



# Bred By Fafnir

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal

**Description:** Humanity is desperate, scattered amongst the stars at the mercy of the planets that will have us, but mostly we have nothing. No hope, no prospects, nothing. Poverty, crime, disease, we're the running joke among the highly advanced alien species that surround us. We're desperate, all of us, but we're not entirely without worth... without use. Humans are still good for cheap labor and entertainment, oh and breeding. Human women are great for breeding.

That's where the Solar Breeding Agency comes in. For a hefty fee and a dowry paid to our families, an alien in need of a surrogate can buy us. When my mom starts skipping meals to sneak more food onto my sister's plates, my dad buried in an unmarked grave... I'm not left with a ton of options. But when I'm paired with a dangerous, berserker alien known for the visceral way he kills and rumored to be suffering with an incurable affliction called war madness, my prospects are dimming by the second. Good thing I only need to lie down and be bred. That shouldn't be too hard, right? But what if it feels better than I expected? What if I end up liking the rough way he handles me? The way he allows no one else near. What if when our time is up and he has the baby he requires, he doesn't let me leave? What if I don't want to go?

**Total Pages (Source):** 51

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## Prologue

They warned us, well, warned the generations before us anyway. Ones who made the laws and ignored the signs, knowing they'd never live long enough to see the fallout of the decisions they did and didn't make. By the time someone decided to listen, it was far too late. Too late for humanity and definitely too late for Earth. Our planet was dead, a husk of flooded, crisp land, storms that would decimate settlements and wipe out family lines. Now? We're scattered among the stars, beggars to planets that will have us, and parasites to planets that won't. Safe to say humans are at an all-time low. We found Terra2, sure, but where we were once eight billion two hundred fifty million four hundred twenty-three thousand six hundred thirteen strong... now? Humanity is in the millions, low millions and dwindling rapidly. Poverty, disease and hunger, and desperation keep the slightly heavier air of Terra2 tainted with the type of smell that makes you wrinkle your nose and breathe through your mouth. Our only real entertainment comes in the form of hazy old Earth media or when one of us is lucky enough to get off-world.

We're desperate, outnumbered, objectively kind of dumb, and valuable.

The trillions of highly advanced alien races know this.

We know this.

Moms, dads, sons, but especially... daughters know this.

You see, for all our rapid fall from grace, humans are still good for a few things, things that keep us dangling just off the edge of extinction. Easy labor, entertainment,

occasionally, horrifically food, but most of all breeding.

Aliens of various kinds have long established breeding agencies, some accredited by the Intergalactic Alliance, others not so much. But humans, we turned the industry on its head. Overpopulation was just one of the many nails in our planet's proverbial coffin, but now? Now it's that very ability to populate that just might save us.

one

Lenora

The holo pager has been buzzing, gripped in my hand for so long that my palm is numb. Tingling like it does when I sleep on it, shoved under my pillow at an odd angle. My chest rising and plunging, but not as fast as I thought it would be. They'd said there was a wait, a backlog of applicants ahead of me. They said I had plenty of time. I even remember the building sense of dread I felt when the Oozarian woman and her husband had assured me as much. It wasn't even the slightest bit reassuring.

How long would it take? Months? Years? Weeks?

I needed a placement now; my family needed the credits now.

How many more months would my sisters and I have to watch Mom scrape more food onto our plates than hers?

I needed this, had even prayed for it despite not being a believer in anything or anyone in particular. I'd taken the shuttle back down to Terra2 with my hands wringing in my lap, eyes screwed shut, sending up shapeless pleas to the stars.

It had only been a few days later when the package had arrived, along with a note:

Human Lorena Morales of Terra2, congratulations on your entry to the Solar Breeding Agency! Inside, you'll find your uniform and fertility injections. Once paged, you have twenty-four zentics to arrive at the Vortara Space Station office. Come dressed, medicated, and clean. You will meet your match, sign your agreements, and be on your way. Failure to arrive in a timely manner can result in penalties warded against you. You may bring a small bag for personal effects, no clothing or personal care items are necessary as the matching party will provide anything you may require.

There was a stark bud of anticipation, fear, and... curiosity?

What species would I be paired with?

Would they be kind?

Are they advanced enough to use artificial insemination, or would I have to lie with them? Will it hurt? What if they are too large, if their reproductive organs are too, well, alien for me? Can I dissociate long enough to get the job done?

It is something the older Oozarian woman had seemed to emphasize a lot, reveled in, much to her husband's annoyance. Those who do not agree to being bred the natural way often sit on the roster for years.

My family doesn't have years.

Our credits are gone. My sisters are too young to work according to the Intergalactic Alliance. Mom already has two jobs where so many have none, and my shifts at the butcher pay close to nothing.

He left us with nothing.

My fist clenches the buzzing pager so hard my knuckles whiten, my eyes dead and on the unopened package as I absently lift it, answering the com.

I barely look when the lumpy humanoid holo message of the Oozarian man fills the space above the device. “Report to The Solar Breeding Agency office within the next twenty-four zentics. You’ve been matched.”

That’s it.

And it only took days, six days.

His unseeing black deep-set eyes stare back at me from their gelatinous pickle colored skin, lumpy and folded behind the oddly human-looking clothing they wear. It’s a suit, one with a tasseled tie, but it’s the fabric that throws you off. Where you expect softness, it looks closer to plastic. From what I’ve heard, they use some kind of magnetic pulse to keep their...bodies in the desired shape. I bite back a shudder at the idea of being matched to one of them, although I doubt we’ll be compatible.

## Page 2

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It's naïve, wishful thinking.

That's why everyone wants a human breeder.

We're always compatible.

It takes a long time for me to move, to place one foot in front of the other on the dirt floor of my bedroom before I press my thumb to the biometric lock on the side of the package. It opens with a soft click, a sterile wrapped injection gun and a neatly folded white dress sitting inside the box. Two items, they seem so innocent, so normal, but they aren't. They represent everything. The hell of this past year, a lifetime of not having much and watching Mom and Dad stress about everything. It's a future for my family, one where they don't have to ration food and can afford an actual floor in our home. One where they won't forgive me for this. One where they'll see it as another loss, another betrayal. It's a future I won't be a part of, but one I'll risk everything for.

Agency housing is nice enough, I think. As long as this paring goes well, I'll be moved up in the roster for the next one and the one after that. A career breeder isn't exactly the life I saw for myself, but there are worse things than traveling the universe, living on other hopefully more comfortable planets.

It's just a year.

One year before my match can send me back. If I don't get pregnant, I can always come home. Sure, there will be shouting and silence, probably resentful glares, but I'll be home.

My family gets paid either way.

But if I do get pregnant, and there's zero reason why I wouldn't... I'll never step foot on Terra2 again. My eyes dart to the door of my bedroom, keeping my breath trapped in my lungs as I wait for the sounds of home. Mom shuffling around, my sisters fighting, and Dad pestering mom, smacking her ass before being shooed away. Happy sounds.

We don't have those anymore.

But they could.

If they didn't have to worry about money, maybe there would be more room for the happy sounds, even if they didn't include me. Sure, we could meet on the space station from time to time, but my shuttle trips are funded by the agency, like all potential breeders; otherwise, the cost is... sickening.

According to intergalactic law, once a human is infected by alternative species' DNA, we cannot set foot back on Terra2, so as to not risk damaging human genetics. One pregnancy and my family will have enough credits to set them up for life. Maybe two or four more alien babies, and my family and I will never have to worry again. I can leave the agency and go.... Wherever I want. Do whatever I want.

All I have to do is break their hearts and mine, wear a pretty, long white dress with see through sleeves and a modest v neckline, take a shot, and get fucked by an alien.

"Seems simple enough," I mutter out loud.

It's not so much a strategic choice to all but storm from my bedroom, holo message still on display hanging loosely from my hand. Nor is it well thought through when I loom behind Mom like a ghost in the small kitchen, willing the tears budding in my

eyes to stay in place.

It's not probably the best way to make the woman you love more than anything resent you, to not give her a chance to turn around before you blurt out that you've been accepted to the Solar Breeding Agency and have less than ten hours before you have to board a shuttle and say goodbye forever. None of it is tactically wise, but I don't have it in me to do it another way. It's too late now, regardless. The information hanging between us.

Mom doesn't move, her tanned, worn hands frozen in the soapy sink, a dish in one and a cleansing bar in the other. I blink my eyes rapidly, determined not to cry, all the while fully accepting I will and likely sooner than later. When her voice comes, it's like a whip, cold and tense. "So, it's done then?"

"Yeah." It leaves my lips as a whisper, disappearing within the silence as if it never came out at all. She knew. She knew when that agency rep visited Terra2, only a few short weeks after Dad died, that I'd listened a little too closely, I'd asked too many questions. The Oozarian looked at me like a juicy bit of meat hanging on a hook dangling inches from his not quite lips.

She'd gone into my room while I was at work, ripping up the holo brochure and leaving it in tatters around my desk.

She hadn't said a word, but her meaning was clear.

Don't you dare Lorena Morales.

I dared.

"I have only just lost your father, I can't- "

“Mama, we need help.”

She whirls on me then, slinging water from the sink, her deep, warm brown eyes reddening with her tears. She’s holding her breath, a thousand words and arguments, screams on the tip of her tongue. My teeth dig into my inner cheek as my own tears stream down my face. I’m pleading with her, begging her to do it. To scream and yell and curse me, things have been so terribly quiet since Dad died.

“Then you will be the one to tell your sisters. Do it now. We will have dinner before you go.”

“You work tonight.” I remind her, my voice choked with emotion.

My damn lip trembles when the fire seems to fade from her eyes, the same broken type of acceptance I recognize settling in its place as she steps forward, barely bothering to wipe her hands dry before her hot palms land on either side of my face. “Mijita, work can wait.”

two

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Lenora

There's something particularly annoying about the whole get ready at home thing. Free walking, breathing advertisement, right? It's the dress. Even those of us from Terra2 know the dress. The beings who work, live, and are patrons of Vortara Space Station know that when you see a white dress, they're here to meet their match. Some entirely unnecessary, grating, they can shove this dress up their assholes, tradition born from the wider alien races oftentimes unhealthy obsession with old Earth and its various customs.

Do Oozarian's have assholes?

You'd have to, right?

All living things need air, water, etc., etc. That was what all the old Earth media used to say. I can't fathom why they thought that. To assume that in an infinite number of galaxies, an ever-expanding space that those four little rules would apply to any and every form of life they could possibly come across seems nearsighted at best.

The majority of them didn't even think aliens were real.

If my cheeks weren't flushed bright red and my stomach wasn't tied into knots, I'd laugh at that. I was born here on Terra2, as was my mom, grandma, and great grandma before them. It's fun, though, watching the Old Earth movies as grainy and dated as they are. It's about the only thing humans have united on, preserving us. What little of us is left. There's no room for new history, too much poverty, too much misery to want to document. Those that do, keep it in archives and to themselves,

because who in the hell would want to watch that when we're living it?

The high banners of the space port are lit with neon hues, sporting advertisements for this shop or that, the long, open, bright walkways bustling with more species than I can count. My hands fist around my small bag, my eyes peeking up at the beings walking around me. My pulse flips as a large Kalzait male's eyes meet mine, my lips parting as my attention slides to the pretty iridescent wings that flutter against his back. As if it takes a lot of control to keep them there instead of taking flight. When my perusal takes too long and he hikes an annoyed brow, I snap my head upward like suddenly the never-ending vacuum of space is incredibly interesting to me. The crisscrossing, almost lattice-looking metal structure bars house octagonal windows that show a slowly rotating stream of stars. The fact that we're technically spinning in circles around the outer core of the station never fails to make me feel uneasy on my feet. My brain instant upon the fact that I can suddenly feel it.

Nausea roils in my gut as I wait for the walking light to turn green. For the millionth time, I wonder if I'll be so lucky to be paired with a Kalzait, maybe even a stranger looking being, as long as their home world is advanced enough for comfort. The idea of being trapped in the underground tunnels of the Strilgid, an insectoid species whose males look like sexy spider flies and live in vast hives. They've kept themselves relatively primitive, but their sharp, handsomely alien looks aren't enough to keep my stomach from dropping. There's only so much a chiseled set of abs can do when faced with the prospect of perpetual darkness I can only picture as the undergrown Paris Catacombs. Something I'm still not sure is real or not, but keeps me up at night either way.

The indication beam that runs along the slightly textured floor covered in languages I can't read turns green. Everything in me screams to keep going forward, to follow the crowds around the bright outer levels of the station.

I turn left.

It takes less than twenty steps for the lighting to change, and already my heart is pounding in my chest. Of course, an agency known for its underhanded, less than legal dealings wouldn't be on the outer rim. Very few places on the outer rim cater to humans at all. We're essentially like the dumb cousins of space, and even after four generations of coexistence and at least ten of partnerships and assimilation before that, they've never let us forget it.

My heart hammers away as I stare down at my scuffed shoes in the lift, a small, high-pitched voice breaking me from my thought vomit. "Hold it, please!"

My eyes widen as I pitch forward, making some being to my left growl when I slam my fist on the door control. The human woman who blurs inside earns another disapproving growl from the being to the left, but we barely react. My eyes are steady on her white dress, a sudden thick lump forms in my throat. She scurries over to me, and when she links her arm in mine, smiling brightly, I force a smile to my lips, trying to match even an ounce of her apparent excitement.

It's not that I'm not excited, who wouldn't be at least a little... it's the faces of my family, the way my little sisters cried and the shame in my mom's eyes that keeps the smile watery.

The bubble of a woman leans in, keeping her voice hushed as we finally set off. My stomach dropping out from underneath me at the sheer speed of the lift. "Who do you think you got matched with?" Her voice nearly squeaks with excitement. Her cheeks flush such a ridiculous shade of pink, her short curly hair smells like strawberries as it brushes against mine. She must be from a higher class on Terra2 to afford anything scented at all.

Why the hell is she here then? I keep the question to myself, but the idea of someone from an upper class choosing this... makes my situation seem even more bitter as it settles in my stomach.

“My name is Melody, by the way.”

I give her a soft nod. “Lorena.”

That’s all she needs, her words spilling out of her like she’s in a race with herself. “I don’t really care what species I get as long as they’re nice, and you know... hopefully not too big.”

Her snicker makes the first genuine smile of the day grace my lips. “Bigger isn’t always better.”

Her light blue eyes widen, her cool hands gripping my arm a little tighter, like this is something she’s sincerely worried about. Which same here, but it’s funnier coming from the woman who looks like there’s nowhere else in the world she’d rather be. “It’s really not. I’d be happy either way, of course, but you know... can you fathom the downtime after some of them? I would be so bored lying around waiting for my lady bits to—”

Another more irritated alien sound follows the doors to the lift, not so much opening but fizzling out like they were never there in the first place. My laughter feels like betrayal as she sneaks a peek behind us, whatever alien she sees there making her all but wince as we tumble out into the small, clinically lit corridor.

Our laughter halts abruptly, the reality of what we’re about to do, the weight of it settling on us. Melody’s eyes dart to the holographic clock on the display, widening. “Oh, shit I’m late!” her panic is palatable as she fumbles with her wrist com, passing over the pager I’ve had clutched in my hand since I left home. The devices ding letting us know the contact transfer was successful and I don’t know why that makes me want to cry. “We should keep in touch, well, if we can use these where we end up.” She rushes out, all but pulling me down the hall.

My heart pounds, the lights and walls pressing in on me like a trash compactor.

“You need to run.” I urge her.

Her eyes dart to the clock again. “Oh, shit yeah.”

What I’m not ready for is the two arms around the neck, squeeze the life out of you bear hug she wraps me in. “Talk to you later, Lorena! Wish me luck!” She calls as she wiggles her brows and sets off down the hall.

Tears well in my eyes as she turns the corner. “Melody, hang on!” I rush after her, nearly making us collide as she pops back around the wall. “Why are you doing this?”

She smiles, her dirty blonde curls wild. “It seems like a really cool way to help people. It’ll be okay, I promise. This isn’t my first go. You might even get mated!”

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I nod, giving her a weak smile and a small wave as she bolts down the corridor again. I should follow, but my feet won't move. My steps carry me further away until my back meets the cold wall, my breath coming a little too quick now. A new sense of dread building deep in my stomach. It's another amendment we had to consent to, the possibility of matehood. Not something humans have to deal with but many other species recognize fated mates, whether it's a biological thing, a spiritual thing, or a mix of the two it means our year contract turns into a lifetime one, for better or worse unless you're lucky enough to be rejected or at least not forced to stay on world for the duration of your mutual lifespans.

The corridor is cramped compared to the outer rim. The inner ones act as a sort of maze. My fingers tremble as I reach out, all but slapping my palm on the wall control. The soft ding sounds followed by a voice speaking a language I recognize as the Oozarian. It takes only domtics to pause, reading my biometric signature as my chest squeezes like a vice. "Terra2 universal English detected. Please name your destination."

"The Solar Breeding Agency," I pant out, wondering how the hell Melody had run off without it. An implant, I'm guessing. She said this wasn't her first time, but... I can't fathom remembering the path through any of this. It dings again, a faint blue arrow lining the metal walls. All I need to do is follow it.

I don't.

Instead, I let myself slip down the wall, my ass connecting with the floor through the thin dress, ignoring the quizzical stares of the few beings filtering through. No part of me budes, my eyes glued to the clock. I'm two hours early. I thought that was a

good choice at the time, that it'd give me time to gather my thoughts. Turns out that was a terrible choice. The thoughts are not my friend. Eventually, my mind quiets, and my eyes stop seeing the numbers as they flip and change. I have no concept of how long that took until my pager dings. My heart lurches, the calm fading as I wake the screen, knowing it won't be Mom but hoping all the same.

Melody Arnold: "He's big :0"

A short, almost hysterical bubble of laughter escapes from my throat.

Glimpsing the clock and finding only a whopping forty-three ontics have passed, I get to my feet, straightening and smoothing my hair and dress before I steel myself, finally following the little blue line.

three

Lenora

"Let's review this paperwork, and we can get into the nitty gritty of things, yes?"

My scowl deepens on the Oozarian woman, her gooey body shaped into a humanoid top and blob bottom in a smart looking alien take on a pencil skirt and vested blouse. She told me her name earlier, but the swap to English was butchered by her translator.

Thorn-e-la-nease or something like that.

I don't respond, my fingers tapping anxiously against my thigh. I can't tell if she's building up the anticipation for climactic effect or if this is just the natural cadence of things, but I'm seconds from exploding. Her mate, who didn't bother introducing himself, lords behind her like always, happy to let his other half run the show while he

looks on with mild glints that bounce between annoyance and amusement.

“You’ve been placed with a species who resides on a class Four B planet, it will be done via natural copulation, under a standard one-year contract. No extra ceremony or traditions, such as but not limited to bodily modifications—”

“Hang on, you said class Four B?” I interrupt, my anxiety spiking.

She scowls over her datapad, not answering my question.

My eyes dart to her mate as if asking for some help. He offers none. “That’s... they're a dangerous species then, right?”

“We have no information on why the planet's grade was listed as a B. As we have told you, all candidates are vetted thoroughly.” She sneers, not bothering to mask her annoyance.

Yes, vetted unless they have enough credits.

I keep that to myself, nodding for her to continue when all I want to do is stand up in my uncomfortable chair in the humid office and launch myself over her desk to see the species' name. There’s no doubt she’s drawing it out on purpose at this point. Some information suggests a kind of psychic ability is present within Oozarians. If that’s true, it’s a secret they hide well, as nobody has been able to confirm.

My attention blips in and out, which she doesn’t seem to mind.

Is he here already? Have they already spoken to him?

Did he find my appearance lacking?

The pitch in my brow deepens. It doesn't matter if he thinks I'm cute. That's not the point. To him, I'm an alien. I probably look.... gross or weird. Unless he's one of those with a human fetish, then I suppose—

“...Your match will transfer the required credits to your listed beneficiary if it is not yourself. Immediately after both parties sign the required agreements, there will be an additional five percent increase in compensation because of the B grade of the planet.”

I perk up at that, making her give me a pointed smile.

“Now allow me to show you your partner for the next year.” She makes a grand show of smashing her blobby finger down on the hologram pad, her husband doing something akin to rolling his eyes. It's uncomfortable seeing them actually roll around completely inside his head. My stomach flips as the image blurs to life in front of me.

“Fafnir is a Bhaurnul, who lives on his native planet of Yolmarth, in the third quadrant. He is quite an accomplished warrior among his people. While the Bhaurnuls have been known to recognize mates in the past, it hasn't been done in ages and never to an off-worlder.”

My eyes are glued to the man in the holograph, wide and I'm sure terribly expressive, judging by the stifled laughter from the back of the room. I'm not sure which part of him to analyze first, the bulked equestrian shaped legs complete with hooves, and what appears to be short, warmed toned gray fur. His long-ridged antelope like horns only adds to the severe and stern looking man, like very possibly he's never smiled a day in his life. Long hair is the same warm gray shade as the fur on his legs. His bottom half appears to be where the fur tapers off, forming an alluring V shape over tapered hips and stomach. Oh, and a....tail.

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He's far more intimidating than I'd even imagined, while his severe, albeit grumpy looking, face is entirely human, it's unnaturally handsome. Sharp eyes, a strong nose and jaw framed by long and furred deer like ears, only one poking out from behind his hair. They are more narrow and sharper, though. Appropriate to the rest of the large man, clad in only a loincloth and some kind of leather covering on his hulking forearms. His chest is bare save for a symbol on his left side and leather straps crossing his chest. Even the miniature version of him is large and imposing.

The Bhaurnul are a berserker species of alien, and suddenly, the B grade makes perfect sense. Berserker types are known to be extremely violent and difficult to control. They are often pay-to-kill soldiers contracted by other planets to help them win wars.

Sensing the nature of my thoughts, the female speaks up. "Fafnir is not the first of his kind of contract with us, specifically through the use of human breeders. All contracts ended well, with positive reviews from both parties." She assures me, or tries to.

"Wait, has he already agreed to match with me?"

She frowns. "He selected you; all our clients are given a pool of potential candidates to choose from." She says it like it was something I should've known. Judging by the pointed glare she sends her mate, it was something I should've known.

A deep flush spreads to my cheeks, tucking my hair behind my ears as I glance at his holo video playing on a loop. It's just him glaring at the space in front of him, slightly adjusting his stance. One of his long-structured ears twitches. "How many other candidates were there?" It's a stupid question, one that shouldn't matter.

One that doesn't matter, but still, I hold my breath while I wait for her response.

"We typically compile a group of fifty females based on comfort agreements and other various factors. Fafnir was in quite a rush. After he selected you, he paid handsomely to have all of this expedited."

I stare at her, worried my eyes will bug out of my skull. The oddest and most irrational swarm of butterflies lighting my stomach. Her smile grows far too wide to look anything other than predatory, but I feel no ill will from her. "Shall we proceed, then?"

I take a steadying breath as I nod.

I'm going to be fucked by a giant alien warrior that wears a loincloth. In the grand scheme of things, the loincloth isn't really the point, but still, maybe this would feel less imposing if he were wearing, I don't know, like khakis?

"Place your thumb here and we'll move on to the joint agreements!" She all but coos in her odd underwater voice. When she claps excitedly, it sounds like two Jello packets fighting. I wonder if he has a food replicator. Probably not. We didn't have one, but our neighbor did. Mom used to pay him a couple of credits so we could use it on special occasions. Another new wave of apprehension fills me. I'm definitely not a picky eater. I just love food and, like everyone else, I have my favorites. If Old Earth had anything going for it, it was the media and the food.

Our agreement locks in place, and my mind all but shudders to a screeching halt when she rises, motioning me to follow her. My legs are wooden as I stand, taking in the warm, yellowing tone of the office walls before they are again traded for corridors of metal. My eyes snap to my shoes as we approach the meeting room, the glass walls already misted in the privacy setting.

I'm so lost in my panicked thoughts that I don't notice when they stop, slamming into the back of the male. My entire body revolts as I don't simply bounce off him but press into him, jerking back and frowning down at the pickle green slime now marring my dress.

My head slams up, an apology on my tongue, but her hand snaps out, fusing with his side, making him hiss in pain. Eyes wide as I stumble back.

"I didn't even do anything!" He gripes at her, glaring down at his mate, who looks one moment away from... doing whatever it was she did to him again.

"She was inside you," she seethes.

He throws out his arms, making them blob against his sides. "It wasn't my fault!"

Her arm snaps out in another attack he seems to tolerate, although I don't miss his wince. "You should have moved!"

"To where, my love?"

He has a point; there's literally nowhere else for him to go, and this was... definitely my fault, but this seems like a them argument and I'm not about to interject.

"The nearest trash chute so I can shoot your gelatinous ass into—"

A deep voice clears their throat, making my attention snap up, lifting on my toes to look over the fighting Oozarians in front of me to see that the door is open.

The door is open.

My eyes flash wide as I fall back to the soles of my feet. Even now, I can see his

curved horns nearly scraping the ceiling of the room.

Oh god.

Oh, my god.

“Fafnir, thank you for waiting!” Her mate rushes out, no doubt in a hurry to get away from his still glaring female as he glides into the room.

She waits for me, scowling at my soiled dress and sick roils in my gut at the tacky feel of it. I move past her, wondering if my family will still be paid if I don't make it off port. The room itself is wide and tall, but he's still forced to hunch inside it. My eyes trail upward again, noting scratches on the ceiling where their severe looking points have etched the metal.

He watches me impassively as I enter the room, roving over every inch of my flesh before his brow furrows deeper at the slime coating the left side of my skin and dress. My cheeks flame as our eyes meet, gnawing on my bottom lip before I turn to the Oozarians. I can't decide if it's ruder to wipe it off or keep it there.

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As far as first impressions go, this is fucking excellent.

four

Fafnir

My eyes narrow on the Oozarians as they fall into their spiel, reminding us both of the requirements of our agreement. My attention again slipping to the impossibly small human female at my side. Her thick hair is the same deep, earthen color as a Valkyra in the spring, falling in waves over her slender shoulders, her height only reaching to my lower waist. My lips curl in disgust at the idea of bringing her back to my home, scented by another male.

“We suggest a period of at least a week to let your human adjust to their new environment before attempting a coupling, as negative emotions can affect the potency of their fertility.”

I give a curt nod in acknowledgment, a growl building in my throat as my horns scrape the ceiling again. Glaring forward seems a vast undertaking. I’ve yet to hear the little female take a breath, let alone speak. The impulse to take her in is strong. Her holo was attractive, I was assured, especially so even by human standards. She looks utterly defenseless, though; I hope our offspring inherits as little of her alien DNA as possible. Humans are considered excellent breeders, not only for their fertility, but also their weak DNA ensures the alien DNA they are paired with is dominant.

Impatience rides me hard as the slime beings drone on. Going over things we’ve both

already agreed to, by the time they offer us the data pad, my hand snaps out pressing my thumb on the scanner making the small female flinch, a spike of her fear souring the otherwise pleasantly floral scent coming from her. I make an effort to slow my movements when I take it back.

“Fafnir Droxxil of Yolmarth, do you accept and agree to the terms set forth in the agreement by your own will, free of duress or compulsion?”

“Yes.” I gruff.

“Lorena Morales of Terra2, do you accept and agree to the terms set forth in the agreement by your own will, free of duress or compulsion?”

There’s hesitation, a brief pause that feels longer than it should before she speaks, but when her voice comes, it’s equal parts soft and steel. “Yes.”

The male all but hums in anticipation as I transfer the credits to the holding account where they’ll take their cut and distribute the rest accordingly.

“Excellent! Now the two of you have access to this room for another twenty ontics before you must vacate. May fertility find you, and if anything should arise, you can contact us at any time. Thank you for choosing the Solar Breeding Agency.”

They glide from the room. The silence that follows is thick and grating. An odd sensation, considering I normally prefer it. I stare down at the female currently avoiding my gaze and shifting nervously on her feet.

A long sigh escapes from my throat. “I have acquired everything listed on the provided documents by the agency as far as your needs, but noted you added no personal requirements. If there is something you want, we can grab it from the station before we embark.” My voice sounds gruff, cold even to my ears. The documents

said humans do not appreciate those qualities. I have no others to offer, so the female will need to adjust.

Her head snaps up to mine, her light upturned hazel colored eyes looking a little glossy, although I can't surmise why. Perhaps the air quality here is undesirable to her. I'd have to agree. It smells like metal and a flurry of... everything else. "Oh, thanks, I don't need anything else." She gestures to the small bag clutched in her tiny fist.

My frown deepens. Surely this delicate female cannot take one of my cocks, let alone them both. I'll split her. My mind waivers, blinding hot rage surging to the surface before I breathe past it. If not for the fact that I've seen the offspring of humans and my people before, I would toss her small body over my shoulder and barge into the Oozarian's office and demand a sturdier one.

Her cheeks flush such a bright shade of red, I rear back slightly. Many venomous creatures change their coloring before an attack. The hint of anger in her eyes only confirms my theory. I haven't a clue what I've done to garner such a reaction, but it would be quite adorable to watch the tiny female attempt to harm me.

She only huffs. Jerking her bag higher before spinning in place and heading for the door. Her flowery smell is only slightly dampened by the scent of Oozarian. "If it's all the same to you, I'd like to leave port now."

I huff my agreement, watching her stalk from the room, less than half the size of a Bhaurnul female but with all the aura of one. Easing my hulking frame into the corridor grates at my nerves, at that ever-lingering flame deep in my mind. Focusing on the suddenly very irritated human, slapping her hand on the wall, the AI asks her for her direction before she sets off, not ensuring I'm following. Not as though my pounding hooves aren't sign enough. I have to slow my gait, keeping my stride small in the cramped space to ensure I don't step on her.

She gasps when I swoop down, plucking her bag from her hand, only glowering slightly before straightening her back further and setting off toward her blue path. I don't tell her I know the way. I follow taking in the view awarded for me by the paper thin, silky dress the agency adorned her in. Her hips flare in a luscious way, leading down to a round, ample ass. The lack of tail is odd, but I can't find it in me to mind the uninterrupted view.

When we pile out of a lift and into the throng of people, I find myself stepping closer to the female. A rush of irritation flooding me when people part, making more way for me than necessary, although I cannot fully blame them. My people aren't known for their kind and warm dispositions. Why would that be the stories they'd tell? The acts of aggression, of war, and the efficient brutality are all that come to mind. All we're good for in the eyes of the wider Intergalactic Allegiance.

The war madness.

That's what they fear the most.

They aren't alone.

That anger pushes at my skull, slipping down and going deep until it spills, flooding over my chest like a scaling shower. My fists clench, making the plastic handle of her bag crack.

"I'd like to wash up before we go."

My chest is rising harder than it should be as I meet her hazel eyes, offering a curt nod and following her to the hygiene rooms, content to glower at the beings passing by as she hurries inside.

five

Lenora

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

My eyes flick up the broad harsh lined back of Fafnir as I follow him to the nearest portal, all but scowling menacingly at everyone and everything. I get the whole grumpy, brooding warrior thing I really do. But must that consist of you acting like a complete ass? How am I supposed to bear a child for a being that hasn't stopped glaring since he laid eyes on me? I'm not against a good hate fucking, I don't suppose, but not with an alien that looks like he could rip me in half with a finger, let alone whatever the hell he's supporting below the belted loincloth.

The echoed sound of his metal capped hooves clack loudly in the bustling port, and I have to imagine if he merely stomped hard enough, he'd bust straight into space. A tendril of anxiety buds in my chest as we step toward the portal. He waves his wrist over the creditexchange to pay for our passage. Most space ports can be connected through what Mom callsportal magic,but to my understanding, it is just tiny alien-made stable wormholes. If that sounds terrifying, it's because it is. I have no idea how it works, only that if you look at just the right angle, you can see straight to the connecting port. The limit seems to be quadrant one to three, though, as far as my understanding goes, the others can't safely be linked.

He ushers me up to the platform. It's just a door. A huge round door with swirling colorful miasma that could, if not functioning properly... theoretically, shoot me out just about anywhere in the universe. My rational mind offers that hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of beings use these daily. They are a common and practical form of travel, but my irrational mind couldn't give less of a shit. My feet dig in as he tries to guide me forward, only resulting in him sliding me across the polished floor until we get to the lip. I don't even think he noticed, much too busy glaring and brooding. The electricity, or... whatever the hell is swirling around the thing, crackles across my cheek, and an ugly scream builds in my throat, panic and self-preservation

win out as I jerk free from his guiding hand and pivot, only to run straight into his broad chest like a steel wall. My hands slam up, gripping the ornate ropes of his loincloth as I all but bury my face in his warm stomach. I keep that forward momentum, like if I just carry on trying to escape, I can walk straight through the absolute brick house of a being and go the fuck home.

He smells like snow and the earth, warm and inviting. When his muscular arm comes around me, whether to peel me off or comfort me, I haven't a clue, I don't give him a chance. Banding around him seems like the best of multiple terrible choices currently. His body is rigid against mine, like he isn't sure if I mean to harm him or not. My cheeks heat as I try to covertly peek up at him. His dark brown eyes are wide as he stares down at me. It's only after another rapid breath on my part that I realize my breasts are heaving against something very large and very hard.

"If you do not wish to show the entire port my cocks, please release my cloth."

My mouth gapes, my hands flinging away from him like he's on fire. "Sorry I just—" my words cut off as I peek behind the wall of a male realizing belatedly while I panicked, he'd just stepped through the damn thing anyway.

My surprise and relief are short-lived as he grumbles something under his breath and takes off deeper into the port, leaving me to scramble to keep up, his tail switching with agitation. My mind is reeling for several reasons, but one rings louder than the others.

He said cocks.

Plural.

As into two.

Just two, right?

It couldn't be more.

I all but sprint to get back in stride with him, slowly taking in the new port around us. It's notably smaller and not nearly as lavish as Vortara. Where the former is covered in bright advertising banners and elaborate displays of the surrounding planets. Streamlined tech and AI, this one's halls are darker, calmer, and the walls are filled with holo pictures of landscapes. The cool ones that move and emit a small sensory output.

My feet stagger to a stop as I take one in. The sweet, earthy scent and blast of frigid air it emits are confined to an environmental bubble. It's by all accounts, just an open field backed by huge mountainous ice glaciers and snow tipped forests. The sky is bright but hazy, as if it's constantly pressed by fog. It's beautiful, serene.

"That is a natural wildlife reservation about fifty ontics from our home by Sihlih." His voice is low, gruff, and the heat of him wars relentlessly with the cold from the picture.

My heart drops.

Our home.

In all the frenzy that's been the past few hours, I'd nearly forgotten, or at least had successfully ignored, the painful way my heart is beating. My eyes dart back toward the portal as I step around him, nodding as if to tell him to continue. He doesn't so much as blink as we set back off down the hall. How far away am I from them? It's hard to fathom the distance, but I suppose it feels no heavier than it did when I stepped just outside my front door.

The message I sent to Melody on the shuttle went undelivered. I can only hope her pairing is going smoother than mine. The private transport is... huge, or maybe it's normal sized to them. We weren't halfway to the planet's surface before it occurred to me Fafnir wouldn't come close to fitting in a standard sized one. He navigated the enormous machine with ease. Watching his arms and veined hands flex on the wheel had my thoughts turning back to the cocks comment. Thankful now more than ever that he seemed to agree with the Oozarians' suggestion of allowing a grace period before I was expected to open my legs and hope for the best.

My breath rushes out of me as we break past the clouds, my nails digging into my own thighs. Out of the corner of my eye, Fafnir watches me as if he's gauging my reaction. As if he truly cared what I thought of his planet, my lips tilt up just a bit. Perhaps he's not as rough as I thought. Once we're landed, my bag in his hand, he's at my door in a few long strides. The blast of cold air nearly sends me retreating into the shuttle, but there are others here, and—

My eyes widen on the giant...thingprowling casually toward the shuttle, backtracking just as Fafnir's strong, wide arm bands around my waist, all but hauling me from my seat. My nails dig into his arm as he sits me down, following my line of sight. The hint of a smile on his lips nearly shocks me as much as the creature does when he bends down from his great height, whispering in my ear. "Do not show him your fear, or he'll never respect you. And neither will they."

My eyes leave the large...lizard-lion mismatched creature bounding closer, long enough to take in the two Bhaurnul men eyeing me curiously, although they try to be respectful about it. Key word being try. The deep breath I suck through my lungs is crisp and soothing as I lift my chin, nodding at them in greeting. They return the favor before forcing their gazes away with little to no effort. If the Oozarians said humans worked with the Bhaurnul people before, it clearly wasn't here.

"Shorra'vulValoryx." Fafnir greets the gigantic creature, petting its large muzzle

affectionately.

It's by sheer luck that I keep my steps from faltering as I step away from the shuttle and toward them, eyeing the feline with a boldness I don't currently feel even a respective ounce of.

"See to the shuttle." Fafnir barks at the lingering men. I don't miss the near scrambled flurry of activity that follows. "I will guide your mounts."

My head swivels, just noticing for the first time the other two largemountshanging back away from the group as if awaiting permission to approach.

"Come female, you are not dressed for the cold."

My pulse hiccups as I approach the beast. Its thick, dark blue scales line its back and down the base of its heavy barbed tail, although its face is distinctly lion, save for the horns. Their sharp points jutting from its proud, lush, tan colored mane like a deadly crown cresting the top of its head. Fafnir watches me closely, like whatever I do next counts for something. My teeth gore my inner cheek until it bleeds with the effort to not flinch as the beast lets out something between a hiss and a deep, reverberating growl. I ignore it, striding past at a leisurely pace as its monstrous head snaps toward me, its hot breath tickling my neck.

It's a test of will, a show of power. The dammed lizard lion is trying to size me up. Its eyes track me, but I ignore it, the same way you'd ignore an asteroid hurling toward your home because there's nothing you can do about it anyway. Even as powerful and competent as the males again lingering and watching me from all angles are, if this animal decided I was on the menu, fuck-all could be done for me. My eyes settle on Fafnir's as he gifts me the smallest of approving nods. It does ridiculous things to my stomach. I get the impression a male like this rarely gives out respect or approval. No, it's something you have to earn from him. If we're going to be together for a year,

I might as well do exactly that. Regardless of his grating demeanor.

When he grips my waist, hauling me atop the beast, I shiver, assuring myself it's because of the cold and not the way his large hands dented and pressed my flesh a little too hard. Like he doesn't know his own strength. I adjust myself in the makeshift saddle, I'm sure is here for my benefit, as he hauls himself up behind me. His large back presses me forward as he grips the reins, his cheek dusting the top of my head as he tells me to ready myself.

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I do.

But barely.

The beast is huge, comparable to an Old Earth's elephant in reported size, maybe slightly smaller. It's a monstrous creature and if I were to tilt, even just a little, the ground would greet me, brutally and fast.

He commands the mount in his language with heavy mix of harsh rolling R's.

A scream lodges in my throat as the creature breaks into a jarring leap before bowing its chest to the ground and springing forward with such force, Fafnir all but slams me against his chest, banding me there, his strong thighs pressing in on mine. "Bral'qorn." He growls out a reprimand, and the large beast settles, rumbling his annoyance but pounding forward with a fluid grace that looks impossible for a creature of its size.

The ringing gruff and rhythmic call that leaves the towering man at my back makes goosebumps burst over my flesh, the rumble of it sinking into my skin where I'm still pressed tightly against him, his long tail draping over my thighs before it hooks on my hips, like a makeshift seatbelt. We're flying over the open field, the icy wind scoring my cheeks raw as I see the other two mounts join us.

Fafnir's beast lets out a savage warning snarl, snapping at the other two when they ride too close, forcing them to fall back. It's not hard to see who outranks who. My pounding heart doesn't settle so much as it beats with excitement instead of fear. My long hair whips wildly behind me as I take in the picturesque snow tipped landscape, a

huge smile breaking out over my face as we hurl forward.

six

Lenora

I'm not quite sure what I'd expected his home to look like, but its elegant and rustic exterior with panoramic floor to ceiling windows wasn't quite it. It, like the other homes nearby, is spaced so vastly that it'd take me a solid twenty minutes to walk between the two. There are no yards, fences, or barriers. Just looks like someone picked up a home and plopped it in the middle of a field seamlessly, just part of the land. The mount, whose name I now know is Valoryx, shifts underneath me, my fingers still knotted and white knuckling in his mane as Fafnir dismounts easily behind me, sliding off the back of the large animal like it's nothing.

My eyes are still taking in the house when my skin prickles, finding his intense gaze already on me. I gather the skirt of my dress up over my thighs to cover myself as I swing a leg over. His eyes dip, watching the movement with a warrior's focus before he reaches up, plucking me from the saddle as one would a child. I've never considered myself heavy per se, but never delicately built either. As far as he's concerned, I'm no more than a feather. There's something oddly alluring about that. The moment his back had left mine on the mount, the cold air had rushed back in, his body heat no longer there to ward off the worst of the chill. My teeth chatter wildly as he ushers me inside. The lack of a lock on the door sends my brows shooting skyward. On Terra2 and old Earth, by the sounds of it, anything not bolted down was free game.

Including you.

Now, instead of just worrying about other humans, we get to worry about aliens too, dropping into Terra2 atmosphere and taking us simply because, more often than not,

there's nothing anyone is going to do about it. The Intergalactic Alliance might do some half assed investigation before deeming the human lost to space and washing their hands of it.

I'm pulled by my thoughts as Fafnir drapes a soft, swathing fur pelt over my back, tucking it around me like a swaddle and heading for the large circular hearth that commands and dominates the middle of the dwelling. "This time of year is usually considered too warm for us to build fires indoors. You'll have to forgive me for not readying one for you." He grumbles.

"It's alright, the wind was the worst part, really."

His eyes flick toward mine, displeased with whatever he finds on my face.

I try to shake off the disappointed feeling that comes with that, directing my attention away from the large alien warrior building a fire in the hearth. Not flicking a switch or commanding an AI to start one, but building it. Even on Terra2, I've never seen anyone do that.

Instead of watching like I'm itching to do, I turn my eyes to the sky-high vaulted ceilings, realizing how uncomfortable it would've been for him to shift himself into that waiting room at Vortara Station. The inside of the home is as wide and open as the field it rests in, but filled with varying shades of brown, from dark to light, that keep it feeling warm and cozy. The entire back half of the house seems to be made up of windows. My feet act of their own volition, bringing me there.

Homesickness strikes harder than ever.

It's beautiful. The land, the house, but all I can think of is my mom and sisters back home with the dirt floor and rusted metal tables. Furs and rugs could almost be mistakenly thrown around the cozy and bright living room with no rhyme or reason

until you take a step back and see the space as a whole. A huge, worn chair bears more signs of use than anything in the house. My lips almost quirk, having just found his favorite place to sit. The long bed sized couch is heaping with furs and pillows as well, but looks as staged and unused as the rest.

“The documents indicated humans appreciate warm, soft bedding.” He explains, now lording beside the hearth. His proud horns stretching skyward.

I nod, “Thank you, it-it’s beautiful here.”

His chest fills at that, gifting me a noncommittal grunt I nearly roll my eyes at. Various weapons line the walls, the worn handles showing signs they are or at least were a more functional place to store them versus an artistic choice.

He gestures toward the hearth. “Warm yourself female, I will tend the Sihlih.” Then he stalks from the house, the door shutting a little too hard behind him.

I frown, begrudgingly doing as he says, all the while wondering what the fuck a Sihlihis and why it needs to be tended more than the woman he intends to impregnate.

Plus, I really need to pee.

Fafnir

My hooves stomp across the frosted grass as I approach the mounts, my mood only souring the longer the little female, Lenora, is in my presence. Not by any fault of her own, simply her weak physical makeup. Already, I fear I’m making a mess of this caring for her venture. Her soft, smooth cheeks are ruddy and chapped from the ride on Valoryx. The only thing keeping me from cursing that decision was the delightful way she’d molded to my front, shrinking into me for safety when she was unsure.

The others saw it too; it was a statement; she thought of me as... safe.

Something I had long thought was impossible for a soft little female.

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The barbarian level of pride that floods my chest next is... only further unsettling. Her hands had shaken like leaves as she strode proudly past my Sihlih. The stupid beast had taunted her, and she still found it in herself to gift him a bright smile, trying to stifle her excited laughter as he raced home. Showing out for the pretty female, no doubt. The desire to roar in correction filled my throat, but it would only undermine his growing respect for her.

Failure to earn the respect of the stubborn, proud mountainous beast is often met with a brutal end. The Sihlih have served my people since the Gods walked these once frozen and barren lands. Valhyr, the God of War and Valor, often depicted astride one; he is said to have even fathered the first. They are not known as war mounts for nothing. My palm runs over the flank of Valoryx. As deadly as they are, once they accept you, they are amongst the most brainless protective beasts you could have the honor of working with.

It's why I train them.

There is no reason for a creature every bit as deadly as I to skirt away as I walk past. Valoryx fought underneath me, shed as much blood as I. My only companion in those times, who never looked at me from the corner of his eye, wondering when my mind would betray me. I drop his saddle onto the post, returning to press my forehead to his. "Nythra." I murmur. It's not a command, but a release. He and the others who followed him may return to their nests or do as they please.

He takes a few leisurely steps forward as the others run off, huffing his giant, dark blue colored nose pressed to the front door, and I can't help but roll my eyes. She'd all but bound her hands in his mane, an intense show of trust and bonding done

between a Sihlih and its rider early in its training.

I ignore his lingering, snagging my kit from the back side outbuilding, letting my mind wander because, for the life of me, I can't fathom why I'm avoiding her. By all rights, I should be doting on the human, ensuring she wants for nothing... connecting with her so that when the time comes, she opens for me without reservation. Instead, I polish a freshly polished saddle, letting my mind wander if my young will bond with Valoryx or a Sihlih of their own, long after I'm gone. Even that normally endearing fantasy doesn't shake the tendrils of worry billowing in my gut.

How long will it take before I have to bring her into Halthara, our community's center? How long before she, too, looks at me with hidden, apprehensive glances? Will her pulse spike in terror as I mount her? How long before she fears me like the rest do?

And why in Valhyr's honor do I care?

I need her for offspring, not her flighty human approval of my home or all the ridiculous soft furs I compiled for her. She's a means to an end, a breeder ensuring my line doesn't fade with me.

seven

Lenora

He's been gone for a while. Although I can hear him outside the front of the house, lingering for who knows what. The fire reddens my skin as I lie beside it on the wide circular base. It'd be comfortable, hell I'd probably be asleep by now, if I wasn't one wrong move away from peeing myself. A quick exploration of the house once the worst of the chill was gone earlier provided absolutely zero clues as to where the bathrooms are, or bathroom, considering there's apparently only one bed.

Oh god, what if they're outside?

I can imagine trekking into the frosty night to take a pee with those lion beasts out there, no less. The absolute last thing I need is to walk up to my new alien partner to ask him where I can wash the urine out of my clothes.

Oh, hell no.

I'll bury them before it comes to that.

Myultra-stilllounging quickly turns to pacing, and when a whimper escapes from my throat, my resolve to let him stew alone snaps.

I all but jerk the front door open, my eyes widening as his mount, looking no less imposing, stretched out like an Old Earth cat, lazily raises its head to meet my eyes. Its warm breath fanning my face might've scared me in any other situation, but I've got bigger fish to fry currently. When I peek through the doorway, I'm met with nothing but darkness and a few glittering lights far off in the distance.

"Fafnir?" I call out, doing a stupid-looking dance because, oh god, I'm actually about to pee.

I try to move past Valoryx, but his large head braces on my stomach, making me rear back to miss being gored by his horns. He paws lazily at me, obviously disapproving of my desire to venture outside. A sound of irritation leaves me as I stalk back in, a momentary retreat only to jerk a fur-lined blanket from the couch before I return to him. He grumbles, making my pulse hiccup as I settle over his back, trying to cross him like a mountain. He gets the wrong idea. The damn thing gives another languid stretch before surging to his feet. A panicked squeal erupts from my throat, my hands still twisted in the blanket hung around my shoulders as I fall off, pain flaring in my tailbone as it connects with the unforgiving frozen ground.

“Lenora?” Fafnir’s growly voice hits me just as I swallow back the volley of curses that would have Mom rolling in her sheets.

He rushes to me. The look of genuine panic in his stern brown eyes might’ve made my belly flutter before. He takes in my sprawled position on the ground, my knees raised and tilted together, my dress riding up with the blanket pooled around me. His panic turns accusatory as he straightens himself. “Female, you cannot just try to ride a Sihlih without its mast—”

Valoryx equals Sihlih. That seems kind of obvious now.

“I need to pee, now!” I all but squeak, willing the fullness in my bladder to remain just a moment more. Cursing my stubbornness, it had felt below me to watch him retreat, only to seek him out for help.

All delusions of pride are long gone now.

His everlasting frown deepens. “Is there an issue with the wasting room?”

What had started as a trickle of annoyance turned to hurt, then frustration, and now?

Now I’m pissed.

“I wouldn’t know, as you never bothered to tell me how to find it, you big dumb male! You dropped me off in your house and fucking booked it to Timbuktu!” I yell, making Valoryx chuff out something that sounds a lot like a laugh, but that would be really creepy, and we can analyze it later.

His eyes widen in understanding, letting loose a stream of curses in his gruff rolling native language. I yelp as he suddenly swoops forward, moving quicker than a giant horned man should as he all but plucks me from the ground, tossing me over his

shoulder.

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The most unholy noise leaves me as I pound his firm back. “Not my belly, oh god, you need to put me down now!”

“Hush.” He growls, his long tan and gray tail swishing with agitation. Because yes, how dare I try to not pee on him!

“Ass.” I hiss under my breath.

I’m counting the seconds as his long strides eat up the house. The warmer tones of the off-white walls in his bedroom overwhelm my vision, my gaze darting to the giant circular bed that dominates the room. I’m squirming as he slides me down his chest, my toes curling against the rough cut but polished wooden floor. His hand smacks against a slightly recessed indentation on the wall, and the door doesn’t slide open more than a few inches before I’m slithering through it like the house is on fire. “Close it!”

He huffs but does as I say.

My glare only deepens as I jerk my underwear down, all but clambering onto the oversized toilet with a weird open back. I guess to account for his tail. It's one of those long, awkward pees that never seems to end, especially considering I know he can hear me.

Once it does, three Terra2 solars later, I clean up and rush to the shower, turning it on, thankful it’s not as convoluted as the bathroom door. Not only do I need a shower, but currently, I’m willing to do anything but be out there with him. My anger got the best of me, and I was a little mean but also screw him right now. I haven’t calmed

down enough yet to feel bad about it.

It heats quicker than any shower I've had before, a sigh leaving my throat as I step under the stream. My finger dusts the control panel, turning it up a little more, to account for the temperature change when the water finally hits me from all the way up there. It takes another few deep breaths before I open my eyes and actually look around me. The shelves are lined with beauty products that've never been opened, obviously meant for me, although I haven't a clue why I'd need so many. All of them are wrapped neatly and are naturally made. My eyes dart for the door, wondering if he's still out there before I pivot in the stream of scalding water, plucking up his opened, used bar of soap, bringing it to my nose.

I don't know what in the world possesses me to do it. My cheeks flame as his smell engulfs the shower, the soap coming off as it suds under the stream. Cold forests and rich wood. My eyelids flutter closed and open before I put it back, rubbing some on my chest like a fucking lunatic.

A hiss leaves my throat as I prod at my bruised tailbone, stretching this way and that to take in the damage in the giant stall like shower. The top half of me is exposed by a half wall meant to keep the water in, but only barely. Judging by the drains in the floor and other shower head looking feature by the sink, this seems to be a wet bathroom like the ones back home.

My heart gives a pitiful little pang. It's only day one, and the lack of family, of familiarity, the smell of my own sheets is—

I shriek, covering my breasts with my arms as Fafnir steps inside. "What the hell?!"

He growls as his gaze lands on me, probably looking like a drowned rat, but... the look he has in his eyes isn't disproving. Quite the opposite, really, or perhaps I'm still taken by the same flavor of insanity that urged me to use his soap.

Oh god, can he smell that?

The bundle of fabrics in his arms is forgotten as he takes in another languid pass of my wet form, making my cheeks flush down to my chest. “F-Fafnir?”

His voice is deeper, gruffer, and I don’t dare step back behind the half wall or lower my eyes despite everything inside me screaming to do both. “Some clothing and fresh towels.”

I nod my thanks, but he doesn’t leave, just glares at the bundle.

“Was there something else?”

“I apologize for my inattention, Lenora. I am used to being alone.”

His words hit deeper than I’d like, wiping away some more of my lingering anger, but just barely. “It’s a lot for us both. These things take time.” I offer, wishing they sounded a little softer than they do.

He huffs at that, stalking from the bathroom. I watch his bulked form and frenzied tail, chewing at my bottom lip until the door slides shut behind him.

I stay in the shower for admittedly too long, and stay evenlongerafter seeing the pajamas he’d bought for me. It’s a sheer, gauzy babydoll style top with silky, barely there shorts on the bottom. I must’ve scowled at the uncomfortable thing for a good ten minutes before reluctantly donning it. I grumble, cursing not for the last time that we aren’t allowed to bring out our own clothes. Something about making it easier to assimilate to the new culture, which is fine and all, but this clearly was made off-world.

Did he bother to get me any clothes locally at all, or just buy the sexiest stuff he could

find on the intergalactic web? Not that it matters, really. My modesty on Terra2 had always been out of necessity and not preference. There's no traditional mirror above the sink, only a large one that leans against a wall in the corner, rimmed with natural knotted wood. Despite the room being thickly cloaked in steam, it isn't the least bit foggy. When I finally bulk up the courage to face it, I get an immediate, uninterrupted view of my own twisted looking face.

That sight alone has me breathing deep and forcing my features to relax. We can't both be petulantly grumpy, or this will be the most hellish year of my life to date.

The moment that thought passes, I know it's wrong, but thinking about my family right now certainly won't help me adopt a neutral disposition. That's currently filed under the, I can't think about anything of substance right now or I'm going to have a mental breakdown category, way in the back of my mind.

My attention dips to the frilly outfit, my cheeks heating with more than the residual heat from the shower. I've never worn anything this...pretty before. Despite the way the lacy parts make my chest and waist itch, it hugs my body well, my wide hips flaring with the bouncy top as I do a little spin. My ass looks great too. Lifting my chin and giving myself a little nod in the mirror, I fumble for only a few seconds, trying to get the door open before the chilled air of the bedroom hits me. The smell of Fafnir and... no fucking way!

Pizza.

He has a food replicator!

I all but float dreamily toward the smell, my mind locked on a one-way track until I see the male chopping something besides a sizzling pan. His broad back tenses as I enter the room, his head tilting over his shoulder only slightly. "If this...PissA is not of your liking, I can get you something else."

Notpizza, piss, then a long A.

## Page 11

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My lips quirk.

“I love pizza. Thank you, Fafnir. I can’t believe you have a food replicator! Mom had always saved for one back home, but something always came up.”

He glances at the large device, looking sorely out of place in the cozy warmth of his home. “I was worried the food here would not be of your liking. I wanted you to be comfortable.”

“You got it for me?” Holy hell, those are expensive, but then again, he did just pay a ton of money for me, so I guess that makes sense.

He grunts.

When I get beside him, taking the plate off the warmer, I give him a bright smile. My mouth is already watering. He’d replicated pepperoni pizza, my favorite. “That means a lot, thank you.”

His eyes widen a fraction. The sound of groaning metal makes my head snap down. The handle of the pan he’s holding is now twisted and bent. He’s cooking some kind of meat and greens in a smoky lard, but it pops. I squeal, shoving away just in time to miss being doused in hot oil, but Fafnir’s large hands get coated.

He doesn’t flinch, simply regards what he’s done with an even bigger scowl.

I all but toss the forgotten pizza to the counter. “Fafnir!” It comes out as a scold and not the concern it’s meant to be, as my suddenly shaky hands grab a nearby rag and

using it as a pot holder to move the pan away from the heat. He grabs for it, but I swat him away.

Swiveling toward the sink, I flick on the cold water before gripping his wrist and hauling him toward it. His skin hot and slippery from the oil. I know logically I can't haul the giant male anywhere, but he comes all the same. His hooves are quieter here than they were at the station as I guide his hands underneath the stream. I'm fussing over the red, angry state of his tanned flesh when he finally speaks. "Lenora, I am fine. We heal quickly."

"Oil burns are serious!" My heart is racing, something is churning in my gut. Like dread, but not the kind from earlier today. Discomfort.

Worry.

Suddenly, my small hands drifting over his large, rough ones in soft, assessing passes is too much. My attention snaps back to the stove instead, tutting as I rush to it, flipping the strange-looking meat onto a waiting plate although it looks like it was well on its way to burnt before I got here.

The sound of the water cutting off has me whirling again, my finger pointed at his chest. "Twenty minutes, or at least until the pain stops or they'll blister."

"Female, I am fine. I do not need you fretting over me like a kit." He growls.

You don't need me—

Breathe.

In and out.

Oh, fuck it.

My hands meet my hips, and I glare up at him. “Then perhaps you should avoid burning yourself like one.”

He makes a huffing sound deep in his chest, his glare deepening with mine, but his eyes flame with a different kind of heat. “It was your fault.”

I sputter. “My fault!? How could you snapping a pan like a horned tanned version of Hulk possibly be my fault!?”

“You were distracting.”

My lips fall open, the anger rushing out of me as his eyes make another lazy path down my body.

“Oh.”

He sighs, heading toward the stove, leaving me there deflated and... squirmy.

He finds me distracting.

Don't smile. Don't smile. Don't smile.

When my brain catches up, I rush to him to help, a tiny yelp leaving my throat when the man simply grips my waist, depositing me on the counter and out of his way instead, scowling at my bare feet. I bite my lip to hide the wince from my bruised tailbone.

“Do humans not wear foot coverings indoors?”

## Page 12

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

Foot coverings?

“You mean shoes?”

He grunts.

My mind flips to the odd-looking pair he'd left for me in the bathroom. They looked like work boots but were made from thick reinforced hide. “Uh, some maybe, but I don't.”

“If I step on your foot Lenora, I will break it. The shoes I provided should offer an adequate barrier. The design is rated well for humans who wish to protect their feet while on work visas.”

Oh, seems to be my favorite word tonight because that's all I can mutter as I watch him clean the mess on the cooktop.

“You don't cook often, I'm guessing.”

“No, everyone shares meals at the Halthara.”

“HAL-thar-ah.” I repeat, trying and failing to growl and roll the R's like he does.

His lips quirk into something that looks suspiciously like a smile. I hide my own, not wanting him to know I saw.

“What is that?”

“Where our village gathers, the center of our community.”

“But you missed tonight...”

I leave the rest unsaid, my heart pounding as the silence stretches between us. Wishing like hell he’d fill it. So much time passes that I nearly give up reaching for my cooling pizza when he finally does. “I thought you’d like some more time to adjust.”

I can’t hide the next smile as I bring the pizza to my mouth, taking an unladylike bite. He forwent supper with his friends, his family, for me. Got boots so he wouldn’t hurt my feet. Brought me clothes and a towel for the shower when he realized I had none. He apologized...

“Thank you, Fafnir.”

He grunts, and despite myself, I’m still smiling.

eight

Fafnir

Lenora fell asleep by the fire shortly after she finished her food. I had intended to leave her there but thought better of it. With the way she squirmed, she’d roll right in. Lifting her slight frame into my arms, the oddest throbbing bloomed in my chest. It ached so badly I wanted to knead the space like you would an overexerted muscle after years of disuse.

Her sweet floral smell reminds me of the Snorrakh fruit. One of the few that can survive the deep and long winters here, only found in the forests where the herds of Thraxis bunker down, the large glacial beasts with blue tinged fur will crack their

nearly impenetrable shells with their jaws. They're amongst our biggest threat here but typically keep to their forests, knowing we nor the Sihlih are worth the trouble of trying to eat. In my youth, I'd thought to capture and tame one once.

That'd been a spectacular failure. The capturing was fine, easy enough. It was the taming that had been something else entirely. The damned thing had nearly rendered the hide from my flesh, and I'd trekked home in twenty lengths of snow to lick my wounds and brood in private.

I'm stalling.

Bhaurnul warriors do not stall so they can hold delicate females in their arms. Warriors of Valhyr do not linger in warm bedrooms because they find themselves loathing to leave. My people don't...couple, not until they're older. Elders and past their breeding prime, and even then, it is a rare thing. My tail thrashes behind me as I lower her, that deep simmering rage bubbling in my gut. If I had a mirror, my eyes would be red, I have no doubt. The shame of it has me tossing the warm furs over her and backing away.

We are a communal people.

We share.

Everything.

We do not feel things like I do now.

Like I want to keep her in these furs spread and filled.

Like I never want to let her see the light of day again.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

Not unless I am beside her.

War madness is a peculiar, haunting affliction.

I timed this perfectly, timed her perfectly, paid more than was reasonable to have her during the winter festival. We would celebrate with my people, and I wouldn't care if she saw their suspicious stares and watched the way they kept their distance. We would be blessed by Thrymus and his mate Sylvara. For once, when the fire died at the next light and people had chosen their partners for the winter, I wouldn't go home alone.

I wanted this.

Needed a child.

Needed to know there would be something more of myself long after I was cast into the dark. Even if my mind was no longer intact enough to feel the pride that might bring.

How, after only a day, do I feel such dread sharing the sight of her with the world? My hand unbidden flies to my horns, feeling the ridges of ivory cool and void of heat. The discomfort in my chest only deepens. Why had I expected them to be hot?

Such things don't happen anymore.

It has been far before my time that the Gods have blessed anyone with a mate.

And what a cruel blessing that would be.

Lenora

I groan, shoving the heavy, thick blankets off my sweat slicked body. Cringing at the way my upper lip is wet when I wipe my hand across it. My eyes flutter open, the bright room only stinging them for a second before I stare at the high vaulted ceilings of the bedroom.

He carried me to bed.

My stomach does an odd little flip just as the bathroom door slides open, steam billowing like an active volcano. Fafnir's eyes find mine and I wish I could say my attention stays there. It doesn't. His deep tanned skin and long warm gray hair sends droplets of water pattering toward the floor. The towel wrapped around his waist hung dangerously low on his hips. The trail of fur shadowing the deep V of his chiseled stomach and waist has me shifting my thighs together under the thick blankets.

"Lenora." He growls.

My eyes snap to his again. An odd red ring around his iris takes me aback. It only makes him more severe, more commanding. "Hmm?"

"Dress and eat. I must tend to my duties for the day. I wish for you to join me."

That snaps me out of it as I roll to my belly, stretching like a lazy cat, kicking off the blankets. I've always been a slow riser. I wake up super early to accommodate lazy mornings in bed. His pounding hooves make me gasp when the back of my pants are jerked down, exposing my upper ass, a feral sound leaving the male.

“Hey!” I try to twist only for his hand to plant against my upper back, keeping me pinned on the mattress. The fact that I’m literally drenched in sweat comes second to the flare of liquid heat that pools beneath my thighs. I’d never thought myself one to enjoy being manhandled but...

His two cocks come to mind, and I can’t help but squirm under his grasp as his hand trails over my sore tailbone.

Just a little lower.

“What happened to your back, female?”

Oh.

The fucking bruise.

When I try to speak at first, an odd garble of words is all I can muster, my sleep rattled brain still hazy. My thoughts are purely between my legs. Perhaps two wouldn’t be so bad. It’d take a lot of working—

“StubbornValkyra. Speak before I lose my temper.”

I’d be okay with that.

I peek over my shoulder, meeting his eyes. My lips part against the mattress, finding the red bleeding and overcoming the earthen brown like injecting ink into water. It's so beautiful, I get lost there for a moment, watching the battle between colors. He must realize, his long hair dripping onto my overheated skin as he jerks his head away. “Lenora, please. You’re hurt.”

I clear my throat, my heart pounding so hard I know he can feel it through my back.

“Yesterday when I went outside to find you, I wasn’t trying to ride your lion lizard—”

“Sihlih.” He corrects between gritted teeth.

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“Your Sihli wouldn’t let me out of the damn house, so I tried to climb over him. He apparently thought I wanted a ride, too.”

His breath seems to come a little easier then, making another far too slow pass over the discolored flesh before righting my pants and removing his palm from my back. I might be delirious. Perhaps I’m still halfway asleep, but the way his tongue snuck out to wet his lips makes me feel like he wanted everything except to move.

nine

Lenora

This time as we set out on Valoryx, Fafnir keeps a massive forearm banded across my waist. Well, kind of waist. The thing takes up my entire stomach and rests just beneath my breasts. I’m pulled flush against his chest, tucked in deep to the wall of a male so tightly the bitter wind barely touches me. This time before we set out, he’d shoved some kind of cosmetic cream in my hands, at first I’d thought to be offended, considered lobbing it back at him, but he’d explained it was to keep my cheeks from getting chapped, and that goofy warm feeling took over again.

It appears I’m at least moderately fond of the giant brute. He’s... thoughtful and sweet. Although I’ll have to explain to him later, I can’t eat pizza for every meal. Even I’d tire of that eventually. He’d all but gagged when I offered him a bite, apparently content with whatever unfortunate looking dehydrated rations bar he’d produced. Even the tinge of sadness I felt when I thought about Mom and my sisters seemed balmed for the time being at least as he rode through the open fields.

He had, in fact, gone through the trouble of having more traditional Bhaurnul-style clothing made for me. A lot, actually. Mixed with lavishly made human options as well. My mouth had all but dropped open when he'd opened the sky-high wardrobe in the bedroom, filled with things for me. I hadn't been able to reach anything, but he was patient, showing me each piece and letting me pick and choose. His brow was furrowing so deeply, I'd thought to jerk him down by the horns and smooth my thumb over the deep crease. I doubt that'd go over well, though.

Apparently, Bhaurnul women are far from modest. Making his pajama choice last night make more sense. I'd gawked at the spring and summer options, finding most of them to be no more than animal skin lingerie. Suddenly incredibly grateful I'd come right before winter took hold. We can work up to those. I can't fathom they'll look very sexy on me when I'm heavily pregnant with a giant baby, but I'll cross that bridge when I come to it.

I wiggle and squirm, making another growl sound from above me. "Loosen the seatbelt Fafnir, I'm not going to fall."

"Youdidfall."

"Yes, because I wasn't holding on." I squirm some more, fighting for even an inch until Fafnir's warm breath tickles my chilled cheek.

"Female, I must insist you cease moving like that."

My eyes widen as my body goes deathly still. The steel press of his cocks against my back makes a tremble break out over my body that has little to do with the cold. My mind wanders for a moment. It's only natural to be curious, right? Soon enough, we'll be well acquainted. I shift back, just an inch, just until he stiffens further, his fists whitening on the reins. The heat coming from them is enough to make me melt. If the warmth is any indication, I bet they'd be ruddy with need.

For me.

My cheeks flame, a shit-eating smile plastered on my face. I don't bother hiding it, wiggling again before something that sounds like a stifled groan leaves him before he loosens his hold, finally allowing me to lean forward.

I purse my lips for only a moment before I sink my fingers into Valoryx's long, blue tipped mane. My dull, dark blue gloved fingers look so pretty next to the vibrant color in his fur, reveling in the warmth and the deep, resonant purr that comes from the beast.

Just like Old Earth cats.

Just bigger and scarier.

Wayscarier.

My eyes dart to Fafnir's hand as it comes back, not to hold per se but to rest on the swell of my hip as a group of Bhaurnul males race past us, doing some kind of terrifying war cry in greeting. There's something so...possessive about the action, my thoughts are made of pure mud by the time we finally reach our destination.

My hands pass through Valoryx's mane, forgoing the brush for the tiny knots and tangles, although I doubt some tugging would bother the large animal. Not for the first time since we arrived hours ago, my attention slips to Fafnir. Watching the expert way he handles the majestic nightmare beasts. Apparently, their economy thrives off of something called war contracts, essentially pay-to-play soldiers. It's mandatory, like Old Earth drafts toward the end. Every fit male must serve at least a three-year contract, if they survive it... which typically they don't. When it'd asked him how long he'd served before he decided to become something of a beast tamer, he'd ruffed out something that sounded like a "for too long" then decided that,

or any conversation, was over.

I'd tried to help him with the others, but the giant lizard kitty underneath me hadn't taken too kindly to that. Every time I'd approach them, he'd kick up quite the fuss. Snarling and swiping his paws at the offending party.

Attention hog.

So, we were exiled by a very annoyed Fafnir, grumping something about the fact that he should've left me home. He hadn't asked for my help in caring for Valoryx, or the others, but idle hands make for wandering minds. I've got far too much my mind could wander on and none that would do me even a bit of good. I've wiped down his hardened scales, brushed his mane and dotted on him like any good attendant at a space port spa would.

The terror has been sprawled out, lounging in the sun since we started. Dozing here and there, but always alert, always watching. Much like his master.

Their heads live on a swivel, and I can't blame them for it.

Mandatory war sounds... horrific.

I know first-hand the things one's mind can subject you to. My chest seems to clench in on itself when the memories of that night flood in on me. The way my sister's screams had echoed for miles. He hadn't meant for it to go that way. Dad would've never—

My sister wasn't supposed to see that, but she did either way. Cammi hasn't been the same since. She needs help... the kind that costs money. A lot of it. A groan leaves me as I clamber off Valoryx, forcing my mind elsewhere. My thighs aching from straddling him for so long, but all that's left is the fur on the underside of his mane,

near his chest, then the cleansing bucket filled with some kind of mild smelling soap for his face.

I get the feeling this isn't something that's done daily, but more something to occupy me now that his beast has decided I can't be useful anywhere else.

“Valoryx up,” I command.

Waiting.

The damn thing doesn’t move.

I scowl, walking around as he tracks me with lazy crimson and golden slitted eyes. Bracing my hands on his side, I try to shove him over. But yeah, obviously, that’s not going to work. His tail flicks at me as if to shoo me away, but I swat at it. Hiking a brow when his lips pull in a silent, lazy snarl. It’s incredibly illogical how comfortable and safe I feel with him compared to just yesterday. I’d done something right on that ride, perhaps too right considering the way he’s begun hoarding me like his favorite servant. My eyes peek at Fafnir again, watching the toned expanse of his brawny arms as he runs another Sihlih through a set of commands and drills.

I point at them, getting closer to Valoryx’s face. “See that? You should be ashamed of yourself.”

Giving his up command a few more times with only mild amusement in response has my irritation simmering dangerously close to anger. Cursing him out feels nice, but he doesn’t know what I’m saying, so it’s not super satisfying. I try to wrap my arms around his neck to haul him up myself; my hands don’t even come close to touching, so I can’t lift his head.

Not that I could either way, but he and I both are past being reasoned with.

He gently swats his paw toward my back as I turn, knocking me forward enough to

stumble before he shakes his mane out, giving a giant yawn. “War beast, my ass.” I grit between my teeth, searching the clearing and eyeing the enclosed training building toward the area where Fafnir is working with the others, when an idea pops into my mind.

“Fine, if you won’t listen, I’ll go back to the group.” I offer, not getting more than a few steps away before his thick barbed tail edges ever so carefully out.

I ignore it.

Until he swipes hard, taking my feet out front underneath me. My breath is knocked from my chest, and my cheeks flame bright, already feeling Fafnir’s no doubt highly annoyed stare. It’s his damn mount that’s acting like a moody teenager! Another slurry of foul words leave my lips as I shove myself up, stalking back toward Valoryx. He watches me, ensuring he keeps his head down and not give me what I want. I brace my back on his side, my feet planted on my ground as I push, holding my breath from the strain of it. So focused on just getting him to move an inch, it takes my brain precious seconds to catch up when the brick wall I’m trying to shove over simply gives.

My back collides with the ground, making me hiss in pain, my bruised tailbone throbbing. It’s not until a mountainous eclipse blots out the sun that I wrench my eyes open.

“What have you done to my mount?” Fafnir accuses, his eyes glued to my sprawled form beneath him.

“What have I done?” I all but screech, pointing to my chest for dramatic effect. It feels good to have big feelings and get loud.

He rears back, his long hair plaited, slapping at the brand on his chest. “He’s being

willfully disobedient. I raised him myself from a pup, fought with him for sixteen years and never, not once—"

"Sounds like poor training," I interrupt. My eyes widening when that odd red color blooms in his eyes, flooding and warring with the deep brown.

I don't get a second to rehash my own words before I'm hauled off the ground and slung over the shoulder of Fafnir, a move he seems to enjoy as he plants a rough, dirty palm over the back of my thigh, squeezing a little harder than he needs to. It's everything I have not to squirm as I'm roughly deposited on the back of Valoryx. Instinctually, I lean up, gripping onto his mane as he purrs his approval.

"Poor training." Fafnir spits, and it's clear I've struck a nerve. I almost feel bad, but the trepidation I'm feeling at his erratic behavior takes a backseat to the mouthwatering spectacle of pure male aggression. He jerks his thick fingers into his hair, his muscles bunching as he stalks toward an open spot in the field away from us. When he turns, his eyes find mine. My core tightens unbidden, making me dig my teeth into my lip.

"Hold him roughly," he orders, and my heart jolts in my chest, digging my fingers in harder, deeper, so much so I worry they'll need to be cut out.

I'm panting, my breath rougher than it was moments ago as he darts further out, moving every bit as fast as the beast I'm on. His strong equestrian legs, all power and corded muscle. When he stops, his back is to me, to all of us, and it's only then that I notice they're watching.

All the Sihlih gather around me in a V formation as he barks commands. When he lifts his arm, the entire field goes still, me included. He turns, looking over his shoulder, his eyes meeting mine. The slightest smirk on his bowed lips does ungodly things to my insides before he gives the line of predators his back again.

The command that comes next is more vocalization than words. I barely hear the end of it as a scream rips from my throat. The line of Sihlih rushes forward, snarling and foaming with their attack.

And it is an attack.

One that he aimed toward himself.

“Stop!” I scream, jerking back on Valoryx’s mane as if it’ll do anything to stop him, to stop any of them. We’re on him in seconds that seem to stretch a lifetime as I squeeze my eyes shut tightly, just as another short, barked command rises above the snarling.

I lurch forward at the sudden stop so violently that I crash into Valoryx’s wide neck. My breath leaving me in choked pants.

“Open your eyes, little female.”

I do, the sound of his gravelly voice swiping over my frayed nerves like warm water over chilled skin. My mouth gapes. The silly, willful Valoryx’s teeth are latched onto his master’s shoulder.

A strange, violent snapping occurs in my chest. “Fafnir!” I try to move to scramble off, but then I look closer.

His teeth pierce but... only just like the tip of a needle, and he’s panting, holding his pose. My head snaps around in horror to find they all are. The beasts stopped a blink away from delivering a fatal blow. All in perfect unison. The gravity of it has me slipping my shaky hands from his mane. “Okay, you made your point.” I spit out, feigning anger because it’s the only thing that makes sense, despite not feeling a lick of it.

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I'm panicked, shaky, and... who the fuck knows? Fafnir barks another command. The beasts stop their eerie, paused attack, all returning to their casual lounging like their master hadn't just commanded them to kill him. Like they hadn't been prepared to do so without hesitation. When I look up from the scaled back of Valoryx, it's not of my own volition. My pulse whooshes in my ears as the sharp prick of something blooms under my chin. My attention snaps up, but I don't dare move a muscle. Fafnir's long pointed horn is poised under my chin, his swirling eyes tilting up under dark gray lashes to meet mine. An elongated furry ear flicks. His hair mussed and hanging in his face with such devout hunger, I have to fight the urge to squirm. "We are less than forty-eight Zentics in, and already you disrupt the very core of me, Valkyra."

My nipples grow hard and chafing under the thick hide tunic.

"I am not a gentle male, Lenora. I do not train gentle house pets. The beast you sit upon has killed and maimed nearly as many as his master. While I admire his obvious affections for you, you would do well to remember whatweare."

We.

What we are.

"Neither of you will hurt me." I breathe out, shaken by the surety in my voice. My hand acting of its own accord as I palm his antler. Something about the action feels... dirty, sacred, like I shouldn't be gripping him here, but I don't let go. Fafnir's eyes widen as I direct it away from my chin. Moving my head back as I gently tug him closer to me, rubbing my thumb over the ivory rings of his tanned horns. He's

ahairsbreadth away from me, and my entire body lights, watching as his eyes swirl and battle.

I don't breathe as he lifts me from the beast, letting my flushed skin make a slow path down his body. I hang onto his horn until I can't any longer, until my fingers slip free, and I watch the terrifying, berserker alien...shudder.

"Come Lenora, that's enough for today."

I try to agree, but nothing comes, my eyes lingering on the huge bulge tenting behind his loincloth as he turns and stalks back toward the Sihlih grounds where most of the mounts have slinked back. Save for Valoryx, who seems content to walk at a slothful pace beside me.

Fafnir said he fought for sixteen years. My breath heaves out of me in a failed attempt to calm and strengthen my shaky legs.

They only require three.

ten

Fafnir

The next few days move on just like that. My mind urging toward the brink more often than not, seemingly in all manners where my tiny female is concerned. A male comes by the Sihlih enclosure. He's curious about the human woman. Curious if I've bred her yet, it nearly sends me into a rage. The closer he gets to her, the more questions she answers with a bright smile I wish she reserved only for me. He puffs out his chest, and a savage sound rips from my throat as I haul her away from him. Setting her atop Valoryx, who has always been a particularly ill-tempered beast, so he ensures nobody else approaches.

Lenora seems to find it incredibly amusing, my illogical behavior, time and time again. I lift my roughened palms in private to touch my own horns. Hope fizzling in my chest. Not that finding them changed would do anything but further complicate our situation. Especially now, with the males whom I've bellowed and threatened, no doubt see my shame for what it is.

It's only a matter of time.

Lenora will bear my kit. Then, if I'm lucky, I will be well enough in my mind to see them off before they go. Not together, of course, another thing that goes away at my chest for reasons I can't understand. We are a communal people, kits are raised as such, not in individual homes but with the groups of other little ones. They are the responsibility of us all, with men dying more than coming home, their minds only to be ravaged with war madness soon after...we do not mate for life. Simply pair for the winter season. We are not possessive people, but it seems I am a possessive male. Of course, I would not be left with even the slightest dignity.

Lenora hums quietly to herself as she folds heavy furs and packs away anything she may need for the night to come. Her long, thick hair plaited down her back with a strap of leather I cut from my war armor. She'd been complaining she'd had nothing to tie it back with. It seemed such a simple request to fill. She never has to know the significance of it. In fact, it's better if she doesn't. In battle, they are tokens of love, of promise, given to those left behind.

"Foolish war mad male," I curse under my breath, slamming my blades into a pile on the counter harder than I meant to.

Her pretty, upturned eyes track me as I stalk, jerking weapons off the wall, only to replace them. Tomorrow morning, the first part of Thrymus's festival will begin with a hunt. One that has never mattered to me before. One I participated in for fun, not for show. Would my battle axe be too gaudy?

I stare at the large axe. The chain on the end has been soaked through with blood so many times that no matter how I clean it, I can smell it on the metal.

My back tenses as my human comes up beside me regarding the axe, too. “For the hunt tomorrow?”

I grunt.

“You get to choose your own weapon then.” She places her small, soft hands on her wide hips, regarding them and then the haphazard pile on the counter, humming thoughtfully. I watch her ass as she heads to the pile, following behind her, wishing my hooves wouldn’t announce the fact as they do.

When she reaches out to touch the razor-sharp edge of a blade, my hand encloses her wrist like a vice, steering her away. I should drop it, the limp thing swallowed by my grip, but I don’t. Dragging her sweet floral scent through my nose deeper than necessary. She doesn’t miss a beat in her perusal of my weapons, simply dragging me with her as she heads back over to the walls. Where a Bhaurnul woman would all but take my head from my neck for my behavior over the past few days, Lenora seems to enjoy being protected, coddled even... like the concept of being delicate isn’t a slight to her but something she embraces. She’s soft in all ways, apart from her temperament. That is pure Bhaurnul, simply without the jarring sense of over-inflated honor and pride.

“How about this one?”

My eyes tear from her soft face, slowly following her finger to where she points at a double-ended spear. I quirk a brow. “Is that what you wish for me to use?”

My heart thunders in my chest, the urge to fidget overwhelming as I stand deathly still. Her wrist is still a hostage in my grip. The documents provided by the Oozarians

mentioned something about humans' liking to hold hands. Is that what we're doing?

She's not holding me back, but to her credit, she can't move. I could let go, loosen my hold, see if she wants to do the human comfortholding. But if she declines, I'd have to find a reason to take her wrist back. I decide against it.

"Faf, are you even listening?" she glares.

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No, I wasn't.

"The spear." I offer.

She simply rolls her eyes. I like it when she does that. She does it a lot, especially at Valoryx and not me, which I like less.

"I vote spear. It reminds me of Tarzan. That would be hot."

Rage, white hot and blinding, overtakes me. My hand releases her wrist, only to jerk her up to my height, my hands under her armpits like an unruly babe. Her eyes are wide as she dangles in my hold.

"Who is this Tare-zun?"

Her dammed full lips quirk. "Tar-zan. He's just a—" her smile grows, her teeth digging into her lip for a moment. "He's a famed human hunter, a wild man who lives off the land and has mastered the jungle of Old Earth. Always armed with a spear, he is said to be the most handsome of all the Disney princes."

A prince?!

A savage growl leaves my throat, and the dammed Valkyra in my grip only smiles further. My eyes dart to the spear, hauling her against me, settling her in close to my chest with one arm as I jerk the spear from the wall. "Has he come to Terra2? Have you bedded this...prince?"

I nearly scoff. A prince would know nothing of the brutality of a warrior. I wish I knew his face so I could picture it as I detached his princely jaw from the rest. I stalk toward my pile of weapons, slamming the spear down.

When her laughter erupts, I nearly skid to a halt, my eyes slamming to the shaking, hysterical female in my arms. “Oh yes, many times. He’s a fine fuc—” her laughter cuts off as her back meets the wall a little too hard, perhaps, but red is swirling my vision, a rage like nothing I’ve felt before blazing the inside of my chest. My knee slams up to support her weight, jamming between her thighs, her core resting there. Only the sound of our shared breathing, rough and perhaps a little frantic, fills the space as I gather her hands above her head, keeping them there, keeping her still.

Her mouth is open, her eyes tracking me as a deep resonant growl comes from my chest. I dip my head, slamming my horns into the wall on either side of her. She lets out a tiny scream, but it cuts off into a breathy, “Fuck.”

She squirms against my knee, and I can feel the wetness of her core there, making my twin cocks jerk behind my cloth. My other hand slams up to brace on the wall, trying to cool my rising temper.

“Faf... release my hands,” she whispers.

That damn nickname...

I squeeze them harder, both hating and reveling in her wince.

And hating that.

The madness clouding my mind.

“Now, Fafnir,” she says a little louder.

It takes a second, then a few more, red swirling behind my eyes in a new horrible way as I breathe. My chest tampering down on my heart.

She's mine.

Mine.

I peel back my fingers, one at a time, until her hands drop. Her expected rage, escape attempts, and demands to be released never materialize; instead, her small hands drop to my horns. I can't see anything save for the rapid rise and fall of her chest. Her pert, hardened nipples behind the thin human dress she calls a nightgown. My tongue wets my bottom lip with the desire to taste them. Her hands run the length of my horns, soft fingers slipping over every ridge and groove before she finds her way to my hair, sinking her fingers into the strands. Some of the red fades from my vision of her beautiful, flushed form.

"Tarzan isn't without his faults, though. He's no warrior, nowhere near a strong enough male for me."

I shudder as her hands slip onto my shoulders, tiny fingers kneading at the tense muscles there until she squirms, her cunt rubbing against my thigh making a soft moan leave her throat. My palm bracing the wall leaves, flattening on her waist to hold her still as I jerk my horns free. Splinters of wood falling over the skirt of her dress gathered around her hips.

My eyes meet hers, giving her a second to stop me as I pull her hips, forcing her to move against my thigh. She braces her hands on my chest, gripping the leather straps there, her teeth goring her bottom lip until I tug it free, smoothing over the chewed flesh with my thumb. I urge her to move again, and she does, the softest, most delectable sound leaving her lips, and she needs no further encouragement. My cocks throb and ache, watching as she grips my chest, pulling me closer to her while finding

her pleasure on my thigh. Her bright eyes half lidded with need as she whimpers, rubbing herself harder.

“Mine.” The word slips from my throat again, unbidden. But if she notices, she doesn't seem to mind. Her grinding quickens in tune with her breath.

“Oh, I’m going to—”

“Yes, come for me, little Valkyra, only for me.”

A sharp cry leaves her throat as she slams her head backward, making it connect roughly with the wall. Her entire body is a goddess sent vision as she heaves, grips, and grinds down on me. Her blunt nails digging into my scarred flesh. All of it is nothing compared to the small, shy smile she gifts me as her waves of pleasure pass, and I gather her into my arms. Brushing my nose against her flushed cheek, wondering how I’m going to last until after the festival or how I plan to say goodbye at the end of all this. Already, the thought of her absence haunts me, and after a year of her... I fear if the war madness has not taken me by then... that surely will.

eleven

Lenora

The ride into the village center is... well, I feel like I'm going to vomit. Everyone has been kind so far, particularly the males in their grunting, brutish way, but I've yet to see a female or see anyone that isn't being run off by Valoryx or Fafnir. A tingle runs down the back of my spine as we lope between buildings, the entire trip taken at a slower pace than usual, reluctantly even, which doesn't bode well for me.

The giant at my back has been quieter than usual, which means his few grunted responses, barked commands, or shortnon-answeranswers are nonexistent. After last night, I'd hoped I'd broken through his tough shell, at least a little. I'm content for now, telling myself he's simply focused on the hunt ahead. His Tarzan spear strapped to his back as the odd greenish hued night sky bears down on us. A foreshadowing of Thrymus's return, or so he said last nightbefore clamming up tighter than my sisters when they stole my lipstick, smashing it around on their walls forart. A fond, if not slightly sad, smile lifts my lips at the memory.

It seems the festival is something to do with honoring and asking for protection from Thrymus himself, God of Winter and Resilience. If the strong Bhaurnul people need protection from a deity, I can't fathom how much I'll need to survive a winter here. Looking back on my meeting at the Solar Breeding Agency, it would've been smart to ask maybe a handful more questions before agreeing, but my brain had been a mess at the time, and all in all... I'm enjoying myself here. The looming, crushing anxiety I felt at the station is a distant memory. My cheeks flush despite the bone chilling wind. If last night was any indication, the whole being bred thing won't be

terrible either.

The hunt always begins before first light and lasts until the participating men have brought back enough meat for a feast befitting Thrymus. Meanwhile, much to Faf's displeasure, I'll be helping the women. He'd all but pinned me to the wall again when I told him I won't attend as a scared, hidden little human. I'll take part as anyone else would, if they'll have me. His pride in my statement had won out over his need to keep me plastered to the back of Valoryx for the next twenty-four zentics. My thighs ache at the thought.

We pass between two large glacial rocks, and again, the beauty of this planet isn't lost on me. Wide open landscapes backdropped by monstrous glacial mountains and lush snow tipped forests with trees that look familiar enough. It could almost be mistaken for a snowy Old Earth if you ignored the tiny dot they call a sun, keeping the land dimmer than the daylight I'm used to. The nights seem...thick, a darkness I once hadn't thought unimaginable. If it wasn't for the stars dotting the greenish sky, it would be anxiety inducing. Familiar enough to feel safe, alien enough to remind me it's not... not me for at least. Not without him. That's never been more evident than when I look at the large animal hide bag strapped to Valoryx, laden with cloaks, furs, and heavy padded lining for beds, so I don't freeze to death in the night. Fafnir, on the other hand, only brought his spear.

The festival lasts from the beginning of the hunt to the first light of the next day, which means everyone camps outside together, taking turns monitoring some fire I don't know the significance of. Faf has already spoken more than he has my entire stay up until this point, and I could tell he'd rather be pulling out his fur with tweezers than continue.

Valoryx roars our arrival, the beast's chest swelling, his form tensing with every bit the regal pride of his distant lion kin. His rushed lope turns into a lazy stroll, like the lap Old Earth horses used to take after doing their tricks and jumps in the ring. Old

Earth seemed to be really fascinated with animal performances, but I suppose if you aren't concerned with your dying planet and horrifying political climate, there wouldn't be much else to do.

All eyes turn to us, and at my back, Fafnir tenses. My heart kicks up to a race in my chest as his hand settles on my thigh with a harsh grip. Males lining the circular walkway around a giant unlit fireplace thump their chests with respect, making that odd bellowing greeting they have before. My eyes turn to Fafnir above me, watching as he nods in dismissal, everyone going about themselves as if they were hand waved by royalty. I hike a brow at the male; he ignores the question in my eyes, clicking in the back of his throat, issuing some unspoken command to his mount. I release my hold on Valoryx's mane as he lowers, stretching his hind above his head in a low crouch.

"The hunt will begin soon, Valkyra. Dismount, I must light the hearth."

My eyes flash to the loads of Bhaurnul people joining our small group around the colossal pyre. The land around isn't paved so much, but heavily used, with more dirt than grass. Hesitation fills me for only a second before Faf's lips nudge my ear, making goosebumps break over my flesh. "Chin high, little female. I will join you shortly, yes?"

I give him a curt nod, steeling myself as I let myself slide down Valoryx's neck a little, getting myself as close to the ground as I can. Even lowered like this, it's an ankle jarring drop, and I refuse to stumble in front of his people. Gasps fill the crowd, followed by hushed murmuring in his native language as I grip the crown of horns on the mount, steadying myself before dropping.

When the murmuring gets louder, Val lets out a warning growl. I huff a little before I turn to him, scratching the top of his nose the way he likes. The growl doesn't turn into his normal resonant purr, but he pushes into my hand for a moment before

nudging me further away so he can stand. I take a few steps back, blending with the giants making up the crowd instead of standing apart from them. My eyes cutting toward Fafnir, not surprised to find him watching me with the oddest look in his eyes. A sharp pang of longing... of pride fills my chest to see the way the others react to him.

Not only with reverence, but with no small amount of fear.

The Oozarians weren't exaggerating. My male is honored among his people. He's strong, and my hand slaps to my chest at the nagging, swelling warmth there. I take a steady breath and ensure my chin is held as he wants it, so that maybe that pride in his eyes might be there for me alone. So that the others, still hushed in their murmuring, might see that I'm worthy of a male like him. As if I'm worthy of bearing his young, even though I'm not big, or particularly strong, I have no horns, war beast, or hooves.

I had expected to feel a great deal of inferiority coming here, prepared for it even. Dreaded it all throughout the night instead of sleeping. Not even my loose, stated body could truly rest. An older looking female approaches him, and despite her obvious signs of age, she holds herself as high as any of the males around us. Her size is not much different as she lifts the burning torch in her hand to Fafnir with a nod. He nods back, his eyes flashing to me, and I can't help but smile. Then can't help but smile bigger as he tries and nearly fails not to return it. How could I feel inferior next to him? When he looks at me like I'm bigger, stronger than any of the giants who threaten to swallow me in the crowd.

Looks at me like I'm his.

Even though I'm not.

When he rips his eyes from mine, it's to turn them to the sky, the deepening green

storm on the horizon threatening to blot out what little light we have. His strong, corded arm slams upward as he releases a bellow befitting a god of war. Befitting a god, bringing a harsh and unforgiving winter. The crowd joins him in a deafening symphony of power, of strength, men and women alike, hands slammed to the sky, roaring with everything they've got. I can't stop the bubble of energy, of excitement, from sinking into my bones. I'm thrumming with it as I lift my arms, my own scream joining theirs. It's small, but it's there. I scream with everything I have until my throat burns and my breath runs thin. Until tears crest my eyes and all I can do is think about them, about Mom and my sisters. About how Dad left and why he did it.

They keep bellowing, so I do too.

When the sound finally trails off, I'm panting wildly, but so are they. My head lights from the lack of air as Fafnir tosses the torch on the pyre. A monstrous fire roaring to life in the tall, proud hearth, its rock sides carved with symbols and pictures, stories of the gods it honors. Where the world was deafening before, everything is silent now, but only for a moment. All eyes turn toward a far mountain in the distance, and I wish I could see what they do. My feet carry me from the crowd, trying to get a look as a far-off braying bellow answers ours.

Other villages lighting pyres of their own.

When that one ends, releasing to the stormy sky, another one joins, and a crackle of electrified energy finds me again, heating my very bones, desperate to see it. A small yelp leaves me as I'm plucked off the ground, my breath whooshing from me. My head snaps to see the smiling, teary face of a Bhaurnul female as she hands me off to another. My heart is thundering, the domino roaring in the distance lost to me for a moment, until I see him. Fafnir takes hold of me next, nodding in thanks to the females who passed me through the riotous crowd. One I'd been heading straight into the heart of in my desire to see the flames. Hooves beat the ground as Fafnir settles me not just on Valoryx by the fire, apart from everyone else, but on his lap. Cradled

there, my wide teary eyes meet his only for him to nod toward the distance as another roaring hearth flares to life.

twelve

Lenora

The willing and able-bodied males had ridden out immediately after the last village lit their flames. Mere ontics before their small sun made its first wink over the mountains. My hands grip a broom far too large for me to use with any true skill as I drag it over the entrance to what I guess is their city hall. Mostly, I was given another job because everyone else was doing something and I wanted to help. Uncomfortable with sitting on the side while everyone else prepared. I don't mind too much; it gives me a much-needed ontic to gather my thoughts.

Bhaurnul females are much like their male counterparts, every bit as large, maybe a bit slimmer, a bit more graceful in their lines. The fundamental difference seems to be that they keep their horns filed down, unlike the males stretching curved ones. I had expected there to be more children, but there are only two. I watch them as they play, chasing each other through the natural wood columns, occasionally skidding and wiping out on uncoordinated hooves. My heart does an odd flip to think that in a few years our—Fafnir's child will do the same. It's an odd, bittersweet feeling I hadn't expected. One I'm thankful Faf isn't here to watch me sort through.

“Bhaurnul pregnancies are long and hard, so you won't see many children.”

My head snaps toward a female, her arms laden with butcher blades. I just nod. “Are one of them yours?”

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She laughs at that, a light, pretty sound so at odds with what Fafnir has shown me of their people so far. “No, I think they were reared by Ivet and Hosen, but to be honest, most of us forget by the time they're this age.”

She must see the confusion on my face, so she continues, a patient and sympathetic tone in her voice. “Of course, a male wouldn't bother explaining anything to you before they bred you.” She's smaller than the rest, perhaps younger too. Her light coloring and bright eyes shift around us conspiratorially. “We raise our young as a whole, not as an individual. As soon as the babes are old enough to be weaned from their dam, they come to the Halthara.”

Her words are a mix of their language, but mostly mine. I make out her meaning well enough. The thought only further unsettles me. “So, he won't raise the child—erkit? Will he come to see it?”

She shrugs, but her eyes have changed. They aren't as lighthearted anymore, and for a moment, I worry I've offended her. “Most come every day and night to the Halthara. Fafnir is...” she takes a breath, “notlike everyone else. I'd imagine if he's still here, he might stop by before he goes out to wander.”

“To wand—”

She steps closer suddenly, damn near stepping on my foot. The hall is buzzing with activity. When she takes notice, she seems to lower her voice further. “Are you not... nervous to be paired with him? How does this breeding thing work? Are you unable to break your contract?”

My heart seems to still in my chest. “No, why would I want to do that?”

Another female walks by, scowling at us both, but not in an aggressive way. Like the way Mom would scowl from across the room when my sisters and I were doing something she didn’t like. “Elat, enough. You know we shouldn’t be—”

“She has a right to know!” another female chips in. Apparently, this hadn’t ever been a conversation for two. The new female who joins us is... beautiful. Unfairly so, her dark brown skin looks stunning compared to her pale fur and hair. I shift on my feet as they fuss with each other. Refusing to feel less than, I force my chin higher, my back straighter.

My first attempt to get past their arguing falls under the current, so I make my second one louder. “Hey! What is it I have the right to know?”

Their eyes all shift to me before glancing at each other. The first female, Elat, seems to make up her mind quicker than anyone else. “Fafnir, he fought too long, took more contracts than is...respectable. Sixteen years is a long time at war. Far longer than any other males of our village have ever fought. If war madness hasn’t taken hold, it’s only a matter of—”

“Enough.”

All our backs stiffen at the command barked across the hall. The same older woman who looked so regal passing the torch to Fafnir stalks toward us, and like me, the other females have the decency to look like deer in headlights.

“You younger females too often speak before you think, especially in the presence of an outsider.” She scolds before regarding me with a softer air of sympathy. “No offense, human, it is simply our way of things.”

The urge to smile and say it's fine is strong. To laugh it off and bury my head in the dirt even stronger, but I do neither. My hand fists on the thick handle of the broom harder than necessary. "If I am to stay here for at least a year, to bear a child that you will all raise, to nurse aBhaurnulchild... I am not so much an outsider. Am I?"

Her chin lifts as she regards me silently. The moments pass like sap dripping down the bark of a tree before she speaks, and more than once, I remind myself that Fafnir wouldn't have left me here if I wasn't safe. "Fafnir is an honorable male." She barks more at the other females than at me. "He has fought past his prime for his reasons alone, and I have no doubt Valhyr looks down on him with his favor. Unconfirmed accusations of war madness are every bit as shameful as the sickness itself."

I watch the females around me shrink in on themselves, nodding their agreement. Only the female with the dark coloring dares to speak up. "Are you not concerned for her well-being?"

My eyes blow wide, darting to the elderly female. She ignores her, staring directly at me.

"If it gets that far, he will do what's needed. You have nothing to fear from him."

"I wasn't scared," I say it loudly, louder than perhaps I should've. Pointing my stare not only at our group but those around us, the ones who have slowly stopped to listen. The stoic older female nods before barking at the women to go about their duties and stalking off, her polished hooves thudding the wooden floor.

It's Elat that lingers, shifting the sheathed blades in her arms to grab my wrist. "Ask him about the symptoms. Human... if that male's mind goes—" She shudders, actually shudders. "I fear there is not a warrior here strong enough to kill him. They do not fight for that long, not for a lack of honor, but because they do not live that long. The berserker... it's a curse on their minds. Anything longer... it

isn't done for good reason. If he has lived, it is not because the war god blessed him out of kindness."

Another barked command from an adjoining room has her pressing her short horn into the space above my head, something I've seen the females do a few times in a familiar kind of greeting. Like a hug. The gesture isn't lost on me, but I can't seem to focus on anything other than the rapid pounding of my heart as I drag the broom across the floor.

Perhaps there is a better reason than even I know for the class B grade of Yolmarth.

thirteen

Lenora

The day is long, the sun high in the sky when the hunter's bellows sound again from the wood line. The tense atmosphere has shifted to something of excitement, a crown of twigs and light blue frosted flowers adorns my head. The females and I are sprawled out on a giant blanket, chatting and gossiping about this or that. While the topic of this morning sits in my stomach like milk that's gone off, my heart now races for another reason entirely.

Apparently, this hunt is for more than to provide food for the festival.

It's a show of strength, of worthiness, to bed a female for the winter. The male who brings back the biggest kill gets his pick before the others. Males who catch nothing are left cold for the season. My heartratchets in my chest, my eyes suddenly glued to my hands, refusing to rise like the others.

Not that I don't want to, but I'm... nervous. Unreasonably so, and I think I missed him. Despite my irritation with him not being upfront immediately, and with the

Oozarians for the same reason. I just really want to see him, for him to choose me. Surely, he would, right? Could I be expected to live in the house while he beds another female for the winter?

The thought makes sickness pool in my gut. It's silly, I know that. I'm abbreeder, a surrogate. He's... my boss if you want to boil things down but—

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A gasp breaks through my ranting. My wide eyes slamming to Elat at my side before her eyes meet mine. “Maybe you should stand.”

I stumble, nearly falling on my ass in my rush to get to my feet and all thoughts blank, like hitting the delete on a holo message halfway through.

Fafnir leads the group, his long-plaited hair mussed, spear strapped to his back. His eyes are narrowed, I can’t tell from here, but I know they’d be rimmed red if I were closer as he scans the crowd for—

Me.

My chest heaves as my eyes drop to the equally as giant, blue toned...

“What are those?” I whisper.

“Valkyra.” Another woman whispers back.

Valkyra?

Mynickname.

They look like giant elk, their blueish antlers dusted in glittering frost. He’s dragging them behind him, antlers gripped in his fists. Their white, shaggy fur smattered with a deep blue... blood?

“They’re incredibly elusive, stubborn, hunting parties see maybe one or two a season.

They're hard to kill, like a delicacy."

He killed two.

Another woman says something in their native language, a few more chiming in.

My eyes snap to Valoryx, lumbering out of the wood line, and now it makes sense why, like the other mounts, he isn't hauling his master's kill.

He was full already.

"It's a shame he's war mad," another female offers, and I can't help the way my chest swells with pride.

Fafnir eats up the ground between us like it's nothing, and soon enough, he's in front of me. Dropping the two giant beasts at his back as he leans down, pressing his forehead to mine. The hint of red fading into brown. The crowd around us giggles and laughs as other males make their requests of a bed partner known. "Little female." He gruffs, making something deep in my belly flutter.

"Y-you're choosing me."

"If you find me worthy."

A crazed, breathless laugh escapes me as I stand up on my toes, my hands flying out to grip his horns, suddenly desperate to have his lips on mine.

"I offer myself, human," another gruff voice cuts in.

Moment gone.

Fafnir freezes, red flaring in his eyes before he shakes it free, rising as another male lingers back, glaring right back at him, a large spikey... dog creature tied to what I assume is his mount. Judging by the way Valoryx halts his lapping at a nearby trough and snarls in his direction. The deep growl builds in Fafnir's chest as his bloody hand comes to rest on the back of my neck. His squeeze should feel threatening, given what I know, but it's anything but. It's warm... safe.

The new male eyes the action with no small amount of confusion and concern in his expression. He doesn't want me, per se. He wants Fafnir not to have me.

"Thank you...but I choose Fafnir." I answer, trying to hide my smile as a burst of breath rushes from my giant.

Even with being the clear winner of the hunt by a landslide... and maybe a little overkill, he was still worried I'd choose another over him.

The man lingers like he wants to argue but thinks better of it, bowing his head to me and shooting daggers at Fafnir before calling for his mount to follow. He doesn't approach another female but drops his kill in the pile.

Fafnir turns to me again, frowning deeply as I reach up, gesturing at him to bend for me. He does, his earthy smell dancing along my tongue. My fist grips the base of his horn, my lips tickling his ear, making it twitch, and judging by the gasp that surrounds us, perhaps I shouldn't be doing this, but I ignore them. "It seems we have a lot to talk about."

His eyes turn to mine, a challenge there. Daring me to continue, I don't, but I don't release him either. My thumb rubs against the base of his horn, where rough bone meets soft hair. His strong jaw clenching and unclenching a few times before he grunts. I release him, ensuring he sees my pointed glare as he lifts me off my feet, hauling me onto his shoulders. Vertigo hits me hard, the height dizzying as I grip his

horns again, frowning at how much warmer they feel. Fafnir is silent as he regains his grip on the Valkyra, dragging them to the pile with the others. I know I'm only up here because Valoryx is currently occupied, but it doesn't slow the butterflies in my stomach.

Fafnir

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I watch my female.

Her movements are skilled and unhurried, as she and the other females butcher the meat. Her soft skin coated in lapis tinted blood to her elbows. I'm pleased to see they have taken her in without hesitation, even if it means my worries haven't gone unfounded.

She knows.

Or at least knows enough.

Yet she held onto me, smiled at me, and lingered. She touched my horns and rolled her eyes.

She chose me, despite my shame.

It honors me as much as it irritates. My back presses into the side of the cold building as they finish up. With night edging the horizon, I'm eager to have her back at my side. In the three years since I returned from war, I hadn't fathomed I could be picked. The open stares of hostility and fear from the very people who had honored and elevated me for my valor ensured I knew where I stood. I had done something never done before, had honored our gods in a way others could not. I was a ticking time bomb, a male unright. A danger, liability.

War mad, long before I had first seen signs.

It hadn't mattered that it wasn't true then, but I hadn't bothered to correct them.

The berserker pushes at my chest, desperate to take our skin. To rip the lingering males apart as they appraise what's ours. The dishonor they show me as they look on at my female with pity, worry...fear. I can smell it on them, and it does little to calm the inferno in my chest. They look at me as if I'll rip into her at a moment's notice, as if she needs saving...by them. As if they plan to rush her to a secure place, her pliant, soft body trembling.

“Silence your growling or you'll have everyone in a flurry.”

My eyes cut to Helgoid. Her wise eyes wrinkled and deep set with age, while her stature and pride show none of it. Save for the pale gray that mars her fur and hair. As the elder among us, she mediates more than rules. What she sees in my eyes shakes her. I don't bother to hide it. Her spotted knobby hand comes to her chest as she clears her throat. Looking away, unable to bear the sight of me. “Is it true then?” she breathes.

“Wasn't it always?” I toss back as I stalk away from my dam, heading for Lenora as she washes her arms clear of blood. Vowing I will never see her so coated again.

Even if it means our contract is void, line dead, my name forgotten.

fourteen

Lenora

Another peal of laughter riots around us. I've lost track of who is offering what from where. Someone hands me over a bite of something else. Meat naturally, which seems to make up most of their diet. Apparently, my reactions are hilarious to them. Soon after Fafnir gathered me up, seating me on his lap at the table, the feast was underway. He piled my plate to the rim with enough food to feed my family back home for a week, and it immediately soured my gut.

That's why I'm here.

They have everything they need now.

And then some.

I repeat those facts until I can enjoy myself again, the guilt ebbing if only barely.

My stomach is already full, my plate mostly untouched. I've simply gorged on samples. The mushy, reddish side has a tangy, savory flavor, like a beet but in mashed potato form. My face screws up as I force myself to swallow, only managing about half. Elat's laugh is so hardy it turns into a choking tea kettle at the end, and my own laughter mingles with hers, making me suck the beaty potato meat down the wrong pipe.

Fafnir jerks my head back by my hair, his eyes wide with worry as I choke. I wave him off, struggling in his hold as I reach blindly for my mug of rich, thick liquor. The difference between the males and females is glaring. Where they are light, loud, and fun-loving, the males, for the better part, are serious, edged by something. War perhaps, even the ones not touched by it yet. They smile and laugh sure; I think they even mean it, but it's far from airy and careless like their counterparts. Fafnir doesn't do either of those things, and they make no attempt to do so with him. Where the males gather and talk, bouts of bellowing laughter drift up. His eyes and attention stay on his plate and me.

His head on a swivel, every loud sound, every shrill cry of laughter, and his muscles tense underneath me. The fifth or sixth time his hand inches back toward his spear, I lift from his lap, excusing us before tugging him away from the feast and toward the fire. The couples around it are quieter, lounging together with soft whispers. An intense reverence in their eyes.

Valoryx lies there, his sharp feline gaze at odds with the lazy way he's stretched out. Other mounts are scattered around too, but further out, in their own perspective groups. Perhaps he feels the same unease as his rider. My head is light, mushy from the liquor as I shake my wrist free from Faf, still not holding hands but close enough to send off a flurry of butterflies deep in my stomach. Valoryx tracks me as I weave through the blankets spread on the ground. The Bhaurnul people need much less covering than humans do. Even draped in a human-sized version of their heaviest winter attire, I'm cold. I lose my footing, plopping down beside the beast before scooting my ass until I'm nestled in the curve of him, away from most of the wind.

Fafnir lords above me, frowning at the two of us.

"Well, come on! I'm freezing."

He huffs, going to retrieve some furs for me from the pack instead. "I will not cuddle my mount. He is a war beast, not a domesticated—"

Valoryx chooses then to let loose a deep purr before he seems to catch himself, cutting it off abruptly as I snuggle in deeper to the giant lizard lion. "Seems pretty domesticated to me." I goad, loving how easy it feels with them.

My teeth chatter as I reach for the covers. I've opted to go by the Sihlih because he's already set himself apart from the others, far enough, I hope to alleviate most of Fafnir's unease. He keeps them just out of reach, gesturing with his head for me to come to him, his horns cutting through the green night sky with the action. "Come, female, you've been left to shiver long enough."

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My cheeks heat. I hadn't thought it was that obvious. "I would be perfectly warm snuggled up to you."

"Come," he orders.

My chest swells with irritation, the urge to argue every bit as heavy as the feel of my sensitive breasts. The need between my legs as I tighten my thighs. I lean over, scratching between Valoryx's horns before I clamber up, following behind Fafnir. Deeper into the throng of people until we're nearly to the base of the hearth. The roaring flame is mighty enough to ward off the chill, but comfortable enough to lounge in front of it too. I watch with amusement as Fafnir attempts to make me a nest of sorts on the crunchy frosted ground, grumbling below his breath as his hooves get tangled in the furs. I laugh for only a few more seconds before I take pity on him, lowering myself and crawling across the blankets to help sort them. He glares at me, but he watches.

Not just my face but the swell of my hips, the way the dark brown animal hide pants dip low on the small of my back. When we're settled, our bodies close enough to touch but not, I can't help the swell of disappointment. Reminding myself I'm not here to be courted, snuggled, or doted on. I'm here to be bred.

I think I'm ready too.

More than ready.

My thoughts are dirty in nature when Fafnir speaks. "It's taboo, you know?"

“Huh?”

“Touching the Sihlih’s horns. It is done only once by their riders, during their bonding, and it’s barely tolerated then.”

I frown, dipping my head backward, getting an upside-down look at the beast in question. “I thought he liked it.”

“He does.” Fafnir growls.

My heart drops a bit as I right myself, the action and alcohol making my head swim. “But you don’t.”

He’s quiet for a bit. I hide my nervousness by covering myself with a heavier fur, although I don’t feel like I particularly need it. His body heat and the flame are more than enough to keep me comfortable. I’m used to Fafnir’s long pauses, it’s refreshing really, to speak with someone who truly takes the time to give the responses he wants versus saying the first thing to come to mind.

“I do.” He growls, admitting it like he’s confessing to some terrible crime.

My eyes widen as he avoids my gaze, my head snapping down to my hands as they fiddle with the seam of the blanket.

“It seems he has chosen to bond with you as well, perhaps even deeper than I. It’s something no longer practiced, but it was once, years ago.”

“Why?” I breathe, my heart thundering as more people gather around the fire, the next activity underway.

“Mates. They would bond their mate to their mount for added protection.”

My heart stills, a longing so intense tears spring to my eyes when he finally looks at me. His frown only deepens. "Do not worry, female, we are not mates. The gods have not yet cursed you so terribly."

I want to correct him, I almost do, but the look in his eyes... the shame there. Another splattering of hushed words leaves me instead. "What is war madness?"

Why do they think you have it?

He doesn't look away as a tear slips onto my cheek, but I can tell he wants to. It's important, whatever he's about to say costs him, and even as activity picks up around us, I don't dare look away. "It's a disease, an affliction that affects the males of my people. They aren't sure what causes it, but most seem to accept it's the berserker. It poisons our minds until they are no longer minds at all. Just chasms of paranoia, violence, and rage."

My heart wobbles deep in my chest.

"We lose ourselves. It is the greatest shame to be so weak, so... far from Valhyn's honor."

The sob that works to my throat is as violent as my attempt to choke it back, Dad's holo note flooding my mind. He had a similar look in his eyes when he spoke of the same kind of shame. Neither was justified.

"Faf—"

"I will not be pitied by you, human." He says the word like it's a curse, but I let it roll off. "They fear me with good cause. I am warmad. There is nothing to be done now but wait. I was an even bigger taboo than you, long before the first signs hit me. It was as though I'd already been warped. Reveling in the pain... the gore. It was every bit a

part of me as my own horns, and when it was time to go... to goback, I couldn't come home. It felt wrong, Ifelt wrong, so I stayed. There, now you know my sh—"

"I think it's quite brave." I interrupt, willing my voice to stay steady. "You came home, stopped fighting. You did the harder thing." I look away, not wanting him to see my tears. I leave his eyes swirling crimson, and hekeepsstaring. He stares so long, so silently, I barely think he breathes until the older, stern woman takes a large seat in front of the hearth, demanding our attention with a keening bellow of her own.

The rest of the night is quiet, everyone's undivided attention on the woman as she weaves tales of their gods, prayers, and stories of how they came to be. Their drunk sways and riotous laughter traded for fond looks of contentment as they lie with their chosen partners for the winter. They take turns getting up to tend the fire as it burns lower, the chill settling back in hours later.

Thrymus, the God of Winter and Resilience, lit a fire so large it burned throughout the worst of his winter, saving the first Bhaurnul people when they had not yet learned the ways of the land. They were unprepared when the skies turned dark and green. They kept the fire burning until morning light on the first night of winter, to show their thanks and favor to the harsh god. All eyes are on me when the elderly female I now know asHelgoidnods toward me, giving me a turn to stoke the flame. My hands scrape, and my arms tremble as I struggle, maneuvering the large log from its pile. It takes me longer; the story goes on without me, Fafnir leaving our spot to be near as I struggle to drag it to the fire.

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My face is slick with sweat, my breath panting by the time I get it in. No one helped, and for some reason, my smile is even wider because of it. They didn't treat me as less than, just as a human. They held me to the same standard as themselves on a night of such importance, and now my log burns with theirs. It's a mark, a small one, but one nonetheless. An acceptance few humans are given among the stars.

When I collapse back onto our spot, earning myself a small gaze of approval from Helgoid, my chest swells impossibly. Fafnir passes me a flask of water quietly. When I lie back, my eyes are heavy, watching as the clouds turn violent above us. His hand makes a soft, reverent pass through my hair, and I wish I could appreciate it. I'm lost to the world by the second one as the stories and warmth continue around me.

fifteen

Fafnir

Lenora sleeps like the cursed, but slightly less so tonight. I'd like to delude myself into thinking it's because, early on, after her eyelids finally gave up the fight on her sleep, she'd shifted toward me. Her head landing on my stomach soon after. I ignored the murmurs and stares, used to them, but knowing this time it was for a different reason entirely. The males' eyes shone with confusion, anger, and envy. Our females, our people, are not an affectionate kind. We don't... snuggle or lie upon each other in this way, unless it is to couple.

The females looked on curiously, some with barely restrained fear, the smell of it unsettling the mounts. They looked down on my human, cuddled up next to me, fast asleep, as if she were no more than a kit and I were no more than a Glacivyr. A long,

iridescent ice serpent, highly venomous, highly aggressive as it slinks through the snow. Sometimes taking out herds of prey, one to ten, without ever being seen.

If I am every bit as dangerous as a Glacivyr, then they should think twice about the way they stare at her. The males should not linger, huddling together, plotting, puffing their chests. Not even the stories of our gods, of our people, had stopped the thread of unease filtering through the air.

“You did the harder thing.”

Her words filter around me, wiping away most of the red threatening to take my vision. Easing the rage seething in my chest as it claws its violent ascent up my throat. Her delicate form and the stunning swell of her curves hidden beneath a thick pile of furs, perhaps more than she needed at first. Now she lies against me, warm, safe, dusted by the first snow. Most others long departed for their homes after the first light. She’s...consuming.

I had thought it was because she was small and delicate, then because she was to bear my young, war madness after that, I had thought of everything to explain the scorching affection I feel for her. The warring desire to keep her hidden and tucked away, but also to show her off. To bellow her name from the highest mountain so that the world around might know that she is mine and mine alone.

But she’s not mine.

She can’t be.

It will be a fate crueler than she deserves.

I’m lost in my thoughts when the sound of approaching hooves hits me. My head doesn’t snap up, but finds the source with a lethal, disciplined fluidity. The same

male who attempted to take her favor strides up to me with all the misplaced confidence of a new warrior straight from the training field. My female rustles, his self-assured stomping putting an end to her rest.

I hadn't been done watching her. Red filters in my vision once again. I know what's coming.

Why he's here.

What he intends to do, to say.

Why there is a group of males waiting just around the community building and why they waited for the rest of the crowd to disperse before they gathered.

I can't even fault them for it.

But I will kill them either way.

Lenora shifts, sucking in a slow steady breath as she stretches, not unlike her newpet, Valoryx. I let out a call, summoning him. His savage warning snarl is enough to wipe off her lingering dregs of sleep.

"Fafnir, I challenge you." The male booms, but my attention is on her again.

"Faf?" Her upturned, sleepy eyes darting between him and me.

"By reason of dejected honor, I challenge you to a death battle." He continues.

Yes, you challenge me, but you have brought help. I all but roll my eyes, something I picked up from my female.

“Wait, you can’t do that. For what reason? If it's over me, then you can shove your challenge up your—”

She yelps as I lift from the ground, taking her with me, a chill overcoming her as she’s exposed to the wind. I pay it no mind, or her fighting me as I hoist her onto the back of Valoryx. “I will be home shortly.”

“He can’t do that!”

“He can.”

He’s not wrong to.

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But I am going to be selfish, at least for a little while longer.

“Take her home,” I command Valoryx in my native language, turning away from Lenora as he bounds away, ignoring her commands and threats.

“Fafnir! You better not be late. I don’t know how to work your food replicator, stupid, stupid, giant male.” Her voice shakes, but she is strong. So strong.

A smirk fills my face as I let the berserker take over, her words making him come in shunted, jolting slashes. I want to wait until she’s out of sight. I try, but he doesn’t care. With no warning, decorum, or strategy, I lunge forward, my grip tightening on the male’s jaw. His eyes widen, realizing his mistake a second too late. The powerful stampede of hooves on frozen ground fills the air, but they will not reach us in time.

Tendon and flesh rip as I pull his jaw free from the rest of him, before striking him with it, making quick work of the dispatching blow. My female is hungry, and she doesn’t know how to work the food replicator. The other males collide against me, hoof, fist, and savagery that lights every inch of my being. I want to revel in it, to draw it out and make a point. My dam steps into the falling snow, but I pay her no mind, giving into the war madness, trusting it will part when it’s time.

My hand grips the spear at my back, creating enough distance to pull it free. This needs to be quick. I have better places to be. A female to care for, a pretty bull-headed human to breed. Whether I am worthy of such a privilege or not, she will writhe under me. I will be the only one privy to her soft whimpers and flushed cheeks as she takes my cocks and seed.

Lenora

I pace in front of Fafnir's house, Valoryx sharing none of my anxiety for the well-being of his master. He was challenged, for what I'm not positive, but it doesn't take a brain surgeon to figure it out. A chill runs up the length of my spine. The fact that Old Earth used to let other humans perform surgery on them is nearly as disturbing as the faint roars in the distance. Will they hurt him? Kill him? What happens to me then? I mean, my family has already been paid, but I don't really want to be cast off into space without direction, or even worse, passed around here. That's what I tell myself. This sick roiling in my gut is born from self-preservation. I'm worried about myself.

It's only slightly true.

The idea... the mere thought of Fafnir being hurt is enough to turn my blood to ice. I couldn't give a fuck less what they say about him. If what he did was wrong or right, or if his mind is troubled... Fafnir is good. He cares for the Sihlih, offers them secret adoring smiles and soft scratches when he thinks no one is looking. Fafnir got me special boots because he didn't want to hurt my feet. He respects his people, cares for them, fought for them, and they turned their backs. Still, he cares. Still, he would fight.

He's fighting now for me.

My pacing falters, making Valoryx's enormous head pop up regarding me for a minute, as if he's worried I'll bolt. I won't. Fafnir is coming back. I can feel it as surely as I can feel the chill worming its way to my bones, but that's not what's bothering me.

War Madness. Fafnir said it was a disease, but what if it's not?

Young males are forced to contract themselves out for war from a very early age, knowing from childhood that there's a higher chance of them dying than coming home. What would that do to someone's mind? War Madness comes on quickly, but only after they return, right? Only after they fight. My brows are furrowed, eyes narrow and unseeing on the snow dusted ground, only vaguely aware of the mixed fat, almost blue-green tinged flakes joining the others.

Dad had a disease of the mind, and it cared little for waiting for one thing or the other. It took him fully. They called it Alzheimer's. It sounded horrible; he wasn't interested in sticking around to find out just how horrible it could get.

He did what he did. As much as I'd tried to hate him for it, he never stopped being a good person either, just colder. Harder. His warm smiles and boisterous laugh traded for tense silence. He always looked as if he were bracing for a blow he couldn't dodge. So much like Fafnir. I don't get long to stand there and sort through my thoughts, to weigh the facts against hairbrained, wishful thinking. To analyze why my heart sank when Fafnir confirmed I wasn't his fated mate, or how that all really worked. I mean, the mere thought of it had sent me into a full-blown panic attack less than a week ago. So much has changed in a few days. Dusting my hands of the whys and hows and chalking it up to fate would be so much easier to swallow.

When Valoryx gets to his clawed feet, staring off into the distance, my heart launches to my throat. He lets out a harsh call, seeming excited, and my hand is suddenly shaking as I let it sink into the fur of his mane.

sixteen

Lenora

My pulse whooshes deafeningly in my skull as Fafnir rides over the hill, atop an unfamiliar mount. The sight of him both churns my stomach and lights it with a tense,

throbbing kind of want. His dark eyes are more crimson than brown, but I don't mind either color, so long as they stay locked on me. He dismounts in one fluid motion, and for the first time, I drag my eyes from his. My lips parting as the state of him truly sinks in.

Fafnir's hands are coated in blood, no longer tanned but a deep blue tinged crimson, up to his elbows before it tapers off. His strong jaw splattered, but it's what's draped around his neck that rips a ragged gasp from my throat. Like a blanket of roses draped around the neck of a horse... are spines. Not one, but many. Involuntarily, I take a step back, apprehension fleeting as I knock into the wall of Valoryrx. The beast of a mount knocks me forward toward his rider, making me stumble.

Fafnir's eyes are heated, promising as he stares down at me, the lines of the antler and shield brand on his chest traced in blood. It's only then that I see the wounds. There aren't many, but they are deep. My eyes snap wide as I rush to him when he dismounts, sending the mount off. My hands hover frantically over his chest, unsure where to touch. There's not much of it, not coated or splattered in gore, but whom the visceral belongs to is barely enough to stay my hands. "You're hurt."

I yelp as he drags the spines off his shoulders, the rattling sound they make nearly upturning my stomach as he tosses them over a nearby rung on the roof of his house. Not a trophy, but a warning. "Inside female." He growls, and God help me, I whimper.

Faf doesn't let me turn around, he herds me. Stalking closer and forcing me into the doorway before he reaches around, throwing it open and letting me stumble into the house. Immediately, the heat from the hearth hits me. I hadn't realized that at some point I'd stopped feeling so cold. He keeps advancing until the backs of my thighs meet the hearth's high stone wall, forcing me to sit. My head level with the throbbing, tented slight of his cocks. I'm staring, so close I can feel the heat of them. I can smell the coppery smattering of blood. Odd, how it can look so different but smell the

same. When he leans forward, his long hair curtains around us. His chest heaving as his bloodied hand grips my chin, steering my attentions from his cocks to him. “I will have you, Lenora.”

The sound of my name on his tongue does insane things to my insides, the odd off-kilter way he says it with his resonant rolled R’s. He’s not asking permission. He doesn’t need it. I’m thrumming, the space between my thighs soaked as he takes the slightest step back, pulling me to a stand by my jaw. The hands that touch me are both brutal and soft. His fingers dig in, making my flesh ache in the most pleasant way. My body is flush with his muscular, equestrian legs, their fur mottled with blood but soft. The color warm, dark gray, dotted with slightly lighter patches along the sides. I follow the line of his V where fur is tapered into flesh, my hands trembling as I brace them there, my heart beating at an unsteady sprint.

Fafnir growls as he hauls me up, turning us until my back meets one of the wooden support beams of the house. I’m panting, my head light and breath rapid as he holds me there at his height. Supporting me with nothing more than a single hand, but falling is far from my thoughts as he rips my animal hide pants like they’re made of paper, baring my soaked underwear to him. I’m hiked higher, my top bunching up my back, revealing my stomach. His eyes focus there for only a minute before he shoves me up again, hooking my legs on his broad shoulders. The deep primal way he inhales me makes me see stars, flush rushing down my neck and spilling onto my heaving breasts. He doesn’t waste time, not a second of it, when he descends on me. I cry out as he rips the fabric covering my center with his teeth, his mouth covering the needy pulse of my clit as he sucks, hard. There are no soft kisses or gentle lapping; he devours, feasts like he’s starved. My guttural moans echo off the vaulted ceilings and high rafters as he forces his thick tongue deep into my center, fucking me with it. My arms that had been braced on my own thighs snap out, gripping his horns as I grind into his mouth. My body jerking and thrusting in a way that’s not so delicate and not so pretty, but I don’t think this beast of a male expects me to be.

Tears fill my eyes as my body goes taut, his tongue curling upward and flicking the rough part of me deep inside. Suddenly, so suddenly, I'm still. "Yes, yes, yes right there, Faf please!" I whimper, the sound of my voice as desperate for something as I've ever heard it. His eyes roll up to meet mine, a scream ripping from my throat as he sucks harder, his teeth adding the slightest pain to the pleasure and I erupt. My orgasm sends me reeling, my body jerking against his mouth, my knuckles white on his horns, and I ride out each wave. He doesn't rush me, doesn't look away, doesn't blink. He's growling, and the sound reverberates through my center, making me shudder.

His hands fly up to support my back as he pulls me away from the post, lapping languidly at my pulsing core. If it wasn't for the smear across my flesh, I would've entirely forgotten about the blood. We're in the bedroom in a few quick strides, my back connecting jarringly with the soft bed as he drops me from his height. His eyes are as red as I've ever seen them, making a crazed little smile light my lips. He crawls over me, watching me like every bit of the predator he is. I shift up, trying to meet him, to slam my lips against his, but he's faster. His hand strikes out, swathing my throat and pushing me into the mattress. At first, I panic at the abrupt lack of air, my hands flying out to grip his forearms, my nails digging into his flesh.

"Stay." He seethes.

He waits, as if seeking some confirmation from me that he was heard. My head struggles to nod fully with his large hand covering my entire neck, but I must manage well enough. When he removes it, my gasp is ragged, my core soaked as I tremble against his sheets. Sheets that smell like a lovely mix of us both, despite him having insisted that only I sleep here.

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Fafnir stalks to the bathroom, leaving me panting and still as stone. I listen as the water rushes on, trying my best not to count the seconds as he washes himself of gore. My head tilts, ever so slightly, watching him furiously scrub at his flesh, making quick work of it, but as he turns, red eyes meet mine. My focus only stays there for a moment before it dips to the ruddy state of his twin cocks. They aren't quite twins, though, not really. Stacked one above the other, the first seems still... large by human standards but thinner, longer and more ridged than its lower counterpart. That one, the lower girthy one already weeping a pearlescent liquid from the tip that lets in the first tendril of fear, its... too big. He can't expect me to take it.

I can't. Nobody could take it.

"Female," he growls, forcing my attention back to his face. Whatever fear I felt must've shown because he forgoes washing further, stalking back toward me. His warm gray hair dripping with water, looking darker, nearly a smoky color because of it. I don't know if it's the look in his crimson eyes, or the way he prowls toward me, towering above like a god, but I know there's no stopping him now, no getting through to him in whatever state he's in. I'll take it, because he will demand it of me. For a moment, it was almost too easy to forget; this is why I'm here, to be bred by him. To be stuffed and filled with his seed again and again until it takes root.

His hands clasp over my thighs. I used to think they were so large, almost unseemly so, but they look far smaller like this as he drags me toward him. The way he studies my center only makes my flush grow as he spreads me wide. His large, thick fingers dip between my folds, spreading them. I can't hold back my whimper as he runs a finger over my opening, stopping to gently prod and tease my clit. He must've done his research on human anatomy. The thought of the Oozarians providing details about

our erogenous zones is far less pleasant of a thought.

“Grip me,” he orders, lowering his horns so I can grab them. I do, gasping at how hot they feel again, but this time, much more so. Like it should be blistering my palms, but it’s not. He doesn’t touch me again but uses my hold on them to drag me up to the head of the bed as he crawls onto it. When he stops, I release him, reluctantly, judging by the heat in his eyes, he likes it too. I wonder if touching them is taboo, like the Sihlih’s horns. The idea that I’m staking some claim, doing something I shouldn’t only makes me want to take them in my palms again. Fafnir bends, reaching for something below the bed while I bring my hands to my face, looking at the odd rings on my palms. As if the ridges on his horns have branded my flesh. Alarm hits me as I test my reddened palms, expecting some horrific pain but finding none. They’re just...hot. Oddly hot.

Fafnir rips my attention back to him when he shoves a thick finger into my center. I gasp, having not even noticed he’s righted himself. His mouth descends on my breasts, nipping and lapping at them while he works me. I moan, grinding down, needing more than wanting to be stretched. He’s bare, all male above me, a groan leaving his gritted teeth as his free hand leaves its place braced above my head to squeeze the base of his larger cock. Seeing him pained, in need, does wild things to my ego. I wiggle down further, trying to press myself into his cocks, showing him I want one, but he quickly stops me with a warning snarl. “Have mercy, female, I do not wish to harm you. My resolve is hanging by a thread.”

That sobers me a bit, but only enough for him to slip in another two fingers, making me wince. He stills, letting me adjust before he works them in and out. Soon enough, the pinch is forgotten, my core soaked and more than accommodating. I’m not a virgin, not by a long shot, but his fingers alone make me feel like I might as well be. He works me softly, scissoring his fingers, watching with rapt attention as I grind down against the heel of his palm. He keeps me like that, cock fisted, but his palm unmoving against the ruddy shaft as it weeps. I writhe and mewl until another orgasm

rips from me, making my head light. My eyes are shut, my breath ragged, body worn and pliant when he spreads my legs wide again, wide enough to burn but not painfully. Just enough to accommodate his large frame as he settles between my legs. I don't open my eyes, happy enough to pass into a blissful sleep and let him use me at will. Perhaps if I am unconscious, it will not be as painful.

That idea is forced from my mind as he notches his smaller cock into my entrance, the head of it pulsing against my center. "I cannot breed you with this one, but I can pleasure you."

I nod, trying to ease my breathing. Refusing to open my eyes, but my body isn't listening to my logical brain. I can't possibly still be humming with desire. My core can't possibly still be soaked and needy, but it is. I am. He slips in, meeting resistance quickly, a savage growl vibrating his chest as his hands vise on my knees. He bends, bracing himself on his forearm while he lifts my bottom, shifting me up to allow his thicker, heavier cock to slip between my ass and the bed. The heat of it makes me moan, forcing myself down on him further, my body gives before tensing again. The pinch sharper than before until his free hand finds my clit strumming it with an expert touch. My eyes open seconds before my body eases. His thumb circling my clit, his tongue teasing my pert nipple, working me into another frenzy, building an insatiable heat. He sinks to the hilt. My eyes snap closed as I cry out, his growl nearly drowned out by the desperate sound. My nails dig into his flesh before I force them to relax, falling to my sides.

I lie prone underneath him, my body spilling over with need, all the while forcing myself to remain still. It works until something hard, cold, and metal is pressed into my palm. I gasp, my head snapping toward the blaster, then back to him, meeting swirling, resolved eyes. "If they go completely red, I want you to kill me."

I blanch, making my clit rub against his base. The wet, thicker one underneath me jerks at the sensation. "What?! No!"

My mouth gapes in horror as he snatches my wrist, jerking the blaster in my hand and slamming the barrel into his forehead. “You will not hesitate; you will aim true because if you miss, there will be nothing that will stop me from ripping your limbs from your base, and I will not survive the guilt that will plague me once I wake.”

“Fafnir—”

My words cut off as he dips his head, flicking my hand and the blaster away with a horn before his mouth descends on mine. The kiss is bruising, and I melt. My body molds to his. The blaster forgotten, his morbid, impossible request forgotten as I let myself get lost in sensation as he starts to move. My insides heat, liquid flame flicking deep in my belly as he rolls his hips, his thick lower cock wet with his own seed as it messages my tight hole. Its sensation, all pleasure, and I’m adrift in it. I don’t argue with him further. How could I when I’m putty in his expert hands? When his crimson swirling eyes are looking down at me like I’m a goddess, born in the flesh. I don’t tell him I couldn’t bear it, that I’d let him kill me before I’d raise a hand to him. Where the world has force fed him pain and violence, he will only ever receive soft things from me.

He’s treated me with such care since the start of this, it’s nearly impossible to relate that male to the one towering over me now. He groans as he pistons his cock inside me, in deep rolling thrusts. My breasts heave and bounce, taking his attention. His hands gripping my waist as he fucks me into the bed. “Look at you, such a tiny female taking my cock.” He praises. “Perfect little Valkyra.”

“Yes, I—oh god, you feel good.”

My eyes roll to the back of my head, making him growl. His hand finds its way under the back of my head, gripping my hair. Pulling it deliciously against my scalp as he forces my head up, forcing my eyes to his. “I will see your eyes when you come on my cock.” It’s an order, a demand, and I am all too willing to obey. It seems my lust

and pleasure-heavy eyes are his undoing, though. He growls, his grip on the swell of my hip turns as punishing as his thrusts. He's watching me oh so carefully, as I moan and cry out. My release hits me again and all at once, without warning. A sharp slap of pleasure jolts my mind from my body. I'm floating, sated, and yet still building as he jerks me up, flipping me so that my chest is braced against the mattress. He fucks like a beast, and I'm his willing languid prey desperate to be devoured. When he roars his own release, I cry out at the loss of his cock only for the thicker, heavier one to be forced in. The sound that leaves me is horrific, a primal guttural scream and I swear I've been gored, ripped wide, but it's pumping hot, thick jets of cum. I can feel each one plastering my inner walls with an intense pressure. Another pulsing jolt of seed hits that part of me deep inside, that rough little patch I can never quite find with my own fingers. The pain is ripe, agonizing until his fingers find my clit, strumming it softly. How can something feel so good and so terrible all at once?

His voice is gruff and pained when he speaks. "Hush now, sweet Lenora, you're perfect, so perfect. It's just the tip, mySha'vria. Just for a few moments more." His words smooth over the shock. I'm pinned to the bed by him, still as stone as he works my clit. Dragging me away from the pain, mixing it again with soul binding pleasure until it's a battering kind of sensation, raw and overwhelming. I force my face from where I've buried it, biting into the soft bedding to look up at him over my shoulder. My eyes widen finding his entirely red, entirely...changed. I am unsure who is staring back at me with such a claiming kind of possession. Perhaps it is the berserker, although I haven't thought of the presence he speaks of as someone different from himself.

No, it's him. It is his gruff voice and soothing, pleased words. I don't make a move toward the blaster; I don't even consider it. I am in no danger; it occurs to me I am seeing something, a part of him no one else has lived to ponder on. That's the last thought that crosses my mind as he shudders, making his thick, heavy cock move, just a bit. I crack open, coming again, but my mind goes dark before I can ride out the waves of pleasure for a fourth time.

## Fafnir

Lenora is gone to the world, her pretty chest flushed with color. Something I'm still not sure the meaning of. It happens both when she's angry, happy, coming, and seemingly anytime in between. In all forms, my little human is stunning. She took me better than I could have hoped, but even now the tinge of her blood salts the air. I let my body collapse heavily beside her, my chest heaving. The residuals of pleasure making my mating cock jerk between us as I gently tug her into my chest. It is... unseemly to hold her this way, but she's so small, so soft. She feels like nirvana there, safe and mine. I am not meant to be a soft nor loving male.

I could see myself being both for my little Valkyra. Her namesake does her more than justice. The large elk like creatures are as majestic and elusive as they are stubborn. It seemed only fair that I brought her back as many as I could, as a token, apledgeto provide. She deserves nothing less. My hand swallows the expanse of her soft stomach, imagining it round and swollen. The skin lined with paler pigmented stripes the documents suggested were expected with human gestation. Battle scars, stunning ones at that. I'd like to imagine my female would have many, so that she always wears the proof of me, the proof of our child long after she's—

Red swarms my vision violently at the thought, my berserker making a wild shove for my mind. Panic claws up my throat. There's some threat, something wrong. I can feel it as surely as I can feel the sweat drying on my cooling skin. Where my hand had been soft and adoring on her stomach before it now grips, making her cry out as I shove her deeper into me. A nasty, savage sound ripping into the content silence of the room. Her panicked hazel eyes pop open, the worry in them dimming the second she sees me hovering over her like a rabid animal. Baffling how the insane female is entirely unbothered.

My eyes dart to the forgotten blaster, wondering if the threat is real this time.

Wondering if there's any danger at all.

My long ears twitch, listening for anything... a warning snarl from Valoryx, a shuffle of hooves.

There is nothing.

Again, my mind's sickness sucks the beauty from life, polluting it. Shame fills my chest as ripe and certain as the dawn. I woke her.

I could've hurt—

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

Soft hands find my cheeks, my gaze finally leaving the blaster. My shallow breathing slowing as Lenora steers my attention back to her. The smile she offers me is soft, but not the pitying kind. The way you look at someone you love when they're acting silly. It is a shame our offspring will not know her. She would make a lovely dam. Although I doubt she would accept the hands-off approach our people take. Perhaps that is why she would be so lovely. Perhaps she would hug our child and look at them like this when they act up.

"I could use a shower," she offers.

I open my mouth to apologize as she pulls back her palm, poking me on the nose. The action confuses me, I growl in response, but something on her hand catches my attention. My heart thunders harder than before as I snatch it, gripping her wrist. She keeps it balled up, refusing to show me. She doesn't know—

It can't—

I press my thumb into the heel of her hand, applying pressure until she winces and releases. "It's nothing, really. Just a tiny burn. I'm okay. It doesn't hurt at all, just warm."

Her small, delicate palm is lined with rings, slightly raised ridges, ones I recognize well. All of my people have one's unique to them, no pair of horn ridges like another. Like a fingerprint. These are mine.

This female is mine.

My mate.

A ripe, beautiful kind of pain lances through my chest, deeper than any wound I've ever endured. I press her burned palm to my chest, and for the first time in my life, I am terrified. Not by threat or war, by beasts or weapons made to evaporate flesh. The Xyreliths who can cause death or madness with a single touch. I am terrified of a tiny human female, sated, coated in my seed. I knew it; I had known. Time and time again my hands tested my horns, finding them cold, but I knew deep down. Lenora was mine. Valhyr and his mate Sylvara, after hundreds of years, have found a warrior fit to receive their thanks. A mate of my own, to keep me in balance, the way Sylvara was born to balance him. Grief wells inside me as the last of the red seeps from my eyes. They sent their gift years too late, long after the war madness had taken root in my mind.

Her eyes are wide and on me now, finally having the good sense to look apprehensive as she pushes against my chest, trying to get me to let her up. I do, after a while. When I try to help her to the shower, she politely declines, too politely. Wincing and hissing with each step she takes until she shuts the washing room door behind her. Leaving me there more filled than ever, with a gaping hole in my chest. Absently, I reach up, finding my horns hot. My jaw clenches, resisting the urge to rage and bellow at the gods.

No crueler trick has ever been played.

Lenora

My mind raced through my shower, running here and there. So many questions, concerns battering my mind.

The way he looked at me...

Oh god, the way stoney, unmovable, grumpy Fafnir looked at me. His brown eyes wider than I'd ever seen them. Clearer than perhaps I'd ever seen them. Their true shade, nearly golden instead of muddy brown. Fafnir looked at me like he'd just found everything he'd been looking for. Then he looked at me as if I'd taken it away from him. The visceral hate...anguish I'd seen in those golden eyes had robbed the air from my lungs. I all but jerked my palm from the brand on his chest, like he'd truly burned me this time. I'd darted, wellhobbled, as fast as I could into the bathroom. Slamming the shower on to cover the sudden sobs that wracked my chest. It felt... ugly, like a rejection. Even though there is nothing there to reject, this is a job.

But save for that very first day, it hasn't felt like one.

I'd stayed in the shower for longer than was necessary. When I emerged, I felt better having gotten whatever temporary lapse in sanity under control. My feelings were hurt, but not so horribly anymore. I'm bringing a child into the world for this male, living with him, eating with him, and still trying to figure out if I can smuggle his lion lizard off planet when I leave. What we're doing... it's a lot. There's bound to be confused feelings, growing pains. I feel better until I come back into the bedroom to find the bed remade with clean sheets and five pieces of lukewarm pizza piled on a plate.

And no Fafnir.

For once in my life, I don't want pizza.

eighteen

Lenora

Much to my continued horror, Fafnir stayed gone. It'd been... I didn't know. I lost count while I winced and paced in front of the hearth. I couldn't tell if their god

listened to their prayers and took their offerings, or if the blizzard raging outside was considered temperamental weather for this time of year. The dim sun rose, peaked, and set. All the while, I didn't dare brave the outside... until I did.

He'd found me shortly after, terribly lost, snow blind, and nearly frozen to death. The savage sounds that left his throat shouldn't have pleased me as much as they did. He gathered my violently shaking form in his arms, shielding me from the worst of the wind as he walked us back to the house. Yes, walked, not rode. Apparently, I was less than a handful of steps away from the front door. I was too chilled to care much about that as he all but slammed me next to the fireplace, replacing my sodden furs with dry ones while saying an assortment of no doubt creative curses in his language. My teeth chattered while I peppered him with the questions that had been plaguing my mind since last night, finally able to put substance to them. He grumped, kind of answered most of them while he ate dried meat. He'd offered to make me more pizza, I'd declined having not eaten the pizza earlier. It's been over a week now, and he still hasn't grasped that the human palette goes beyond that. Food replicators automatically supply any food choice with the daily needed nutrients for whatever species' cuisine it's programmed for, so that's not a concern, at least.

And that little segway brings us to the here and now, Fafnir glaring in his natural way at the roaring fire as if it's committed some terrible act against him and me, more unsettled than ever. I've learned a lot in the past two zentics. Apparently, not so shockingly, Faf responds better to outright angry interrogation than gentle prodding. Especially when it comes to war madness. First, he was gone, ensuring the mount's enclosure was ready for the upcoming storm. As if it hadn't already started? Also, his sudden and unexplained absence bothered me more than it should have.

But more importantly, war madnesses on set, like I suspected, is only during or after they serve their war contract. Contracts are absolutely required for able-bodied males at the risk of "being set out to wander," which he declined to explain rather aggressively. War madness, disturbingly, has zero medical basis. It's an affliction of

the mind, a disease, as they call it, without a cure. Long understood to have been sent to males who proved to be without valor by their war god. They go mad, suffering from extreme bouts of paranoia, rage, and uncontrollable fits of violence.

It seems very much like the way humans of Old Earth had once viewed the aids epidemic of their time. Dirty, shameful, and... scary. They're ostracized, so suddenly by the very people with whom they once shared every meal. A people so deeply set in community, resource sharing, the way they rear their young, down to the way they couple, shared partners, only bedding down with one person for any extended time in the winter. Only to serve the war contract they demand of you, against all odds, live and be received home with pride... then a few months or years later, ostracized. No aftercare, no help, no support. War madness is a newer affliction too, only affecting the two generations before Faf's in any real numbers.

He'd clammed up when he noticed I was taking notes on my holo pager, sending the messages to myself for safekeeping. He's ashamed. It only makes me angrier at how the winter festival ended.

They tried to kill him.

Not just the one male who challenged, but he'd brought friends.

All for what?

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

It doesn't sit right. My mind aches and spins long after I retire to the bedroom for the night. I spend it staring at the vaulted ceiling, seeing nothing except the unmarked mound of dirt that covered Dad.

He'd had loads of love and support. Just not enough credits for the fancy machines to work on him, to fix his mind, or at least ease it. Not enough backing to show we could afford a credit loan. He had so much more than Fafnir.

And he ended up dead despite it.

Something terribly familiar seizes my chest, the gnawing, aching helplessness I'd felt in the days after Dad told us he hadn't been feeling himself. The way mom cried as she emptied their small savings to have him seen by a human doctor there on Terra2. After my sister found him dead, a blaster shot to the face in his shed out back. I still didn't know how he got his hands on one.

I'm up and out of bed before I can think better of it. Before I can keep the lines we've drawn in the sand firmly in place. My bundle of furs dragging the slightly uneven ground as I pad quietly over to where Fafnir's huge form rests on the couch. I stand there for a minute, realizing I've never really considered the fact that he actually slept. A male like him seems above silly needs like that, which is ridiculous in hindsight.

My movements are slow and deliberate as I lay out a tiny bed of fur on the floor beside him. The fire dimmed so he can rest. It still wards off the cold just fine as I settle into my makeshift bed. Telling myself everything will be fine; any child will still be cared for and their world... while unfair and cruel, is the lesser of two evils compared to the plight of humans. I tell myself Fafnir is okay. That he's here. That

he's stronger than Dad, but then I wipe that thought away completely. It feels like a betrayal. I go to sleep fitfully, my hand on my empty stomach, and tell myself my worries and tears will be gone by morning.

They weren't gone, but with the daylight came reason. Determination. I held onto it as I awoke back in the plush bed, the smell of pizza in the air, and a suspiciously Fafnir shaped divot unoccupied beside me.

nineteen

Fafnir

The past few weeks have flown by, each one going over smoother than the last. We settle into a routine, and while my mate's purpose here is to become heavy with our child, I haven't touched her in that way again. Much to her apparent displeasure. We wake, weather permitting, she joins me to check on the Sihlih who bed down heavily during this time and require little tending unless they are needed for something. We spend our long nights and heavy evenings doing whatever odd exercises she insists I do.

For the most part, I play along because it seems to please her. My strange, pretty female chews her lip, taking the notes she safeguards as furiously as a Thraxis mother with her cub. I haven't asked, but it takes no great mind to figure out it regards the affliction in my mind. As much as her constant vigilance of it shames me, whatever she's doing seems to ease the worries that plagued her. So, I swallow what little pride I have left and breathe deeply; I count to ten and pay attention to each of my senses until the red fades and the world comes back into order.

I draw the line when she asks me to talk about it. The years I fought are a plague I refuse to spew onto her mind. I cannot bear the look in her eyes when she hears of the things I've done. When she's finished with her notes and questions, games and

stories, I decline her offer to share our bed and wait on the couch. Ruddy, aching cock gripped in hand until her breathing evens out and I slip in beside her, getting restful sleep that's evaded me for years.

I'm gone before she wakes.

But she knows I was there.

The night I found her curled up on the floor beside me, I'd woken so violently I'd gored the couch with a horn. The world came back into focus slowly, keeping me half trapped in the nightmare.

I'd nearly put a hoof through her skull.

Not for the first time, I wonder if this is what my predecessors felt before they were put out of their misery. I wonder how much worse it'll get before it's my time to wander. I must admit, while her odd methods and tests make me feel no larger than a kit, they aren't without merit. How much good could these...calming exercises do for the next male lost to his mind?

Would they even try?

No.

I wouldn't, not if it were anyone but her requesting it of me.

A sudden flurry of activity snaps my attention to Valoryx, and more importantly, my mate lounging lazily against him. Her small frame tucks into his curl, the beast's tail wrapped around in front of her like a gate. She can't care less, her legs draped over the thicker, spike free base. A thick batch of furs protecting her from the snow, even though she insists she doesn't need them every time I pack her a bag, they're always

used.

Their heads pop up in unison, watching as a younger Sihlih takes off after a Zylari, a small, agile animal with pure white fur and long, fluffy ears, making it near impossible to spot in the snow. Well, until the Sihlih swipes it, sending it flying, its blood erupting onto its fur, highlighting its trail where it skids to a stop. The thing makes a pitiful cry of desperation, but my attention is on the blood, locked there for a moment, red dotting my vision until my gaze shifts to something else, like she taught me. Sight. I focus on the technique the beast uses as it stalks the animal, and how I can improve it. It's not until the red parts and a flash of long brown hair catch my attention that my mind returns to me. Immediately, my heart slams into my throat.

Lenora is sprinting for the tiny animal, her upturned hazel eyes blown wide in panic. I bellow out a command to stop, but he's young, willful yet. I start for her. What she doesn't see is the large Sihlih lowered to the ground, its powerful muscles tense, ready to attack. And it does. The world slows to a panic induced crawl as it lunges. I command Valoryx to stop him because he's far ahead of me. My mount slams into the side of the younger Sihlih, not a second too soon. A deep agonized sound of relief rips from my throat as my eyes find my bloody and unharmed mate, clutching the Zylari to her chest as if she meant to shield the fucking thing with her outstretched arm.

The rage that follows that concept will not be quelled with calming exercises. I'm on her in seconds, bellowing at her sprawled form in the snow. Her shell shocked, confused expression makes me realize belatedly I've spoken in my native language. "What in Valhyr's name were you thinking!? Vyr'ash! Ridiculous, maddening female! You were almost killed! Lenora, if the war madness doesn't do me in by Valhyr's name, it will be you!"

She flinches at that, tears well in her eyes. I hate the sight of them. I let loose a bellowing roar, fisting my hands in my hair as I stalk my vision red. Struggling,

trying to reclaim an inch of control. My roar only serves to make the Zylari cry out in her arms, and I watch those tears in my mate's eyes, the hurt turns to anger.

My tiny, foolish, brave mate gets up. Readjusting the bloody, pained animal in the crook of her arm like a kit, making sure it's as comfortable as it can be before she turns that anger on me. "What am I doing!? I'm trying to keep this poor baby from being mauled to death by one of your ill-trained lion lizards!"

I only growl in response, watching as Valoryx doles out his own justice against the younger Sihlih. They are a hardy mount. He will be okay, but it will take a great deal of healing to get there. I don't dare undermine my mount in front of the herd, knowing this is his domain. "It is a food animal! What do you think they eat?!"

"I- I don't care! I wasn't going to sit back and watch it happen! It needed my help!"

"It did not need your help! It needed you to let nature take its course. It needed you to let it die instead of forcing it to wallow in agony, the illusion of life dangling before its eyes! Is this what you think mercy is?! You are showing it none! It's useless, Lenora!"

Tears are streaming down her cheeks, and I know I've said something wrong, that perhaps in my anger, I'd forgotten we were fighting about the Zylari.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

I think she forgot too.

My mate drags a shuddering, ragged breath through her lungs before she screams.

Truly screams, as if she's determined to match my roar.

I watch as she lowers herself as quickly as she can to the ground, gently laying down the wounded animal before she's picking up fistfuls of snow and throwing them at me. Sobs wracking her chest. "You stupid fucking male! It's not useless! Don't fucking say that! You're horrible for saying that!" She lobbs the loose snow as I rear back, the red from my vision snapping out of existence as a deep well of guilt takes its place. "That's what he said! He said it was useless to try! It's not! You- you can't just stop trying! What about me, huh? What happens to the rest of us? Did you even think about what would happen to me if you stopped trying?! You fucking— fucking horn sporting asshole! What do you think I'm doing all this shit for? I'm trying to help you! And it's useless! Oh-fucking-kay then!"

I'm panting, deathly silent, my eyes wide as she gives the small animal another pained glance, sobbing as she picks herself up out of the snow. Her entire body is trembling as she calls for Valoryx. My head snaps to my mount, nearly as baffled as I am with my mate when he stops his attack and bounds to her. He doesn't give the wounded Zylari a single glance. The lying bral'qorn would've eaten it in a single gulp any other time.

"Lenora..." I start as Valoryx lowers for her, sensing she wouldn't want my help. He shifts the base of his tail so she can use it as a step. "Don't," I warn, but the daggers she shoots me as she clambers up my stolen, traitorous mount tell me that was the

wrong thing to do as well.

“Don’t let it suffer.” She spits back, before they take off toward the house.

I’m left there, staring at the place they left, my mind reeling. Wondering how in Valhyr’s name everything went so wrong so fast and who let my mate down so terribly before me?

twenty

Lenora

Admittedly, I might’ve lost my cool a bit. Throwing unpacked snow at a towering, deadly alien warrior isn’t quite all-time low material, but it’s pretty close. My eyes are raw and puffy even hours later. I don’t cry often, but when I do, I cry hard and can never seem to stop. Just when I think I’m done, that there can’t possibly be more tears inside me, I find some tucked away. It felt good at first to lose my cool, to freak out, and just cry.

Now I’m just tired. The food I prepared for Fafnir sitting idly on a warming plate.

I want to help.

I have to.

Even if it’s crossing boundaries and overstepping. Even if it’s ugly and uncomfortable, I can’t leave here knowing he’s not okay. That there isn’t hope. However small. The wind howls so fiercely that it acts as a lull to thoughts that have been racing for weeks. I’m jolted from my spot, dozing on the couch, when the door slams open. I suck in a ragged breath, launching to my feet like I’m under attack. Fafnir lords in the doorway, making a blast of cold air whip through the toasty house.

His long hair knotted and windswept. It'd taken a nasty turn shortly after I got back. I'd tried to send Val back, but of course, he declined to listen. Fafnir's nostrils flare, his eyes darting to the food waiting for him. As usual, there's no indication of how he receives my peace offering, aside from the clenching in his jaw. Biting back my sigh, I jerk the blanket I've been wiping my snot on for the past few hours up and head toward the bedroom.

I'm less than halfway there before the world tilts and I'm jerked up off my feet and slammed against a broad chest. "Hey!"

"Quiet female."

"Nofemalenotquiet! Female is pissed off and wants to stop being tossed around like a wet noodle!"

"What is a noodle?"

I rear back as he covers me with more furs, canting my head back to stare at him upside down. "You don't know what a noodle is?"

He shakes his head, adjusting me in his arms before stalking out into the blizzard. The blast of unforgiving wind and snow feels like glass shards, hitting my skin like a whip. I'm grateful when he turns the corner, stalking around the side of the house, protecting us from the worst of it. I open my eyes wider than I dared moments before, staring at the large wooden box now lying on the ground.

My heart thunders as I struggle free from his arms. He puts me down reluctantly, moving to snatch me back up when I hiss, my bare feet sinking into the snow. He only gets an outer layer of fur as I drop to my knees in front of the wooden nest. My heart swells, aching something awful at the little blue rabbit inside, its belly wrapped and mended. The cozy nest laden with warm fur, sticks, and some greens, water...

“D-Did you build this?” I call over the wind, my teeth chattering. This time, when he plucks me from the ground, I curl into him, hiding my face from the snow.

“I am not the best with my words, Lenora. I wanted to make things better before I returned.”

Tears bud in my eyes as he walks us back through the threshold. When I speak again, my voice is a whisper. “Should he be inside?”

“She is made for the cold and is far more comfortable where she’s at.”

I nod, blinking my eyes rapidly before pulling back and staring at his clear, golden eyes. I’m not sure who moves first. Maybe it’s us both. Perhaps it’s me, but our lips don’t slam this time, but meet gently in the middle. The kiss is deep, agonizingly slow, and my core flutters pressed against him. We savor each other, and when my tongue tests the seam of his lips, he allows me in with a deep groan. We only part once we reach the bedroom. My chest and cheeks flushed as I’m lain back on the bed. He doesn’t hesitate, crawling over me, peppering my flesh with attention as he strips me of my clothes.

This softer, gentler vision of him is... muddying. Reverent. Like I’m a gift he’s waited his entire life for. There’s no chastising, no judgement as he peels me open. His lips tracing the path of my tears as he adores and worships me. He doesn’t stop his musings until I’m a panting, shaky, needy mess. Then he continues further, my first climax hitting me in a slow building eruption. I’m offered a hungry satisfied smile; he hasn’t even touched my cunt. He hadn’t needed to.

“Please Faf, I feel so empty,” I whimper, wishing I could rub my thighs together. My core still clenching and unclenching around nothing at all.

“You need to be filled by my cocks.”

I nod hungerly, despite it not being a question. “I want your mating cock, please, I can take it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

That seems to snap his soft resolve. I yelp as I'm jerked up onto his lap. My throbbing, pulsing clit pressed against his upper cock. The lower thick one already slick, the tip ruddy and weeping. When he grips my hips, forcing his smaller cock in between my folds I moan. He lets me take over, grinding on the hardened length until my thrusts are jerky and wanton. I'm teetering on the edge, looming over the drop when he stills me, lifting my hips to offer me his fingers.

"No-no, I need more, please," I beg, my head against his chest. Sitting on his lap, it's all I can reach.

"I will hurt you—"

"No more than I can take," I counter.

The growl that leaves his throat should be terrifying. It's everything but. He lifts me, notching his smaller cock in my entrance. I answer him with a moan as I sink lower, stretching inch by small, agonizing inch. My core flutters as it finally gives, letting me sink to the hilt. The sound he makes has me teetering all over again. Fafnir doesn't take control again. He lets me lead as I ride him with slow, languid rolls of my hips, my clit grinding his base until I scream my release. My pert nipples dragging across his chest as his tail trails up and down my spine, making me tremble.

I'm still catching my breath when he lifts out of me, shifting my hips back. "I want you to rub your pleasure spot."

"My what?" I breathe.

“This.” He flicks my clit, making me cry out, trying to evade him. I go absolutely nowhere in his ironclad grip.

“It’s a clit. Call it a clit.”

“Rub your clit, Lenora. I am seconds from wasting my seed.” He grits, and I obey a little too quickly. The tiny bud is oversensitive, nearing painful when I get to it. My own light circles on the pulsing nub makes me whimper before all of my attention is slammed to the way his hand grips his mating cock, smoothing it over with seed. I watch with parted lips, wanting so badly to taste it, but he’s having none of that. “Keep going, pretty female.”

His praise sweeps through me. My eyes flutter closed, unsure if I can watch when—

I scream as he shunts forward, forcing the head in. My eyes well with tears as his hand relaces mine, rubbing his seed over my clit. I breathe deeply, but each one only seems to make me twitch in some terrible way.

“Fuck, you’re so tiny. So tiny, my beautiful Sha’vria.” The word is so pretty, I focus on that, and slowly, surely, the deep-seated throbbing burn turns as he works me over, gathering more of his seed. I force my eyes open to watch him smear and paint my breasts with it, as if he’s trying to root it in my skin. “I’m going to breed your tiny cunt.”

I lose it, pleasure finally coming back to me with unprecedented violence. My hands are shaky as I grip his smaller cock, working it with my hands. He groans, whatever he is about to say lost to it. When he rocks upward, my body holds out for a few tense seconds before he sinks deeper. I’m stretched, too full, too wide, too fucking deep, but I want more. I wiggle, making myself hiss in pain before his hand snags my throat, robbing me of air. The effect is dizzying, my head already light from the way he’s spearing my cunt.

“Be still and let me use you.”

I melt.

My head knocks against his chest as he releases me, his warning clear. My hand still feverishly working his other cock. A wild mewlingsound leaves my throat as I press it against my clit, jerking it across the pulsing nub.

He roars out a curse in his language, and the hot jet hits me all at once. I moan, being so still as he works me down further, impossibly far. I’m sobbing by the time I reach the base. “Such a good little human. You’re taking my cocks so well, little Sha'vria.”

My body is trembling violently, his seed hitting somewhere so deep, so wrong inside me. But fuck, it feels divine. The pain wrapped around pleasure, and both battling for the forefront.

“Look at yourself Lenora, look how deep my cock is. Look at what a good little breeder you are for me. Perfect, stunning female.” He praises again, and my eyes are blurry with tears when I force them open. Shock hits me first. I am...wide,unnaturally so, but it’s happening and... and it’s good. He’s still pulsing inside me, filling me up so much that it's leaking out from around him. “I want you to come on my mating cock.”

“I- I can’t.”

“You will, but you have to stay still, yes? You cannot move when we are like this.”

“Faf- no, I- it’s too much. I can’t.” I sob, pleading.

His mouth captures mine, and his deep, earthy, warm taste steals the rest of my objections. His expert fingers work my clit and my nipples until I’m babbling

unintelligibly against his lips and again when I come, I don't stay conscious long enough to ride it all the way through. The world dots and pivots as I come back to my body, my limbs like stone. "Shhhh, so close my mate. You've done so well."

My mind blots again, but he's still speaking, saying something important. I'm too tired to listen. Absently, I feel him pop free of my core, letting out a spasm of agony and an obscene gush of fluid. Helays me gently on my back, and my body shakes so hard my head starts to pound. I'm used, broken, ripped in half, but sated, oh so sated.

My body is jelly in his arms as he eases me into them, cradling me tightly to his chest as I try to swallow back every sob that worms into my throat. I'm achy all over and my vagina feels like it's got a gaping hole carved through it. If he keeps putting his mating cock all the way in, the baby will surely walk straight out. I doze for a few seconds before the spattering of hot water makes me flinch. He eases me out, lowering the temperature before trying it again. All the while murmuring soft, kind assurances on his lips.

"You did so well Lenora, such a brave, strong female." He all but coos as he rests me in his lap under the water, letting it warm and ease my throbbing, weary bones.

My chest feels raw too, in a different, soul deep kind of way. He's cleaning me, using his soap gently between my legs. My teeth dig into my bottom lip to stop myself from crying out with each pass of his rough palm. When I'm clean, half asleep and warm, he eases me to the ground. My eyes are half lidded as I bend my knees with minimal cursing and inspect the damage. I'm bleeding, but no more than I do with a light period. My stomach feels like I've done a thousand sit-ups, but aside from the red, angry color, it looks more or less the same. No gaping crater in my pussy, that's nice.

I let my head knock back against the shower wall to watch Fafnir as he cleans himself. Scrubbing the base of his horns where they meet his scalp. Next time, I'd like to do that for him. The odd, cloying well of emotions that's been keeping my

mouth shut and throat clogged finally breaks loose. “My dad committed suicide a little over a year ago.”

He stills, his Adonis muscles tensing, but he doesn't speak, no false condolences and plications. I find it refreshing. “He had Alzheimer's, his mind... it didn't work right anymore. He forgot things, himself...us. It was progressing so fast, we couldn't afford the treatment, so he just—

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“Gave up,” he offers.

“Yeah. He gave up.”

“It is a terrible thing to not trust your own mind.”

I want to get upset, to yell and throw things again, but I’m exhausted and everything aches. Mostly, I know he’s not wrong. I cannot fathom how horrible it must be. So, I just nod instead as he kneels in front of me, water soaking his handsome, severe face. “We can keep doing yourcalming exercises. You can ask your questions and take notes, if it will help balm the pain you carry.”

I choke back a sob.

When I’m dry and he’s lain me in the clean bed, I’m asleep seconds after my head hits the pillow, wondering what life would look like if I stayed.

twenty-one

Thelasttwomonthshave been... wonderful. He’s kept his word, even paid for an outrageously expensive intergalactic receiver so I can access the web. Which has only furthered my suspicions about thiswar madness, although I keep it to myself so long as he continues to be a test subject. Our days are filled with soft looks, ravenous touches, and a surprising number of smiles and laughter. I’m achy and regaled to lounging around like a pampered princess most days, which doesn’t bother me a bit. I’ve spent my life working, the greater majority of all twenty-six years of it. It’s nice to be coddled. Also, we don’t have much of a choice. I’m bred at least once a day,

usually just the tip of his mating cock, but a few times since the first, all of it, which puts my lady bits out of commission for a while.

Still, my stomach remains flat. Judging by the limited research on Bhaurnul gestation, my contract will probably be extended if pregnancy doesn't occur soon. Within the next month at the latest. I'm required to extend to the end of my pregnancy and nursing period, anyway. Not that I mind... not even a bit. Evidently, where Bhaurnul females carry for a year, having terribly low birth survival rates, something about their uterine shape, human women tend to go into labor early. A Bhaurnul child and human mother haven't had complications yet, but the pregnancy is said to be... unpleasant. Which I had been warned about due to their size. If I'm lucky, maybe I'll get pregnant in one of my last months here and get another year extension.

A long sigh leaves my throat as I peek out of the window at the Zylari running circles in her little nesting box before darting out of it. She recovered quickly, but has stuck around, much to Fafnir and Val's displeasure. The colossal beast eventually gave in, bunkering down with his herd for the rest of the winter. He looked tired, uncomfortable in the last weeks before he gave in. I had to stay at the Sihlih shelter until he'd fallen into his rest, or he'd just get up when I did and follow me out. Like he somehow knew this was temporary, that maybe when he woke next, I'd be gone. The night I stayed with him had been incredibly long. My exposed skin chapped and raw. It'd been miserable but worth every second.

The food replicator dings, and I nearly skid into the kitchen to get to it before the dammed giant does something to the food. He's halfway there when I come to a stop, my thick hair slapping me in the face. "No! You promised!"

He rolls his eyes, something new he's picked up and uses often. "A promise made while your lips are around my cock is taken under duress and hardly a promise at all."

I giggle at that, because he's not entirely wrong, but I am entirely uncaring.

His deep-set golden eyes track my every move, setting my belly on fire as I step up to the counter. He doesn't hesitate, knowing what I want. Strong, rough hands band around my waist, lifting me and plopping me down beside the food replicator. I lean over, not missing the way he pushes into me, lingering like always as I retrieve the food, a shit-eating grin on my face.

"It looks like worms, female," he breathes, his lips curled in disgust.

"This is an Old Earth delicacy!"

"Perhaps that is why there is no longer an Earth."

I give him a pointed glare at that. "I hardly think spaghetti is the reason for mankind's downfall." Although it very well could've been, in a different timeline, humans of Old Earth were weird like that.

"It is inedible," he grumps, glaring at the bowl as if it's a threat.

"You haven't even tried it."

"Sometimes the world is better for its mystery."

"Truly? A giant, horned, big, bad, scary warrior alien is throwing a hissy fit over noodles?"

"My fits are no hissy in nature," he bristles.

"You don't even know what that means."

"It is offensive, no doubt, if it is coming from your lips."

I sigh, letting the hot bowl rest on my bare thighs, warming them. As the winter drags on, there is no longer any daylight to be seen. Warmth harder to come by. “Look, what if we do this Lady and the Tramp style?”

He side eyes me.

“An Old Earth cartoon. It’s one of my favorite pieces of the recovered media. Next to Tarzan.”

He stills.

I still.

Oops.

“Tarzan, this warrior of old... the one you bedded with is—”

“A cartoon.”

“Not real?”

I shrug. “Only in my dreams.”

A shriek leaves my throat as his hand snaps out, banding around my chin like a vice, forcing my eyes to his. My back smashes into a row of dried herbs that go unused, upsetting the glass jars and their contents. I watch as red swirls, darkening the gold. My heart stilling for a few beats as he takes a deep breath, holding for seven, breathing for seven, the stunning golden color returning almost immediately. My chest swells with pride as I discreetly shove the bowl of spaghetti into a safe spot.

“You had me—” he cuts himself off, taking another seven-count breath.

I can’t help but smile.

“Maddening female.” He curses.

“If I didn’t know better Faf, I’d say you were terribly jealous.”

He huffs, releasing me with a soft pass of his thumb across my lips. My core throbs at the action despite having been fucked only an hour or two ago. “You are mine.”

The words are a quiet growl, a plea, and the long blurred lines are obliterated. My heart thumps wildly in my chest, my cheeks heating and God, how I wish that could be true. I clear my throat, retrieving the bowl. He watches, his eyes darkened not with red but with need as I plunk a noodle from the savory smelling mound, popping the end in my mouth.

He stares, dumbfounded.

I roll my eyes, offering the other end to him. He takes it... reluctantly.

Thengags.

My eyes snap wide, rearing back as his tanned, handsome face goes ruddy, his throat bobbing as if to choke something back. Then he glares at me, as if I'd personally given him the palette of a toddler.

My laughter starts with this strange choking gasp before I can't hold it in anymore. I'm laughing so hard tears stream down my face, my abs aching before he decides he's done being the butt of my joke and gathers me from the counter. I'm still rolling, gasping between bouts of laughter when he drops gently more than sits me on the ground. My amusement fades to sniffles as I watch him lie back on the bed.

He hikes a brow, gesturing toward his head. "Come human, ride my mouth. I wish to rid myself of the rancid taste."

My giggling cuts off abruptly. We do many kinds of things, things not capable of producing a baby. Which I can't recall being in the contract, but I am far from minding. I rid myself of my clothes slowly, ignoring the sudden goosebumps on my arms and legs, the way my nipples harden with more than my growing need. The chill is noticeable, but not unbearable. He watches me with hungry, demanding eyes as I crawl up his towering frame. When I'm hovering over him, I grip his horns, lining the

rings up on my palms with the rest of them. They have faded considerably, but they are there, noticeable and oddly warm, which bodes well for me often. A growl leaves his throat, his hand bands around my hips and slams me into his mouth.

I whimper as he flattens his tongue, dragging it up my soaked slit. He laps at me like that, languid and unhurried, his tail finding its way to my ankle, tethering itself there. When he gets to the front of my core, he curls the tip of his tongue, working my clit until I'm a wonton mess, grinding against his face. He releases the pulsing bud, shoving his tongue inside me, letting me ride it as I grind onto his mouth. My hips ache, but I barely feel it, a scream ripping from my throat as I come. He takes everything like it's the best thing he's ever tasted.

Then demands seconds.

I give them over willingly.

By the time Fafnir is done with his feast, I'm far too tired to force him to try the spaghetti again. My heart is fuller than it's ever been as he gathers me to his chest, tucking us under furs I know are too warm for him. I'm asleep quickly, the world as it should be, as I wish it could stay.

It doesn't.

When we're woken in the middle of the night by a pounding at the door, my heart sinks so deeply I fear I'll never be able to unbury it. Everything that happens next happens so quickly that my mind is left reeling. Fafnir forgets his calming exercises. Blood splatters against the stone of the hearth. Savage roaring mixes with my panicked screams until he takes a dart to the neck. His large body hits the ground so hard that I barely scramble away before I'm bludgeoned underneath it. I'm sobbing, crumpled on the floor as the males drag him from our home, assuring me everything will be okay. Looking at the hysterical female, like I'm every bit as dangerous as him.

When I slap, scratch, punch, and kick, they leave me to my sobbing. They call it a trial; assure me he won't be harmed. It falls on deaf ears, and when I'm left alone, it's to stare at the uneaten bowl of spaghetti and spilled herbs. I don't even glance at the cooling body of a male when they come back for it, leaving the door wide open until a single warrior comes and scowls at my shivering state on the floor. He tosses a pile of furs off the couch to me, then shuts the door, keeping guard in front of it. Whether it's to keep me in or Fafnir out, I'm unsure. So long as the bastard freezes out there.

twenty-two

Lenora

The next five days are as effective of a reality check as a slap to the face. Still, I'm reeling. Still, I'm a hostage in his home. The same towering prison guard stands outside, looming like a silhouette in the brutal snow. I'd almost started to feel bad for him. It's likely he's only following orders. That was until the sixteenth time I'd sobbed and begged him to take me to Fafnir, and he'd gruffly declined, ushering me back inside. The only time I'm let out is to "care" for my "injured" Zylari, which he seemed deeply confused about, but allowed it. I don't mention that the pretty blue snow bunny doesn't require any care on my part, and is perfectly fine. Half the time when I "check" on her, she's not even in the box. He hasn't figured it out yet.

The food replicator dings, and already my stomach is soured at the thought of eating. The moment the pizza touches my lips, it well and truly revolts. A hot sweat builds at my hairline, the food hitting the floor with a wet slap as I rush to the bathroom. I'm still getting to my knees as vomit surges up my throat, but I make it.

Mostly.

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My head pounds as I upturn my stomach.

It's been like this for the past two days.

I try to eat, sometimes even get it down, only to throw it up later. Which is confusing since it's called morning sickness, but I've yet to actually experience it in the morning. Turns out the tenderness in my breasts hasn't been from their constant abuse. My exhaustion and endless sleeping not just a side effect of Fafnir killing someone in the living room when they tried to arrest him in the middle of the night.

I'm pregnant.

Turns out you pay a lot more attention to things when you aren't constantly being fucked, teased, happy and stated, you have more time to think when you're alone.

I hadn't wanted to ever feel that again.

The crying comes next. Deep sobs echoing back at me from the toilet before they taper off, and I gather myself enough to clean up the bathroom. When I finally exit, avoiding the crumbled sheets that have remained untouched since that night, I have a plan in mind. It takes me all the rest of that day to compile my notes, linking research and articles back to my theory. Everything I've been struggling to bring up to Fafnir. My pulse hiccups as I send off the message to a Kalzait doctor I hoped might listen, might tell me I'm not crazy. If anyone can make sense of my poorly constructed research, it'll be a species with medical advancements second to none. The ones who hold the prestige of being the race that makes and markets most all human designed healing pods. The very machines we couldn't afford to save Dad. If I'm right though,

Fafnir doesn't need one. If I'm right, WarMadness isn't a disease, at least not in a literal sense. It's a severe form of alien PTSD. It's late into the next morning, and I can't sleep. Now is as good a time as any, I guess.

My stomach is twisted in knots as I bathe and dress, forcing even breaths when all I want to do is pant and gasp, sniffle and cry. My chin is high, like he showed me that very first day, as I jerk the door open, meeting the annoyed stare of my guard.

"Back inside."

"I'm out of supplies, I need to go into the—"

"No."

"I need them."

"What do you need? I'll send—"

"Feminine... things. Surely you don't expect me to list out the requirements. I need to talk to another female. Elat, if you know where to find her. I—" I hesitate, feigning embarrassment, "I'm not sure how bleeds are handled here, and I am leaking—"

He coughs, cutting me off. "Come, I'll take you to her then we come straight back. Understand?"

I nod.

Being pulled onto his mount feels... horrid, and I keep my freezing hands far from its mane, despite how unsteady it makes me feel. My eyes scanning the snowy, dark landscape for the Sihlih enclosure. We give it a wide berth, passing without issue, and my heart drops just a bit. Things would be much easier if Val would burst through,

maim some people, and we'd be on our way. He's resting soundly, and know he needs it. The ride jolts my stomach, and by the time I'm lowered to the ground, my legs feel like jelly, and I'm sure my face is an alarming sickly pale green. I'm determined not to vomit as I stride up to a similar house to Fafnir's, albeit smaller. The door is thrown open before I can knock. Her pretty, soft eyes widen on me. "Lenora! Are you alright?"

My chin wobbles, a truth on the tip of my tongue.

No, no, I'm not alright. I'm fucking terrified.

I don't need to say it; she sees but keeps her face schooled.

"I need some help. Ugh- female things."

She nods, her small, docked antlers bobbing. My guard paces uncomfortably as she lets me inside, slamming the door in his face.

"I'm pregnant," I whisper.

"It shows." She answers, leading me toward the bedroom into her bathroom. I ignore the naked male with jutting cocks on the bed, but so does she, as if he's no more than the bed he's lying on. "You're glowing."

I give her a miserable look. I am death frozen over, and we both know it.

She shrugs. "It is a nice thing to say."

I almost laugh as she shuts the door behind us, taking a pen-type device in her hand and mine in the other. "Fafnir is—"

“I was at the Halthara... when he was brought in.”

Tears bud in my eyes, but her gaze is on my palm. Her brows are furrowed, lips parted as she brings it to the light, staring at the faint rings.

“Fafnir didn’t mean to. It was an accident. Really, he’s a good male Elat. I don’t mind them, their kinda pretty, like a tattoo.”

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She stares at me, baffled for a moment before she clears her throat. Abruptly stabbing my palm with the pin, I hiss, ripping my hand away. “The fuck?”

“We need to confirm the pregnancy. That’s why you’re here, right?”

Is it? Is that why I’m here?

“I need to speak to him.”

“No, Lenora, that’s not safe. If they took him, it’s because it’s time. Pasttime... he’s favored but that can only get you so far.”

“Elat, listen, it’s not—”

I rear back as she takes me into her arms. “I am not without sympathy, but you are notus. You have more to worry about now.” She releases me, and the chasm in my chest feels deeper than before as she presses the pin into my palm. I stare at the foreign characters; she doesn’t need to translate what it says. I already know.

My voice wobbles when I speak, letting her lead me from the bathroom. “Thank you.”

“You could stay here, you know? Winter is nearing its end, and I have grown tired of my bedding partner.”

The male huffs as we pass him.

“No, you’ve done enough. Really.”

She nods, leading me to the door, her large hand gripping my wrist as I go to open it. “Pregnant females hold a special place here. Revered for their sacrifice, you will be no different.”

I stare at her blankly, too tired to read between the lines.

She sighs, gesturing to the weird pregnancy pen now hidden in the lining of my cloak. “Use it.”

My guard nods in thanks as we step out before facing me. “You are sorted? Did you not require padding?”

I shake my head, not sure what to say. Thankfully, the female behind me doesn’t miss a beat. “Her personal business is hardly a concern of yours, or has the dried meat rotted your brain?”

I snort as he manages to look only mildly annoyed. This time, when he lifts me onto his mount, I feel just a little lighter. Maybe not so entirely hopeless.

twenty-three

Lenora

The next two days are much of the same, although more time is spent staring at my flat stomach with an overwhelming bittersweet happiness. It’s my purpose here. It’s everything he wanted. A beautiful horned beginning, and a horrible, heartbreaking end. I watch as another male approaches my guard. There’s been a lot today. Where there’s usually only one who shows up with meals and then another to swap some nights, the dark suns are only at their highest point and already there’s been five.

I try to press my ear to the door, listening for anything, but their voices are low, lost in the wind. The storm is picking up, and it feels like an omen. I swing the door open suddenly, as if to catch a naughty child doing something they shouldn't. Only met with two baffled Bhaurnul males. I stare, dumbfounded too, then angry. Oh, so fucking angry. It hits me suddenly like a slap of hot iron against my chest, digging in deep. I stare at them; the silence is heavy and thick. My guard cracks before the other. "The trial is tonight. No, you may not attend. It is dangerous for a female."

"I was coming to check on my Zylari." My guard's eyes narrow as the other one seems to relax, grateful I seemingly don't care. I'm a human surrogate after all. Nothing more, nothing less. "I can imagine this means I will be returned to the agency soon. Once everything is resolved?"

He lifts his head higher, as if when he gets a better vantage point of the top of my head, I'll make more sense. "I am unsure. It is up to the elder and you, of course, but that comes later."

Stepping out past them into the harsh wind, I simply nod. I hadn't dressed properly, but granted I hadn't really been planning to come out here yet. At most I get one visit, but... with the weather turning, perhaps maybe two.

That's all I need.

I'm small on this planet.

Easily lost.

I keep that in mind when I tend the empty nest box, shivering in the snow.

Fafnir

Horns ram into my shoulder, piercing flesh, but I am stronger. One snaps off, I shove it in him deep.

## Page 34

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They've taken something from me.

I will kill until it is returned.

I have forgotten how to breathe.

What the world looks like when it's not drenched in red.

My thoughts are quiet.

Only hazel eyes and a single word keep chanting steadily in my mind.

Mate.

Lenora

Slipping my guard is laughably easy. I'm a human. We're small, weak, nothing is expected of me except maybe to annoy him or get myself killed. The latter I still hope to avoid, but I'm quickly realizing that's more or less out of my hands.

The storm is brutal.

Building into a crescendo of needle-like ice and bellowing winds that stagger and topple me. My entire body shakes, the sound of my chattering teeth lost to the howling storm, but inside my head it's deafening. Another hard gust hits me, knocking me to my knees. I haven't a clue how long it's been, but judging by the near pitch black darkness, I've come far. Maybe too far, maybe not far enough. I'm

exhausted, each step is taken through thick piling snow, and each of my legs weighs as much as Val's.

I have to be close, surely.

I'm going to miss it.

I'll be too late.

Desperation claws up my throat as I struggle to my feet, only to be knocked down again. I made a mistake, but it's too late to go back. I need to get up.

I have to get up.

Maybe in a moment.

He worked too hard, suffered too much for his child to freeze in my belly because I'm a weak, impulsive human. The bitterness is choking; it has been for days now, souring my already spoiled stomach.

My tears freeze on my lashes, my head snapping behind me when a soft crunch sounds in the snow. My heart jolts in my chest when another comes to the right. I tell myself it's nothing. It's been nothing for the past.... however long. Denial is a powerful tool to have in your arsenal, and I've spent years cultivating mine. Humans are dying out, but there's still time to change that. The aliens hate us, but only some. Terra2 is a death sentence, but there's hope that people make it out. Fafnir is probably already at the hands of a fate I cannot control, but maybe he's not. I am lost, but I think I'm close to the Sihlih enclosure.

Another step to my left, followed by a deep, low growl.

I am easy prey, but they haven't taken a bite yet. Perhaps I do not look worth eating.

There's a quick flurry of movement behind me, and my brain slams its fist down hard on the fight-or-flight button.

I cannot fight something I cannot see in near pitch darkness, in an alien blizzard.

I am pregnant.

Freezing.

Sick.

Scared.

I scream.

My thighs burn and ache as I pump them, crawling, scrambling on my knees as something snaps just over my shoulder.

I'm sorry.

## Page 35

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

Oh god, I'm sorry Fafnir.

I'm sorry, my baby.

I messed up.

Bad.

"Help!!! Help!" I scream. It's lost in the wind. Something large and heavy knocks into my side, hard. Stealing the breath from my lungs. When I look up, it's into the snarled maw of a dark colored, horned... wolf?

I'm going to die.

I'm so far away from home.

I'd hoped I'd be buried by Dad. Another unmarked grave. There's no one who knows what I wanted. I never said it out loud.

"Valoryx!!!"

It snaps for my throat; I give it my arm instead. The pain is instant, crushing. I scream again, but my eyes fill with tiny black dots. "Valor—" my words cut off in another violent scream as the beasts' teeth are ripped from my arm. Around me is carnage. A familiar deep, snarling growl makes a crazed laugh sound from my throat as I tuck my arm to my chest, trying to gauge how truly bad it is in the dark.

Notterrible.

Not good.

Denial. Denial. Denial.

The blood is warm, though.

That's nice.

When the sounds of carnage end, a giant nose digs under my shoulder, trying to shift me up, a low keening, worried sound leaves my scaled, furry friend.

I lift a shaky, bloody hand, sinking it deep underneath Val's chin, into his mane and scratch. "Let's go get your dad."

It takes me longer than usual to climb up onto the beast, even with his tail's help, but the adrenaline hasn't slowed yet. My heart is pumping so hard I can feel it in my ribs, slamming against them as if caged. Oh, fucking hell, I really thought I was about to die.

"Halthara!" I bark over the wind, my pronunciation shoddy at best. My head tucks deep into his warm fur as he launches into the night. I realize belatedly I'm not even sure that's where Fafnir is.

But itcouldbe.

Ithasto be.

twenty-four

Lenora

The village center is quiet, desolate due to the storm, but the large building that serves as its mecca is a beacon in the dark. I nearly sob at the sight of it. My arm is a mangled bit of agony, the skin there shredded. Now that I can see it in the light, it seems to hurt worse. My stomach revolts at the sight as I slip down Val, falling on my ass. My heart pounds against my ribs as I get to my feet. When I start for the door, hoping for a nice quiet entry, I hear a savage bellow from inside.

Valoryx does too.

He answers his master.

I can hear Fafnir bellowing commands to his mount. One's no doubt meant to render anyone between him and his release slaughtered.

The response is immediate. As Val starts forward, intent on barreling his way through the doors, armed Bhaurnul males rush out. "Stop!" I scream, which gets the attention of the males.

The wind howls like mad, Val's mane wildly tufted and smeared with my blood. They immediately misunderstand. I panic as they blow a dart at him, doing the only thing I can think of. Something incredibly taboo. When Val lowers his chest to the ground, leaving his hind high, readying for an attack, I scramble in front of him. Narrowly dodging the grabby giants attempting to wrangle me back. One snags my injured arm, making me scream in pain and wobble a bit as I stumble in front of the currently less helpful lion-lizard. I grip both of his larger horns on the far sides of the crown of them that crest his head. My skull slamming against his much larger one with a painful thud, and I scream.

Not a scared kind, but as close as I can get to the odd bellowing vocal commands

Fafnir gives. Val's slitted eyes lock onto mine, snarling madly, shoving me as he jerks. I bare my teeth right back. I am in no danger, but they don't know that. We have bigger fish to fry than an overprotective mount with good intentions and terrible execution.

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*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

He settles,reluctantly,his heavy back end slamming to the ground, his eyes tracking the males who are looking at me like I've just birthed a unicorn and then rode it into battle. When I start toward the building, their befuddlement wears off abruptly.

One barks at me in his native language. Due to the war contracts, most Bhaurnuls have been taught universal, forgoing translator implants. Which means it's shoddy at best. "I don't speak horned giant. Let me through." I command him, holding my chin up, but I'm dizzy.

So dizzy. Their heads look tiny compared to their bodies, coming in and out of focus, and I can't fathom that's a good sign. My head swims, and I think I might pass out.

"There is a trial in order, you may not—"

I move back toward Val. He snarls as they reach for me. "You will not fucking touch me, or I will let him kill the lot of you," I warn.

I have no idea how to command, or evenpolitelyask Val to do a damn thing. They probably know that.

Oh hell.

They eye my injuries, starting for me again.

"I'm pregnant! Take me to speak with the Elder immediately. I need to see Fafnir." It comes out pleading, desperate. Everything I'm not supposed to be. A spasm of pain lynches my heart. The adrenaline is wearing off and fast. "Please. I've come so far.

It's cold and I'm hurt."

The words tumble out of me, hopelessness heavy in my voice, and to my amazement, they all but scurry to usher me inside. The warmth is immediate, my muscles throbbing as they ache. When I enter, the space looks different. No tables of supplies, nor the warm spiced smell of prepped ingredients. It's warm, but cold, cavernous. Empty. My eyes find him quickly, my heart cracking in my chest, because he's already found me.

Of course he has.

Fafnir's eyes are a blanket of deep red. There's no battle, no swirling of brown against crimson. Not a hint of gold. He's lost. My chin wobbles at the state of him. He's filthy, covered in dried blood, the spears at his shoulders, sides, and back digging in despite him being chained. The ends are held by several males on either side. "Mine." He snarls, lunging. The sound of the chains makes me wince.

"Why is she in here? Have her removed."

"No!" He bellows, snarling, going for the elderly woman. She looks unaffected, but I don't miss the way she flinches as he jerks forward, making the sharp tips of the spears puncture his flesh.

I rush forward, my legs nearly giving out as I dart for him, only to be snagged by a male. He hauls me against his chest, and the sound that comes from my Fafnir is wicked and haunting. "You will release her, or I'll break these bonds and rip your entrails from your gut! I will eviscerate you so thoroughly your ancestors will scream as you pass to the next life!"

"You cannot go to him; he is not as you remember." The male hisses in my ear.

“Let me down now! I am pregnant, you’re hurting me! Faf, I’m pregnant!” I yell at him, watching as he suddenly goes very still. For the first time since I laid eyes on him, the chains are not taut.

“Release her. She will not do anything foolish, correct?” The woman says it like a warning instead of a question, and I nod. My mind wobbles at the quick descent, making me stumble a bit. Her eyes widen in horror. “What has been done to you?”

“Blue wolves,” I answer absently, as I try to steady my swaying as I walk to her. My entire body shakes as I thrust the pen test into her lap, smearing blood on her skirt as I go.

“Female, come to me,” Fafnir orders. The males shove him violently, making his chin connect roughly with the ground as they bark something out in their language. “Come.Now.”

I tremble, wanting so badly to listen. To calm him, but I can’t. He needs to show them he can do it himself. That’s why we’re here. They think he’s a lost cause, a monster in his own mind. He’s proving them right. “You’re going to need to remember how to breathe before I can do that, big guy,” I call out, not looking at him.

He growls in response.

My eyes are on the only person with any authority here.

Her.

The bloody test trembles in her hands as she steels herself. “Get her a medical kit, quickly.” She barks. Hooves beat on the ground as the doors fly open, letting in another blast of cold air.

“What is a wolf... how has it done this to you?”

I open my mouth before a booming familiar voice calls from the back, sounding more than a little winded and extremely irritated. “A wandering pack of Shivar. She left them in mangled chunks, no doubt thanks to her mount.”

My mount? No. “Fafnir’s mount.” I correct, my eyes still on hers.

“It obeys you; you have bonded to him.”

I nod. Mostly obeys, he does more or less what he wants, but I keep that to myself.

## Page 37

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“You could’ve been killed, merciless Valkyra.” Fafnir snarls. When I glance at him, a dangerous, painful hope blooms in my chest. His eyes are red, but there’s brown, just a little of it. The others notice too. I watch as brows furrow and they shift uneasily.

I wonder just how hard it is... what Fafnir is doing.

If it’s ever been done before.

“Your eyes—” the elder female starts, looking visibly shaken.

“I am not so far gone.” He snarls in response.

“Lies!” My guard calls from the back. “His eyes were completely overcome; it has been days. The entire time, he has been no more than a bral’qorn. A beast lost to his rage! How many has he killed? How many wounded?!”

“You took my mate, you are blessed I did not kill more!”

The room goes silent. All our heads snapping to him in unison.

Mate?

“Impossible, there has not been a recognition in—”

“Come, human, let me see your palms.”

My palms?

I lift them, looking at the bloody covered rings. My eyes go to Fafnir, his long gray hair mangled around his horns, dirty with blood as he nods. Brown swirling red. I'm breathing hard as I wipe them on my pants, clearing the filth, but it doesn't do much but smear it. When I reach the woman seated on a large wooden bench, she gasps.

My eyes are wide on hers.

"They can be faked!" My guard yells, making me shoot him daggers. "He is without honor; he only wishes to avoid a wandering. No one is above the end, not even the most valiant of us. We all meet our war—"

"Silence. The guards reported a searing from his horns. I had assumed it was because of his illness. I- I hadn't thought it was possible..."

They argue, the room erupting in loud, booming voices as I turn to Fafnir, where he pants in his chains. His eyes are tormented. "You are hurt," he offers, and I can't stand the defeated, broken sound of his voice.

I run for him. My knees knock the ground roughly as I skid, wrapping my arms around his broad neck. The first of a few wayward sobs escape me as his warm skin presses against mine. The room is silent again, but I don't care. When they try to pull him back, I ignore the devilish growl that leaves him. "Hush, just breathe. Show them you're still you." I whisper, peppering kisses on his dirty chin. "I'm your mate. Why didn't you tell me, you stupid male?"

"I hadn't thought it would be well received."

"Stupid." I smile, clinging to him harder.

"He is not attacking her." Another warrior states, baffled.

“Of course not.” Fafnir spits.

“Drop his chains.” She orders, but they hesitate. My guard again opening his mouth. All these long days he’s had nothing to say and now suddenly he can’t seem to shut up.

“You cannot be serious, you—”

“I am the reigning elder. Do you wish to question me again?”

“He is your son, perhaps your favor is—” his words cut off in a grunt.

I turn my head, making Fafnir growl as he tries to keep me tucked tightly under his chin. The enigmatic older female’s horns are long while other females keep theirs short, a sign of her status. She’s standing now, my pregnancy pen gripped in her hand. When I turn my attention to the guard, he’s grinding his teeth so hard I worry they’ll snap, a small blade sticking out of his left arm.

Oh shit.

“Ogarrex, you are dismissed. Release Fafnir, now.”

The chains slap to the ground loudly, but not loud enough to miss the way his flesh squelches when they pull the spears free. He doesn’t hesitate, gathering me in his arms. Lording over me as if to keep the others at bay. I give him a watery smile. “It’s going to be alright.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

Another deep sob gathers in my throat. Fafnir's mate.

I'm Fafnir's mate.

I get to keep them, both of them. At least for now.

The delicate thud of hooves only barely drags our attention from one another. The way he stares at me tells me he's thinking the same thing. When his mother offers me the pregnancy pen, her hands are steady, as if they've never dared to shake before. "This changes nothing. Surely you understand. Accommodations will be made to support the two of you until the kit is born, but—" she takes a deep breath. "You've killed many Fafnir."

"Every death was justified." He seethes.

I'm surprised when she nods in agreement. "It would be easier, different had so many not seen."

Seen his eyes, she means.

"While you seem to hold an unnatural level of control over your berserker, over this...sickness, we've all witnessed the progression."

He stands, taking me with him, and again I'm awed by my giant horned alien. He must be in agony; you'd never know it if you couldn't see the wounds. "I will kill more if it is necessary. I will leave not a soul in this village untouched if you try to remove my mate from me. Not even you, mother."

Tears spring to my eyes, my heart uncaring if that wasn't the most intelligent move given our situation. The Bhaurnul people are different though, they speak in terms of violence. When I turn away from my mate to face her, where I expect to see horror, rage even... there is only respect and a deep, unending well of sadness.

"She will not be taken, so long as you are you. If the day comes when you fear you will no longer be, I expect you to do the honorable thing. War madness will come, and when it does—" I barely stifle my gasp as she removes the long wooden pin in her hair, letting it fall around her shoulders, revealing the half bald, scarred top of her head. Toward the front is a deep divot, like her head had been terribly gored there. Her eyes meet mine with her chin high, her next words said aloud but for me alone. "When it does, the love you feel for her will not be enough to cool the rage. You will forget her face as you maim it."

He nods, and my heart sinks deeper yet. This impasse is only a bandage for the gnarled, festering wound that lingers under my relief.

"Ogarrex will remain your guard. He is the strongest amongst us. Aside from your mate. You will have him until after the kit's weaning period and no more. You are favored in Valhyr's eye, he has blessed you in ways our people have longed for, for one too many spans. Savor it, then wander."

"And my mate, after I am gone?"

"Wait," I interject, fussing until I'm lowered to my own two feet. "What does wander mean? Gone how, like sent away? I will go with you, Fafnir." I hate it. How pitiful I sound even to my own ears, like I'm clinging to sand that won't stop rushing through my fingers.

They ignore me, both of them, only Fafnir giving me a warning look that says, not now.

Her aged eyes level me, I hold her gaze as best I can, but I'm tired. My head is swimming, and everything hurts. "She is only human in form. I suspect she is more Bhaurnul than even some of us. It takes a lot... to do what she has done tonight. Valhyr has given you a lovely mate. She will always have a home here, if that is what she chooses."

Emotion seizes my chest, and oh god, I'm hanging on by a thread.

When she steps forward, it's with a small smile. The female kneels, pressing her palm to my flat stomach. "Shorra'vul," she whispers and without another word and a curt nod, she stands and leaves.

"What does that mean?"

"It is a blessing of sorts; she wished the kit well."

The next hour is a blur in my mind, and seen through eyes that refuse to stop producing tears. My arm is tended by a healer. The stitches nearly make me black out. Apparently, the Bhaurnul doesn't widely use automatic healers... or pain medicine. I cringe to think what that means for the birth of this baby. Soon enough, we're mounted on the back of Val, and I fall asleep, safe in my mate's arms, before we make it past the opening of the glacier rocks.

twenty-five

Fafnir

My heart pounds at the right cadence for the first time in days, my mind... whole. Where no others had come back, I did, for her alone. She needed me in that moment more than the madness needed its talon tipped hold. If she calls, I will crawl to her.

I would do anything for her.

Fight for her.

Die for her.

Live for her.

For them both.

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It is easy to be a martyr, to decide to give your life for something. It is far more a test of resistance to stay when you're terribly exhausted. I smooth my large hand over her flat stomach, picturing how beautiful she will look when her belly is rounded with our kit. A sense of longing so strong slams me, nearly taking me off my hooves. I want to see them, hold them, do all the things sires don't do. I want to teach my kit to hunt, or craft, to ride their Sihlih... I want them to know me. Not as a male sent out to wander, but as I am now. The male who's worthy of their mother.

Her quiet, tired voice hits me then. "Fafnir..." My eyes slide up to meet my mates, cradled still in my arms, standing just inside the doorway of our home. "We need to talk."

I nod. "Yes, Sha'vria, but first let me savor you."

"Shavera, what does that mean?"

"Cherished one."

Tears well in her eyes. "I was so worried about you." That statement seems to undo her, like admitting it out loud displaced the pebble that held the dam together. She cries softly, held in my arms as I walk us into the bathroom. I listen to her halted, shuddering breaths, noting every tear that mars her face as I undress us, slipping us under the warm stream. There is more silence than discussion, more basking than washing until her chest stops heaving. Her slight frame finally untucks from the confines of my chest.

When our eyes meet, it's like galaxies collide, and our bodies follow.

I'm mindful of her arm as I lift her up into mine. Her core slick with more than water as she grinds against me. My needy little mate is already desperately seeking her own release. I let her, her throbbing cunt sliding up and down my mating cock, her hips rocking.

Her breasts brush my chest as small, panted whimpers leave her mouth. The moment I dip my head, mindful of my horns, I suck one of her rosy taut nipples into my mouth. She explodes. "There you are, my perfect mate." I praise, loving the way she melts every time.

There's no working her up, no more teasing. My cocks are heavy and needy as I line up my pleasure shaft, shoving it into her until I bottom out. A deep groan leaves my throat as her cunt clamps down on it, squeezing, halting and then blessedly gives. I fuck her like that, claim her as thoroughly as I adore her. Lenora's skin is flushed, her head thudding forward as she graces my chest, the brand there with sloppy, feverish kisses. My hand knots in her hair, tugging her head back so I can watch her heavy-lidded eyes as I take her. She meets me thrust for thrust.

"You were made for my cock, such a good little human breeder. Such a pretty mate."

She moans loudly. "Yes, I- I'm going to come."

"Wait, my sweet Lenora, come with me."

"I can't."

I tug her head back further. Only my cock lodged deep inside her and my palm flattened on her back holding her up. "You will." She gasps as I release her hair, sinking my fingers deep into her mouth, making her gag. "Suck them like my cocks."

She moans loudly and does just that. The sight of her wanton, desperately seeking

pleasure, is my undoing. I roar my release, my seed spurting across the shower from my mating cock as my other swells inside her. Pulsing with its own waves of pleasure. I jerk her up, grinding her clit at my base until her scream follows.

Lenora

I'm fighting sleep off like the plague as I lie in Fafnir's arms, bundled in furs only parted at my stomach. My heart wrenches at the sight of the big, terrifying warrior adoring my belly. Memorizing it as if something has changed since a week ago when he last painted it with his seed. I didn't take his mating cock this time, the healer having advised against it. I watch him, imagining a life together, our life. A life with an alien mate I never knew was out there, just waiting for me. Mating is different, means different things for different species, but fated mates are sacred. By the sounds of it, his gods brought me into this world to thank him. I don't mind that theory much at all.

Breaking a sweet moment like this seems sacrilege, but my mind doesn't agree with my heart. It's swirling, all the worst-case scenarios forming a prominent lump in my throat. The tip of my tongue is heavy, laden with questions. Soon enough, I can't hold out, not for a second longer. "Faf..."

He sighs, adjusting himself to look at me, long plaited gray hair falling to the bed where he's propped up on his elbow, looking very much like a relaxed, lounging god. "The elder, Helgoid, is my dam, my father was sent out to wander shortly after I came into the world. He'd held off as long as he could, hoping it would be him to give me this."

I listen, somehow already fighting tears as he gestures to his brand. The long, curving antlers crossed over a shed.

"He held out too long... he almost killed her." He takes a long, drawn out breath.

“Wandering is a way of life after the madness takes effect, a way to regain our dignity in death.”

My heart stills, slowing like it doesn't dare beat.

“As the madness takes us and its hold becomes unyielding, we are given a choice... wander and when it's time, fight with the dignity of Valhvir, or be executed.”

I gasp, my hand gripping my nightdress tightly. “Executed?! For what?!”

He ignores my outburst, his eyes so very far away.

“If we choose execution, it ends there. We are killed; our souls sent to rot in the land far beyond the glaciers....”

“And the wandering?” I whisper.

His eyes seem to come back then, swirling red when they meet mine. “After we're sent to the wildness to wander, a hunt is organized...”

A quiet, choking sound leaves me. Knowing what he's about to say and hoping against hope I'm wrong.

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“The youngest warriors hunt us as training, giving us an opportunity to die in battle, regaining our place behind Valhyr’s gates.”

“They hunt you like a fucking animal.”

“You do not understand.”

“No, fucking of course I don’t!” I scramble off the bed, away from his touch like it’s on fire. My hands fly through my bedside table searching for my holo pager. He’s patient when I return with it.

Where I pant, his breath is even, steady.

Where my eyes are wild with fear, his are swirling but calm.

“Lenora, this is the way of things.”

“Fuck that! I will not let you be hunted and murdered for sport.”

“It is—”

“Fafnir, just-look, look at this.” My hands are shaking violently, my mind a deep whirl of dizziness and racing thoughts. “It isn’t a disease, not really. Humans have it too. It’s called PTSD. It’s a mental health disorder, not a death sentence.”

His eyes are narrowed, if not a little angry, but he listens. Letting me ramble on, taking each and every note in as I read it to him, and by the time I get to the end,

where I sent all my research over to the doctor, Fafnir's face is stoic and unreadable. I sit in heavy silence as he starts back at the beginning, reading everything once, twice, three times through. The seconds drag on into ontics and ontics, verging on zentics when he finally lays the data pad down between us.

I hold my breath, sweat slicking my palms.

"This changes nothing."

I swear my heart cannot take another fracture; my voice is small, smaller than I wanted it to be. I want to be angry and scream, but I don't. I just don't. "It changes everything, though. I- I'm yourmate."

"Do you even know what that means? You arehuman. Humans cannot recognize a soul mate."

I shake my head, knowing he's wrong. So wrong. "Being your mate means I can finally stop feeling like I'm breaking some stupid rule bylovingyou. It means I can stay... with the both of you."

"I must wander, Valkyra. Even with a Bhaurnul spirit, the winter is harsh for a human body. It is no place for—"

I cut him off, gripping his horns as I stare down at him, tears in my eyes, sorrow clawing my throat. "You won't wander, youcan't. I won't let it come to that, but I need you to try for me. Forus,because I wanthimto know you."

His eyes widen, darting to my stomach. "Him?"

I sigh at that, knowing it's silly as I release his horns. I don't get far before Fafnir grips my hands, bringing them back. "It's just a stupid feeling."

“It’s not stupid. Never call it that,” he corrects vehemently.

“So, you’ll try? No matter what it takes?”

His eyes meet mine as he grips my face in his large hands. If I had horns, I’d imagine he’d be gripping me there instead. “I told you before, I will not give up. If even half of what was in those notes is true...” he takes me deep breath. “I want it to be true but—”

I shake my head, a sob leaving me. “No, no buts, not even one.”

He tugs me to him at that, kissing me softly, softer than a male like him should. “You said you loved me.”

I sniffle. “Of course I do, stupid male.”

He chuffs, tucking my head under his chin. My eyes widen as something damp reaches my scalp. “I ensure your love is not wasted on me, my Lenora.”

“I love you too. That’s what you’re supposed to say.”

“I do love you, but such terms feel... inadequate. I suppose it’s better than anything I could come up with.”

My chin wobbles. He has no idea how wrong he is. Everything he’s done since the moment we landed on this planet has screamed love. Improbable, irrational, ill-timed love.

twenty-six

Fafnir

Lenora and her friend chat animatedly beside me, their voices chipper as always. Now that the worst of the winter is over, and the season of birth is looming, I can no longer justify denying my mate anything. Although this... this I do not enjoy. Ogarrex scowls at me, and I back at him, sitting across from one another at the Halthara. My little Valkyra has decided it's important to not hide away, to show the people I'm stable. She's scheming something far bigger, no doubt. I had managed three months of avoiding it. Three months of keeping my pretty mate hidden, safe in our home while her belly grew round.

My time has come.

I must socialize.

No less with a group of people who would sooner see me dead, not out of malice but self-preservation, because by all accounts... I should not be as I am now. I should be a mindless beast, out to roam and maim until I am taken to the underside. I do not fault them for it. What is happening now defies everything. Helgoid has been under great pressure because of it. As much as I am thankful for her mercy, I'm bitter that I needed it at all. Breathing exercises do not help in matters of wounded pride, as bullheaded as that sounds. We're here as we have been every other day of the past two weeks, and still, my people give us a wide berth. The males loom closer than females dare, as if to whisk my mate away at a moment's notice. My Lenora is oblivious, wrapped up in the only female who will risk being close, Elat. The masses

have begun to look at my mate as if she's every bit as maddened as me.

A growl slips from my throat, making her cast me a warning glare. It's all spit and fire, but I see the worry there. It is small, but it exists. The bigger she becomes, the more it grows with her, every bit a living and breathing being inside her as our kit. The healer gives her a while yet before we cross that bridge. I am keeping my promise; I am trying... some days it is harder than others.

But there is hope.

Perhaps I am not doomed after all. I feel it will be harder this way. To have my mind intact when I am cast away from them.

My eyes catch Ogarrex's before he hardens himself and looks away. I keep my gaze trained on him, on his eyes, watching for the tendril of red. I am the oldest amongst the warriors, but he is close second. Where I served under Valhyr's eye for sixteen, he served for five. More than was needed, but not quite an offensive number. He watches me, watches us. It is normal to be curious. I would be curious too, watching a highly feared warrior sitting what my mate callscrisscross applesauce on a fur and doing mindful meditation. All the while muttering nonsense things to myself.

I am calm.

I am safe.

I am in control.

My mate is safe.

I am home.

There is no danger.

This would not be a problem had he stayed outside as he was meant to, but my kindhearted Lenora had taken pity on him. He is inside, lurking and scowling, often now until one of us loses our temper and he heads back out to scowl and lurk there instead.

My mate has taken to calling him my friend.

Another baffling theory on her part.

“Are you done with that?” He finally speaks, gesturing to my leftover lyran roll. I could say no and let it go to waste out of spite, like usual. I just grunt in my assent, tossing the damn thing at his head.

He stuffs it in his mouth immediately, his eyes lingering on the chittering females to my left. When he speaks next, his voice is muffled behind the food. “They done yet, you think?”

I try and fail to stifle my long-suffering sigh as I glance at them, both of their plates nearly untouched because Lenora is describing the entire plot of something called Home Alone to Elat. “Unlikely.”

A deep, bellowing roar leaves my throat, shaking the entire house. My fists are clenched, eyes swimming in red as I breathe through my nose, fighting the urge to smash the holocom in front of me. To his credit, the Kalzait doctor doesn’t flinch, his greenish iridescent wings matching the shade of his hair, giving only a slight shift behind him.

I don’t get a second to calm myself, to remember the tools to get past the bludgeoning rage swallowing my chest as Ogarrex barrels into the room. My eyes widen... for the

first time, I see it.

Red.

Lenora pads into the room, walking right between us both, a worried expression on her face. When she reaches out, placing her hand over the brand on his chest, I snap. The doctor's voice is lost to me as I snarl, launching myself up and ripping my mate away from the crazed male.

"Are you hurt, Lenora?"

She struggles where I've pinned her behind me. "Ugh, no let go!"

"Fafnir, you must calm. This is your friend, not an enemy." The doctor reasons.

But Ogarrex and I are locked in, neither of us daring to move, knowing what it could mean, nobody wanting that.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

I have come too far to kill another.

To lose my chance to meet my son.

To lose the few remaining weeks I have with my mate.

The red cools in my vision, but I'm left with a heavy chest as I stare at him. "You are war mad."

"Not maddened, not yet," He responds, glancing at the doctor who watches us with keen interest. "What is this?"

I open my mouth to tell him something unkind before my mate's little fist connects roughly with my back, feeling no more painful than a tap. "My apologies, Sha'vria." I offer, releasing her. She huffs terribly affronted, adjusting her dress. Again, I am taken aback by how stunning she is, swollen with our kit.

The doctor chimes in then. "Perhaps today's visit should be cut short if you are agreeable, Fafnir. It seems you know someone else in need. Your insight could be valuable to him. He could be helpful in my research as well. The more the merrier, truly."

Yes, the research, why he offered to take us on without cost. I am a well-off male, but to employ a Kalzait doctor... there are not enough credits on this planet to have afforded that.

Ogarrex eyes the doctor with no small amount of suspicion before looking at my

irritated mate, for what I'm unsure, but whatever look she gives him makes him straighten from his guard position and offer me a curt nod.

It is like looking in a less attractive mirror, the pride warring with desperation and shame. He comes around quicker than I do to the idea of hope. That our brains can be strengthened, that we can survive what has taken so many. I'm not sure if that makes him better or worse for it.

twenty-seven

Lenora

My back aches as I pace outside the house, Val watching me lazily from his spot on the ground in front. The large beast swapping between watching the little Zylari I've named Lily and glaring balefully at Ogarrex, where he runs through training exercises down the field. He's not so much aguardanymore, more like a reluctant friend and test subject who is forced to be here. My giant, on the other hand, is dangerously close to being demoted to reluctant friendas well.

I'm dressed and ready to go, my sides straining and back spasming every five seconds. We started fighting ten minutes ago, so now I'll have to go back in to pee again before we leave. The toilet is too high and it's a pain in the fucking ass to get up on now. Like most everything.

I huff, stalking back over to him. My large, heavy stomach hanging lower than normal between us as I jab his chest with my finger. "I am going, and if you try to stop me, I'll scream so loud it'll bring the Halthara here instead."

"Lenora, you cannot ride Valoryx in your state, and we do not have—"

"Yes, we do! We have enough! With the doctor's testimony, we have to try. We're

running out of time Fafnir, why can you not understand that?" Each pull of my lungs takes three times longer to complete, and if I'm being honest, which I am not, I agree... I highly doubt even mounting the super-sized lion lizard in my current state. Even with my stomach supported by taping, I am miserable and...huge.

Too huge.

Turns out Bhaurnul babies are every bit as big as you'd think they'd be. If I hadn't seen evidence that this was done before, I wouldn't believe it.

"They will not listen. You are too far along to argue and—"

"They will listen though, Fafnir, they will or I-I'll make them! I'll take your spear and jab them in the ankles until they see reason if I have to!"

I'm yelling now.

Admittedly, I'm not sure why my brain decided today of all days was the one to pick a fight and force my way to Helgoid and tell her everything we've done over the last eleven months. Today is the only day, though. I know that innately, or at least my pregnancy hormones finally decided making me come and feeding me wasn't enough to keep me patient and lazy today.

My body feels like a fucking wasteland. Morning sickness is supposed to be a first trimester thing. I'm in my millionth and still I vomit. My ankles are swollen, my skin is shit and I've never felt less glow-y in my life.

Fafnir still stares at me like I'm a goddess reborn.

That mostly makes me happy, but sometimes pisses me off too.

He doesn't care.

He doesn't want us.

Tears well in my eyes, and I know the concept is ridiculous. I'm literally his fated mate. A gift given to him by his gods. But right now, my wayward hormones don't care.

Right now, I'm mad, scared, and I feel ugly.

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Fafnir is patient, so terribly patient as I stalk, teary and glaring.

“My mate...” he pleads. “Please come inside. I do not wish to anger you further by forcing you.”

“No!” I spit back. “I’ve done everything I needed to do, and it still feels wrong, Fafnir. I can’t stand another second of resting when losing you, losing our family, hangs in the balance. I’ve cleaned everything, over and over again. All the baby’s clothes are ready and fresh, the crib is ready, I’ve packed and repacked my just in case bag five million times... I’ve done everything and I’m not ready!”

“Lenora, you are stressing the kit.” He tries to reason, but it only shoves me further into hysterics.

“And you think the kit won’t be stressed without a father!?”

“It is the way of—”

I turn on him so quickly my head spins, and my side cramps something awful. “If you say the way of things one more time, I swear to your gods I will—”

“What if she’s right?”

We both turn to Ogarrex then. My mate's eyes shining golden with irritation and mine wide with hope. “Exactly! At least some male in my presence sees reason.” I shoot a pointed look at Val, who refused to let me mount him and alerted his master to my escape attempt just a little while ago.

“Fafnir,” my voice breaks, and I hate the way he winces at the sound, his long hair dragging over his shoulder as he glances behind him to look at me. “Do you not want something different for your son?”

It’s a low blow, but we’ve been at this for months. For months I’ve been patient and waited before bringing anything to anyone outside of our small circle. Months of dodging Dr. Univos’s questions about getting more participants for his research, about bringing our findings to the elder council. He’s done waiting. For all their brilliance and insight, Kalzaites are a cold and unwavering race. Unforgiving. It’s either progress or abandon.

I will not let him abandon us.

My hand drops to the baby in my stomach as he gives a little kick. Faf sighs and comes to us. I know what will come out of his mouth before he reaches out, cupping and lifting my stomach. I can’t help but sag against him, grateful he’s taken some of the weight.

“The elder is at the end of her term; she’s fading and under enough pressure for my sake already.”

Ogarrex scoffs at that. “This is not just about what she can do for you. How many more will be sent to wander while you have your mate sit on information that can save them?”

My eyes slide to Faf. Ogarrex is right, and he knows it. My mate has taken well to the therapy, very well, but Ogarrex has done so in strides. Not so much as a slip up since they started. Early intervention makes all the difference. That’s what we’re wasting: time. As much as I want this for selfish reasons, I want to help people too. So does Fafnir, but a Bhaurnul’s pride is only second to their dedication to tradition, to their word. He gave his that he’d take his fate with grace.

Sometimes you just can't go gracefully.

Sometimes you have to be dragged to your fate, kicking and screaming.

And if he won't, I will. I'm about to tell him as much when he finally speaks. "You must give me your word you will not openly argue for my sake, Lenora."

My lip trembles.

I can't.

That's why I've done this.

Why we got the Kalzait doctor involved.

I can't bear the thought of losing him, especially not like that. He's a good male, the best. He deserves the chance at healing...at life just as much, if not more than the rest of them. Without him taking a chance on me, submitting to my silly trauma driven desire to help, we wouldn't know what we know now. He wouldn't be here now.

My heart drops again when he releases my belly gently, picking me up in his arms. "We will go tomorrow, but tonight you will rest. You think I cannot see you gripping your sides?"

The relief bursts from me in a gush of wind and tension. My thick hair is tied up high on the back of my head as I tilt it back, mouthing the words thank you to Ogarrex as I'm hauled back inside. Soon enough, I'm lying on the bed, dressed in a soft nightgown I'd had Fafnir order for me because the skimpy lingerie had stopped being comfortable very early on.

My eyes land on the bassinet in the corner of the wide room, waiting to be attached to

the bed as my mate brings a pot of salve from the bedside table. I nearly laugh at the sight of the blaster there as he palms a huge glob of the balm, rubbing it into my stomach, massaging the lined, heavily stretched skin there. He pays those marks extra attention. It had bothered me at first, like he was pointing out my imperfections.

Until I realized that only I saw them as such.

He traces each one softly, his tail wrapped around my ankle. It does something twisty and warm to my heart, seeing such a big, scary male doting on me like this. I never tire of it. When he leans down, pressing a gentle, chaste kiss to my stomach, tears spring to my eyes again. His cocks are hard and bobbing behind his loincloth, but he doesn't push for more.

Another thing I am grateful for, the further along I get, the less I feel like anything even remotely sexual. While his need for me is still apparent, he has never pushed me. For the past three weeks, I've spent my nights being adored and catered to before bed. He's every bit as happy doing that as he was fucking me to sleep.

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His soft smile finds me next. It's such a rare sight, I take it in for as long as I can. "I am in awe of you," he offers softly.

"I was just thinking the same thing."

twenty-eight

Lenora

When I wake, the small sun is just beginning to crest. I'd stressed myself into a coma like slumber and feel oddly rested. Oh, and there's a girthy steel rod pressed so hard into my ass if he moves even an inch, I'll be impaled. One of my favorite things about Fafnir's therapy working is that he sleeps with me now. Where he used to stay up brooding and wandering around the house, now more times than not, I wake to him snoring softly beside me, lost to the world. That's how he is now. I untangle myself from his heavy arm banded around my belly, turning so that I can face him. My lips part as he shifts forward, seeking me out with his engorged cock again as a soft groan leaves his lips.

A tinge of arousal builds in me. As rare as that is lately, I don't hesitate. My movements are slow and measured as I slip down his expansive form, the heavy furs traded for lighter ones now that winter has passed. Most nights, they end up on the floor anyway, perks of bedding down with a literal space heater. He shifts slightly, making me pause my descent. I hold my breath as his twin cocks jerk, brushing across my breasts. He shifts closer, his thick, large mating cock shoving between the tender mounds, my teeth digging into my bottom lip to keep from whimpering. A few more moments of him thrusting his cock and I'm seconds from reaching between my

legs and forgoing the plan. It's a special kind of torment having such a fine specimen dote and wait on you hand and foot, to want him so badly you dream about it and your body not getting the message.

I wiggle down further until I'm eye level with his mating cock; I don't touch it, no teasing or working him up. The sleeping giant jerks as I pop the head in my mouth and suck like it's going to produce the very substance I need to survive. He releases a savage sounding growl, my eyes rolling up to meet his golden burning ones. "Fuck, Lenora."

Now that he's awake, my hands join my mouth. Knowing it doesn't go in very far, I place one on his pleasure cock and the other on the mating one and work them in tandem. The beast of a male tenses, trying not to thrust harder into me. It works, for the most part. His hips jerk, making me gag loudly, tears filling my eyes. My own cunt is a throbbing, soaked mess between my legs. When he watches me rub them together, he moves to reach down and pleasure me, but I don't want his fingers.

I want his mouth.

But first, I want to be drenched in his seed. Covered in his scent, so when we journey to the Halthara today, there's no doubt where I stand, where my loyalties lie.

His fist grips my hair, not pulling, just holding me still against him as he slowly starts to move in my mouth, gently, but I am not in the mood for along gamekind of fucking. We have a lot to do today, and I need to get off. I take back over, his eyes rolling back in his skull when I suck harder, swirling my tongue around the head of his mating cock.

"Little female, I am going to drown you."

I whimper.

His roar follows, and he does drown me. His cock jerks and swells almost painfully in my mouth. Panic hits me for a moment before I remember to breathe deeper through my nose. The salty, earthen taste of him making my senses go haywire as I swallow and swallow and swallow.

When I can't possibly take another drop, I pop off moaning as a shot hits my face before he pulls me up higher on the bed, aiming his jerking cock for my breast. I'm needy, panting and squirming when he smirks, peppering a kiss on my cum covered lips before he licks a clean trail down my body only stopping to blow gently on my wet cunt.

"Please, please, just get me off," I whimper.

He hikes a thick brow. "I cannot deny you much, my mate, but certainly not that."

I all but scream as he latches onto my clit. Only his horns can be seen over my big belly, but I'm not really looking. My eyes are unseeing, my mind short circuiting as he sucks and laps, working me like he was born to do only this. My hands grip the sheets as if I'm going to float away, the orgasm that follows hitting me like a blindside, and I gush, fluid rushing as I'm groaning my release, bucking into his mouth like a crazed animal in heat. I'm panting when reality comes back, when my very satisfied mate rises over the mountain of stomach and smirks.

Horror hits me all at once as I struggle to get seated. "Oh my god, did I fucking pee?"

His laugh is deep, rumbling, and nearly distracts me from the horror of the situation.

Nearly.

"No, Sha'vria. I believe it is something humans call squirting."

Oh.

Oh fuck.

Wait, isn't that pee though?

At least kinda pee?

My face must be a telling shade of red because his laugh finds me again, this time I do join him, perhaps not as hardily. Still slightly disturbed. "Come, we must clean and head out soon," he offers, helping me from the bed.

That sobers us both.

We're stepping into the shower when my hands brace on my belly, refusing to let go long enough to wash. So, he does it for me. His touch is soft, reverent as always, and when he kneels, kissing and nuzzling my aching stomach, all I can offer him is a watery smile.

Wishing like hell I could talk to my mom. Like she'd know the magical recipe to fix all of this. That longing hits me hard. I want to tell her I'm pregnant, that I'm staying, happier than ever. I want to know how she'd feel about an alien grandbaby. She'd be over the moon. Mom always loved kids. The lump is still in my throat as he helps me from the shower, sending me off to dry and dress while he washes. I wish I could unsee the agonized look in his eyes as I walk away.

twenty-nine

Lenora

I'm grateful for my mate and Ogarrex finding a hunting sled for me versus having to walk all the way from the house to the village's hub. The journey takes the better part of an hour, heavily pregnant and the exhaustion I suddenly feel must show on my face. I fuss a little, for show, but I am definitely not at my best today.

A sharp pain in my side only further ratchets up my pounding heart, anxiety riding me hard as I call out for them to stop just outside the twin rock glaciers leading into the circular opening. Fafnir gives me a questioning look from atop Valoryx, who is thankfully being oh so very careful with his deathtrap tail, where the leads to the sled are attached to the thick spikes like a multi-looped harness.

"I want to walk from here," I offer, trying not to grunt as I struggle to get myself standing.

His eyes shine with as much pride as they do disapproval. The giant horned man is at my side before I can wobble far, leering like always. I don't shoo him today, but press myself closer, letting him help me into the clearing. It was shocking at first, relating this place to the one I witnessed during the start of winter when I arrived. Where it was desolate before, it's a frenzy now. Loud drinking, plates piled high of food that never seem to end, rich colored fabrics, and finely carved wares being traded at little booths set around the clearing.

Elat sees me from hers, waving happily, where she makes the prettiest handmade

brushes and fine, wooden dyed jewelry. Of which, thanks to Fafnir, I have an expansive collection now. I want for nothing and have so much more than I ever thought possible. Is that terribly selfish, to want just a little more?

Is it selfish to ask him to run with me?

Knowing how it would wound him, dismantle his honor, his pride... knowing if I only asked, he would say yes.

It seems unfair.

But so does everything else about this too.

My entire life seems unfair. Poverty just because I am human. Selling myself off to be bred because there are no proper opportunities for us. Dad taking his own life because his future looked so bleak, him leaving Mom to wipe the gore from the walls in his shed, leaving us to pick up the pieces of our family. Finding everything I never knew I wanted right before I lose all of it.

My heart is beating so fast that my head feels faint as we enter the large building that makes up the very lifeblood of this place. Helgoid sits on her chair at the head of the table whittling something and my stomach lets off another ungodly spasm. The baby has been quiet today, the last few really, but the healer assured us everything is fine. He is simply running out of room.

I decide then I don't care if it's selfish.

I don't care what I'm asking for or if it's too much.

For once, I'm going to have my cake and eat it too.

“Fafnir, Lenora.” She greets us, rising from her spot, a faint but fond smile on her face. I wonder how long it will last. Outward affection, or any affection at all, isn’t something frowned upon per se for the Bhaurnul people, but they give it sparingly. It makes it feel so much more special, genuine.

“Elder Helgoid,” Fafnir greets.

There’s a ringing in my ears as Ogarrex joins us in front of her. Her fond smile turns to a frown.

“Something has happened?” She questions, pulling her aged hands behind her back.

“No- well, not really. I—” I stumble over my words for a moment before pulling in a deep breath. Only Fafnir’s and Ogarrex’s support making the next few flow smoothly. “Helgoid, I have spent the last year working with a renowned Kalzait Doctor—”

She steps forward, placing her hands on my stomach, worry clear in her eyes. “Are you well? The healer said it has been a difficult pregnancy by human standards, but the kit is—”

I place my hand over hers, her eyes widening as the baby gives a little shove against our palms. “We are fine. More than fine, really, and so are Fafnir and Ogarrex because of the work we’ve been doing.”

It’s like someone clicks a button, flips some kind of switch, and I try not to take it personally as she withdraws her hands, glaring at Ogarrex. “You are war touched.” It’s an accusation.

He only nods, leaving me to explain.

Lovely.

Everything that leaves me next comes out a little too fast, a little too rushed in my breathless state, but my hands are shaking. My wholebody is tense and uncomfortable. It feels like someone is twisting a blade in my side. I do my best to ignore that. One train wreck at a time. “We, with his help, have been studying the effects and possible treatment of war madness—”

“You cannot treat war madness.” She cuts me off, taking a step back as if I’ve said something entirely ridiculous. I assume to her it is.

Dread builds deep in my gut, souring my breakfast. “But youcan. You’re looking at the evidence of that. Fafnir should be beyond reach by now. He is not because we have a treatment plan and it’s working for him. For themboth.It can work for others too. War madness is not a disease of the spirit or body, it’s an affliction of themind. Trauma brought on by war.”

“Stop.” She breathes.

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I don't, taking a step toward her and fuck the desperation shows in my voice. "Humans call it PTSD, but it goes by many names for many species. All can experience it, it's treatable. With the right doctor and therapy, it can vastly improve the quality of life for the person suffering. We think it destabilizes the berserker in your males, which is why it affects them so heavily."

"You think. There is no cure for war madness!" She booms, making me flinch, and the males behind me step forward, snarling.

She watches them closely, and I know what she sees there. Control. Golden untouched eyes.

"Dr. Univos is sure of it, but he needs more Bhaurnul males to test—"

She shakes her head, flustered. "No."

"You need to listen; we can save people. We can stop the hunts. No more males lost to wandering."

"I said no. It is impossible. I will not have my people be given false hope because some off world doctor thinks he can solve an issue that has decimated our numbers for generations!"

My entire body seems to bottom out, panic gnawing at my chest as I spin to my mate. "Help me Fafnir, she's not listening!"

The look he gives me makes my heart drop to the floor. Sympathy, longing, and on

Ogarrex... bitter resignation.

No.

No!

I storm to her, my hand gripping her wrist to keep her from leaving. “He is your son, and I am telling you I desire a better fate for mine!” My eyes widen a sharp, twisting pain blooms in my gut. I stagger, Helgoid’s cold, aged hands catching me as I gasp.

Oh god.

Not now.

Not fucking now.

Fafnir is at my back, trying to pull me away, but I shake him off. I don’t need his fretting right now. I’m panting as I regain my composure. “If there is even a chance, is it not their right to know? To choose for themselves?”

“Do you think others have not tried, Lenora? That I did not try to save my love from wandering, that I have not led my authority and reasons to be questioned in order to give more time to my son?”

“This can work. Ask either of them, they’re proof it can work! It may not be a cure, but it is a chance!”

“You must stop this, human you are—”

A ragged gasp tears from my throat as a wetness floods between my legs, running down them onto the floor.

My water.

My fucking water just broke.

My mate is there in a second, bellowing to Ogarrex to call for the healer and ensure the space shuttle is ready should we have to go off world quickly. I swat him, trying to get loose from his hold. “Let me go, I can’t do this yet! She’s not listening Fafnir!”

“Hush my mate, it will be—”

“If you tell me it will be fine, I will shear your antlers in your sleep!”

He gives me a panicked but endearing smile. How can he manage it right now? He’s so strong, so much stronger than me. I turn and struggle in his arms until I’m facing his mother again, tears budding in my eyes, but not the sad kind. I’m angry, so angry. “I will not have this baby until you agree to hold counsel with the other elders!”

She offers me an amused smile, her long animal hide dress dragging on the ground as she places both her hands on my face. It’s such a maternal gesture that my lip wobbles. “You do not have a choice.”

Fafnir laughs, but it’s a breathless sound. He keeps looking around, panicked, like there’s something more he should be doing. “I wouldn’t bet against her.” Helgoid notices, looking at him, listening to his laughter as if it’s a divine being that just stepped into the room with us. Like it’s the workings of a miracle, perhaps it is, but not the type given by gods. It’s the kind of miracle born from suffering, hope, and fucking work. “I am well within my mind. We have stores of data and proof of our claims. We have help.” I watch as he passes her a copied chip containing everything we’ve compiled so far. Files and files of video data, research, his, Ogarrex’s, and the doctor's testimony. I watch as she takes it, tucking it into the pocket of her dress.

“I might not have a choice, but you do.” I gasp through the next contraction.

The healer rushes in at that with Elat and a panicked wealth of Bhaurnuls on their heels.

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Helgoid gives me a slight nod, touching her antlers to the place where mine would be in a sign of respect and affection that makes a tear escape from my eye. “You have won this battle well enough, save your energy for the war ahead.”

It occurs to me then what this means for them. How terribly pregnancies affect their females. Most dying due to complications of childbirth in the end. They are every bit warriors in their own right. I can see her shudder in anticipation of what comes next. The worried look in my mate’s eyes settles into my chest, and for the first time since we started this, I’m afraid for myself.

Humans handle Bhaurnul births well.

That’s what I tell myself as I choke on my next contraction, my mate swinging me into his arms when my knees buckle. The healer barking orders and the throng of people follow us down the wide hall, my mate snarling at them to give me space as I’m ushered into a dimly lit, warm-toned room. For once, they aren’t glaring and shying away from him but rallying together with us until they’re shut outside.

“It’ll be okay, Sha’vria. You are stronger than even I could dream of becoming.”

I huff out a sob, my body ripping in two, but when I look down, I find it intact and wonder how that’s possible as the healer and Elat rush in, and I’m stripped of my clothes. They’re replaced with a soft, lightweight material that’s so pretty in any other situation I’d be remiss to soil it.

I’m about to have a baby.

I'm about to be amom.

Strange how that hasn't really occurred to me until now.

Fafnir

My mate's screams echo in the small room, her tiny hand gripping me with more strength than I thought possible. She seems to switch wildly from wanting my touch to all but snarling at me like an angry Sihlih when I give it to her. I am unsure which to do, so I wait for her to do one or the other and switch accordingly. My heart is beating harder than I ever thought possible, and for the first time in a long while, I feel my berserker at the front of my mind. He's unsettled from his rest, but he doesn't move for our skin. Still, I can barely resist the urge to snarl at the two females in the room when Lenora cries out, whimpering in pain.

"You are doing well. The kit is cresting, another big breath and push hard."

Emil translates for the healer, one of the few who have not fully embraced universal.

"I can't, I'm tired." Lenora pants before she sucks in a ragged breath and bares down hard doing it anyway. Her back is supported as she squats on the slightly raised bedding on the ground. Her scream shakes me to my core, the blood smeared on the bedding and her pale dress needling in my mind as I breathe deeper.

I have never known a fear like this.

If I lose her—

It will all be for nothing.

I cannot endure it.

She cries out, struggling to get her hand from mine to reach between her legs. She lets loose an exhausted little wail of happiness at whatever she feels there. It's enough to make my heart slam in my chest as she pushes again. The kit releases from her with a rush of fluid, and a loud, hardy cry. My eyes are wide on the babe as Elat whispers encouraging words to her, a huge smile on the female's face.

Elat faces me then, nodding with teary eyes. "A male."

My mate's hands shake as we help her lie back on her mound of pillows. She jerks down the top of her dress, baring her breasts as our kit is lain on her chest.

She sobs, looking at me with the world's prettiest hazel eyes. "He's so loud."

I laugh at that, but it's a shocked sound as I step closer, wanting like hell to hold our baby as she calls them, but feeling oddly undeserving of the sight of them in front of me.

I was lost.

What if I lose control?

What if it hurt them?

I watch, chest heaving, as the females leap into action, cleaning up around us. Lenora worries her bottom lip, fiddling with her breast, trying to navigate it into the kit's wailing mouth.

He is small, bloody, and has the rich honeyed color of his mother's skin with dark hair to match. The dirty smattering of fur and little soft hooves make my chest ache. They will harden into proper hooves as he grows older. It's the tiny nubs, his bludgeoning horns, that force me into action. I can no longer help it when I place my

hand over the top of his head, liquid filling my eyes.

It is alarming at first, before I realize I'm about to cry.

I huff at that, making the kit jerk a little. I silence myself immediately.

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The healer places a hand on the cord, testing to see if it's still pulsing before gesturing for me to sever it. A lump thickens in my throat as I bend my head, taking the length and nicking it with the tip of my horn. The look in my mate's eyes is my undoing. I go back to them, pressing kisses to them both before her eyes widen helplessly. "He won't latch."

The healer, an older female chuckles. "Give him a moment. He only just arrived."

I translate, kicking myself for not having noticed my mate's distress. Soon enough, Helgoid arrives. I watch her in a maternal light I barely recognize as she pinches the top of my mate's breast, helping her get our son to latch, he does.

The prideful, relieved smile Lenora gives me as she gestures for me to sit with them is like cold water on a festering burn.

"Our Hatheus," she announces, and my dam nearly stumbles to the ground next to us.

My mate came up with a cross between our sires' names. Mine, Hathorex, and hers, Thaddeus.

"It is a strong name for a strong boy." The elder remarks. She lingers for a while, ensuring my mate wants for nothing before leaving us alone. When she walks into the grand hall, the sound of cheering can be heard throughout the village.

We laugh at that.

"Do you want to hold him?"

I hesitate, my chest aching with how badly I want exactly that.

“You will not hurt him, Faf. Stop being silly and come here.”

I obey her, taking him like one would the webbing of a spider, wishing not to disrupt it.

“Support his neck.”

He is so tiny in my arms, fitting in just the palm of my hand. He is perfect, every bit as perfect as his mother. I decide then... Valhyr himself could not separate me from either of them.

thirty

Lenora

The next week is a flurry of activity, a few harsh learning curves, tons of black tar baby shit and exhausted, sleepless nights. I sit on the bed, slowly folding our freshly laundered clothes to put in our bags in the birthing room of the Halthara. Fafnir snores on the couch in the corner of the room, Hatheus snuggled in the crook of his enormous arm. I have not seen his mother since the day I gave birth, so, when a soft knock comes from the door, my anxiety spikes and my mate jerks. A snarl leaves his throat, his hooves crashing to the ground so loudly I wince before he settles, reassuring himself he hasn't dropped our son. I give him a raised brow and an annoyed look before my eyes widen on his mother, looking every bit as worn and tired as me.

The way she stares at the two of them with such love and pride nearly makes me forget about my greasy hair, the fact that I haven't changed my shirt in two days, and that I'm in need of a diaper change.

Okay, not quite a diaper, but close enough.

I look like a gross mess, but she doesn't seem to mind as she crosses further into the room. "You two are heading home today. I don't assume I can convince you to stay another week... just to be sure?"

I glance at Faf with a pleading look. I want to go home; it's great here, but I'm growing weary of the constant visitors. He shakes his head. "We live close enough to get to the healer, should any complications arise. Lenora and Hatheus have a clean bill of health."

There is a fat, lingering kind of silence that comes next. Neither of them moves, a stalemate of biblical proportions, until I can't take it any longer and clear my throat.

My giant speaks first. "You were away."

She was?

My head snaps between the two when Hatheus decides to fuss. When Helgoid steps forward, a silent request in her eyes, I nod at Fafnir to hand over our son. Which he does with the utmost care. It is quite endearing to see him as every bit the doting newborn father I suspected he would be. Ogarrex was confused by his continued presence after the birth. Even more so when Fafnir explained to him his duties as a mate did not end with his fated female. Ever the introspective type, the older male stood gruffly in the corner of the room for a while before leaving silently. He's returned a few times since to do the same. He's the only male that's been allowed back without my mate going half mad again. I think that says quite a bit, although they still both deny being even remotely fond of one another.

She turns to me, rocking and cooing at the baby.

Or kit, as they call him.

His tiny little tail makes to curl over her arm, and the older woman melts before my eyes, her true exhaustion showing as the remaining icy exterior fades away. “I held counsel with the village elders. It was received... not as horribly as I had hoped. Naturally, the females listened better than the males, but I was forthcoming with the tools and techniques outlined in your research, should they wish to partake in private.”

Tears well in my eyes as my heart pounds in my chest.

“When I returned, we held a meeting here as well... with all the information and the testimony from the doctor and Ogarrex, we have agreed it is unreasonable for Fafnir to be sent to wander. A few males even expressed interest to Ogarrex about receiving his help. It is assumed they will sign up for the doctor’s study.”

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:33 am*

My mate stands, his face cloaked with emotion before he schools it, thanking her with a resolute bow of his head. I, on the other hand, start blubbing like a madwoman. She sits beside me, letting me carry on as she dotes on Hatheus. For a moment, my heart breaks, wishing my mom could be here too, that my sisters could meet Fafnir and gawk at his enormous size and tickle my baby's feet.

When my thoughts turn toward Dad, I'm halted as his mother hands our Hatheus back to his father, kneeling before me on the ground. My eyes are wide, nose snotty, as she places her head to mine. "You have given me more than I can repay." She whispers the rest in their language, and I only catch bits and pieces, but one that rings amongst them is the word daughter. As she leaves the room, nodding her goodbyes, I'm sobbing all over again.

It's late into the night when we finally get home. When I step off the sled, my vagina definitely not ready for a ride on anything else, I head to the front of Val. He makes a mewling sound, one that sounds more threatening than he meant it. I know what he wants as I tug the side of the sling Hatheus rests in down, letting his giant nose inspect the bundle of fur and baby while I scratch under his chin. "This is your little brother. I expect you not to get him into loads of trouble or knock him over as you do me."

Fafnir sighs, hating how I baby his so-called war beast, but he can't hide his smile.

It's then that our child lets out an unholy, screeching cry. Valoryx rears back as if he's been slapped. Backtracking until the sled knocks loudly into Fafnir's equestrian style shins. Judging by the enraged look in his eyes and the growl that leaves his throat, that pain is universal. I pat Val, ensuring him he did nothing wrong before I'm

ushered inside.

A fond smile grows on my face to see that Elat has been here along with... dozens of others. Ensuring it's clean and stocked to the brim with food and gifts for the baby. A fire stands roaring in the hearth despite it being past the point where they consider one necessary. We're not more than a few steps inside when a shrill ringing echoes through the house. My mate tenses, reaching for one of the weapons on the wall before I roll my eyes, "It's my sat com, from the agency. In the bedroom, go, go! He just started calming!"

He rushes off loudly, not at all graceful, and when he returns, I find he's ignored the call. I glare at him. "Why did you do that?"

Fafnir, always looking, always watching, doesn't meet my eyes. His attention on our child slung to my chest as I bounce him. When he shifts, I realize he's scared I'll leave. My heart seems to pulse with affection for him as I step up, gesturing for him to lean down as the phone rings again. I let them wait, kissing him deeply, telling him with each pass of my lips that he has nothing to fear. Stupid giant male.

I answer the call, watching as the odd shaped Oozarian couple pops up. "Finally, you answer!"

"Yes, we were getting settled."

She truly looks at me then, her eyes widening with joy. "It was a successful match then. How brilliant! Look at that little Bhaurnul! It always amazes me how grotesque and oddly...cute the children always are. Dear, can you see it?"

Her mate's head takes up most of the holo, looking at my kid the way you would a child's art project, fondly, but with no understanding. "Yes, it's fine. Carry on, my darling, we're late for dinner."

My mate growls behind me.

“Lenora, your contract is up. Will you be staying on to nurse the kit, or shall we arrange for you to return to us?”

“I will be staying, permanently. We have mated.” I announce proudly, my smile dimming when hers turns knowing, making me wonder again about those other abilities Oozarians are said to possess.

“Very well. Fafnir, does this mean you will continue the regular payments to her family personally, or shall we act as a medium?”

My jaw drops, heart lurching to my throat as I turn to face him.

His eyes are stern, face unreadable. It is easy to forget him like this, what he truly was before I met him. “I will handle them.”

“Very well. Congratulations to both of you, should you require our services in the—”

“The message, my love.” Her mate chimes in.

“Oh yes, we just spoke with Melody Arnold, the girl I believe you arrived with. She wanted us to tell you she checked in on you and hoped you were well.”

A wealth of fondness fills me, and then a bit of guilt. I’d barely thought of Melody since I arrived. Everything has been overwhelming. “Oh wow, that’s great. Please tell her—”

“Oh yes, for the love of the fucking gods, I am coming.” She interrupts, rushing out a, “Best wishes, thank you for choosing the Solar Breeding Agency,” before she ends the com.

I'm sitting there in stunned silence for a moment before I turn back to Fafnir. "You kept sending them money... for how long? The dowry was more than enough."

"I started the second week you were here. We have more than we'll ever be able to spend, say nothing about it."

I smile at that. "I will say plenty about it. You are a kind male, and I am so glad to be yours." I grunt as I lift from the couch. He follows me into the bedroom where I lay a now sleeping Hatheus in his bassinet.

Fafnir's arms wrap around me from behind, his lips finding the top of my head. "Thank you, my Sha'vria. You have given me everything. A life indebted is the least I can do."

"Indebted, so dramatic." I tease, giggling as he lifts me into his arms, capturing my lips with a deep, resonant growl.

The End

Read further for the epilogue...

### Epilogue

Lenora, Five Years Later

As you can imagine, convincing an entire race of people that a terribly stigmatized “disease” that plagued them is not what they thought it was is a slow and unpopular process. We aren’t without our fair share of enemies, but we have a village or two to back us tirelessly. Oh, and the intergalactic alliance, which has offered funding to villages willing to enact aftercare protocols for their warriors. War contracts are still a thing, but in most places, slightly more relaxed. All in all...most males genuinely want to take part. Less stress means more winter matches. Which means more children and safer, more relaxed dams. There’s even been a mating or two since us!

Hatheus runs ahead into Vortara Space Station, his father grumbling out as I offer him a reassuring squeeze of my hand. While Fafnir’s war madness has long been under control, he’s still every bit the possessive and overprotective giant he always was. And still, it makes me feel needy in all the right places.

“Mema, Cammi, and Leelee!” Hatheus squeals, his tail making wild passes as his tiny hooves chomp at the metal ground.

My mom drops to her knees, smiling as the hefty toddler slams into her. Marci pouting and fussing playfully because she didn’t get the first hug. Cammi comes for me first, wrapping her arms around my neck.

“You cut your hair!” I cry out, gripping her nearly buzzed head in my hands.

“Yes, I know, isn’t it terrible?” Mom calls over as we approach, still being mauled by her grandson. It’s odd how different people can look despite seeing them once a month. The twins are nearly grown now, their eighteenth birthday only two weeks away.

“I love it,” I whisper in her ear, giving Mom a long-suffering look.

Marci comes for a hug next and Cammi leaves me to talk to my mate, who always seems to look terribly uncomfortable during our meetings. He’s loved as fiercely as myself and my sisters, but his people aren’t the affectionate kind. He’s fond of Cammi the most, the quiet and reserved one of us all. She’s been talking about moving to Yolmarth when she’s of age. With the number of human breeders being taken there now, I won’t lie if I say I don’t wish she’d stay away. Watching my baby sister bed down with a Bhaurnul male for the winter sounds about as thrilling as birthing my next kit from my ass.

We head down the path, Mom and Marci talk about their travels and how Marci is attempting to get her apprenticeship as a medical doctor in the coming years. The dowry combined with monthly support from my mate means she can live comfortably on her own and receive an education off-planet, not awarded to many humans.

My heart swells looking at them, tears springing to my eyes. Hatheus sees it first, coming over in the indoor garden to plop down on my lap, his furry legs wrapped around me. He smacks both my cheeks softly with slightly sticky palms, which means Leelee, aka his grandma, has been sneaking him sweets already. “Are these the happy kind of tears?”

I laugh, sniffing. “The happiest.”

“Loooooove you.” He sing-songs before giving me a wet kiss on the cheek and running off to look for Cammi, who has been dutifully hiding behind a tree for a

while now.

Fafnir grunts as he sits down beside me, knowing we're more accessories to our son these days. Which is fine by us both, considering my morning sickness is rougher than it was the first time and my libido tenfold. I had thought the idea of community raised children would bother me much more than it does, but it's actually incredibly nice. Most nights our son is home with us, but most days he's at the Halthara with the other children, running between aunt Elat and his grandma. Last year, she stepped down as elder to begin her final fading, where Bhaurnul's enter a point of heavy rest. She sleeps most days, but the warriors who accompany her, as is tradition, keep her company.

He doesn't understand yet, but I think he knows something is changing.

She leaves behind one hell of a legacy. Days after she nearly bled to death, bringing Fafnir into the world, her chosen mate had attacked her and a male who stepped in to help; he was sent out to wander immediately. She'd never stopped grieving him, still hasn't. She, along with the help of Ogarrex, our next elder in waiting, has stopped hunts altogether. Save for some of the more strict, smaller villages. They are working to make it into law, banning the practice entirely. Wandering is still a thing, but not in the way it was. It's seen as a voluntary retreat now, males sent to isolation with therapy and tools. War contracts are slowly becoming obsolete, off-world crafting making up for the revenue. They will always fight. The berserker is in their DNA. Something the Kalzait doctor can't quite figure out, calling it a matter of spirit, but the fighting is done voluntarily and with more careful selection.

Males are returning to their villages and returning whole.

I lean my head against Fafnir's chest, listening to the cadence of his heart while we watch our son play, a son who will have a future, a choice, a chance.

He'll stay this sweet boy a while longer.

Val is waiting for us when the shuttle lands. He paces around, excited to see his family after we spent all day away. Hatheus screams, his small, blunt horns waving back and forth as he runs from the shuttle, heading for his very large friend. The ends of children's horns are shaved for obvious safety reasons and will be sharpened to a point again when he is old enough to control the impulse to ram everything in sight. I'd nearly maimed Fafnir's mother when she'd done it the first time. If you'd have gone by our son's reaction, you'd have thought she was mutilating him.

Apparently, it is an odd sensation, but not a painful one. Unless you hit the inner core, which is nearly impossible to do unless that's your intention. Val dips low, letting Hatheus clamber atop him, where he quickly toddles off the other side, landing with a heavy thud in the grass. "I okay! Don't freak out!" He calls, making his father laugh.

I still check him over, as always, he's fine, but very irritated to be bothered with my fussing as I pluck a piece of grass from his dark wavy hair. Another thing about Bhaurnul children that I love is that they are made of tougher stuff and heal even quicker than adults. I can still hear my sisters' wails like mad when they were his age, having just bitten their tongue when eating. Our ride, as usual, starts with Hatheus's excited squeals as Val makes a show of jumping and leaping, zagging and spinning, trying to see if he can make his new favorite person laugh louder and make the newsecond-bestvomit.

I'm a little green in the face by the time we make it to the Halthara. Ogarrex lingers outside, waiting to take Hatheus to Elat's for the night. Where my son will be spoiled rotten and get away with most everything. After big kisses, I love yous, and goodnights, he trots away after the brooding older male who pretends not to wait up but slows his walk to match the toddlers. When our son reaches out, he offers him his finger. I linger for a few moments until I can no longer see him. He's safe as can be, I know that, but I get a tinge in my heart every time.

My mate, on the other hand, barely waits until we're back on his mount before his fingers and tail begin exploring every inch of my exposed flesh. I sigh into his musings, never able to get enough of him. We reach the house in record time, my eyes going to the empty nesting box. Lily is long gone to make a family of her own, but I refuse to let him move it. My mate demands my attention quickly enough, teeth, hands, and nails fighting one another as I'm shoved through the doorway.

I gasp, teetering off balance before his thick hand clasps around my waist, pulling me back to him. "I could've fallen."

"As if I would let that happen." His golden eyes are ravenous as I'm lifted, pressed into the wall above his head. It starts with a ripping of clothes, his warm breath on my inner thighs, and when his tongue hits me, I moan loudly, bucking into his mouth. My hands find their customary grip on his horns as I grind onto his tongue, loving the way it twists deep inside me. When he curls the end in a quick flicking motion, I see stars. My orgasm rips from me with a violence I was unprepared for. I slip down the wall, a yelp leaving me before he catches me, a hand gripping my chin, "Now, now, little mate, what did I just tell you?"

"Stupid male." I moan, needing to be stretched around him more than I need the air in my lungs. I'm panting wildly, desperate for it.

When my back hits the bed, I don't stay down. I watch on my hands and knees, displaying proudly the stretch marks he loves to trace along my stomach and thighs. His cocks jerk, the mating one already engorged and weeping. "Come pretty Lenora, show me where you want my cock."

A smirk fills my face as I turn, showing him my pulsing, soaked center. Flattening my chest on the bed, tilted just enough so that I can watch him devour me with darkened eyes. He strokes a hand down his mating cock, making it spurt cum that splatters the backs of my thighs. He crawls onto the bed, looming close like a

predator stalking his prey. I shove my hand between my thighs, spreading the lips of my cunt, showing him how badly I need him there. “Please.” I whimper, my cheeks and chest flushed.

*Source Creation Date: July 11, 2025, 6:34 am*

I watch his face as he palms the cum he left on my thighs, slicking the tip of his tail with it. Anticipation builds as the deft, flesh-colored appendage trails over my ass, painting me with his seed. My mate drapes himself over me, his hand coming out to tease my oversensitive nipples, making me buck. I'm panting, pushing back into him when the tip of his tail pushes past my tight hole. I cry out at the intrusion, seconds before his pleasure cock joins it.

He takes me then, no more teasing, only rough thrusts and biting kisses peppered across my back as he fucks me. "You like my tail in your ass, don't you, my perfect little human?"

"Yes." I moan as he swirls it around the rim. "F-fuck you need to—" he thrusts harder, cutting my words off in a gasp. "You need to stop. I'm going to come."

"Then come, come with my tail fucking your ass, Lenora."

He says it so matter-of-factly, filthy disgusting words, and I'm putty for it. I come hard, mewling and babbling my praises as the waves of pleasure rock me. I'm lost to it, to the way he worms his hand around to my clit, stringing out the unbearable pleasure. I'm ready, needing, and relaxed when his mating cock slips in mid-shaft. The uncomfortable fullness is everything, but he won't seat me further while I'm pregnant, even if it is early on. It took a lot of begging on my part and some very... uncomfortable conversations with the healer to get this. I'm speared, each breath only adding to the uncomfortable fullness as he palms his pleasure cock.

"Play with yourself." He orders, and he doesn't have to tell me twice.

It's a battle of divine restraint, staying still when all I want to do is rip, rock, and tug myself back on him until he's seated so far I can feel him in my gut.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes." I moan.

"So sweet, so perfect." He groans, shunting his hips just a little, making me whimper as he roars his climax. The warm pressure of his cum hitting me makes me cry into the sheets. I bare down, forcing him deeper in, only for a steel vice of a hand to band around the back of my neck. "Move again and I take my cock from you."

"No!"

"Then behave," he growls, but it's gritted and oh god another jet hits me and I'm mewling all over again, my lower belly tightening as another tendril of fire races through my core.

I come again, nearly blacking out as it whips through me. My mind is somewhere between sleep and nirvana when I'm gathered into Fafnir's arms. His back now resting against the headboard of the huge bed.

"Thank you," I whisper, half asleep.

"For what, my Sha'vria?"

"Doing the difficult thing. Thank you for giving us all of this."

I'm gone to the world before I hear his response, but I feel the kiss he leaves on my forehead, and I couldn't be more grateful for the day I collapsed in the hall, panicking in front of the Solar Breeding Agency.