

Guards formed a semicircle around the entrance, their weapons drawn. More appeared from behind pillars and vehicles, closing the trap. Their black uniforms seemed to absorb the afternoon light.

“Well, this is unfortunate.” Brivul’s tail curled protectively around her.

Mila’s mind raced as she counted their opponents. At least twenty guards, all armed. No escape route in sight. Her stomach churned at the thought of being dragged back to Kurg.

“Drop any weapons and surrender the slave,” one guard called out.

“I have a name,” Mila snapped back.

“Last warning.”

The circle tightened. Mila’s back pressed against Brivul’s chest as the guards closed in. So close to freedom, only to fail now.

The crowd of guards suddenly parted, and Mila’s blood ran cold as Kurg stepped forward. His greasy skin gleamed in the afternoon light, that familiar smirk twisting his features.

“My wayward little slave. Did you really think you could escape me?”

Mila pressed closer to Brivul, her fingers curling into fists. “I’m not yours anymore.”

“Touch her and die.” Brivul’s tail lashed, his muscles coiling for attack.

Kurg’s laugh echoed across the courtyard. “Such spirit. But perhaps this will change your mind.” He gestured to his guards. “Bring her out.”

Two guards dragged forward a limp figure. Mila’s heart stopped. Priscilla’s face was barely recognizable through the bruises, her dress torn and stained with blood.

“No!” The cry tore from Mila’s throat. “What have you done to her?”

Priscilla lifted her head, her swollen eyes finding Mila’s. “I’m sorry,” she whispered.

“Let her go!” Mila lurched forward, but Brivul held her back. “Please. She’s innocent.”

“Come back willingly,” Kurg said, “and I’ll release her. Simple trade—you for her.”

Tears burned Mila’s eyes as she watched her sister tremble between the guards. All those years she’d stayed to protect Priscilla, and now her escape had caused this. Her sister’s blood stained the ground because of her choices.

“Don’t,” Priscilla croaked. “Don’t give yourself up for me.”

But how could she not? This was her baby sister, the one she’d raised after their mother died. The one she’d sworn to protect.

“I’ll make it even simpler.” Kurg’s voice hardened. “Either you return to me now, or I’ll make you watch while I finish what I started with her.”

Mila’s chest constricted as memories flooded back—holding Priscilla through nightmares, teaching her to read in secret, sharing stolen moments of laughter in the

kitchen. Her sister was all she had left of their family.

“Time to choose, little slave.”

“Don’t do it.” Brivul’s voice cracked with desperation. “We’ll find another way.”

Mila’s heart shattered as Priscilla coughed, blood staining her lips. Her sister’s face was so swollen, yet somehow, she still managed a weak smile for her. The same smile she’d worn when Mila would sneak her extra bread from the kitchen.

“He’ll protect you.” Priscilla’s voice came out as a whisper. “Go with him.”

“I won’t leave you.” Tears streaked down Mila’s cheeks. “I promised Mother I’d keep you safe.”

Brivul’s tail wrapped tighter around her waist. “Mila, please. Stay with me. We can save her together.”

But Mila saw the truth in Kurg’s eyes—that familiar gleam of cruelty. He’d make her watch every moment of Priscilla’s death, drag it out until her sister’s screams echoed through her nightmares forever.

“I love you, sister.” Priscilla’s words came between rattling breaths. “But I won’t be your chain anymore.”

Mila’s chest constricted. All those nights holding Priscilla after beatings, wiping away her tears, telling her stories of freedom—how could she walk away now?

“I’ll find a way to protect both of you.” Brivul’s words carried such conviction, but Mila knew better. She’d seen too many of Kurg’s victims.

“My mate.” She turned in Brivul’s arms, memorizing his violet eyes. “I can’t watch her die.”

“Don’t throw your life away.” His hands cupped her face. “Not when we’ve just found each other.”

A sob caught in Mila’s throat as she pressed her forehead to his. “Keep fighting, my warrior. But I have to go.”

“So touching.” Kurg’s mocking voice cut through their moment. “Your choice, slave?”

Mila pulled away from Brivul’s warmth, each step feeling like daggers in her heart. Cold air rushed between them as she stepped toward Kurg.

“I’ll go with you. Release my sister.”

“Wise choice.” Kurg’s oily smile made her stomach turn.

The guards holding Priscilla dragged her forward, shoving her toward Brivul. Her sister stumbled, barely catching herself. Fresh blood dripped from her split lip.

“No, Mila, please.” Priscilla’s voice cracked.

Metal clinked as shackles closed around Mila’s wrists. The familiar weight settled against her skin, heavier than she remembered. Or maybe it just felt that way after tasting freedom.

“Take care of her.” Mila’s eyes locked with Brivul’s violet eyes one last time. His jaw clenched, scales bristling with rage.

Rough hands grabbed her arms, yanking her toward a waiting transport. The afternoon sun caught on her chains, making them gleam. Just yesterday those same rays had warmed her skin as she'd walked freely with Brivul.

"Move it." A guard shoved her forward.

She caught a glimpse of Brivul gathering Priscilla into his arms before the transport door slammed shut. Darkness pressed in around her as the engine rumbled to life. The metal bench beneath her was cold, matching the emptiness spreading through her chest.

How had everything fallen apart so quickly? Just hours ago she'd woken up in Brivul's arms, dreaming of a future together. Now she was back in chains, heading toward whatever punishment Kurg had planned.

As the transport lurched forward, Mila closed her eyes, trying to memorize every detail of her time with Brivul—his laugh, his touch, the way his tail would curl protectively around her. She'd hold onto those memories in the dark days ahead.

A sob caught in her throat. She wouldn't cry. Not here. Not where Kurg's guards could see her break.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Brivul

Brivul's claws dug into his palms as Kurg's transport took off down the street, taking Mila far away. Every instinct screamed at him to chase after them, to tear through anyone who stood between him and his mate. But Priscilla's ragged breathing beside him demanded his attention.

"Stay with me." He scooped up Priscilla's battered form. Blood matted her golden hair, and purple bruises bloomed across her face. Her skin burned with fever against his scales.

The nearest clinic was three blocks away. Brivul slithered through the crowded streets, cradling Priscilla against his chest. The tang of copper filled his nostrils with each labored breath she took.

"Almost there." His jaw clenched. Kurg would pay for this—for hurting both sisters. But first, he had to honor Mila's sacrifice by saving Priscilla.

The clinic's doors slid open with a hiss. "This woman needs immediate attention."

"Sir, we require payment before—"

"You'll treat her now." Brivul hissed, violet eyes flashing. "Or I'll ensure this establishment never sees another patient."

The clerk's mouth snapped shut. She pressed a button and medical staff rushed forward with a hover-stretcher.

“Multiple contusions, possible internal bleeding,” one medic rattled off as they whisked Priscilla away. “Get her to trauma bay three.”

Brivul’s fists clenched and unclenched as he watched them disappear through the double doors. The warrior in him wanted to tear through the city hunting Kurg. But abandoning Priscilla would destroy any trust Mila had placed in him.

“Your mate?” The clerk’s voice was softer now.

“Her sister.” The words tasted bitter. He’d failed to protect both of them.

“She’s in good hands. Doctor Ren is the best trauma specialist in the district.”

Brivul gave a curt nod and settled into the waiting area. He’d get Priscilla stable and then find a way to rescue Mila. His mate was strong. She’d survive until he could reach her. She had to.

The antiseptic smell of the clinic burned Brivul’s nostrils as he paced the waiting room. His tail lashed against the floor, drawing concerned looks from other patients. Let them stare. His mate was in danger.

“Sir, please remain seated.” A nurse wrung her hands. “You’re disturbing the other patients.”

“Then get me an update on Priscilla’s condition.”

“The doctor will—”

“Now.”

The nurse scurried away. Brivul resumed his pacing, his mind racing through

scenarios. A frontal assault on Kurg's compound would be suicide since the kingpin's security rivaled military installations. Sneaking in might work, but he'd need detailed blueprints. Intel. Resources.

"Damn it." His fist connected with the wall.

Going through official channels would take too long. By the time the Council of Seven acted on Talis's evidence, Mila could be dead.

"Priscilla is stabilized." The nurse's voice cut through his thoughts. "She'll make a full recovery."

Relief loosened some of the tension in his shoulders. At least he hadn't failed both sisters completely. But each second he spent here was another second Mila suffered.

"When can she be moved?"

"Sir, she needs at least—"

"How long?"

The nurse swallowed. "Twenty-four hours minimum."

Brivul nodded curtly. One day. He had one day to form a plan while keeping his promise to protect Priscilla. His scales clicked against the floor as he resumed pacing.

Maybe he could pose as a buyer? No, Kurg would recognize him instantly. Cause a distraction? Possible, but risky without backup. Every option seemed to lead to either certain failure or Mila's death.

The scar on his jaw throbbed as he ground his teeth. He was a former general of the

Niri forces. He'd led countless successful missions. Why couldn't he see a clear path now when it mattered most?

Suddenly, the perfect idea came to him, and he made his way down the clinic's service corridor, his warrior instincts guiding him past the staff. The communication terminal had to be somewhere in the administrative wing. His tail brushed against the sterile walls as he tracked the smell of electronics and ozone.

There. A small office with the door slightly ajar. He slid inside, scanning the room before settling at the terminal. His claws clicked against the keys as he input Lors's private frequency.

"This better be important." Lors's voice crackled through the speaker.

"I need your help. My mate's been taken."

"Your mate? Since when do you—"

"Focus. Remember Kurg the kingpin?"

"The slimeball who thinks he owns half of Jorvla? Yeah."

"He has her. And I'm going to get her back." Brivul growled. "But I can't do it alone."

"Slow down. What's the situation?"

Brivul outlined everything—the evidence against Kurg, Mila's capture, Priscilla's condition. His fists clenched as he spoke.

"You always did find the most interesting trouble." Lors chuckled. "I'll contact Nia,

Cantos, and Kev. Maybe even Fikleio, if I can track him down.”

“How fast can you get here?”

“Give me twelve hours. We’ll need gear and a solid plan.”

“Make it six. Kurg’s not known for his patience.”

“Eight. And that’s pushing it.” Lors paused. “You really care about this human. Don’t you?”

“She’s my mate.” The words came out as a possessive growl. “Anyone who touches her dies.”

“There’s the general I remember. Eight hours. Keep your comm open.”

The connection closed. Brivul erased all traces of the call and slipped back into the corridor. Eight hours. He could protect Priscilla and plan their assault in that time. Kurg would learn why taking a Niri general’s mate was a fatal mistake.

Brivul soon entered Priscilla’s room, his scales rustling against the sterile floor. The sharp scent of antiseptic couldn’t mask the copper tang of blood that still clung to her bandages. His jaw clenched at the sight of her bruised face, tear tracks cutting through the dirt and dried blood.

“He’s going to kill her.” Priscilla’s voice cracked. “She shouldn’t have traded herself for me.”

“Your sister made her choice.” The words came out rougher than he intended. Seeing Priscilla’s pain reminded him too much of his own failure to protect them both.

“You don’t understand. Kurg will make her suffer.” Fresh tears spilled down Priscilla’s cheeks. “He’ll break her just to prove he can.”

A growl rumbled in Brivul’s chest. His claws dug into his palms, drawing blood.

“Listen to me.” He straightened himself up to his full height, letting his warrior’s presence fill the small room. “I was a general of the Niri forces. I’ve commanded armies and taken down entire pirate fleets. Your sister is my mate, and I will tear apart anyone who stands between us.”

Priscilla’s eyes widened. “Mate? But she’s human...”

“She’s mine.” The possessive growl in his voice made Priscilla flinch. He forced himself to soften his tone. “I have soldiers coming. Warriors I trust with my life. We’re going to get her back.”

“You promise?”

“On my honor as a warrior.” Brivul’s eyes blazed. “Kurg will regret ever laying hands on either of you.”

Priscilla’s shoulders relaxed slightly.

Brivul pulled a chair close to Priscilla’s bed, his tail coiling with barely contained tension. “Tell me everything about Kurg’s stronghold—every entrance, every guard rotation.”

“The main gate has six guards at all times.” Priscilla’s voice trembled. “But they bring in supplies through a service entrance on the east side.”

“How many guards are there?”

“Two, usually. Sometimes three during deliveries.”

Brivul’s claws clicked against the metal bed rail as he absorbed the information. His military mind mapped out potential infiltration points.

“What about inside? Security systems?”

“Motion sensors in all the corridors.” Priscilla’s fingers twisted in the sheets. “And cameras. But there’s a blind spot near the kitchen storage. That’s how Mila and I used to sneak extra food.”

A low growl rumbled in his chest at the thought of his mate having to steal food to survive. He’d make Kurg pay for every indignity she’d suffered.

“Where does Kurg keep his... prisoners?”

“The lower level. It’s...” Priscilla swallowed hard. “It’s where he breaks people who defy him.”

Brivul’s massive form tensed. The thought of Mila in that basement made his blood boil.

“Guard rotations down there?”

“Four guards, changing every six hours. But Kurg’s personal enforcer is always nearby.”

“Description?”

“Massive Draknid. Nearly as tall as you. Has a cybernetic eye that can see in the dark.”

Brivul committed every detail to memory, already planning how to neutralize each threat. The enforcer would be a challenge, but nothing would stop him from reaching his mate.

“The access codes change daily,” Priscilla continued. “But Mila discovered that Kurg keeps them written down in his office. He never could remember them.”

A hint of pride colored Brivul’s voice. “My mate is a very bright girl.”

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Brivul

The landing pad's lights cut harsh shadows across Brivul's scales as he tracked the approaching ship. His tail twitched with impatience. Soon, the familiar whine of Niri thrusters filled the air as the sleek vessel touched down.

The loading ramp hadn't fully descended before Lors burst out, his golden scales gleaming in the moonlight.

"You look like shit, General."

"Still outrank you, Lieutenant." Brivul clasped Lors's forearm in a warrior's greeting. The familiar gesture settled something in him he hadn't realized was unsettled.

Nia emerged next, her violet eyes scanning the perimeter before focusing on him. "Sir."

"Drop the sir , Nia. I resigned, remember?"

"Once our general, always our general." Cantos's deep voice rumbled as he ducked through the hatch.

Kev and Fikleio followed, their weapons clearly visible despite their civilian attire. Good. They had come prepared.

"Didn't expect all of you to show up." Brivul's throat tightened. These warriors had followed him through hell once before.

“As if we’d let you storm a fortress alone.” Fikleio checked his blade with practiced ease. “Besides, it’s been too long since we had a proper fight.”

“This isn’t just another battle.” Brivul’s claws flexed. “Kurg has my mate.”

“Your mate?” Nia’s head snapped up. “The human?”

“Yes.” The word came out as a possessive growl. “And I’ll tear through anyone who stands between us.”

“Then we’ll clear the path.” Lors clapped his shoulder. “The unit’s got your back, General. Always will.”

The others nodded, and Brivul felt the familiar surge of pride. These weren’t just soldiers. They were family. His chest swelled as he looked at each face, remembering countless battles fought side by side.

“Thank you.” The words felt inadequate. “All of you.”

“Save it for after we rescue your mate.” Cantos checked his weapons. “Now, what’s the plan?”

Brivul walked up the loading ramp, and they all followed him faithfully.

The ship’s familiar hum vibrated through Brivul’s scales as he stood at the tactical display. His old unit gathered around, their faces lit by the blue glow of the holomap showing Kurg’s stronghold.

“Three main entry points.” Brivul’s claw traced the perimeter. “Guards rotate every four hours. Priscilla says the east entrance is least defended.”

“Perfect breach point.” Lors leaned forward. “We could split into teams.”

“Two teams.” Nia tapped the display. “One for distraction, one for extraction.”

The tactical planning felt natural, like slipping into old armor. Brivul’s chest swelled with pride at how quickly they fell back into their roles.

“Kev, your stealth skills would be valuable on the extraction team.”

“Already packing sonic dampeners.” Kev patted his gear. “Guards won’t hear us coming.”

Fikleo cracked his knuckles. “Leave the distraction to me. I’ll give them something to worry about.”

“The main challenge will be reaching Mila’s cell.” Brivul pulled up the interior layout. “Underground level, heavy security.”

“Just like that prison break on Niri Prime.” Cantos’s scales rippled with anticipation. “Remember how we handled that?”

“Smoke bombs in the ventilation.” Lors grinned. “Classic.”

“We’ll need to move fast.” Brivul’s tail lashed. “Once they realize we’re there, Kurg might try to use Mila as leverage.”

“Not if we get to him first.” Nia’s violet eyes narrowed. “Cut off the head...”

“And the body falls.” Brivul nodded. His claws dug into the display’s edge. “We go in at night shift change. Lors, Nia—you’re with me on extraction. The rest of you, make sure they don’t know which way to look.”

The familiar rhythm of planning calmed the rage burning in him. Every second without Mila felt like torture, but he'd do this right. For her.

“Questions?”

Five heads shook in unison. They knew their roles, just like always.

“Good,” Brivul said. “Let's bring my mate home.”

As their ship was en route to Kurg's stronghold, the familiar scent of military rations filled the ship's common area. Brivul watched his old unit settle around the table. His tail curled with satisfaction at their easy camaraderie, despite the year apart.

“Remember that time on Vega Six?” Lors passed around the protein packs. “When the general here had us eat bugs for three days straight?”

“Better than starving.” Brivul's scales rippled with amusement. “Though Fikleio's face when that beetle crawled out—”

“We swore never to speak of that again.” Fikleio pointed his fork accusingly.

Nia snorted. “At least bugs don't compare to that mystery meat from the Zenith campaign.”

The laughter that followed loosened something in Brivul's chest. He'd forgotten this—the way they could find humor even before the deadliest missions. His gaze swept over each of them, committing their faces to memory.

“Getting soft on us, General?” Cantos caught his look.

“Just appreciating having the best unit in the galaxy at my back again.”

“Wouldn’t be anywhere else.” Kev’s quiet voice carried weight. “You led us through worse.”

Brivul’s jaw tightened. He’d walked away from all this—the responsibility, the brotherhood. Thought he could live a simpler life. But watching them now, sharing a meal like old times, he realized how much he’d missed it.

“Should’ve kept in touch better,” he admitted.

“You needed time.” Lors’s understanding tone made Brivul’s scales itch. “That civilian ship hit us all hard. But you’re still our general.”

“And we’ve got your mate to rescue.” Nia’s practical reminder brought nods all around.

Brivul’s claws flexed against the table. Mila. Every instinct screamed to charge in guns blazing, but having his unit here steadied him. They’d do this right.

The familiar routine of a pre-mission meal settled over them. They ate efficiently, their bodies preparing for action, while trading the kind of casual banter that came from years of trust.

Brivul’s scales tingled in the cool night air as their ship settled onto the abandoned landing pad. The familiar weight of his tactical gear pressed against his chest as he led his unit down the ramp. Street lights cast an oily sheen across the deserted industrial district of Jorvla.

“Formation Delta,” he whispered, and his team fell into position without hesitation.

Kev melted into the shadows ahead as their point man. Lors and Nia flanked Brivul while Cantos and Fikleio brought up the rear. Their footsteps whispered across the

stone, a sound that brought back countless midnight raids.

“Two guards, northwest corner,” Kev’s voice crackled through their comms.

Brivul raised his fist, and the unit froze as one. His tail twitched with predatory anticipation as he watched the guards pass. Every muscle in his body yearned to charge forward, to tear through anyone between him and Mila. But years of command experience held him in check.

“Clear.” Kev’s signal sent them moving again.

They wove through the maze of warehouses, each member instinctively covering the others’ blind spots. The acrid tang of industrial chemicals couldn’t mask the familiar scent of his unit—the metallic bite of weapons oil, the leather of their gear.

“Like old times,” Lors murmured as they pressed against a wall, waiting for Kev’s next signal.

Brivul’s jaw clenched. This was different. This wasn’t just another mission. Mila’s face flashed through his mind—her fierce green eyes, her determined chin. His mate needed him.

“Kurg’s outer perimeter ahead,” Nia reported. “Security’s tighter than intel suggested.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Brivul’s voice carried the steel of command. “We’re getting in.”

His unit’s quiet murmurs of agreement steadied him. They’d followed him through impossible odds before, and they’d do it again.

Brivul’s claws flexed against his weapon as images of Mila tormented his thoughts.

The memory of her bruised face from their first escape twisted his gut. If Kurg had marked her perfect skin again...

His tail lashed, nearly striking the wall. The thought of his mate in pain made his scales bristle with rage.

“General?” Lors’s quiet voice pulled him from his dark musings.

“I’ll kill him.” The words came out in a low growl. “If he’s hurt her, I’ll tear him apart with my bare hands.”

“We’ll get to her in time.”

But Brivul barely heard the reassurance. His mind filled with Mila’s fierce green eyes, her determined spirit that refused to break even under Kurg’s abuse. She was his—to protect and cherish. He’d failed her once by letting Kurg take her. Never again.

The mating bond ached in his chest, an empty void where her presence should be.

His jaw clenched as he forced down the primal urge to roar his challenge to Kurg. He was more than just an alpha male driven by instinct. He was a former general, a tactical commander. And he would use every skill, every strategy he’d ever learned, to ensure Mila’s safety this time.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Mila

The chains bit into Mila's wrists as she shifted on the damp stone floor. Her ribs protested with each shallow breath, a reminder of Kurg's brutality. The underground cell reeked of mold and decay, its darkness broken only by thin shafts of light filtering through a barred window near the ceiling.

"At least Priscilla's safe now." Her whisper echoed off the stone walls. The image of her sister's beaten face haunted her, but the knowledge that Brivul would protect her brought a measure of comfort.

The cold seeped through her torn dress, making her long for Brivul's warmth. Their last morning together felt like a distant dream now—his gentle touch, the safety of his arms, the way his violet eyes had sparkled when he called her his mate.

A rat scuttled across the floor, its claws clicking against stone. Mila drew her knees closer to her chest, ignoring the protest of her bruised muscles. "You should see this place, Brivul. Makes the cargo hold look luxurious."

Her fingers traced the rough wall behind her, finding grooves carved by previous prisoners. How many others had sat here, counting their breaths while waiting for rescue or death? The thought of Priscilla ending up here made her stomach turn.

"I'd do it again." She tested her chains for the hundredth time. "Every time. For her."

Blood trickled down her arm where the metal had rubbed her skin raw. The metallic scent mixed with the musty air, making her dizzy. Or perhaps that was the blow to

her head. The guards hadn't been gentle when they'd dragged her down here.

Heavy footsteps echoed down the corridor. Mila's heart raced as Kurg's silhouette appeared through the rusty bars. His rings glinted in the dim light as he unlocked her cell and stepped in.

"Look what we have here. The little slave who thought she could outsmart me." Kurg's cologne couldn't mask the stench of cheap liquor on his breath. Behind him loomed his enforcer, the Draknid's cybernetic eye casting an eerie red glow across the stone walls. Four guards flanked him, their weapons trained on her.

"I think I might have found the perfect buyer for you." Kurg's thick fingers gripped her chin. "The mines of Korus always need fresh meat. The radiation burns will be the least of your problems."

Mila jerked away from his touch, her chains rattling. The thought of those mines made her blood run cold. No one survived there more than a few months.

"And once you're safely underground, I'll pay your dear sister a visit." His lips curved into a cruel smile. "Maybe I'll make it quick. Maybe I won't."

The Draknid's mechanical eye whirred as it focused on her. Its red beam cut through the darkness, scanning her like she was merchandise to be cataloged.

"You won't touch her." Mila snapped.

Kurg laughed, the sound bouncing off the damp stone walls. "Bold words from someone in chains. Your sister was always the weak one of you two. It won't take much to break her. Just like your mother."

Rage burned through Mila's veins, hot enough to make her forget her injuries. Her

mother had died protecting them both. She wouldn't let her sacrifice be in vain.

Kurg finally stepped back, straightening his elaborate coat. "Enjoy your last night of relative comfort. The mines aren't known for their hospitality."

Kurg's footsteps faded up the stone stairs, leaving Mila with his four guards and the Draknid enforcer. The enforcer's red eye tracked her every movement, its mechanical whir setting her teeth on edge.

A crash suddenly echoed from above, followed by shouts. The guards turned toward the noise, their weapons raised.

Brivul burst through the doorway at the top of the stone stairs. Three other Niri warriors followed, their movements fluid and practiced as they descended the stone stairs and engaged the guards. The clash of metal on metal soon filled the cramped space.

"Get away from her!" Brivul's deep voice thundered through the cell.

Mila's heart soared at the sight of him. He moved with lethal grace, his blade finding gaps in the guards' armor. One of his companions—a female Niri with silver scales—took down two guards with precise strikes while the others handled the remaining forces.

The Draknid enforcer charged at Brivul, his cybernetic eye glowing brighter. Their weapons met in a shower of sparks. Brivul fought with controlled fury, each strike purposeful. The enforcer's mechanical parts sparked and sputtered under Brivul's onslaught until a final blow sent him crashing to the ground.

"Mila." Brivul rushed to her side, his eyes scanning her injuries. His fingers were gentle as he broke her chains. "I'm so sorry I let them take you."

The metal fell away and Mila collapsed into his arms, breathing in his familiar scent. Her bruised ribs protested, but she didn't care.

"You came for me."

"Always." He cradled her face, careful of her injuries. "I'm never letting you out of my sight again."

His companions secured the unconscious guards while Brivul examined her wounds. His touch was feather-light as he checked her ribs.

"Can you walk?"

"I think so." Her legs shook as she stood, but Brivul's arm around her waist kept her steady.

"We need to move," one of his companions called from the doorway.

Mila planted her feet despite the pain shooting through her legs. "Wait." Her voice cracked from disuse, but determination steadied her next words. "We can't leave. Not yet."

The silver-scaled female Niri peered around the corner. "More guards are coming."

The damp stone walls of the cell seemed to close in, but Mila straightened her spine. "Kurg will hunt us down wherever we go. He has connections everywhere." Her ribs ached with each breath. "The only way to truly be free is to expose him."

Torchlight flickered across Brivul's violet eyes as he supported her weight. The warmth of his scales against her side almost made her forget the chill of the dungeon.

“His private terminal.” Mila licked her cracked lips. “If we can send the evidence of his embezzlement directly from there, the Council of Seven can’t deny its authenticity.”

Shouts echoed down the corridor, growing closer. Metal scraped against stone as guards approached. The acrid smell of smoke drifted down from above—likely from whatever distraction Brivul and his soldiers had created to get in.

“The terminal’s three floors up.” She gripped Brivul’s arm tighter. “We’ll never have another chance like this while his guards are scattered and we’re already inside.”

The sound of running footsteps grew louder. One of Brivul’s companions drew his weapon. Mila’s heart beat erratically in her chest, but she held firm. This was their moment to end it all—to ensure Priscilla’s freedom, to stop Kurg from hurting anyone else.

“Listen to me,” Mila insisted. “As long as Kurg has power, we’ll never be safe.”

“You can barely stand.” Brivul’s eyes flickered with concern as he steadied her. “We need to get you medical attention.”

The distant sounds of fighting echoed through the stone corridors, but Mila refused to back down.

“If we run now, we’ll spend the rest of our lives looking over our shoulders.” Her ribs screamed in protest as she straightened.

The silver-scaled female Niri at the doorway shifted. “More guards approaching from the east wing.”

“Three floors.” Brivul’s jaw clenched as he looked up the spiral staircase. “Through

who knows how many guards.”

“I know the layout.” Mila pressed her hand to his chest, feeling his rapid heartbeat beneath her palm. “I’ve cleaned every inch of this place. There’s a service passage the guards don’t use. It’ll take us right to his private wing.”

His scales rippled with tension beneath her touch. She saw the battle in his eyes—the need to protect her warring with the tactical advantage of her plan.

“You’re my mate.” His voice dropped low. “I just got you back.”

“And I want a future with you where we’re truly free.” The words came from deep in her heart. “Where we can build a life together without fear.”

Brivul studied her face for a long moment. His tail coiled around her protectively as shouts grew closer. Finally, he gave a sharp nod.

“Show us the way.” He scooped her into his arms, mindful of her injuries. “But if things go wrong, we retreat immediately.”

Relief flooded through her as she pointed toward a narrow corridor. “Left at the junction. The hidden door is behind the tapestry.”

Brivul

Brivul cradled Mila against his chest, his jaw clenching at the sight of her bruises. The narrow underground corridor stretched before them, lit by torchlight that cast eerie shadows on the stone walls.

“Nia, get the others in position,” Brivul commanded. “Three floors up, outside Kurg’s communications room.”

Nia nodded, pulling a small dagger from her belt. “Take this,” she said, pressing it into Mila’s hand. “Just in case.”

As Brivul headed down the narrow corridor, the sound of explosions echoed from around the corner—Lors and Kev’s distraction. Brivul slithered silently through the corridor, keeping Mila secure against him. Her breath hitched with each movement.

“I’ve got you,” he murmured in her ear.

“I know.” Mila’s fingers curled into his shirt. “The service passage is through here.”

They reached the junction. An ancient tapestry hung at the end of the left corridor, its threads dulled with age and dust. Brivul quickly reached the tapestry and shifted Mila’s weight to one arm. Using his free hand, he swept the fabric aside, revealing a narrow door.

“Security panel,” Mila said, reaching for the keypad. Her fingers trembled as she input the code that had never been changed for this entrance.

The door slid open with a soft hiss. Brivul's tongue flicked out, tasting the air for threats. The passage beyond was clear, but the metallic tang of blood—Mila's blood—made his protective instincts surge.

“Hold tight,” he said, navigating the space. His tail propelled them forward smoothly, avoiding the scattered debris that could give away their position.

Another explosion rocked the building. Dust rained down from the ceiling.

“Lors always did love making things go boom,” Brivul muttered, drawing a weak laugh from Mila.

They reached a maintenance shaft. Brivul coiled his tail, preparing to ascend. “Up we go. Three floors to Kurg's private comm room.”

“And then we end this,” Mila said, her voice gaining strength despite her injuries. “For good.”

Once they reached Kurg's private communications room, a flash of movement at the end of the hall caught Brivul's attention. Guards. At least six of them, their weapons already drawn. His muscles tensed as he gently set Mila down behind a decorative column.

“Stay here.” He pressed a quick kiss to her temple. “I won't let them near you.”

The thunder of boots echoed through the corridor as the guards charged forward. A familiar war cry rang out behind them—Cantos's signature battle roar. His old crew had the guards flanked.

Brivul's blood sang with the thrill of combat. This was what he was made for. He launched forward, his tail propelling him with deadly grace. The first guard didn't

even have time to raise his weapon before Brivul's fist connected with his jaw.

"Just like old times, eh, General?" Lors called out, driving his knee into a guard's stomach.

"Less talking, more fighting." But Brivul couldn't help the fierce grin that spread across his face as he moved in perfect sync with his former soldiers.

A guard's blade whistled past his ear. Brivul caught the man's wrist, twisted, and used the guard's momentum to throw him into two of his companions. They went down in a tangle of limbs.

"Behind you!" Nia's warning had him ducking just as she vaulted over his shoulders, her boots catching another guard in the chest.

The corridor filled with the sounds of combat—grunts of pain, the clash of weapons, bodies hitting walls. Brivul moved through it all with deadly precision, each strike calculated and brutal. These men had helped hurt his mate. His vision tinged red at the edges.

"Clear!" Fikleio called out as the last guard slumped unconscious.

Brivul straightened, surveying the scattered bodies with satisfaction. None dead, but they wouldn't be getting up anytime soon. He turned back to where he'd left Mila, his heart rate settling only when he saw her safe and unharmed.

"Secure the perimeter," he ordered. "We hold this position until we accomplish what we came for."

Brivul and Mila slipped into Kurg's private communications room, Brivul's tail coiled protectively around her. The terminal hummed against the far wall, its blue

glow casting shadows across polished marble floors. His nostrils flared at the lingering scent of Kurg's cologne—a sickly sweet stench that made his skin crawl.

“Can you find it again?” He kept his voice low, positioning himself between Mila and the door.

“Give me two minutes.” Mila's fingers flew across the keypad, her jaw set with determination despite her injuries.

Brivul's muscles tensed at every footfall in the corridor outside, ready to destroy anyone who dared interrupt them.

“There.” Mila's voice held quiet triumph. “Same transmissions as before, showing the embezzled funds.”

Brivul moved closer, his chest pressed against her back as he peered at the screen. Complex financial data scrolled past, but he trusted Mila's assessment. His mate was brilliant.

“Sending it now, directly to the council's emergency channel.” Her fingers trembled slightly as she input the commands. “They can't ignore this—not when it comes straight from his private terminal.”

“That's my mate.” He squeezed her shoulder, pride swelling in his chest. She'd outsmarted them all.

The terminal chimed softly—transmission complete. Mila sagged against him in relief, and he gathered her close, careful of her injuries.

“Let's get you out of here.” He scooped her into his arms, already planning their escape route. The council would come for Kurg soon enough, but Brivul wasn't about

to wait around for the aftermath.

Brivul slithered out of the communications room with Mila held securely against his chest. The corridor stretched before them, now littered with unconscious guards. His old unit formed a protective circle around them, weapons at the ready.

“Exit route?” Lors asked, checking around a corner.

“Service tunnels.” Brivul’s tongue flicked out and tasted the air—fresh blood and gunpowder with more guards ahead. “Two levels down.”

Nia took point while Cantos covered their rear. The familiar formation settled something in Brivul’s chest. This was what he’d trained them for. His tail muscles coiled with anticipation as boots thundered down the adjacent hallway.

“Company,” Fikleio warned.

A burst of weapon fire peppered the wall beside them. Brivul curled around Mila, shielding her with his body as marble chips exploded outward.

“Take them down,” he ordered, his voice hard as steel.

His soldiers moved like a well-oiled machine. Nia dropped and rolled, coming up firing. Kev launched a smoke grenade while Lors charged through the chaos. The sounds of combat filled the corridor—grunts, crashes, and the meaty thud of fists meeting flesh.

“Path’s clear,” Cantos called out.

Brivul surged forward, every protective instinct screaming to get his mate to safety. Mila’s fingers dug into his shoulders as he navigated the turns, following the route

she'd described earlier.

More guards appeared at the end of the hall, but Brivul didn't slow. He couldn't—not with Mila injured and vulnerable in his arms. His soldiers fanned out behind him as he barreled straight toward the threat.

“Down!” Mila suddenly shouted.

Brivul dropped instantly, trusting her instincts. A blade whistled over where his head had been a moment before. His mate's quick thinking saved them both.

“That's my mate,” he growled with pride, continuing their advance while his team engaged the new threats.

The service tunnel entrance waited just ahead, its metal door gleaming dully. Almost there. Just a little further and they'd have a clear shot at escape.

Brivul's tail muscles bunched, ready for the final sprint. Then the click of multiple weapons being primed froze him in place.

Guards melted from the shadows, their laser rifles trained on Brivul and his team. More emerged from side passages until the corridor bristled with weaponry. At their center stood Kurg, his oily lips twisted in a smirk.

Brivul's battle instincts screamed as he counted the opposition. Thirty guards at least, all armed to the teeth. His own soldiers formed a tight circle, but they were hopelessly outnumbered. The metallic tang of gun oil and sweat filled his nostrils.

“Get behind me,” he commanded Mila as he set her down and shifted to shield her with his body. Her warmth against his back steadied him, even as rage coursed through his veins. No one would touch his mate again.

“We’re surrounded, General,” Lors muttered, his weapon trained on the nearest cluster of guards.

“I see that.” Brivul’s mind raced through combat scenarios, discarding each as too risky with Mila injured. His tail coiled protectively around her legs.

Nia’s fingers tightened on her rifle. “Orders?”

The guards pressed closer, their weapons humming with charged energy. One wrong move would turn this corridor into a killing field.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Mila

Mila huddled behind Brivul's protective bulk. Her ribs screamed in protest, each breath a sharp reminder of Kurg's cruelty. Armed guards blocked both ends of the narrow corridor, their weapons trained on their small group.

"Did you really think you would get away again?" Kurg's silky voice echoed off the walls. "I own this stronghold. I own you."

Brivul's massive tail curled around her protectively. His friends formed a defensive circle around them, but Mila counted at least thirty guards. The odds turned her stomach.

"You own nothing." Blood trickled down Mila's chin as she spat the words.

"Stupid girl. My power and influence are far reaching. Soon, all of Jorvla will be my domain." Kurg's bulk rippled with arrogance. "And all of you will be dead."

Sweat beaded on Mila's forehead as she pressed closer to Brivul. His scales were warm against her skin, grounding her despite the terror clawing at her chest.

Kurg's eyes fixed on Brivul. "Step aside, and I'll make her death quick. Fight, and you'll watch her suffer first."

"Touch her and die." Brivul's voice rumbled through his chest, deep and deadly.

"So be it." Kurg raised his hand, signaling his guards. "Kill them all."

Suddenly, heavy boots thundered down the corridor, accompanied by the metallic clang of armor. Mila's heart leaped as Jorvlen authorities poured in from both ends, their weapons trained on Kurg's guards. At their head strode Kingpin Talis, her porcelain skin gleaming under the harsh lights.

"Stand down, Kurg." Talis's voice rang with authority.

Kurg's lips pulled back in a snarl. "Come to steal my territory at last?"

"This isn't about our rivalry." Talis produced an official document bearing the council's seal. "By order of the Council of Seven, you're under arrest for embezzlement and treachery against Jorvla."

The blood drained from Kurg's face. Mila savored his expression, though her legs trembled with relief. She gripped Brivul's arm to steady herself.

"Impossible." Kurg growled. "You have no proof."

"The council received quite an interesting transmission from your personal terminal." Talis's smile was razor-sharp. "They found your creative accounting... concerning."

Kurg's guards lowered their weapons, clearly unwilling to fight the authorities. Some even stepped away from their former master. The cowards who'd helped him torture slaves now couldn't distance themselves fast enough.

"Secure him," Talis commanded.

As the authorities moved in, Kurg thrashed and spat threats. "You'll regret this! All of you! Especially you, slave!"

Mila straightened her spine despite her injuries. "My name is Mila." The words tasted

like freedom on her tongue. “And I’m not your slave anymore.”

A mix of relief and accomplishment flooded through Mila’s body as she watched the authorities drag Kurg away. Brivul turned to her, a wide grin spreading across his face.

“We did it.” His violet eyes sparkled with pride. “Actually, you did it.”

“Not just me.” Her gaze swept over Lors, Kev, Nia, Cantos, and Fikleio. Their weapons still drawn and faces streaked with sweat and grime. “Thank you all.”

Lors grinned. “That was some impressive strategy to take down Kurg.”

“Should’ve seen her planning it.” Brivul’s chest swelled. “Mind like a general, this one.”

Heat crept up Mila’s cheeks. Strange how a simple compliment could affect her more than facing down Kurg. The blue scales of Brivul’s arms glinted as he pulled her closer, mindful of her injuries. His warmth seeped into her tired muscles.

“My brilliant mate.” His deep voice rumbled through her.

Before she could respond, his lips met hers in a gentle kiss. Her heart fluttered.

Cantos cleared his throat. “Get a room, you two.”

Mila pulled back, laughing despite her aching ribs.

Talis strode toward them, her iridescent skin catching the harsh lights of the corridor. Mila leaned into Brivul’s supportive embrace, her body aching but her spirit soaring, as the kingpin approached.

Talis's crystalline features softened into a smile. "You two certainly have impeccable timing," Talis said. "I've spent the last few days trying to convince the council that the evidence you brought me on the data chip wasn't fabricated. Then suddenly, a transmission from Kurg's own terminal arrives, confirming everything."

Mila's chest tightened with emotion. "Thank you for believing in us enough to try."

"You're very welcome," Talis replied. "Oh, and your sister asked me to tell you she's doing well," Talis added. "The healers at my estate say she'll make a full recovery."

Relief washed over Mila. "You're keeping her safe?"

"Of course." Talis's sapphire eyes sparkled. "Though she's quite worried about you. She nearly tried to sneak out and follow Brivul on his rescue mission."

Brivul chuckled, the sound rumbling through his chest where Mila rested against him. "That sounds like your sister."

"Thank you again," Mila said, meeting Talis's gaze. "For everything." Her voice cracked slightly.

"You did the hard part," Talis replied. "Both of you. Taking down Kurg will reshape the power structure of Jorvla for the better. The council won't forget that."

The weight of those words settled over Mila. She'd started this journey just wanting to save herself and her sister. Somehow, she'd ended up changing so much more.

Mila's relief soon evaporated as Talis's guards herded slaves into the courtyard. Her muscles tensed, and she pressed closer to Brivul, her ribs protesting the movement. The familiar sight of downcast eyes and shuffling feet sent ice through her veins.

“What’s happening?” she whispered to Brivul, her fingers digging into his scales.

His tail curled protectively around her. “I don’t know.”

The slaves huddled together in the courtyard’s center. Their fear-filled eyes darted between Talis and the armed guards.

“Did we just trade one master for another?” The words slipped out. Her heart hammered against her bruised ribs as memories of similar gatherings under Kurg’s rule flooded back—inspections, punishments, sales.

Brivul’s arm tightened around her waist. “I won’t let that happen.”

Talis approached the gathered slaves, her crystalline features unreadable. Mila’s throat constricted. Had she been wrong to trust the kingpin? The evidence against Kurg had served Talis’s interests, after all. Maybe this had been her plan all along—eliminate a rival and acquire his assets, including his slaves.

“By order of the Council of Seven,” Talis’s voice rang out across the courtyard, “all slaves owned by the criminal Kurg are hereby…”

Mila’s fingers dug deeper into Brivul’s scales. She’d fought so hard for freedom, only to end up here again. Her mind raced, already planning escape routes and weighing options…

“...emancipated.”

The word hung in the air. Mila blinked, certain she’d misheard.

“What?” A slave woman’s voice cracked with disbelief.

“You’re free,” Talis said simply. “All of you. The council has determined that Kurg’s assets were acquired through illegal means. That includes his claim of ownership over you.”

The courtyard erupted in a cacophony of gasps, sobs, and incredulous laughter. Mila watched, stunned, as decades of bondage fell away in an instant.

“I told you everything would work out,” Brivul murmured against her hair.

Tears blurred Mila’s vision as she watched her fellow slaves embrace each other, their faces transformed by joy and disbelief.

Brivul’s eyes met hers, filled with pride and something deeper. His blue scales caught the light as he cupped her face in his massive hands. “You did this. You freed them all.”

“I never dreamed...” Her voice cracked. Tears spilled down her cheeks, but for once they weren’t from pain or fear. “I just wanted to save myself and Priscilla. But now...”

“Now you’ve changed everything.” His thumb brushed away her tears. The gentleness of his touch made her breath catch.

Mila rose on her tiptoes, ignoring the throbbing of her bruised ribs. Her hands found his shoulders, warm scales smooth beneath her palms. When their lips met, the celebrating crowd around them faded away. His kiss tasted of victory and promise, of a future she’d never dared imagine before.

His tail curled around her waist, supporting her weight as she melted against him. The scent of him, leather and something uniquely Brivul, filled her senses. Her mate. The word still thrilled her.

“I love you,” she whispered against his lips. The words she’d held back, afraid to voice while still bound by slavery, now flowed freely.

His answering kiss was fierce and tender all at once. “My brave mate.” His deep voice rumbled through her. “I’ve never been prouder to fight at anyone’s side.”

Mila buried her face in his chest, overwhelmed by joy, exhaustion, and love. At this moment, Mila realized she didn’t have to hold back anymore. She didn’t have to hide her feelings or guard her words. She was free to love, free to live, free to be exactly who she was.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Brivul

Brivul adjusted his formal attire as he watched Mila descend the grand staircase of the council palace. The emerald silk dress hugged her curves, making his breath catch. Her dark hair cascaded in elegant waves, and the birthmark on her temple seemed like an artist's deliberate flourish.

"You're staring," Mila said, a smile playing at her lips as she reached the bottom step.

"Hard not to." He slithered forward, offering his arm.

The crystalline chandeliers cast rainbow patterns across Mila's emerald dress as she glided beside Brivul through the council's grand ballroom. His chest swelled with pride at the way other guests' heads turned to admire his mate.

"Everyone's staring at you," Brivul whispered, his tail curling around her waist.

"They're staring at both of us. You're the great general who helped take down Kurg."

"Former general."

"Once a general, always a general." Mila's fingers traced the medals pinned to his formal uniform. The council had reinstated his rank along with additional honors for exposing Kurg's corruption.

The marble floors gleamed beneath them. Sweet incense wafted from golden braziers, mixing with the perfume of a hundred exotic flowers arranged in towering vases.

A Niri nobleman approached, his eyes lingering too long on Mila's exposed shoulders. Brivul drew himself up to his full height, his scales bristling. The nobleman quickly found somewhere else to be.

"You're adorably protective." Mila's eyes sparkled with amusement.

"Can't help it."

"I can take care of myself, you know."

"Oh, I know. But that doesn't mean I won't fight anyone who looks at you wrong."

She laughed, the sound making his heart skip.

A gong chimed, signaling dinner. Brivul guided Mila toward their seats at the high table, savoring how perfectly she fit against his side. A week ago, they'd been fugitives. Now they were honored guests in the council's palace.

Brivul pulled Mila's chair out at the high table, and she settled gracefully into her seat. The golden plates before them caught the light from crystal chandeliers, casting warm reflections across her face.

"The council certainly knows how to celebrate," Mila whispered, leaning close.

The scent of her—jasmine and something uniquely her—made his scales ripple with pleasure. "They should. You helped expose one of the biggest corruption scandals in Jorvlen history."

"We did it together."

His tail curled possessively around her chair. A year ago, he'd been drowning in guilt

and shame, convinced he'd never be worthy of a good life or happiness ever again. Now, watching Mila charm the dignitaries around them with her quick wit and warm smile, he felt whole. Happy.

“What are you thinking about?” Mila's fingers brushed his arm.

“How lucky I am.” He grabbed her hand, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. “A few months ago, I was just a security guard going through the motions. Then you walked into my life.”

“And caused nothing but trouble.”

“The best kind.” His violet eyes met her green ones. “You gave me my purpose again. A reason to fight.”

The first course soon arrived—some exotic Jorvlen delicacy that probably cost more than his old security job paid in a month. But Brivul barely noticed the food. His attention kept drifting to Mila and the way she carried herself with such quiet strength. She'd gone from slave to honored guest, yet she handled it all with natural grace.

At this moment, Brivul realized that his future stretched bright and clear before him. No more hiding. No more letting life pass him by. With Mila at his side, he felt ready to take on the entire universe.

After the dinner celebration ended, Brivul guided Mila through the ornate palace corridors to their chambers. The silk of her gown whispered against his scales with each step.

Inside their room, moonlight spilled through towering windows onto marble floors. Brivul helped Mila out of her formal gown, his breath catching at the sight of the

bandages wrapped around her ribs. His jaw clenched, remembering Kurg's cruelty.

"Let me check these." His fingers traced the edge of a bandage.

"They don't hurt anymore." Mila's skin flushed under his touch.

Brivul unwound the bandages with careful movements. The bruises had faded to nothing, leaving her skin smooth and unmarked. Relief flooded through him. He'd failed to protect her once—never again.

They changed into the silk robes provided by the palace staff. The fabric was impossibly soft against his scales, but his attention stayed fixed on Mila. The way the midnight blue silk draped her curves made his blood heat.

"Come." He took her hand, leading her onto the balcony.

Three moons hung in the velvet sky, casting silver light across the palace gardens below. Stars sparkled like scattered diamonds, and a warm breeze carried the scent of night-blooming flowers.

Mila leaned against the balcony rail. "It's beautiful."

"Yes. But not as beautiful as you." He watched how the moonlight painted silver highlights in her dark hair, how it made her green eyes luminous.

His tail wound around her waist, drawing her closer. She fit perfectly against him. Like she was meant to stand by his side. The sweet scent of her skin mixed with jasmine from the gardens below.

"I never thought I'd see a view like this." Mila's voice was soft. "A slave dreaming of the stars."

“You’re not a slave anymore,” Brivul said in a low voice. “You’re my mate. My warrior queen.”

She turned in his arms, pressing closer. The silk of their robes whispered together as her fingers traced his jaw. His scales rippled at her touch.

Above them, a shooting star streaked across the sky, leaving a trail of silver in its wake. But Brivul barely noticed, lost in the depths of Mila’s eyes.

His protective instincts surged at her proximity, wanting to shelter her from everything that had hurt her before.

“Come to Nirum with me,” he said in a low voice. The words had been building inside him all evening. “You and Priscilla both.”

Mila’s green eyes widened. “Nirum?”

“I have a home there.” He drew himself up to his full height, wanting her to understand what he could provide. “The universities there are the finest in the system. You could study anything you wanted.”

Her fingers traced patterns on his scales, sending electricity through his blood. “You’d do that? For both of us?”

“I’d give you the stars themselves if you asked.” The fierce possessiveness in his voice surprised even him. “You’ll want for nothing. Neither will your sister.”

“But what about your position? The council reinstated your rank.”

“I don’t care about rank anymore.” His eyes locked with hers. “I care about you. About us. About building a life together where you’re truly free to become everything

you were meant to be.”

A smile curved her lips, making his heart stutter.

His tail tightened around her waist. “Say you’ll come with me to Nirum.”

“Yes.” She pressed closer, her warmth seeping into his scales. “I’ll go with you to Nirum.”

Pride and possession roared through him. His mate chose him, trusting him to provide for her and keep her safe. The warrior in him preened at her acceptance.

“When can we leave?” she asked.

“Tomorrow, if you wish.” His fingers traced the line of her jaw. “I’ll have my ship prepared by morning.”

She smiled up at him. “Then let’s go home.”

Brivul cupped Mila’s face in his hands, his thumbs tracing the delicate line of her cheekbones. The moonlight caught in her eyes, turning them to liquid emeralds. He lowered his head to claim her lips.

The kiss started gentle but quickly deepened with barely contained passion. Her hands pressed against his chest, sending electricity through him. The sweet taste of her, the soft press of her body against his, made his head spin.

“You’re all mine now,” he growled against her lips. The words held centuries of Niri instinct, the primal need to possess and protect his mate.

“All yours,” Mila whispered back.

Joy exploded through him, pure and overwhelming. After years of darkness and doubt, she'd brought light back into his world.

The three moons cast their silver glow over them as Brivul drew back just enough to drink in the sight of her. Her dark hair spilled over his arms, her lips curved in a smile that was his alone.

"I never thought I could be this happy," he rumbled, his violet eyes intense.

"Neither did I." Her fingers traced his jaw. "It all feels like a dream."

"No dream." He nuzzled her temple. "This is very real, and you're mine. And I'll spend the rest of my life making sure you never doubt either of those things."

Brivul

Brivul led Mila back into their palace suite, the cool marble beneath their feet a stark contrast to the warmth that crackled between them. The moonlight followed them, casting a silver glow over the opulent room, but Brivul had eyes only for his mate.

He guided her to the edge of the large four-poster bed, its curtains billowing softly in the night breeze. Mila's green eyes met his, a mixture of trust and desire that made his chest swell with primal satisfaction. He was her protector, her mate, and soon, he would be her greatest pleasure.

With a gentle touch, he undid the sash of her robe, his fingers brushing against the soft skin of her shoulders. The fabric whispered to the floor, pooling at her feet and leaving her gloriously naked before him. His gaze raked over her, taking in the delicate curves and valleys of her body, each inch more precious than the last.

"You are so beautiful," he murmured.

Mila's cheeks flushed, her eyes dropping before meeting his once more with a spark of defiance. "And you, Brivul, are still dressed."

With a chuckle that held an edge of raw need, Brivul shed his robe, revealing the hard evidence of his desire for her. His members sprang free, thick and ready, and he watched with satisfaction as Mila's eyes widened, her breath hitching ever so slightly.

He laid her down on the bed with him, the cool sheets a stark contrast to the heat that radiated from her skin. Starting at her lips, he kissed his way down her body, savoring

the taste of her, the feel of her skin beneath his lips and tongue. Her soft moans and the way her fingers tangled in his hair spurred him on.

“Mila,” he growled against her stomach, his hands skimming up her thighs, “I want you to straddle my face. I want to taste you, to feel you lose control because of my tongue.”

Her breath came in short, sharp gasps, her eyes dark with need. “And what will you have me do while I’m... straddling your face?”

His lips curled into a wicked smile. “I want you to take me in your mouth. I want us to pleasure each other, to be so wrapped up in each other that nothing else exists.”

For a moment, she hesitated, her gaze flickering between his eyes and the hard lengths of him. Then, with a determined nod, she moved to obey, positioning herself over his mouth as he lay back against the pillows.

His hands gripped her hips, guiding her down until he felt the heat of her against his lips. His long tongue darted out, tasting her, and she gasped, her body shuddering above him. At the same time, she wrapped her small hand around his primary member, her touch tentative at first but then growing bolder as she took him into her mouth.

The dual sensations were exquisite torture. The taste of her and the feel of her lips around him, the soft sounds of pleasure she made as he explored her with his tongue—it was almost too much. His scales rippled with the effort of holding back, of not letting himself be swept away by the overwhelming tide of pleasure.

“Mila,” he murmured, his voice muffled by her body. “Take your pleasure from me. Let me hear you.”

And she did, her cries growing louder, more desperate, as he brought her closer and closer to the edge. He felt her tightening around his tongue, her body coiling, and with a final flick of his tongue, she shattered, her body convulsing as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her.

As her orgasm subsided, she released him from her mouth, her body collapsing beside him on the bed. Brivul turned to her, his own need pounding through his veins, and gathered her into his arms.

He claimed her lips once more, his body poised above hers, ready to make her his in every way possible. Her skin was warm against his, the scent of her arousal mingling with the musk of his own need.

“Mila,” he said, his voice a low growl, “I need to be inside you.”

She nodded, her breath coming in short, eager pants. He positioned himself at her entrance, the slick heat of her welcoming him. Slowly, he entered her, his girth stretching her and claiming her as his own. Her gasp of pleasure-pain was music to his ears, a testament to their perfect fit.

He began to move, each stroke a promise, each withdrawal a tease. Her fingers dug into his shoulders, her body arching to meet his, an unspoken demand for more. He indulged her, increasing his pace, the sound of their joining flesh a symphony of raw desire.

“You feel incredible,” he murmured, his lips brushing against her ear. “So tight, so perfect.”

Her response was a moan, her eyes fluttering closed as she lost herself in the sensations. Brivul felt the coiling tension within her, a storm about to break, and he knew he was the only one who could calm the tempest raging inside his mate.

He shifted his angle, targeting the spot he knew would send her over the edge. Her body bucked, her inner walls clenching around him as she cried out, her orgasm ripping through her like a bolt of lightning.

The feel of her climax triggered something primal within him. With a guttural growl, he withdrew from her warmth and flipped her onto her hands and knees. He entered her from behind in one powerful thrust, the new position allowing him to go deeper, to claim her more completely.

His hands gripped her hips, his fingers leaving marks on her creamy skin as he set a fierce pace. Each stroke was a testament to his need, his desire to possess her, body and soul. Mila met each of his thrusts with an eagerness that drove him wild, her cries of pleasure spurring him on.

“This feels so good,” she gasped, her body tightening around him as another orgasm began to crest.

The admission was all Brivul needed to send him hurtling over the edge. With a final, powerful thrust, he buried himself deep within her, his member pulsing as he spilled his seed. The force of his orgasm was blinding, a rush of sensation that obliterated all thought, all reason.

They collapsed onto the bed, their bodies slick with sweat and satisfaction. Brivul rolled onto his side and took Mila with him, unwilling to break their intimate connection just yet.

As their breathing slowed and their heartbeats returned to normal, Brivul pressed a gentle kiss to Mila’s temple. “You are more than I ever could have hoped for,” he said, his voice soft with awe and wonder.

Mila turned in his arms, her green eyes shining with unshed tears. “And you, Brivul,”

she said, her voice trembling with emotion, “are more than I ever dreamed possible.”

Their lips met in a tender kiss, a silent vow of their shared future. As Brivul held Mila in his arms, he knew he would protect her, cherish her, and love her with every fiber of his being.

He soon pulled the silk sheets over their bare bodies, savoring the way Mila curled against him. Her skin was warm and soft against his scales, fitting perfectly in the curve of his body.

“I love you, Mila,” he murmured, his deep voice but a whisper. His fingers traced lazy patterns along her spine, feeling the slight shiver that ran through her body at his touch.

She lifted her head, her green eyes meeting his with an intensity that made his heart race. “I love you, too, Brivul.” Her fingers traced his jaw, a touch so gentle it made his chest tight with emotion.

He tightened his arms around her, pulling her closer until there wasn’t a breath of space between them. The sweet scent of her skin filled his nostrils, and he pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. Peace settled over him, a feeling he hadn’t known since before that fateful mission. But this was different—better. This was home.

Their breathing synchronized as sleep claimed them. Brivul felt Mila’s body grow heavy against his, her breath evening out. His eyes grew heavy, but he fought to stay awake just a moment longer, wanting to savor this perfect moment.

Finally, surrounded by the warmth of his mate and the quiet of the night, Brivul allowed himself to drift off, feeling completely and utterly fulfilled for the first time in his life.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:33 am

Mila

Mila gazed out the window of their Niri home, sunlight dancing across the crystalline spires of the city. Her datapad rested in her lap, filled with notes from her latest political science class. A year ago, she wouldn't have dreamed this life was possible.

"Still studying?" Priscilla's voice came from behind her. Her sister looked healthier than ever, her eyes bright with the freedom they now enjoyed.

"Just reviewing my speech for tomorrow's council meeting," Mila replied. "I can't believe they're going to listen to my proposal for interplanetary slave liberation laws."

Priscilla settled beside her on the window seat. "Because you're making them listen. You've got that fire in you."

The front door opened, and Brivul's massive form filled the doorway. His violet eyes found hers immediately, and warmth spread through her chest.

"How are my favorite humans today?" He crossed the room in one fluid motion, his blue scales catching the light.

"Your mate is working too hard again," Priscilla teased, standing up. "I'm heading to my art class. Don't let her skip lunch."

After Priscilla left, Brivul coiled around Mila protectively. "She's right. You've been at those notes all morning."

“I need this to be perfect.” Mila leaned back against him, drawing strength from his presence. “The council needs to understand that what happened on Jorvla isn’t isolated. Countless others are still suffering.”

“And they will listen,” Brivul assured her, his jaw brushing her temple. “You’ve already helped pass three human rights bills in the past year. You’re making real change.”

Mila set aside her datapad, turning to face him. “Sometimes I still can’t believe this is real. Having a voice, being heard, being free to learn and fight for others.” She traced the scar on his jaw. “Being with you.”

“Believe it.” He caught her hand and kissed it. “Now, how about some lunch before you return to changing the galaxy?”

“Fine.” She laughed, letting him pull her to her feet.

She followed Brivul through their garden, the twin suns of Nirum casting dancing shadows through the crystalline arbor above. He guided her to their favorite spot beneath a shade tree, where a small table waited.

“Close your eyes,” Brivul said, his tail swishing with barely contained excitement.

Mila obliged, listening to the rustle of something being retrieved. The sound of a basket being set on the table made her smile.

“Okay, open them.”

Her breath caught at the sight of the vibrant oranges nestled in the woven basket. “You remembered.”

“Of course I did.” Brivul picked one up, his scales catching the sunlight. “That day when we were walking through those maintenance tunnels, when you told me you’d never tried them... I promised myself I’d change that someday.”

Warmth bloomed in her chest as she selected one of the oranges, its weight perfect in her palm. She slowly peeled it and took a bite. The sweet citrus taste exploded in her mouth. “Wow, that really is delicious,” Mila said, smiling widely.

She then touched Brivul’s arm. “Wait here.”

She hurried into their kitchen, retrieving the carefully wrapped package she’d hidden away. It had taken three attempts to get the recipe right, but the spicy-sweet aroma told her this batch was perfect.

When she returned, Brivul’s eyes widened at the familiar scent. “Is that...”

“Your mother’s spice bread recipe.” Mila set it before him, watching his expression soften. “You mentioned it that same day in those tunnels, how you missed it.”

Brivul’s usual commanding presence gentled as he unwrapped the loaf, and Mila caught the shimmer of moisture in his eyes before he blinked it away.

“It smells exactly like hers.” His voice was rough with emotion. He broke off a piece, savoring it. “Tastes like it, too. How did you...”

“I may have contacted your father for the recipe.” Mila grinned. “He was more than happy to share it with his son’s mate.”

Brivul pulled her close, pressing his forehead to hers. “You’re extraordinary. You know that?”

After their lunch in the garden, Mila grabbed her datapad and rushed through the crystalline halls of their home. “I’m late for Advanced Political Theory!”

“Have a good class,” Brivul called after her, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

The university grounds buzzed with activity as students of all species hurried between classes. Mila still marveled at how natural it felt now, being among them as an equal. Her mind wandered during lectures, distracted by messages from Brivul about meeting him for dinner at the Crystal Spire—one of the most exclusive restaurants in the city.

After her final class, she found him waiting outside in formal attire, his scales polished to a brilliant shine. Her heart skipped. Even after all this time, the sight of him still took her breath away.

“You look beautiful,” he said, helping her into a hover transport.

The restaurant sat atop the tallest crystal spire in the city. Through the transparent walls, the twin moons of Nirum painted everything in silver light. Their table overlooked the glittering expanse of the capital.

“This is incredible,” Mila whispered, taking in the view. “But what’s the occasion?”

Brivul smiled mysteriously. “Can’t I spoil my mate?”

They talked through dinner about her classes, his work with the military advisory board, and their shared dreams for the future. As they finished dessert, Brivul grew unusually quiet.

“Everything okay?” she asked.

He slithered from his chair and raised himself to his full height before her. “Mila, when I found you that day in the market, I had no idea you would change my entire world.” His voice roughened with emotion as he produced a ring of twisted gold and crystal. “Would you do me the honor of becoming my wife as well as my mate?”

Tears pricked at Mila’s eyes. This beautiful, brave man who had saved her, supported her, and loved her unconditionally—how could she give any answer but yes?

“Yes, of course I will,” she managed through happy tears.

The ring slid perfectly onto her finger, catching the moonlight. Brivul gathered her close, and the other diners burst into applause.

Mila’s heart fluttered as Brivul’s arms encircled her, his scales cool and smooth against her skin as he leaned down to kiss her. His lips met hers with tender reverence, and she melted into him. The applause from the other diners faded away until there was only this—only them. His scent wrapped around her, that unique mixture of leather and spice that had become her comfort.

“I love you,” she whispered when they finally parted. “Though I think you’ve made quite a scene, my warrior.”

Brivul chuckled. “Let them look. I want the whole galaxy to know you’re mine.”

“As if the mate bond wasn’t enough?” She raised an eyebrow, playing with the ring. The twisted gold felt perfect on her finger, as if it had always belonged there.

“That’s just for us.” He pressed his forehead to hers, a gesture that had become their own private sign of affection. “This is for everyone else. Though I must admit, I was worried you might say no.”

“After everything we’ve been through?” Mila whispered. “After you helped me find my voice, my freedom? You’re stuck with me, General.”

“Former general,” he corrected automatically, making her laugh.

“Always my general,” she countered, rising on her tiptoes to kiss him again. The ring caught the light once more, sending rainbow fractals dancing across his blue scales.

The hover transport glided through the crystalline streets of Nirum, its quiet hum matching the contentment in Mila’s heart. She kept stealing glances at the ring on her finger, watching how it caught the light of the twin moons. Beside her, Brivul’s scales reflected the city’s glow, making him look almost ethereal.

“You haven’t stopped smiling since we left,” he said.

“I can’t help it.” Mila leaned into his side, savoring his familiar warmth.

The transport settled outside their home, its crystal architecture catching the starlight. As they walked through their garden, the night-blooming flowers released their sweet perfume, as if celebrating with them.

“The universe has a strange way of working things out,” Mila mused, pausing to look up at the stars. “All those years of struggling, of protecting Priscilla, of trying to survive... they were leading me to you.”

Brivul pulled her close, his scales cool against her skin. “Then I suppose I should thank the universe for bringing me my perfect mate.”

Mila

Beneath the canopy of their favorite shade tree, the world seemed to narrow down to just the two of them. The stars above twinkled with an amusement that mirrored the joy in Mila's heart.

"You know, I think I could spend an eternity just looking up at the stars with you," Brivul murmured, his blue scales shimmering in the starlight.

Mila leaned into his solid form, her head resting against his arm. "I'd like that," she said, her voice soft with contentment.

He turned to face her, and his lips found hers in a kiss that was both possessive and tender. It sent shivers cascading down her spine, pooling in a warmth that spread through her core.

With a surprising gentleness, Brivul lifted her up and set her down on the small table. The cool metal surface against her skin was a stark contrast to the heat radiating from his touch.

He began to undress her with urgency. Mila's breath hitched as he exposed her to the night air, his eyes drinking in the sight of her. His kisses journeyed down her neck, across her collarbone, and further still to the tender peaks of her breasts. She gasped as his tongue lapped at her, the sensation sending jolts of pleasure coursing through her.

"Brivul," she whispered, her fingers threading through his hair, urging him on.

He responded with a growl that vibrated against her skin, his hands gripping her hips with an urgency that betrayed his own need. Slowly, he trailed kisses down her stomach, each one a promise of the delights to come.

When he reached the apex of her thighs, Mila's body tensed in sweet anticipation. His long tongue was impossibly agile, probing and exploring her with a skill that left her breathless. He soon licked and sucked at her most sensitive spot, his tongue delving into her with a rhythm that soon had her crying out in ecstasy.

Her climax hit her like a supernova, waves of pleasure crashing over her as she clung to him. He lapped up her juices hungrily, his groans of satisfaction resonating within her.

As the aftershocks subsided, Brivul lifted his head, his eyes meeting hers with a look of adoration that took her breath away.

Mila's pulse quickened as Brivul shed his clothes, revealing the impressive length and girth of his arousal. The sight never failed to stir a primal hunger within her. His eyes locked on hers with a silent command that sent a shiver down her spine.

"Come here," Brivul said. He took a seat on the chair beside the table, his blue scales catching the moonlight.

Mila rose from the table, her body still humming from the pleasure he had so expertly coaxed from her. She moved toward him, the anticipation of what was to come making her heart flutter with excited anxiety.

"I want you to straddle me," he instructed, his hands gently guiding her hips as she positioned herself above him.

With a deep breath, Mila slowly lowered herself onto his hard member, feeling it fill her completely. The sensation was overwhelming, and she couldn't help but let out a

low moan as she adjusted to his size.

His hands moved to her waist, his grip firm as he guided her movements. “Ride me, Mila,” he commanded, his voice laced with a raw need that mirrored her own.

She moved, slowly at first, savoring the feeling of him inside her. But as her pleasure grew, so did her pace. Mila’s breaths came in short gasps as she ground against him, each thrust sending waves of ecstasy through her body.

Brivul’s possessiveness took over, and he dominated their rhythm, thrusting harder and faster. His eyes never left hers, and the intensity of his gaze made her feel as though she was the only woman in the universe.

His hands moved to her breasts, his fingers pinching and rolling her nipples while she rode him. The combination of pleasure and pain was exquisite, and before long another orgasm began to build within her.

“Brivul, I’m—” she gasped, but her words were cut off by a cry of pleasure as her climax ripped through her.

He didn’t slow down, his thrusts becoming even more aggressive as he chased his own release. Mila clung to him, her fingers digging into his shoulders as her orgasm shook through her.

With a final, powerful thrust, Brivul buried himself deep inside her. His body shuddered as he reached his own climax, his hot seed spilling into her with a force that left them both breathless.

Long moments passed as they sat there, their bodies entwined and slick with sweat. Mila felt Brivul’s heart pounding in rhythm with her own, a testament to the passion they had just shared.

Finally, he lifted her off him and set her down gently on the chair he had vacated. She watched as he dressed, his movements graceful despite his size.

“You never cease to amaze me, Mila,” Brivul said, his voice filled with warmth and admiration.

She smiled up at him, her body still tingling from their lovemaking. “You’re pretty amazing yourself, General.”

Mila got dressed, her fingers still trembling from the aftershocks of their lovemaking. The cool night air caressed her skin, a gentle contrast to the heat that burnt within her moments before. Brivul stood beside her as she adjusted her clothes.

Together, they walked back inside their home, the world outside fading into a backdrop of remembered passion. The familiar surroundings of their sanctuary welcomed them, a testament to the life they had built together over the past year.

Once inside, Brivul turned to her with a playful glint in his violet eyes. “Ready for round two?” he asked, his deep voice laced with a mischievous promise.

She felt her cheeks flush with a mixture of anticipation and surprise. “Already?” she teased.

He chuckled, the sound resonating in the quiet space. “With you, always,” he replied.

Mila’s heart fluttered at his words. She knew she would never tire of his desire for her, which matched her own. With a nod and a smile playing on her lips, she followed him toward the bathroom.

They soon undressed each other, their movements a dance of familiarity and urgency. The shower’s spray was a warm embrace as they stepped onto the cool tiles. Within seconds, he pressed her against the wall, his hands exploring her petite frame with a

possessiveness that made her feel cherished and desired. His lips met hers in a searing kiss that left her breathless, the taste of him mingling with the water's sweetness. Her fingers threaded through his wet hair as she pulled him closer, deepening their kiss.

His hands roamed over her slick skin, igniting a fire within her that only he could quench. Her breath hitched as he lifted her up, her legs wrapping around his waist as he positioned himself at her entrance.

In one fluid motion, he entered her, filling her completely. She gasped at the sensation, her body stretching to accommodate his size. The water cascaded around them, a symphony of droplets that accentuated each thrust of his hips.

She clung to him tightly as he moved within her. Each stroke fanned the flames of her desire, a relentless rhythm that drove her toward the edge of ecstasy.

"Brivul," she whispered, her voice laden with need.

He responded with a fervor that matched her own, his movements becoming more insistent, more demanding.

Her body soon shattered around him as the waves of pleasure ripped through her. She felt him follow her over the edge, his own release pulsing within her as he claimed her with a primal intensity that left them both spent and sated.

They remained entwined under the shower's spray, their breathing slowly returning to normal. Brivul set her down gently, his arms lingering around her as if he never wanted to let go.

Mila looked up at him, her heart brimming with love and gratitude for the Niri who had become her protector, her confidant, and her greatest ally.

After they stepped out of the shower and reached for towels, Mila couldn't help but

marvel at the journey they had embarked upon. From the depths of despair to the heights of passion, they had found solace and strength in each other's arms.

And at that moment, as Brivul wiped a droplet of water from her cheek with a tenderness that belied his warrior-like exterior, Mila finally realized this was always her destiny.

Thank you so much for reading Naga General's Mate!