



Ulfar (Intergalactic Surrogacy Agency #4)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: In less than a day, my simple life disappears and if I don't have an alien warlord's baby—everyone I know will suffer.

When strangers visit my home, I learn my life is a lie and my father isn't who I thought he was. To save us and our town from the powerful Syndicate, I agree to have an alien warlord's baby.

And then kidnap it.

Ulfar is nothing like I expected. Powerful, dangerous, rough. Gentle, caring, protective.

If I confess, I'll be sent to a prison planet and my father will die. If I leave, I'll break more than my own heart.

What do I choose? My past or my future?

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LIbrARY

SARAH

I finish tidying up the library, quietly appreciative of the fact that I can count on the regular patrons to be exactly that: regular. I find the regularity of their lives comforting, a reminder that there are things in life that one can rely on. With a contented smile, I begin to shelve the last few books, my eyes taking in the titles and covers without truly registering their contents.

When I finish, I notice that one of the tables at the back of the room has been left with a tablet still running. I walk over to turn it off, but my hand freezes when my eyes meet the image on the screen. It was a page from the Intergalactic Surrogacy Agency—the ISA, the matchmaking program pairing human women with alien males. My heart lurches as I remember the talk around town. A few women, some of my neighbors even, had left with the ISA. What would it have been like to have the courage to leave?

I close the tablet, feeling a twinge of sadness. I have never been one for adventure, always content with my life in my small town with my father. It's too dangerous for humans out there. My father's stories made that all too clear. I am safe here. Content. But a small part of me wonders if there's more out there. Something I'm missing, just beyond the clouds.

But no. That's ridiculous. I have a good life here, and that's enough. Besides, I could never leave my father. Not after all he's done for me.

As I perform the final checks and lock up the library for the night, the thought stays with me, lingering seductively in the back of my mind. What must it be like to be an alien's surrogate? The program pays incredibly well, and it's only for a year. My father and I would be set for life if I did that, and let's face it: He's not getting any younger. I'd be more able to care for him in his old age if I had money from the ISA.

It's a half-baked plan, and I know that, but I'd be lying if I said it didn't excite me a little bit. But as I close the door and step out into the cold night air, the brisk temperature hits me with a dose of reality. I can't just leave everything behind and go on some wild adventure. I have family here. Responsibilities. Purpose. This is my lot in life, whether I like it or not, and there's no changing that.

My father sacrificed so much to keep me safe, and to go against that would be like a slap in the face after all he's done for me. No, I'll stay. Keep to myself. Live my little librarian life. Be happy.

Or so I think.

Before long, not even the chill breeze can keep the idea from taking root in my mind. It's like a seed that's growing with each step, blossoming into a full-blown desire that's impossible to ignore.

Walking down the street to my house is something I've done hundreds of times before. Everything looks the same...except one thing. There's a transport parked in the cul-de-sac that's impossible to ignore, all sleek silver and strange markings that could only be from off-world. I frown as I move closer, wondering what a craft like that could be doing so far from the Hub. It's not out of the ordinary to see a courier or two ferrying goods back and forth, but this is bigger. Much bigger.

My house beckons, however, and I look away from the strange craft at the end of the road. It's weird, sure, but it doesn't affect me. I'm too tired from a long day at work

to pay it any mind, and I just want to go home, get a shower, and sleep.

My heart's pounding despite myself as I open the door and step inside, the interior darkened and quiet. Usually my father is up and waiting for me. He must have gone to bed early. As I put down my bag and hang up my coat, I hear a strange shuffling sound coming from the living room.

Holding my breath, I creep around the corner, not knowing what I'll find. The scene I find there takes my breath away.

My father stands in the center of the room, trembling, as the biggest alien I've ever seen towers over him, lifting him up by the collar until his feet dangle pitifully off the ground. He notices me, and his eyes, already bloodshot, widen further.

"Sarah! Get out of here! Run!" His choked voice rattles around in my head but does nothing to quell the rising panic. And then the monstrous creature turns on me.

He's huge, standing a good two feet taller than my father and nearly brushing the ceiling. And his immaculate black suit does nothing to hide the sheer physical power he radiates. His glittering black eyes zero in on mine and his gaping mouth curls into a savage grin before he drops my father to the ground.

The spell between us breaks and I turn tail, bolting for the door, but the creature is too fast. He slips between me and the exit easily, anticipating my dodge before I even do it. "No!" I scream, bringing my hands up to protect my face when he lunges, but it's too late. He wraps his huge arms around my waist and neck, leaving me struggling, squirming, like a fly caught in a web.

Prey.

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FAUSTIAN BARGAIN

SARAH

No matter how much I thrash against my captor, he holds me in a vise-like grip that leaves no wiggle room. I look with terror for my father, regaining his feet and throwing his hands up in surrender.

“What’s going on here?” I hear myself yell, but it doesn’t even sound like my own voice anymore.

My father’s on his knees now, practically in tears. I’ve never seen him so distraught. “I can explain, just don’t hurt her!”

The sound of footsteps on tile echoes from down the hallway, and then I hear an unfamiliar voice. A female voice.

A tall, severe-looking woman walks in, her piercing blue eyes scanning the room with a practiced indifference. She takes in the sight of my father on the ground and the hulking alien with his hands around my neck.

“Yes, Areo,” she purrs, “why don’t you explain to little Sarah here the deal you made so many years ago.”

“Deal? What deal? Who are you people?” I ask frantically, my voice shaking with fear. What had my father done? Who was this woman? And why did she know our names?

The female laughs. “You really didn’t tell her anything, did you, Areo?” She turns her ire on my father, who flinches away instinctively. “Turns out you’re just as pathetic as I thought.”

“What are you talking about? Dad?!” My heart thuds fearfully in my throat as I look to him for answers, but he just shakes his head in shame.

“Why don’t I help fill things in, then.” With a click of her heel, she rounds on me. “My name is Atraxia, and I’m here on behalf of the Syndicate. Surely you’ve heard of us?”

The Syndicate. I’ve only heard of them in hushed murmurs, so little and so secretly that I thought they were a myth.

But now, standing before me, is a woman who claims to be working for them. My mind races, trying to piece together what I know about the organization. The Syndicate is a shadowy entity that operates outside of the law, with tentacles that reach into every corner of the galaxy. They’re known for their immense wealth, but also for their ruthlessness, never hesitating to eliminate anyone who crosses them.

“What do you want with me?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

She folds her fingers together, leaning forward until we’re face to face. I don’t like how shiny her eyes are up close. How foreign . A faintly floral scent pours off of her, but it’s a sharp, artificial smell. “You see, your father took something that belonged to me. Something that I am willing to do anything to get back.”

“Y-you! Liar!” My father gasps, his face contorted in panic.

“Hm. Funny you would be the one to call me a liar, when it is your own lies that landed you this fate.”

“Don’t listen to her!”

Atraxia pulls away from me long enough to step between me and my father, looming over him just as she did to me. “What would Phuong think if she could see you now? Disgusting. How disappointed she would be.”

The name stops me in my tracks, tilting my world on its axis all over again. Phuong was my mother.

“How dare you speak of her.” My father quakes with rage.

“She failed to meet her end of the bargain too, didn’t she? And now she’s not here anymore. What makes you think you won’t meet the same fate?”

“Please!” My cries fall on deaf ears.

“Your father knew exactly what he was doing when he stole from us. Phuong knew that too. Now you must pay the price, just as she did.”

My breath catches in my throat. “What does that mean?” Nothing makes sense to me right now, but the only thing I can do is keep fighting.

“What it means,” she growls, “is that your father is a thief just like your mother was. He stole something of great value from the Syndicate, and he thought he’d get away with it. But he forgot one very important thing. The Syndicate always gets what’s theirs.”

I cast a frantic glance around the empty living room. We have nothing of value here—no jewelry, no family heirlooms. “What could he have possibly stolen?” I dare to ask. “We’re poor, or don’t you see that?”

Atraxia strides forward and kneels in front of me. She takes my chin in her hands, and her fingers feel like claws digging into my skin. Her words are cold when they finally come out: “What he stole... is you.”

“Your father, Areo, was once a guard at the Syndicate. In violation of his duties, he formed an attachment with a woman named Phuong—one of the prisoners he was meant to be guarding.” She pauses for a moment, her lip curling in disgust, before continuing. “They escaped together with you when you were just a child. Both of them knew that they’d pay dearly if we ever ran into them. And now you have to pay for their cowardice.”

“Don’t hurt her!” my father shouts from behind Atraxia. “You can take me instead, but please don’t hurt her!”

“Silence!” Atraxia barks. She flicks a hand in his direction, and something flies out from a bracer at her wrist, striking him in the chest. With a yelp he goes rigid, falling to his knees while the burly guard trains a blaster on his neck.

“No!” I scream, praying that it’s not too late. My mind whirls, trying to remember everything that I can about the Syndicate. “You like to make deals, right? Let’s talk. We can work something out. A deal of our own.”

“Oh?” She raises a brow, genuine surprise painting her features. “Maybe you’re not as dull as you look.”

“Don’t do it,” my father mutters. He’s hunched over in pain, but I am grateful that he is still alive. “They’ll trick you just like they tricked me. Just run—get out of here while you still can!”

“No.” My voice comes out surprisingly calm. The immediate panic and confusion fade away, in their place a resolute clarity rises. “You would gain nothing by taking

me. I know how your kind works. You want puppets. Lackeys you can control. That's why you want the babies, isn't it?"

"You know nothing about us," Atraxia spits, but the venom in her voice has noticeably lessened. "Where are you going to get a baby?"

My stomach churns, and I can't believe I'm about to say this, but the words tumble out of my mouth before I can help myself: "I'll join the ISA!"

She blinks, pauses. An eerie silence fills the chaos. "You'll what?"

The alien holding me lessens his grip and I wiggle free, stepping forward until we're face to face. "The Intergalactic Surrogacy Agency. They hire human women to serve as surrogates for alien males. I can sign up, go there. Have some alien's kid, and then when it comes due..." I cast my eyes downward. "It's yours."

"No!" my father shouts again. "Don't do it, Sarah! You don't know what you're getting yourself into!"

Atraxia groans. "Shut him up already."

The guard claps a hand over his mouth. I know I have to act fast if I want to prevent him from getting hurt any further. Atraxia returns to me, a faint muscle twitching on her forehead.

"Now what about this deal of yours? You will really go through the trouble of having a child through the ISA, just to bring it to us?"

"Yes," I pant, unable to meet her gaze. "Please, just let my father go."

"You will follow all the ISA protocols and meet a prearranged transport when you are

confirmed pregnant?”

“Think about it,” I beg. Because I don’t want to . “Those aliens that can afford a deal with the ISA are strong and powerful warlords. Alphas. They will produce a much stronger child than simply taking me will.” I hate how much it makes sense, but it’s my one chance to save both our skins.

“All right, I’ll admit you have a point.” She extends a gloved hand, and I take a deep breath, heart shuddering, before clasping it and sealing my fate. “Kelnar, take this one to the ship. Don’t hurt him, but we’ll need to keep him close by for insurance. And as for you, my little deal maker...” Atraxia leans in, placing a finger under my chin. I’m left staring up at her Cheshire-cat grin, a sickening feeling in the pit of my stomach. “You’re coming with us.”

Slowly, too quiet for anyone else to hear, she whispers in my ear when I draw close: “And if you so much as breathe a word of this to anyone, you will see what the Syndicate’s wrath really looks like.”

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GREATER GOOD

SARAH

With each stroke of my pen across the page, I feel my freedom slipping away. When I saw the ISA screens at the library, the last thing I expected was to be signing up like this.

The fine print about signing up under false pretenses haunts me. They make it clear in no uncertain terms just what will happen if I'm found to be lying. They also lay out terms and conditions concerning the health and safety of the baby, and what would happen if I were to leave with the baby without the father's consent...

I feel trapped, more like a prisoner than a volunteer. But I know that I have no other choice. My father's life is on the line, and I would do anything to save him.

The thought of the Syndicate getting their hands on a defenseless child makes me sick with worry, but I'm hoping that it will buy me enough time to come up with a plan. Right now I need to stall until I can figure out a way out of this mess. But right now, I have to go through the motions and hope no one finds out.

I'm standing in line at the intake center for the Intergalactic Surrogacy Agency waiting to get my shots. All the pamphlets list out any number of side effects I might experience, and I've heard that the women go through something called a 'heat' when they're most fertile, but honestly I skimmed over most of it.

The less I know about the process, and the less I know about my baby, the better.

That's what I tell myself anyway. If I can look at this as purely a business transaction and not let any feelings get in the way, then I can finish the job and secure a future for both my father and me. If I don't...

I shiver, thinking of the prison planet Crys, stuck in an eternal winter. I can't go there. I won't.

"Miss Sarah Eriksson. Please come forward." I perk up at the sound of my name. A nurse stands there, beckoning me into the back while other girls sit in a waiting area. Taking a deep breath, I step forward, knowing it's just the first of many steps on the way to my freedom.

* * *

My head feels like it's trying to detach from my neck and float into space. Every spot on my body tingles and aches and burns. On top of it all is a gnawing emptiness that threatens to consume me whole.

It's uncomfortable, but the emotions are nothing I can't handle. If this is the worst of the 'heat' they speak of, maybe this ISA thing won't be so bad.

I'm sitting in the waiting area for the allotted amount of time while they check if I've had a reaction to the omega serum, but all I want to do right now is go home and bury myself in bed.

Preferably naked, and with a huge cock splitting me open...

Wait, what?

The chair next to me creaks; I snap to attention. While most of the women in the waiting room with me are some sort of gleeful, proud, or excited, my new seat

neighbor's the only other one that looks less than thrilled.

"So what are you in for?" she asks gruffly without looking at me. Makes it sound like a prison sentence, and I guess in some ways it is.

"I—" I can't tell her the truth. Instead, I make up a hastily constructed set of half-truths. "Got a debt to pay off. ISA offers more than my job ever will. That's about it."

"I hear that. Lotta girls join for the money and end up falling in love, but that's not gonna be me. No, I'm just here to serve my time and get out. Ain't no man gonna hold me down."

Her bluntness is a welcome respite from the formal paperwork and speeches of the center. Realizing she could be a valuable ally, I stick out my hand in greeting. "I'm Sarah."

She takes my hand and shakes it in an almost bone-crushing grip. "Veronica. But you can just call me Vi."

"Vi," I repeat. "Nice to meet you."

She sighs, leaning back in the chair. "Will be nicer once this whole racket is done and over with. I never asked to be here, but I didn't have much of a choice."

"Neither did I," I admit. "What happened? If you don't mind me asking."

"Got caught fighting one too many times, and where I'm from, they don't take kindly to girls fighting. Or doing anything other than being good little baby factories, apparently." She rolls her eyes. "Stupid podunk planet. Glad I'm going to be getting away from there, at least."

And here I'd thought the other planets were more progressive, not less. A momentary stab of fear strikes through me. What if the alien I'm matched with is an arrogant misogynist? How does their race feel about women and about childbearing in general? Am I walking right into the lion's den by doing this?

"On my planet, if you don't obey you get sent to institutional centers for 'reprogramming.'" She shivers, even her steely facade broken. "I wasn't about to do that, so they gave me one last chance to prove myself." A sad, resigned chuckle. "So here I am. I'd rather bang an alien than get my brain wiped any day."

We're quiet for a few minutes as I think about everything that's happened. Vi seems crude and confident. More so than I could ever be. But despite it all, I feel a kinship with her for reasons I can't explain. Maybe it's because we're both here essentially against our will, but I feel like she's someone I can trust.

And when the time comes, I could use some brawn on my side to get off the planet.

"You want something to drink?" Vi nods to the outdated water cooler over in the corner. "Who knows how long they're gonna keep us here?"

"Sure," I mutter, still staring off into space.

When Vi pushes a cup of water into my hands, she raises hers in a mock toast. "For the greater good," she says with no small amount of sarcasm.

I snort and tap her glass with mine. "For the greater good."

Whatever that means.

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OATH TO THE GODS

ULFAR

To be honest, I never thought it would happen to me. Finding surrogates and even heart-mates was something that happened to other people. Not me.

That suited me just fine, though. I was content to watch my comrades match with beautiful human women and fall head over heels in love. I always said I would never lose my head over the whole alpha/omega thing the way the others seemed to. I knew how to keep my cool and get the job done.

And then I got a last-minute match from the Intergalactic Surrogacy Agency and everything turned upside down.

I'm pacing the luxurious cottage they've assigned me to, running a hand through my beard and trying to slow the racing of my heart. I'm more jittery than on my first raid, and for what? A human woman?

The entire day's been an endless parade of nerves, if I'm being honest. I woke up with a knot in my stomach and threw myself straight into training, hoping to keep the butterflies at bay. Even the grueling workout couldn't stop the buzzing in my mind, and I barely had enough time to bathe and change clothes before setting off for the facility.

They'd assigned me a translator, a cabin number, and two comms we could use to contact one another or the center. And now I'm here, waiting for my match to arrive.

I've spent my life in the military. I know how to handle myself. I can fight. I can fuck. So why am I so worried?

Maybe because she could be the one.

A little voice in my heart echoes through the silence. It's a small, foolish speck of hope with no basis in reality, but it won't go away. I try to base my decisions on rationality and logic, but love? Relationships? Finding a heart-mate, even? There's never any clear answer, and that makes me nervous.

But when I read her profile and saw that we were a 99% genetic match, something inside me wondered if this was a sign from the gods, after all. That it's finally my turn for a happily ever after.

"Foolish," I mutter aloud. "Delusional and unrealistic!"

The sound of the door hissing open startles my distracted fight-or-flight response, and I whirl toward the opening, drawing my weapon, when I see...

Her.

Oh, dust.

No sooner do I see the beautiful creature standing in the doorway than I feel a shock like lightning travel down my spine and ending all the way at the tips of my toes.

She looks so different from the women I'm used to here on Aesirheim. She's smaller, for one. But her full lips and ample curves more than make up for it. Her long, dark hair falls in graceful waves over her shoulders, reflecting the last rays of sunlight. Her skin is soft and smooth, making me want to caress every inch of her to find out if it's as velvety as it looks.

Too bad she looks scared out of her wits.

Before I can stop her, she shrieks and hides behind the spindly alien woman joining her.

The woman holds out a pale three-fingered hand. “Stand down, Ulfar. Now.” She doesn’t need to raise her voice. Her steely tone is enough to knock sense back into me, but it’s almost too late.

My beautiful mate is already terrified of me. Great first impression. With a sheepish expression, I sheathe my weapon as fast as I can and hold up both my hands in what I hope is a peaceful gesture. “My apologies. You simply startled me, that’s all.”

The human woman peeks out from behind the alien, her wide brown eyes fixed on me. I can see the fear etched onto her features, and it tugs at something deep inside me. The feeling of protectiveness, of wanting to shield her from any harm that might come her way.

I can’t deny there’s something else there, too. A primal need that’s drawing me in like a moth to a flame. Wanting to take advantage of her vulnerability and claim her right then and there. My cock twitches in my pants at the thought, but I’m a bigger man than that. I signed up; I gave my word. I’ll do this right.

“It’s okay, Sarah,” the alien woman says, her voice gentle. “He won’t harm you. And he’s your match.”

I watch as the human woman—Sarah—looks up at the alien woman, then she looks back at me. Her expression is hard to read, but I can sense the wariness emanating from her. Little by little, her pose softens, and she steps over the threshold. Her delicious lips part ever so slightly as she cranes her neck to look up at me.

“I’m sorry,” she finally says, her voice a soft whisper. “I just wasn’t expecting...this.”

I nod, trying to keep my own voice steady. “I understand. It can be overwhelming.”

The alien woman steps aside, and Sarah steps forward, slowly. I can see the way her eyes rove over me, taking in every detail, and I can’t help but feel a surge of self-consciousness.

What if she doesn’t like me? What if she doesn’t want to be with me?

But as she gets closer, I can see the way her breath hitches, the way her pupils dilate. I can smell the sweetness of her from here, so it’s taking every bit of willpower I have not to pull her close and make her mine.

Thank the gods she doesn’t run. If she did, I’d have to chase her down, and I hate how much the idea makes my dick throb. What is happening to me?

“Will you be all right?” the alien woman asks. “Remember, you can press the panic button on your communicator if you ever feel unsafe.” She levels a withering glance at me that makes it clear who’s in charge here.

Sarah peels her gaze away from mine for long enough to turn and embrace her companion. “Thank you,” she says softly, though I can hear the veil of tears even from here. “I’ll be all right.”

“Good. We’ll be checking in,” she reminds her, though it’s probably more for me. And with a final ‘I’m watching you’ glare from the alien, the door swishes closed and I’m alone with my match at last.

I clear my throat, trying to break the awkward silence between us. “Would you like to sit down?”

Sarah nods, and I lead her over to the plush couches. We sit down side by side, and I can feel the tension in the air. It's palpable, thick enough to cut with a knife.

"I'm Ulfar," I say, extending my hand in greeting.

Sarah hesitates for a moment before taking my hand. Her skin is soft and warm, and I can't help but hold on just a little bit longer than necessary. My heart leaps in my chest at the feeling, screaming with unfathomable triumph. Like this is right. Like this is where I'm supposed to be.

"Sarah," she says, her voice barely above a whisper. I know I've started things off on the wrong foot, and now I'm drawing a blank on how to recover.

I can't help but feel a little hurt that she doesn't seem excited to meet me. I know this is a weird situation, but I thought we'd at least have some common ground. We're both here for the same reason, after all.

"I know this is all really sudden," I say, searching for something to say that will break the ice. "But I want you to know that I'm committed to making this work. I know it won't be easy, but I'm willing to put in the effort if you are."

She looks up at me again, and this time her gaze lingers. "I'm willing," she says quietly.

I lean in closer, slowly, and she doesn't move away. I let out a breath. One step at a time. "Then why don't I show you around your new home?"

It's not much, but it's a start. And I swear to all the gods I know that I'm not going to screw this up.

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SURRENDERING TO THE HEAT

SARAH

EARLIER

The shuttle is more luxurious than a private jet, with plush seating and a full buffet for each of the surrogates on board. The ladies chatter and talk among themselves, the excited tension in the air only building the closer we get to Aesirheim.

I stare out the window, trying to ignore the burning feeling in my gut. They said this would happen, but it still doesn't make it any easier.

Vi got scheduled for the next shuttle, so we didn't even get to ride together. We're far from friends, but she's the only one I've talked to even a little bit during this whole ordeal. Being around her makes me feel almost normal. As 'normal' as this whole situation can be.

But now here I am, alone and fighting these strange, primal urges I can't explain...

I've never been one for large parties or loud celebrations. Not then, not now. And the closer we get to Aesirheim and my inevitable fate, the more nervous I feel. While the rest of the passengers are practically having a bachelorette party on the shuttle, I'm holed up in the back, trying to ignore the flood of hormones and get a moment's peace.

Books have been my refuge for as long as I can remember. So I'm on my tablet

looking up everything I can about this strange species before we're face to face.

The more I read, the more I realize I might be in over my head. I learn that they are a warrior race; fierce and proud, with a powerful army at their command. Their strongest soldiers—or warlords, as they're called—underwent special treatment and saved the planet from a war long ago. That's why they need us, apparently. The treatment caused fertility issues among their own kind, but with a close enough genetic match...

Enter the Intergalactic Surrogacy Agency.

Enter me.

I can't help but feel a little intimidated by the thought of being paired with one of these warriors. I'm just a librarian—what could I possibly offer someone like Ulfar?

A womb, for starters.

My stomach twists at the knowledge of what I'm going to have to do. No matter how glamorous the agency makes it sound, I won't be following their rules. This baby won't be mine, and it won't be his. I'll never see it again.

I won't just be depriving myself of a child, but their people as well. Is it really all worth it?

I squeeze my eyes shut against the tears beginning to form. It doesn't matter. I have to see this through.

I don't have a choice.

* * *

At the cottage...

“And, uh, this is where you will sleep.” Ulfar’s scattered, unsure voice is nothing like the hardened warriors I read about on my tablet. Maybe they aren’t all like that.

Or maybe I made things totally weird by nearly bolting at the sight of him.

We continue the awkward dance, neither of us wanting to step on the other’s toes. Part of me—a secret part I haven’t acknowledged yet—almost wishes he would.

Because despite my hesitance, I can’t deny the intense chemistry between us. He’s a warrior in every sense of the word; strong and muscular with a deep voice that stirs something deep inside me. But there’s also a gentleness to him that’s impossible not to notice. It’s like something beneath all that steel is begging to be released; I want nothing more than to be the one who unlocks it.

The only thing stopping me is my own fear. What if this goes wrong? What if I get too attached? What if someone finds out my plan? I gulp. And what if the Syndicate doesn’t uphold their part of the bargain?

If I get caught, that’s it. I’m going to live out my days on the coldest prison planet in the system, and not even the Syndicate will lift a finger to help me.

But I can’t think about that now. I have to focus on survival. One day and one step at a time.

Which means I may as well get this over with as soon as possible, for both our sakes.

I give him what I hope is a seductive glance and step closer to the bed, focusing on the feel of my shirt beneath my fingertips. My heart pounds as I slowly strip off my clothes.

My brain tries to compartmentalize it all and wants to remain as clinical as possible, but my body's having none of it. Once the air hits my bare skin, goosebumps rise and I shiver despite myself, a wave of unmistakable pleasure coursing down my spine.

I'm acutely aware of Ulfar's gaze on me, even though his face betrays nothing. I can't help but feel inadequate and inexperienced. I've never done anything like this before. As I drop the last article, I instinctively close in on myself, trying to cover my skin with my hands and avoiding his gaze.

It's a strange mixture of shame and arousal, but it only sends me higher. Makes me want him more. I'm practically panting with it, my pussy clenching against nothing as wetness seeps between my legs.

I look up to see Ulfar watching me with that same intensity, his eyes dark and smoldering. He takes a step forward, his hand reaching out to cup my chin and lift my gaze to his. His free hand takes my other arm and gently pulls it away from my body, baring me completely.

"You are beautiful," he says, his voice low and husky. "And you do not need to hide from me."

"I..." I stammer, but the words won't come out. "I've never done this before." Blush floods my face and my heart pounds in my ears. He's surely bedded dozens of women. I must seem like a clueless amateur in his eyes.

"Shh," he coos, wrapping his arms around me. As I melt into his embrace, the rest of my world fades away; I give myself over to the heat at last.

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FIRST TASTE OF HONEY

ULFAR

I can't believe my luck. Almost don't want to. This beautiful human has never lain with a mate? It almost seems impossible. But here she is, trembling in my arms as I hold her close.

I can feel her heart racing against my chest, her body shivering with anticipation. As much as I want to take her, to claim her as mine, I know I have to be gentle. She's not like the other females on my planet who come to us willingly, eager to please.

She's scared.

I run my hand up and down her back, feeling the goosebumps rise under my touch. "It is all right," I whisper, my lips brushing her ear. "I will take care of you."

Because that's what she needs right now. A strong yet tender man who will guide her through the pleasures of her body. A man who will show her the beauty of submission.

After scaring her earlier, she needs to know that she can trust me. And I might be an alpha, but I would never force myself on a woman who didn't want it. I need to warm her up first. Get her to accept and understand these new sensations flowing through her body.

But I am in no rush. We have all night.

She looks up at me with a shy, hesitant expression. I can tell she's still trying to decide whether to bolt or not.

"That's right," I say softly. "You lead the way."

Relief washes over her face and she takes my hand, leading me to the bed. We stand there, facing each other in silence for a few moments before I finally break it.

"Take off my clothes," I order. There's an underlying tone of dominance in my voice that I can't quite hide. She blushes, her eyes widening slightly as if surprised at my request.

But then something else passes in her expression—a flicker of interest, of arousal—and I know she feels it too. She takes a step forward and slowly begins to unbutton my shirt, her hands trembling slightly as she does so.

I stand still and let her have control, watching as her cheeks flush pink from her efforts. When I'm finally bare-chested, she pauses and looks up at me with those beautiful eyes of hers. That same spark is there again—the one that tells me her body is responding to mine in ways neither of us expected—and for a moment the air between us hums with electricity.

"Good girl," I mutter, one hand brushing through her soft locks as I gently push her onto the bed. The way she's looking up at me with those full, parted lips nearly makes me bust on the spot. "Now my pants, too."

She bites her bottom lip but doesn't hesitate, reaching for the clasp on my pants and unzipping them slowly. My cock springs free, already hard and ready for her, and she gasps at the sight of it.

"It's all right," I tell her, my voice low and reassuring. "Just touch it. See how it

feels.“

Her hand hesitates for a moment before finally reaching out to take me in her grasp. Her fingers are soft and tentative at first, but as she gets more confident, her grip tightens, making me groan with pleasure.

“That’s it,” I growl, watching her face as she explores my body. “You’re doing so well.”

Sarah glances up at me, expectant, as if she wants me to say more, and all I can do is smile.

“Good girl,” I repeat softly, my cock twitching in her hand. “Lie back now.”

Her eyes are full of questions and wonder but she doesn’t hesitate, scooting back to stretch out on the soft, fluffy blankets.

“Like this?” she says breathlessly.

“Just like that,” I growl, taking my cock in hand as I crawl on top of her.

She squirms a bit but stills when she meets my eyes. Everything about her screams submission in the most carnal, delicious way. This has to be a gift from the universe.

With a slow breath that washes over her neck, I press my lips against her earlobe. My voice rumbles low in her ear. “Ready to feel what it’s like to be devoured by an alpha?”

She swallows hard, eyes blazing. “Yes. Please. I’m so hot...I’m burning up.” Her eyes brim with tears as she clings to my body, unwilling to let go. “Ulfar...”

The sound of my name on her lips is almost my undoing. But a good alpha always makes sure his female comes first. So I delve into the soft flesh of her neck, licking and kissing at the sensitive skin there and reveling in the shiver that passes through her small body.

“It’s okay,” I reassure her, moving down from her neck to the swell of her breasts. I take one in hand, rolling the stiff bud between my fingers while I suck the other into my mouth, flicking it with my tongue. Sarah arches her back, a soft groan escaping her parted lips. It’s music to my ears. I can’t wait to hear what kind of sounds she’ll make once I fill her with my seed.

Still massaging one breast in my hand, I move lower, nipping at the soft curves of her stomach and hips. Sarah’s mewling and trembling beneath me; we haven’t even gotten to the main event. The females of Aesirheim were never like this. Never so sensitive, so responsive to every touch. It lights a fire deep within me that I don’t think will ever go out.

And I don’t want it to.

I want to explore every inch of this beautiful human, to memorize her and make her mine forever. But even I know that’s too good to be true. She might not be mine, but for the next year? I’ll give her something to remember me by.

With that thought in mind, I move lower, trailing my tongue over her most intimate places until I reach the apex of her thighs. Her skin is slick with need; my mouth waters just thinking of how sweet she must taste.

And there it is: her swollen, untouched cunt, bared to my eyes and my eyes only. When I plant a soft kiss on her inner thigh, her breathing hitches in her throat.

“Don’t be afraid,” I whisper. “Your body wants this. Just let go. Feel it coursing

through you.”

She’s still a bundle of nerves, but I can tell the more I touch and taste her, the more she’s able to let go. And when she comes apart at last, it will be with my name on her lips.

Her cunt glistens with arousal, seeping onto the sheets and marking her thighs every time she tries to close her legs. This human is so much wetter than any alien female I’ve ever seen before, and it makes me want to feast upon every drop of her honey until there’s nothing left.

That’s when I realize—this is the fabled omega slick that makes her ready to accept me. That calls to me like a siren song and makes me want to coat her in my cum.

Unable to wait any longer, I bury my face in her cunt, ravaging her soft flesh with my tongue. The reaction is instantaneous as her body tenses and bucks up against me, a strangled cry torn free from her throat. My cock twitches, throbbing hard and fast while liquid beads up at the tip. It won’t be long now.

Tasting Sarah is like the first sip of water after a long field mission on a desert planet. It’s so crisp, so refreshing that I don’t know how I ever went without it. She pings all of my senses, lighting up every cell in my body in the knowledge that yes , this is right, this is her .

The effect Sarah’s pleasure has on me is incredible, and it only intensifies when I focus on her clit. With a few more strokes of my tongue, she starts to quiver and I can feel her pussy start to clench around me.

And then it happens. With a stifled cry, she comes apart in my mouth, shattering around me and filling the air with cries of pleasure. Her orgasm seems to go on forever, waves of bliss radiating out from her body as I lap up every last drop of her

sweet nectar.

When it finally ends, she's left panting and shaking with residual pleasure. She turns toward me with glazed eyes, barely able to keep them open as she smiles blissfully at me.

"Ulfar..." she moans. "That was..."

"You did so well," I say, pressing a kiss to her forehead. "So good for me. Are you feeling all right? Are you ready for more?"

Her eyes widen, and instead of the fear I saw before, now there's only desire. "More?"

"So much more than you can imagine."

Her voice is still hazy, body supple and relaxed after her orgasm. "You're going to..." She trails off, blushing.

"I'm going to fuck you now. I'm going to breed you, Sarah. I'm going to cum inside you until I've planted my seed deep inside your womb."

She sucks in a breath at that, lips parted in silent question. She's waiting for my next move, and I give it to her. With my hand I slide the head of my leaking cock over her clit and across her pussy lips, teasing her with a preview of things to come. She's still so tight and so small. I have to remember to be gentle, but when her hormones are lighting up every primal desire I have, it's not going to be easy...

But it's going to be worth it.

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HILT

SARAH

I 'm on fire. That's the only word for it. Every nerve is frayed. Every cell aches for something, anything to make it better. I thought I had an idea of what to expect from the brochures and the informational sessions. From all the books.

I was dead wrong. Nothing could have prepared me for this. The yearning. The aching. The desire.

And most of all, the heat .

I've never been more wet in my life. Or more desperate for a man to fuck me. So when his huge cock brushes against my innermost folds, I'm nearly in tears.

"Please," I whimper, knowing how desperate I sound but too far gone to care. "I can't wait anymore."

His cock prods at me again, parting my folds one agonizing inch at a time. All the while, his eyes never leave mine. "Relax." His voice is calm but commanding, an anchor in the storm. "Open up for me, Sarah. Relax and just feel. You can take it; I know you can."

I let out a shaky breath, trying to let my muscles soften as much as I can. He's so big, and I've never lain with a human male, let alone an alien.

But he says I can do it. There's something about his presence that makes me feel safer. Calmer. Like maybe I really was made for this after all.

Inch after inch, his cock sinks farther into my slick depths. My walls cry out in momentary pain, stretched beyond belief, but seconds later comes an even stronger pleasure. I can't believe it. My body's actually adapting to take him. My cunt aches and throbs and yet it's clenching and contracting, trying to pull him in farther and keep him there forever.

With a slow but steady pressure, he fills me up until I swear I can't take anymore, and even beyond that. Impossible moments later, he bottoms out, his hips flush against mine.

I let out the breath I've been holding and sink into the sensation, giving myself to him completely. I'm full. I'm stretched. I'm stuffed to bursting with his cock. And it feels so good that I never want it to end.

"Sarah," Ulfar groans my name like a prayer, sweat beading up on his forehead as he looms over me. "Fuck, you're tight..."

"Ulfar..." I grit out between clenched teeth. "It's so much, so good..." I throw my head back into the pillows and shudder, a moan echoing to the ceiling.

"I'm going to start moving now," he says, leaning down to nip at my earlobe. "Hold on."

And move he does. The slow, slick thrusts soon turn quicker and more desperate, touching every secret spot I didn't know I had. Every thrust feels more intense, more all-consuming than the last. When he plows in to the hilt, holding himself there with a howl that's more beast than man, I cling to him for dear life.

“Don’t stop,” I groan, hardly even recognizing the primal sound coming from my throat.

“Don’t worry,” he pants, his face a mask of pure rapture. “There’s more where that came from. I’m going to fill you up all night, Sarah. Breed you so full you can’t hold anymore, til you’re wet and leaking my cum all over the sheets...”

His arms wrap around me and his massive body blankets mine, pinning me to the bed beneath him.

“Let go, Sarah. Let go and feel all of me!”

The primal words hit me like a shockwave, and I lose all control. With a long, keening cry, pleasure floods my body and I’m racked with spasms of bliss. Some distant part of my brain registers the warm splashes of his cum filling me one after another after another. It’s a seemingly endless tide, rippling through my body. Before I know it, my body starts to relax, muscles going limp as I drift into pleasant oblivion.

* * *

I wake up, drowsy and spent, and it takes me a few moments to reassess my surroundings.

Right. I’m in a luxurious mating cottage. I just had the best sex of my life with an alien warlord. I think that he has ruined me for anybody else. And he’s going to breed me with his child.

My belly twinges at the thought and I sit up, wincing with the soreness in my muscles. The burning, throbbing sensation of my heat has died down, but it’s not gone completely. In its place is a subtle, comfortable warmth that feels almost like being drunk.

Memories of the eventful night wash through my mind. The sheer rapture I felt as my back arched and I came apart around him. The stretch and pressure of his huge alpha cock. And of course, the waves of hot cum coating me from the inside out.

To be honest, I didn't expect to enjoy it as much as I did. I went into the evening with a poker face, determined to simply spread my legs and get the job done. But when he loomed over me and looked at me like I was not just a prize to be won, but a woman , I wanted to do whatever he asked.

It's embarrassing to think about. I've never been one to be so easily swayed by a pretty face. I had my comfy life and my job and my books and that was enough for me. Until I met him.

It has to be the hormones from the injection they gave me, right? Is the omega heat messing with my mind? Because the alternative—that I might actually fall for this man—is so much more shameful.

It feels so good. So natural. So right .

Too bad it's all a ruse.

The guilt weighs heavy like a stone on my chest as I slip out of bed and into the bathroom. It almost feels like a sin to clean the dried, sticky mess from between my legs, but I know I have to.

If he finds out why I'm really here, I don't want to think about what he'll do. He's a fierce alpha warlord, and I'm not sure even the ISA could save me if he felt his young could be threatened.

Shivering, I clean up as best I can and try to focus. I might have made it through the first night, but my heat's not over yet. There will still be more to come...

In more ways than one.

My mind wanders; I wonder how Vi must be doing. Unlike me, she was looking forward to the sex fest that the heat would bring. I can only hope that her assigned mate treats her half as well as mine has.

Speaking of which...

“There you are.” Ulfar’s voice comes from the doorway and I turn around to see him standing there with a blanket in his arms. “I was afraid you had gotten cold feet and run off.”

My heart pounds once, fearfully. There’s no way he could know yet. I have to keep my cool. So I school away my panic and give him the most genuine smile I can. It’s not hard when he’s looking at me like I’m the most precious treasure in the world.

I could get used to that. Too bad I won’t be able to.

“You were shivering in your sleep,” he says simply, holding out the blanket. “So I went to fetch this for you. Are you coming back to bed?”

My clit throbs at his words, all the barely suppressed instincts rising to the surface all over again. I feel my face getting hot, and even though my mind is firing off alarm bells, his presence is too strong to ignore.

I don’t just want him. I need him. Need to rub against his legs, wrap my limbs around his body. I want to be entangled with him, intertwined so deep there’s no telling where he ends and I begin. I want to purr and nuzzle and fall asleep in his arms.

And I want his cock filling me up again and again, to feel that orgasmic bliss as he effortlessly sends me over the edge...

Yeah. There's no doubt about it. I'm down bad.

"Come here," he says again, extending a hand. "You expended a lot of energy back there. You need your rest."

I take his hand and follow him back to the bedroom, trying to keep the whine from my voice. The last thing I want to do right now is rest. I want him in me, on me, all over me until I can't think straight anymore. I want his cum, his pleasure, his shouts of ecstasy.

I still have enough presence of mind to be ashamed of my body's response, but it doesn't quell the aching need that only builds the longer I'm next to him. He gets me laid down and covered with the blanket, then climbs into bed next to me and places a protective arm over my torso.

His weight and warmth holding me have a calming effect, stilling some of my racing thoughts but encouraging other, even darker fantasies. I'm this close to whimpering and rubbing my ass against his crotch in search of relief when he speaks again.

"You must be hungry. You'll need to eat to keep your strength up. And to give your baby all the nourishment it needs to grow."

There's that word again. Baby. The one I'm going to be essentially kidnapping away from him.

I laugh it off, hoping he won't notice the tremor in my voice. "But I'm not even pregnant yet."

A low chuckle. "Is that a challenge?"

I know I'm not supposed to be getting attached, but when he says things like that? All

bets are off.

“Maybe I want it to be,” I murmur, unable to hold off the lust clouding my thoughts any longer.

“Then I’ll make you a deal,” he purrs in my ear. The warm timbre of his voice sends shivers down my spine, and I involuntarily buck against him, my ass brushing against his already hardening cock. “First we eat, then we fuck. Deal?”

Well, when he puts it like that...

“Deal.”

* * *

“How did you know this was my favorite?” I open wide as he spoons another mouthful of the strawberry tart into my mouth. It’s sweet and tart and perfectly flaky, melting in my mouth with each bite. I admit I had my reservations about what food would be like here on Aesirheim, but it turns out those fears were unfounded. With their replicator technology, turns out they can ‘order in’ all my favorite foods from Earth. And not just any foods—only the freshest, highest-quality meals that make me feel like I’m dining at a five-star restaurant every time.

“Just a hunch,” Ulfar says with a smile. “I’m glad I was right.”

“It’s so good,” I croon, taking a sip of the milk tea next to me. I feel like a princess; Ulfar is only too happy to treat me to every little thing my heart desires.

It is too good to be true—he can never truly be mine—but in the meantime, I’m going to savor every last morsel I can get.

“I’m glad to see you eating,” he says. “Your color’s returning already.”

My face burns at his attention, but I can’t help myself. I love it. I love the way he pampers me. I love the way I feel seen and cared for, for the first time in my life.

For so long I put others ahead of myself. My father. My neighbors. The library patrons. But feeling what it’s like to be the center of attention for once? I don’t think I could ever go back.

I don’t know if I want to.

After eating, I’m full in terms of food, but still horribly empty in another, more pressing way. There’s only one problem—the warmth and richness of the meal have me teetering on the brink of a food coma and I can’t decide which I want more: sleep or sex.

I want to curl up against him and lazily grind on his dick until I cum myself to sleep. But there’s also this instinctual drive to shove my face in the pillow and present myself to him, to use however he pleases...

Ulfar, for his part, is much more in tune with me than I ever would have predicted. He pulls me close and nuzzles against my neck, snaking a hand around to caress my breasts. “Shh,” he whispers, burying his nose in my hair. “Let yourself rest. We have plenty of time. I’m here. I’ve got you.”

All that comes out is a whimper, but even that he knows what to do with. “Let me do the work. All you need to worry about is relaxing. Can you do that for me?”

I answer with a desperate grind of my ass against him. With a low chuckle, he slips his member between my thighs, letting me feel its warmth and hardness while his other hand goes around my hips and between my legs. He circles my clit with

practiced strokes, interspersing each jolt of pleasure with whispered praise and the sounds of his breath.

Before I know it, my mind's somewhere else, floating on clouds of bliss as my walls flutter into a sweet, satisfying climax. And wouldn't you know it? That was all it took to put me back into a comfortable, easy slumber, my alpha by my side. All of my worries seemed to slip away and wait for tomorrow. I know that I have an incredibly temporary reprieve.

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A SECRET?

ULFAR

I know I gave Orri a lot of crap about how fussy he got over Isabella. I know I said I'd never end up like him, that I would be different. That I would keep my wits about me.

It's only been one night, and already I'm eating my words.

She's so soft and delicate in my arms, but she is still so strong and feisty at the same time. The passion she displays mixed with her cries of pleasure and the way she submits to me so beautifully makes a haunting combination.

One that I can't get enough of.

I want to shower her in silks and luxury, to give her everything her little heart desires. I want to protect her from the world, to kill anyone or anything who tries to hurt her.

And most of all, I want to see her soft belly swell with my child.

Our child.

Because damn, I know this match is only contractual. I know it's only for a year, and only so that I can produce a child. An heir.

So why does it feel so real?

As the days pass and we fall into a comfortable routine, I begin to learn more about Sarah. One little tidbit at a time, she's starting to open up to me. To tell me more about who she is. Where she comes from. I want to hear it all, but there's always this fear in her eyes when she talks about home. This unspoken threat that simmers just below the surface. I could be imagining things—it's my job to look out for potential danger after all—but I want to wait. To give her the chance to open up.

We may be getting along better now, but there's still a fragile trust between us. I don't want to do anything to sabotage that. So for now I'll wait. I'll watch. And I'll see what happens next.

* * *

"Why act so surprised? Of course I read books." I'm leaning over an enormous bathtub, helping my beautiful mate wash while we talk. This time, the conversation turns to books. I've read quite a few of her favorites, and she acts like I told her I eat bark for breakfast (I have—it's not very good.)

"I thought maybe you'd have different series. Different authors. I never thought..." Sarah goes quiet, sinking slightly lower in the tub.

"Earth, with all its problems, turns out to be an excellent exporter of entertainment." I rub my fingers through her luxurious hair, massaging the shampoo deep into her scalp. "A lot of the same series are popular here, too. And besides..." I chuckle. "What do you take me for? Some kind of thoughtless savage? What do they teach you down there, anyway?"

Her skin flushes with emotion, and this time it's not just because of the hot water. "That you're some of the most fearsome warriors in the galaxy."

I playfully splash at her, bending down to press a kiss to the back of her neck. "And

that means I don't know anything?"

A warm, easy smile blooms across her face. It's one of satisfaction. Of peace. What I wouldn't give to see that smile forever. But I know it can't last. She probably has a life to go back to on Earth. Family. Friends. And that reminds me...

"You never told me much about your family," I start, cautious.

I feel her body tense under my touch, but it lasts only a moment before she relaxes again. Bet she thinks I didn't notice. I know better.

"There's not much to say," Sarah says casually with a shrug. "I live with my father and I work at a library. That's about it."

There's more to the story. There always is. But if she's not willing to tell, then I'm not going to force her.

I just hope a time will come when she trusts me enough to tell the truth.

"Why are you taking such good care of me?" she asks, changing the subject. It's an absurd question, but she turns her head to meet my gaze, expression serious. "You don't have to do all of this. When I read the brochures and reports about what to expect, I didn't think..."

I snort. "Those pamphlets are woefully outdated. And how can a block of text describe such a precious experience as this?"

She purses her lips with momentary doubt but relaxes against the edge of the tub at last. Tilting her head back, I carefully wash the suds away and run my fingers through the strands to work out any tangles.

“But why?” she asks again. It seems so obvious to me, but maybe she isn’t feeling the same way. Maybe I was only projecting my own hopes and dreams onto her. My heart thuds painfully for a second. What if she’s not happy here? What if she wants to leave?

“Why do the suns come up in the morning? Why do the birds sing their song? It pleases me to take care of you. It’s a drive all alphas share. We may be intimidating on the battlefield, sure, but we fight hard and love harder. Nothing brings me, or any alpha, more pleasure than ensuring that their omega is well looked after.”

Sarah stills at last, going soft and pliant beneath me. Her hair splays out in lovely waves where it touches the water, and as her dark eyes meet mine, I feel a wrenching in my heart that I know will never go away as long as I live. I never expected to fall for this female. Especially not so hard, and so fast.

The worst part of it all is that she’s not even mine.

“I’ll take care of you,” I murmur, breathing in the sweet scent of her and hoping I can remember it forever, long after she’s gone. “As long as I’m able to.”

It’s almost imperceptible, but I’ve been trained to notice micro expressions that most do not. A brief flicker of guilt passes over her face. A muscle ticks in her jaw. A single tear wells up under her long eyelashes.

She’s hiding something. And it might not be today or tomorrow, but I’m going to find out what.

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FALLEN STARS

SARAH

When I worked as a librarian, one of my guilty pleasures was reading the steamiest romance novels I could get my hands on. I imagined it was me having all those sexy escapades, even though I knew it would likely never happen in real life. Fiction is always better than reality, right?

How wrong I was.

I'm lying under the cool satin sheets, enjoying the feel of the cloth against my bare skin as I stare up at the clouds through the skylight. My heat's finally passing, and even though my body's sore from all the sex, I've never been so satisfied and confident in my life.

Since I started working with my heat instead of against it, I've experienced heights of pleasure I'd only read about. I surprised myself with how easily I gave in. How submissive I become when I'm with him, and how his stern voice and loving dominance make me feel powerful in a way that I never have before.

I began asking for what I wanted. I began to respect not only him, but my own body as well.

And with every night that passes, I find my heart opening further. Feel myself slipping into feelings I have no right to feel.

It will make my eventual betrayal that much harder, and yet...

I wouldn't take it back for the world.

I sit up and throw my legs over the bed, yawning and stretching before padding over to the dresser. Ulfar had it filled with clothes in his people's style, and while I found some of the garments a bit odd at first, I can't deny they're extremely comfortable. Slipping a soft, airy dress over my head, I run a brush through my hair before putting it up into a ponytail.

I'm leaving the cottage today for the first time since my heat started. Vi and I are going to meet at the gardens nearby, and I can't help but wonder how she's doing. Vi is the only other person I even slightly know around here, and it will be nice to talk to someone who isn't Ulfar for a change.

My clit throbs at the thought of him. Even though my heat is finally dissipating, I can't help the way my body reacts to him. At first, I thought it was purely a hormonal thing, an artificial attraction no more trustworthy than a love potion, but as time went on I realized that my feelings went deeper than that.

I think I'm actually falling for him.

Which means I'm so totally screwed. And not even in the fun way.

* * *

"Well, aren't you a sight for sore eyes!" Vi's booming voice greets me before I even see her. I whirl around to find her standing there, arms outstretched and a huge grin on her face. If she was exuberant before, now she's positively glowing.

"Vi!" She pulls me into a hug and her strength nearly chokes me. "Vi! Okay, I get it,

you're choking me—”

“Ah, sorry ‘bout that. Sometimes I don’t know my own strength, ya know?”

“It’s fine,” I croak, pulling away from her grip and taking a deep breath. “I’m glad to see you too.”

We start walking down the cobblestone path, following it past the rows of flowers to the small creek bursting with all types of alien fish. Mushrooms as large as trees tower over us and provide a canopy from the sun, each one as brightly colored as the last. Strange birds chitter and clack overhead, and soft pink petals flutter through the air on a gentle breeze.

It’s a perfect day, and I realize for the umpteenth time just how nice it actually is here. Even though it’s merely a contractual obligation, I wouldn’t mind living here. The landscapes are gorgeous, and the men aren’t bad either.

In another life, if the Syndicate wasn’t hunting my father and me down, maybe we could have a life here. Maybe we could be happy.

“Sarah? You still in there?” Vi’s voice jerks me out of my thoughts, and I give her what I hope is a convincing smile.

“Sorry, yeah. I’m just...thinking.”

“Bout what?” Vi isn’t one to sugarcoat things, but I appreciate that about her. Bluntness is helpful when there seem to be hidden motives around every corner.

Hidden motives like mine, I realize with a grimace.

“Just. Everything. It’s a lot to take in, you know?”

“That I do. How’d your heat go, anyway? I know you were nervous about it. The big fella calm down once you got to know him?”

I snort, but the blush that rushes to my cheeks gives me away. “Something like that.”

“Oooh, sounds like you had some fun. Spill!”

“He’s...” As I try to think about how to describe him, my heart skips a beat and I can’t miss the pang of emotion that burrows its way deep inside. “He’s nice.”

“Nice? So you mean you weren’t getting plowed into the mattress for the past two weeks?”

“Vi!” I gasp at her forwardness, but I should have expected it. My thighs clench at her words, the memory of his affections all too recent. “But yeah...that too.”

“Ayy, atta girl!” She slaps me on the back with a laugh. “Knew you could do it.”

“Yeah,” I say, but my thoughts are already far away again. With every word, with every second, the lingering knowledge of what I’m going to have to do hangs over me like a weight. There’s no escaping it. I made the deal, and if I fail to uphold my end of the bargain, I’ll not only lose my father, but my entire village...

With a deliberate swallow, I push down the nausea and change the subject to something I know she wants to talk about. “So how was yours, then? I haven’t heard anything about your mate. Who’d you get matched with?”

“His name’s Djorn. And let’s put it this way—I want to fuck him almost as much as I want to strangle him.”

I raise an eyebrow at that. “You want to strangle him? Is he mean to you, or?”

“Nah, not like that. We just butt heads. It’s all in good fun.” She winks at me knowingly. “And besides, it makes the sex super hot.”

“If you say so.”

We reach the banks of the creek and find it glittering in the midday sun, the crystal-clear waters almost blinding. I can see fish swimming to and fro from here, and the sandy bank is scattered with small pink stones in the shape of stars.

“They call them fallen stars,” Vi points out. “Local legend says if you toss one into the water you can make a wish. Wanna try it?”

A wish. I could sure use one of those right now. With a small, sad smile, I nod. “Sure.”

I pick up the nearest stone and turn it over in my hands, admiring the smooth surface. It’s about as big as my palm and rounded by the endless movement. I’ve never seen anything like it back on Earth, and part of me wants to keep it as a souvenir. Something to remember this planet by, when I inevitably have to...

“Got your wish ready?” Vi calls.

“Y-yeah,” I croak, gripping the stone as tightly as I can.

“All right. Three, two, one, throw!”

My stone sails through the air and lands with a splash, scattering the fish and rippling the glass-like surface. As the rings spread ever outward, one thought lodges itself deeper in my mind:

I wish this could be real.

We stand like that in silence for some time, both of us watching the creek and enjoying the feeling of the sun on our skin. After some time, Vi speaks.

“So now that heat’s over, we’re probably pregnant. Are you nervous?”

That’s an understatement. A fresh wave of nausea clenches my stomach, and I’m not sure if it’s from anxiety or my supposed pregnancy. “Yeah.” Then, after a moment of staring out onto the water, I add, “I almost hope I’m not.”

“Oh? Why’s that?”

I know she’s genuinely curious, but she doesn’t know the half of it. Part of me wants to tell the truth, to let her know everything. But I can’t get her in trouble with the Syndicate too. She deserves a nice, peaceful future. Unlike me.

So I end up with the lamest excuse in the book. It’s not a lie, but it’s miles away from the whole story. “I was thinking if I wasn’t pregnant yet, I could stay here longer.”

Staying here wouldn’t be the worst gig in the world. Being pampered like a princess, getting to eat delicious meals whenever I want, and having the best sex of my life? I could get used to this.

And that’s what scares me.

“Listen, I know it’s natural to want to stay as long as you can. We got it pretty good, after all. But there’s no telling what the future will hold. The heat pheromones make pregnancy practically a done deal, so let’s just enjoy the time we have. Don’t get so wrapped up in worries that you forget to live.”

My heart aches at her words, but I know she’s right. So with a sniff, I push away the sadness once more and lean into the arm she’s wrapped around my shoulder. “Okay,”

I say softly, and hope that it's enough.

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VILLAGE VISIT

ULFAR

As I don my fur-lined cloak and secure it using a brooch at my shoulder, I look into the mirror and fight to still my racing heart.

Today Sarah will meet the people of my village. She will see my home for the first time, outside the bounds of the ISA centers. We received special permission from Orvox herself, and I can't wait to introduce her to my clan.

I didn't expect her to agree to the trip, to be honest. She's been strangely distant the last few days, that unknown sadness plaguing her more and more often. She even moans and mumbles in her sleep, thrashing against an unseen foe.

The alpha part of me wants to tear anyone who would hurt her limb from limb. I want to wrap her in my cloak and keep her far away from the horrors of the world.

But that is not my right, and she is not my mate.

Not really.

"Are you ready?" I call into the bedroom. Sarah steps out and my jaw nearly hits the floor. She's gorgeous, done up in traditional garb that flatters her every curve. Her hair falls in soft waves over her shoulders and a bright yellow flower rests behind her ear, accentuating the warmth of her eyes. She's beautiful.

“You look...” I start, but words fail me. All that comes out is a goofy, wide-eyed smile.

“Thank you for the outfit,” she says earnestly, doing a little turn so I can see the full length of it. My mouth waters at the sight, and my cock twitches in recognition.

“You look beautiful.” I draw close and wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her in for a sweet kiss. This time, she doesn’t tense. Doesn’t pull away. She melts into my embrace, kissing me back with all the fervor I feel in my heart.

Maybe I’m not so doomed after all.

And as I help her atop my mount and we walk off toward the rising sun, I try to burn this image in my memory forever.

* * *

As we walk into the village, heads poke out of their houses and my neighbors throw up their hands in greeting. Sarah takes in everything with wide, awestruck eyes as I point out every one of them in turn.

“Ulfar, is that you?” A familiar voice comes from behind us, and I turn to find my friend Orri standing there with his heart-mate, Isabella.

“Aye,” I say, forming a fist at my chest to greet him. “This is my female, Sarah.”

Orri gives me a smirk, and I know exactly what he’s thinking. It wasn’t too long ago that I sat with him in the birthing ward while he waited for his mate Isabella to give birth. I teased him then and told him I would never get so worked up over any woman, omega or not.

Now he's going to rub it in, and to be honest? I deserve it.

"You look well," Isabella states, smiling up at us with a child in her arms.

"And you," I echo with a nod of my head. "How is little Lyra?"

"A handful as ever," Orri says with a grin. "But an adorable handful." His eyes turn to Sarah, and I feel her tense under his gaze. "Won't be too long until you have one of your own, eh?"

Orri's words echo through the air. It's a lighthearted sentiment, but I know it holds all the weight in the world for my omega.

Sarah nods. "Yes. I'll be going in for my checkup soon to make sure everything is progressing smoothly."

"Don't you worry," Isabella points out. "They'll take really good care of you there. I was scared too, but they know what they're doing. You'll be fine, I promise."

In the distance I hear the sound of children playing nearby, their giggles and laughter carrying on the breeze. The scent of freshly cut grass and blooming flowers envelops me, filling my nostrils with their sweet fragrance.

We make our way through the village, and I can tell Sarah is in awe of the place—especially all the happy, content omegas.

"You look surprised," I say as we walk. "Did you expect something different?"

"I just always thought omegas would be..." She chews her lip, considering the words. "I don't know. Lesser."

I snort. Just what were they teaching them at the ISA? “You’ve got it all wrong. Omegas are our greatest treasure here. They keep our society stable. Keep us flourishing. Without them...” I trail off, remembering the dark times. Remembering how hard it was when we realized the alpha serum had affected our ability to bear children. “We would have died out.”

“Wow,” she says after a time. Her voice is hushed, thick with untold emotion.

“Yeah,” I echo into the silence. “Wow is right.”

As we walk, people stop and bow to us in greeting. We pass by a young omega woman who is singing softly to her child as she rocks it back and forth in her arms. The child’s eyes flicker open, and it gurgles happily at its mother’s song before drifting off into peaceful sleep again. Sarah watches them with an expression of wonder on her face, and I can’t help but feel my heart swell with love for my omega mate as I see her so enchanted by this beautiful moment.

“Here we are.” We stop in front of my home, the one I built with my own two hands. It’s modest, but it’s mine. It’s where I feel most at peace.

And hopefully one day, she can too.

We step through the door to the cottage I built and I’m filled with pride. I want her to feel at home here, wanted, loved—even if this isn’t the life she ever expected for herself.

As we walk through the sparsely decorated rooms, I point out the furniture and tools I crafted by hand. She seems impressed by my workmanship, and it fills me with pride to be able to show off my skills in this way.

Finally, we reach the room where I display my wall of trophies from battles past. She

clings to me as I point out each one in turn, telling her of the exploits of my past. She listens intently to every word.

It's the most decorated room in the house—everything else has been trimmed down to near-spartan efficiency, providing only what I need to rest and prepare for the next mission. Nothing more, nothing less. But now that I see Sarah here in my space, I realize it was missing something all along:

Her.

Every battle, every prize was to prepare for my future. To cement my status as alpha and show that I could provide for my future mate, whenever and whoever that may be. And now she's standing right in front of me.

My heart cries out at the thought of losing her. I would cross the galaxy, fight the most formidable foes if it meant being able to see her again. And that's when I realize: She's my heart-mate. She has to be.

And if I don't tell her how I really feel, I'm going to lose her forever.

"Sarah," I start, my voice steady by some miracle. "There's something I want to—"

Suddenly she cries out, racing across the room to pick up an old book lying on a table by the door. It's a worn paperback, not common on this world, but I had it imported especially for my collection. She holds it up with glee.

"You actually have it!" Sarah says in awe, flipping over the cover. She squeals again. "And it's signed by the author?! No way! How did you get this?"

I'm taken aback by the sudden shift of conversation, but I can't help but laugh at her excitement. "I had it imported from Earth. Was a pain to get, but I told you. It's one

of my favorites.”

“Mine too.” Her voice comes out as a whisper. Our eyes meet just then, a silent, perfect moment of clarity.

I know what I have to do.

“Sarah, I need to ask you something.” I step closer to her, determination now pushing me forward. “Do you like my house?”

She blinks as if she expected something else. “Yes, of course I do. It’s a bit sparse, but cozy all the same. I love seeing all the things you made. You are a great craftsman.”

My heart stutters once more, and I take a deep breath. “That’s good, because I’ve never invited another female into this house.”

Her eyes widen. “Never?”

“Never.” Now for the hard part. “Do you know why that is?”

The book hangs by her side, all but forgotten. She’s trapped under my gaze, the rest of the world fading into the background as we draw closer and closer. “Why?”

“I made a vow long ago,” I say, taking her soft, small hand in my own. “That I would not bring a female into my home. And when I did, she would be the one I want by my side for all eternity.”

LOVERS

SARAH

All of the carefully constructed walls, all of the safeguards I put up around my heart, crumble at his earnest declaration. What am I supposed to say to something like that? The gravity of the gesture sinks in at last.

He loves me. In more than just a contractual way. He actually loves me and wants me to stay here, with him. It's possible, of course—that's what omegas like Janie and Isabella did—but for me? Even if I wanted to, I can't.

A rush of anger flares up, unbidden. It isn't fair. If it weren't for my father and his 'mistake' so many years ago, I wouldn't be in this mess. I would be free to do as I wished. I could build a life here, with him and the rest of the alphas and omegas in this small town. I could open a library. Share my love of books with a new generation, a new world even.

Too bad I don't get to have any of that. All because of the Syndicate. Fresh tears well up under my eyelids and for once I don't stop them. To Ulfar, it will simply look like I teared up at his confession. But it's so much more than that.

It's the realization that I may not ever get to have a normal life the way all these other women do. That even if I do this thing for the Syndicate, who's to say they won't find another way to screw us over in the future? The happily ever after that I read about in books...that's for other people. Not me. Not this time.

Vi's words at the creek ring in my ears, painful but present. Enjoy your time while you can, she said. Don't spend so much time worrying about the future that you forget to live, she said.

One day, and one day soon, I'll have to break Ulfar's heart. But if there's no way around it, then why can't I take advantage of this relationship while it lasts? I look up at him, wide-eyed and lost.

"Ulfar...I don't know what to say." My heartbeat rumbles in my chest. My breath heightens. When my eyes meet his, something shifts between us. Like the expression on his face, his very presence is the anchor. The answer I need.

"Then don't say anything," he murmurs. Those brilliant golden eyes bore into my soul, and for a brief second I feel like he's unlocked something there, deep down in my chest.

This time I don't have to say anything. I do what he says, and simply act.

Wrapping my arms around his neck, I pull him down and into a passionate kiss. He responds in kind, freezing up for only a second before kissing me back with such ferocity it takes my breath away. I draw back, panting, and both of us watch each other with lust-filled, shocked expressions.

"Are you sure?" Ulfar breathes, eyes wide at my initiation. This is the first time I've actually prompted him to have sex with me in such an active fashion, and it feels right .

We're not in heat anymore. We're not beholden to our hormones or our animal urges. This is us. The real us. Coming together as man and woman because we want to. Because we share a bond deeper than just alpha and omega. And even if I can't be with him forever, I want to show him just how much he means to me tonight.

“Does it look like I’m sure?” I coo and kiss him again.

With a happy grumble, he hoists me into the air in a bridal carry and walks the short distance to the bed. Instead of tossing me into the blankets, he deposits me lovingly on top of the comforter, and it’s like lying on a cloud.

I look up at him with tear-brimming eyes as he removes his clothes. Layer by layer, he bares himself to me, and it’s like watching the most wonderful unwrapping I’ve ever seen.

“All of this,” Ulfar says with a deep, reverent voice. “This is all for you, Sarah. What I’ve been fighting for. What I’ve been living for.” He kneels down on the bed, spreading my legs and lifting my hips to remove my bottoms.

The words roll around in my head before sinking lower, settling themselves deep in my heart.

Ulfar...I’m sorry...

He peels away the last of my clothing until I too lay bare before him, both of our bodies clasped together in the purest expression of intimacy I know. This time it is not a contractual agreement. It is not a hormonal frenzy. It is not a primal imperative to breed and claim.

It’s just me and him. Ulfar and Sarah. Alien and human. Male and female. Holding one another and reveling in each other’s touch. In each other’s presence. And as he strokes one hand over my bare skin and goosebumps appear in his wake, I shiver with the intensity of the feeling that washes over me.

It’s not the searing discomfort of the heat. It actually feels...good. A calm, flickering fire like a warm hearth after a day in the snow. A safe feeling. A protective, cozy

feeling. That this is right. This is where I'm supposed to be.

And I let that warmth take me, tide me over as our bodies intertwine.

Ulfar, I love you.

And that has to be enough.

He presses kisses everywhere he can reach—my cheeks, my lips, my neck, my collarbones. I throw back my head and let out a sigh. Every place he kisses tingles under his touch, another spark in the fire that burns inside.

Ulfar moves down to my breasts, circling the nipples before taking one into his mouth. I gasp and claw at the sheets, but he holds me down with one strong arm while using the other to flick at my other breast. The sensations flooding through me this time are purely for him. No longer am I doing this out of obligation. Out of fear.

These feelings are for him and him alone.

The Syndicate is still out there. Still waiting on me to fulfill my end of the bargain. My father's life and more hang in the balance. But for tonight, all that matters is me and him, and the bond we share.

"You are simply..." Ulfar chants as he moves lower, kissing the soft swell of my belly and spreading my thighs with his large hands. "Divine." And when he puts his mouth down there and starts to lick, I can almost agree with him.

"Don't stop," I pant, fingers clenching the thick strands of his hair as I thrust my hips upward, desperate for more of him. "Don't ever stop."

"Stay with me, Sarah," he moans between sucking my clit and thrusting his tongue

deep inside. The pleasure twists and rises toward a peak, clenching like a spring about to unfurl. “Say you’ll stay with me, forever.”

And as he draws my clit into his mouth one last time, filling my dripping cunt with his fingers, I lose control completely. “Yes!” I scream to the heavens. To anyone who is listening. My body shakes and trembles with each aftershock, bucking against his fingers like I’m milking his cock all over again.

As the waves pass and we slow, still riding the high of connection, an idea crosses my mind. Something I haven’t had the courage to do even in a hormone-fueled frenzy, and if I’m going to be leaving him soon, I want to try it. I want him to know just how much he turns me on. So gathering the rest of my strength, I press my hands to his chest and push upward, with what I hope is a seductive grin on my face.

“Now my turn.”

“What are you—” he starts, but I nudge him to turn over and let my actions do the talking. He rolls onto his back, looking up at me with love in his eyes. His cock is still hard and jutting up against his stomach. It’s still a monster of a dick, and although my pussy was able to accommodate him, I have my doubts about my mouth.

Still, my core clenches at the thought of tasting him. Of his smooth skin stretched taut over his hardness. Of every bump and ridge on his alien member. It’s the same color as the rest of him, only an even warmer hue as it’s flushed with blood and arousal. His lips part in surprise as I take him in hand, wrapping both hands around his length.

He’s so big that even both hands can’t encompass his full length, but that’s okay—I have one last trick at my disposal. With a deep breath I lean down and lick at the rosy tip, enjoying the twitch of his cock beneath my skin. He sucks in an audible breath, hands finding purchase in the sheets while I squeeze him tighter.

“Sarah...” he moans, watching my every move. “Fuck.”

His sounds give me confidence and I take more of him into my mouth, opening as wide as I can. It’s still only the head, but I use my tongue to lap around the crown, my fingers stroking and twisting as they move up and down the shaft. He hisses, muscles tense, and I can tell just how much restraint he’s showing by not grabbing my head or thrusting into my mouth.

My clit throbs with every stroke and eases the stretch of my lips around his girth. Looking up at him through my lashes, I see him watching with pure wonder on his face.

“What’s the matter?” I say with a smirk, his head slipping out from between my lips with a pop. “The Aesirheim girls never do this?”

“No,” he pants. “Never. How did you—“

“Just one of my many talents,” I say with a smirk before going down on him again. The fact that I’m the one to do this to him brings me no small amount of pride. I may be a small human and physically weak in comparison to his people, but no one else can bring him to his knees like this. No other woman even thought to bring him pleasure like this.

And before I leave this planet, I’m going to make sure he never forgets the way I made him feel.

With a combination of licking, sucking, and kissing every part of him I can reach, I stroke his cock with increasing speed and pressure until his face is red with strain and his eyes squeeze closed in concentration.

This time, it’s my turn to say it. “Let go,” I whisper against his flesh. “Give it to me.”

Just like that, it's like a switch flips. Ulfar sits up, pure animal lust in his eyes. "I want you," he growls, pulling away from my hands and mouth. "I want to finish inside of you. Feel you clench around me, please. I need to be inside you, right now."

And though I'm momentarily disappointed that he won't cum in my mouth, his words have me close to the edge already. As he grabs and flips me over, I see just how much he was holding back.

"Fuck," he grunts as his length spears inside of me with one smooth stroke. I'm still so wet, so turned on for him that it's the most natural thing in the world. My walls welcome him in, and as he drives home it's like two pieces of a puzzle connecting at last. He winds his hands in my hair, pressing his forehead to mine as he makes short, shallow thrusts deep inside.

"Sarah," he chants like a prayer, pushing me deeper, pushing me closer. "Sarah, Sarah, Sarah, Sarah!"

And with a shudder that feels like it could shake the entire house, he roars out his release and stays there, buried inside me, filling my aching cunt with his seed as we cling to each other for dear life. Not as surrogates. Not as alpha and omega.

For the first time, we are only lovers.

MEETING HIS MOUNT

ULFAR

The next few days pass easily. We're getting more comfortable with each other, but there's still something simmering beneath the surface that I can't quite name. Every time I try to ask her about her past or her planet, she freezes up. Shuts down. I know everyone's entitled to their secrets, but the alpha part of me wants to find whatever it is that's hurting her and fix it so that she'll never be sad again.

If I do that, I know I risk coming on too strong. My heart yearns for this to be more than just a contracted deal, but I am still not sure if she feels the same way. That's why I come up with a plan: a little trip for the both of us, away from the prying eyes of the ISA. When we have time alone to chat and truly be together, I'll open up to her.

And I can only hope that she will as well.

"Sarah?" I call into the bedroom while I finish cooking the Earth breakfast she loves so much—bacon and round, fluffy discs called pancakes. "Breakfast is almost ready."

"Just a minute!" she calls back.

As I plate up the food, she steps out of the bedroom wearing only my robe and a towel around her hair. The robe is comically large on her, nearly falling off her shoulders and pooling at her ankles, but I don't mind. It pleases me to see her wearing my things. And besides, the way it's hanging open displays a delicious amount of

skin that almost makes me forget all about breakfast.

“This looks amazing,” she says earnestly, pulling up a chair at the bar seating. I slide the plate over to her and she digs in with gusto, letting out a happy hum. “Mmmm, this is so good! It tastes just like the bacon back on Earth, how did you do it?”

I chuckle to myself. She doesn’t need to know the trouble I went through to have it specially imported. “I have my ways. Now eat up, there’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Oh?” She raises an eyebrow, a bit of syrup from the pancake still smeared on her lip. I want to lean forward and kiss her, just to lick that sweet nectar away. I don’t want to interrupt her meal, though. It’s considered very rude among my people. I don’t know about hers, but I’ll have to put my horny impulses on hold for a bit longer.

“How do you feel about going on a trip?”

Sarah’s eyes widen. “A trip? Where?”

“Don’t worry, we won’t be going too far. It’s one of my favorite spots. I’d love to take you there. There’s a lovely grotto, giant mushrooms that nearly touch the sky, and the best views this side of the galaxy.”

She thinks to herself for a few moments while she finishes eating, and I don’t miss the way her cheeks flush at the idea. After taking the final bite of her pancake, she looks back up at me. “Is it safe?”

I almost laugh but manage to catch myself in time. Leaning forward, I place my hand on her chin and lift it up to face me. “Do you need a big, strong man to come with you?”

With a gasp she swats my hand away, but the tone of her voice is nothing but playful. “You know what I mean, silly. I just meant...” She gestures at the cottage. “Away from here. Thought we had to stay put as per the Intergalactic Surrogacy Agency regulations.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve already made the arrangements.” Which is to say I checked to see if we were going to get in trouble or not. I didn’t find anything, but better to ask forgiveness than permission, right? What they don’t know won’t hurt them.

A soft, easy smile spreads its way across Sarah’s face. I want to see her smile like that for the rest of my life, if she’ll let me. “That sounds really beautiful,” she says softly. “But how long will we be gone?”

She’s still worried. How cute. “A few days, a weekend at most.”

I circle around so that I’m standing behind her, wrapping my arms around her shoulders and leaning my head down to hers. “You don’t have to worry about anything when you’re with me, Sarah. I hope you know that.” I take one of her hands in my own and link our fingers before bringing it to my lips in a soft kiss. “I will always take care of you. That is my duty not only as an alpha, but as a man and as a citizen of this great planet.”

Sarah leans her head back into mine. She lets out a sigh and I feel her muscles relax. That’s a good thing. She no longer tenses up when I make those promises like she used to, and maybe one day soon she’ll open up to me completely.

“I never wanted to leave, you know.”

It’s an unexpected turn, but I keep my tone even so as not to spook her. “Your home world?”

Sarah nods. “It’s...complicated. But let’s just say I had to help my father, and signing a contract with the ISA was the best way to do that.”

“Hmm.” My protective instincts are on full alert, but that’s not what she needs right now. I run my hands through her thick, beautiful hair. Up her soft arms. “Get up,” I say at last. “I want to show you something.”

I lead her out of the cottage and over to the stable area, where our large mounts reside. I’ve been here hundreds of times before, but Sarah looks like she’s seen a ghost. I keep a steady hand on her back.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “I’ve got you.”

“What are those things?” She whispers. “They’re so...b-big.”

I can’t help but chuckle at that. “Everything is big for you Earth humans.”

And I do mean everything.

“These are our mounts. They are called aki in our native tongue, and we bond with them as children. We grow up together. Share our triumphs, our fears, our battles. They are an extension of ourselves, in some ways.” Our mounts were more than transportation to all of us.

Sarah’s jaw still hasn’t closed from the shock, but she relaxes a little in my hold. “Like a best friend?”

“Something like that. Enebris has been with me through it all, and will be until the day I die.”

“Enebris.” Sarah tries to repeat what I said, but her human tongue is not equipped for

such sounds. Still, it sounds adorable to hear her try. “Is that his name?”

“Her,” I correct her, and point out the one closest to us, in the front stall. “See that one there? That’s her. Want to go say hello?”

I fully expect her to say no, but she takes a step forward, no longer braced against my body. Sarah looks at me over her shoulder and nods. “I want to meet her.”

“She wants to meet you too. Come here, don’t be nervous.”

Sarah approaches the aki carefully, holding one hand out as far as she can. I’m at Enebris’s side, patting her flank and neck as Sarah approaches.

When Sarah’s only inches away, Enebris lets out a huff, stomping her hoof and shaking her mane. Sarah lets out a strangled yelp and flinches backward before I can call out to her. “It’s okay! She’s saying hello. Got a little excited, is all.”

“O-oh.” Again, I think she’s going to call it quits and ask to go back to the cottage. But I’m learning that she’s a lot stronger than she looks, and I’ll be damned if that doesn’t make me want her even more. Sarah takes one step forward, and then another. I see her suck in a deep breath, then her fingers brush Enebris’s mane.

Enebris reacts in kind, tilting her head against Sarah’s hand. She gains confidence quickly, moving her hand up and down in gentle strokes. “She’s beautiful.” Sarah smiles up at me.

“She likes you,” I reply.

“How can you tell?”

She’s no longer the scared omega I met on the first day at the ISA center. Again and

again she surprises me with her tenacity and wit, not to mention her seemingly boundless kindness. I wonder if I'll ever get used to it.

“Let's just say I know Enebris like the back of my hand, and she is a very good judge of character.”

Sarah beams at the praise, and I step out of the stall to join her at her side. “Shall we go back to the cottage? Or do you have anywhere else you'd like to go first?”

She thinks for a moment before answering. “Do you have a library here?”

I shake my head. “I'm sorry, but the closest physical library is in the capital city. Most people read digitally these days. But I can take you some time, if you'd like.”

The brief disappointment gives way to a peaceful sort of hope I so rarely see from her. “I'd like that.”

And as we walk hand in hand back to the cottage, I can't help but notice the way the sunlight filters through the trees and falls on Sarah's face, lighting up every curve and angle just for me.

It's funny. Not long ago I would have—no, did laugh at alphas that went all ga-ga over their chosen omegas. Then it happened to me. And you know what? I wouldn't want it any other way.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:53 am

AUTOGRAPHED COPY

SARAH

“A ll right,” Ulfar says. His large, warm hands cover my eyes and I can hear the grin in his voice. “Open your eyes.”

He pulls his palms away, and as I stare out at the dazzling landscape, I suck in a gasp.

We’re standing in a clearing deep in the mushroom forest. Butterflies flit in and out through the trees and sparkle like diamonds in the sunlight that filters down to the surface. Vines hang from the tall trees and fungi, swaying gently in the springtime breeze. Before us is a beautiful grotto, formed from where the ground collapsed around the creek above. It’s created a sort of crater lake, shining with a surface like glass.

Ulfar’s hand is strong and comforting against the small of my back, and the gravity of the sight almost makes me weak in the knees. It’s beautiful...

And far more than I deserve.

“What is this place?” I whisper, craning my head to look up at him.

“This is what I wanted to show you. One of my favorite spots. Where I go to reflect. Relax.” He gestures at the shimmering lake. A pink leaf that looks like a lily pad floats on the surface, and I watch a small amphibian creature leap out of the water and land on top of it, staring up at us with beady red eyes.

“It’s amazing.” That’s all the words I can think of at the moment. My real feelings are much more emotional. Much more complex. But words can’t do justice to the sheer majesty I see all around me.

Aesirheim has been nothing but surprise after delightful surprise. It’s teeming with more natural splendor than any place I’ve ever seen on Earth, and the bright colors and mysterious plants and animals never cease to amaze me. I wonder if I’ll ever get used to it. I wonder if he has. If he realizes just how good he has it.

You won’t have time to get used to anything, remember? The sour memory sticks in my mind like a thorn. This is all temporary. You’re going to leave him. You’re going to betray him. And there’s nothing you can do about it.

I grimace against the pain and hope he doesn’t notice. For now, I just want to enjoy this time we have together.

Shut up, brain.

“I thought we could set up a tent here. Spend the night. Take in the stars away from the lights and activity of the ISA.” He nudges me. “Our own little vacation.”

“That sounds lovely,” I admit. My heart warms whenever I’m next to him. Like my whole life has been a cold winter’s day, and he’s finally the soothing hearth I needed. He breaks down all my barriers and makes me feel seen. Wanted. Loved.

“And I brought you something,” he adds, rummaging in the bag he’s brought along. “A gift.”

My heart nearly stops. “A gift?” What is he thinking now?

“It’s nothing fancy,” he assures me. “But it’s something I think you’ll like.

Something..." Ulfar pauses. "Something that I hope will make you think of me, every time you look at it."

My stomach twists in anticipation. Now I'm really curious.

Ulfar pulls out a thin rectangle wrapped in shiny gold paper. A red ribbon holds it closed. I turn it over in my hands, admiring the presentation, before tugging at the bow. It falls open easily, and there in the center of the wrapping paper is a book. But not just any book—it's from the series we talked about not so long ago. And it's one I've never seen before.

"Is this...?" My thoughts start to race as I look at the spine and check the numbering. "No way!"

It's the next book in the series. I didn't even know it was out yet, and here it is in my hands. My gasp turns into a scream of surprise when I open the cover and see an inscription there in elegant handwriting.

"To Sarah: don't be afraid to reach for the stars. —Erzo Winston"

It's all I can do to choke back the tears at this point. Not only did he go out of his way to find the new book in my favorite series, but he somehow got it signed by the elusive author himself. And not only that but made out to me personally as well? I can't believe it.

Ever since we met each other, he's been nothing but kind. Dominant, commanding, and devilishly sexy at times, but beneath it all is a tender kindness that I've never experienced before.

He'd be a great husband, I find myself thinking. He's going to make some girl very happy one day.

Too bad it can't be me.

Shaking my head, I focus on the moment between us. On the small ripples on the lake and the way one of the jewel-like butterflies alights on the surface of the water without sinking.

"Let me help with the tent," I say, thinking that doing something with my hands will help keep my mind off of things. As long as I stay busy, stay active, I can get through this without breaking down.

"You don't have to," he says with a smile. "You can explore, relax, do whatever you want. I love taking care of you, so I can set everything up. All you need to do is enjoy yourself."

"I want to help." I press a hand to his chest and give him the same smile. "It pleases me as well."

"Are you sure?" Ulfar hesitates.

I nod.

He draws me close and presses a kiss to my forehead. "You're full of surprises, little omega."

You have no idea.

Part of me wants to just stay here, to lean into the kiss and let him sweep me off my feet all over again. But it will be night soon, and we'll need to get a tent and a fire going before then. That's the only thing that keeps me from jumping his bones right here and now.

Ulfar draws away at last, but the look on his face shows he's thinking the same thing I am. "You can go gather firewood while I set up the tent. Don't go far, all right?"

"I won't," I promise before turning my back on him. While he looks for a clear spot to pitch the tent, I delve deeper into the forest, eyes on the ground.

I probably should have asked him what viable firewood looks like here on Aesirheim. The mushroom trees don't exactly have traditional wooden branches. I'm not sure how anything will burn in this wet, swampy environment, but I have to trust Ulfar.

Trust . The word bounces around in my head. As if I have any right to be making judgments about trust.

I pick up a few dried-out stalks that are about the same thickness as my arm, hefting them against my side while I trek deeper into the woods.

My mind wanders as I walk, and it lands on my father. His smile. The way he would lift me in the air when I was a child. The way I felt so weightless, like I was flying. I can't leave him. No matter how good my life is here. He deserves better. He gave up so much for me, and now it's my turn.

As I pick up more firewood and head back to camp, however, I try to think of any alternative ideas. There's got to be something I haven't considered yet. Some loophole, something I can do to make things better for all of us. I can't bear the thought of parting with my as yet unborn baby, but maybe I can renegotiate.

Or maybe I can finally open up to Ulfar once and for all.

The thought terrifies me, but what if he could actually help? Ulfar has shown himself to be a strong and capable alpha, and quite a gentleman to boot. Sure, he has a strict code of rules and standards, but maybe he could bend the rules for me. Just this once.

On the other hand, the idea of what might happen if he finds out and doesn't approve almost scares me even more than the Syndicate itself. What if he reports me to the ISA for my betrayal? He's too strong, too fast, and too smart to escape on my own. I'll be as good as dead if they send me to the prison planet, and my father's fate will be sealed. I'll never see him again.

"Hmm," I mumble to myself, crouching down to brush through a bed of crispy pink leaves to find yet more kindling. He always says that he wants to protect and look out for me, but would he still do that if he knew the truth?

Because having a tall, intimidating alien alpha on my side when I go up against the Syndicate would make me feel a lot safer. Maybe we could fight. Maybe we could win. Take the baby and my father, come back here to Aesirheim. Back to Ulfar. Make a life together.

I sigh, the tense muscles of my shoulders aching. It's no use. Just a fantasy. The Syndicate owns my ass, and there's no way around it. That's why I need to hurry up and come up with a plan to get off the planet before I hurt either of us even more. I haven't been confirmed pregnant yet, but with the amount of sex we had during our heat? It would be a miracle if at least some of that alien seed didn't take.

Chewing my lip, I see Ulfar in the distance putting the finishing touches on the campsite. He puts a hand up to his forehead to shield him from the sun's rays and stands up straight, stretching his back. Even though he's clothed, I can see his muscles flex from here. My mouth waters despite myself.

Right. Gotta get back to camp. He turns his head and catches my eye through the foliage. Gives me a smile and a wave that nearly melt my heart.

I wave back and jog to catch up with him, the thoughts and fears and memories still playing in my mind. Tonight, I have to put my plan into action. I can't wait any

longer. I can't let myself sink any deeper.

Before we leave, I'm going to make my move. I just hope that he can forgive me.

* * *

After we get a fire going and he shows me how to roast kebabs over the open fire, I'm full and tired, but I still have one more thing to do tonight. The moon is starting to rise overhead and shine her light down upon us. Fireflies make their way out of the ground and fly through the air, sparks of gold in the waning dusk. I get up off of the log we've been using as a bench and stifle a yawn before turning to him.

"Had enough to eat?" he asks, waving a final skewer at me. "There's one more if you want it."

I shake my head and slip a finger under the strap of my top, sliding it off my shoulder and watching him with a grin. "I think I'm hungry for something else..."

Ulfar's eyes light up. The kebab falls to the side, all but forgotten. "Is that so?" he says, drawing close. "And just what could that be?"

"Hmm, I don't know," I tease him, swaying my hips as I step toward the water's edge. With my back turned I pull my shirt over my head and toss it to the side, looking over my shoulder at him with a smirk. "I was thinking about sampling some of the Aesirheim delicacies. Indulge in something I can only get on-planet, if you know what I mean..."

He makes quick work of his shirt and pants as well, following me with a wicked expression. "Oh, I think I know what you mean..." And with that he wraps his huge arms around my middle, hauling me into the air. I respond with a happy scream, playfully beating at his chest and shoulders while I flail against his grip. It's all a

show. I love how strong he is. How easily he can manhandle me.

And he knows it.

With a grin, he puts me down. We wade into the lake together, laughing and splashing at one another as the moon watches us from above, the droplets of water on our bodies making everything hot and wet.

“Sarah,” he breathes, pressing a heated kiss to my temples, my cheeks, and finally my lips. My legs hook around his waist, and the combination of the water and his strength makes me feel weightless.

“Ulfar,” I respond, nuzzling into his neck and arching my hips against him.

“Is this the dessert you were talking about?” Ulfar nips at my ear. The timbre of his voice sends a shiver down my spine.

“Mmm,” I hum. The water isn’t the only thing making me wet right now. “Something like that.”

“Good,” he growls, hoisting me higher so that I can feel the hard length of his cock pressing up against me. He’s so close now. If I could just angle my hips a little more, he’d be inside.

“Ulfar,” I pant again, trying to rub against him with everything I have. “Please. I need you. Now.”

He lets out a laugh. It’s a low, hearty rumble that would make me weak in the knees if I wasn’t already in his arms. “But you already have me, little one.”

I can’t help it. I let out a frustrated whine, pressing myself into him. I bury my face in

his neck, drawing in as much of his scent as I can. This time the desperation isn't because of a hormonal heat cycle.

It's because I truly want him. And because I want to burn this moment into my memory forever, so I can remember him when I leave. I will always want to remember how loved and cherished he made me feel. How special. How safe.

"Use your words," he prompts me, his wide hands resting on the curve of my ass.

I'm sure I'm blushing redder than the mushrooms on the bank, but I'm too far gone to care. "Y-your cock. Ulfar. I need you inside of me. Please."

Another chuckle. Damn him. He knows just what he's doing to me, and he's enjoying every second of it. "All you had to do was ask, little one. Was that so hard?"

I don't need to say a word in answer. The combination squeal and moan that I let out when his cock spears into me says more than I ever could.

We rock together, letting out sounds of primal joy that only the forest can hear. And as he cries out my name and fills me to the brim with his cum one last time, I swear that I'll remember this feeling forever.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:53 am

MARKING A MATE

ULFAR

There's no doubt in my mind anymore. Sarah is my heart-mate. I feel it in my soul every time we touch, and when we shared that moment together at the lake last night, I swear she felt it too.

I make a mental note to ask Orri what he did when he made the mate bond with Isabella. How it worked with the ISA. If there were any extra forms to fill out. Because as much as I dread the idea of more paperwork, I'll do anything if it means I can keep Sarah by my side another day.

I wake early the next morning and wade into the deeper waters, watching as iridescent fish swim between my legs. With a quick, practiced movement I plunge my hand into the water and come up with a wriggling fish.

"Perfect," I mutter to myself. "Breakfast."

When Sarah wakes, I'm almost done frying up the fish I caught over the fire. She steps out of the tent and yawns, rubbing her eyes and stretching. Her hair is a mess from sleep and sex, but it makes her that much more beautiful in my eyes. If I had my way, I would wake up to this every morning and prepare her fresh meals with my own two hands.

"What's that smell?" Sarah asks, her voice still sleepy. "It woke me up."

“You say that like it’s a bad thing,” I tease. “You’re just in time for breakfast. Just caught this morning.”

I turn and extend a plate to her, and her face lights up. “Wow! You caught this? I didn’t even see any fishing gear in your bag.”

“Don’t need any,” I say. My chest swells with pride. “Got all that I need right here.” I hold up my hands and wiggle my fingers to make a point.

“You—” Her eyes go nearly as wide as the plates. “You caught a fish with your bare hands?! But they’re so fast!”

“When I was out on duty, we had to pack light. Didn’t have room for all that equipment, so I learned to make do. Now come here, dig in before your breakfast gets cold.” I pat the log beside me and gesture for her to sit down.

“Wow, this is so good!” Sarah crows after taking a bite. She pauses for a moment, thinking. “But you know what would go really well with it?”

“What’s that?” I ask between bites.

“You know that red sauce back at the cottage?”

I nearly spit out my fish. “You mean the jam?”

“Yeah! That.” She shrugs. “I don’t know why, but I had a craving for it all of a sudden.”

A craving . She may not know, but the word pings a memory in my head. Something they told us when sitting through all the long, boring informational meetings at the ISA.

“Strange cravings can be an early symptom of pregnancy...”

Sarah. My Sarah. Pregnant. It sounds too good to be true, and already I’m daydreaming of a life with her back at the village, where she can raise the children with the other members of my clan. In my mind’s eye I see her glowing and round with child, holding my hand as our children run barefoot through the grass.

It’s a nice vision. A peaceful one. Far from the tragedy of battle my people have endured for far too long. I want to share that with her, and by all the stars, I will make it happen.

She is mine. No matter what the Intergalactic Surrogacy Agency says. No matter what anyone says. I’ll fight them all if I have to, but now that I’ve found my one true heart-mate, I’m not going to let her go.

I come back to myself and press a kiss to her forehead. “When we get back, you can have as much jam as you want. Promise.” Getting to my feet, I turn back to the tent to start packing up. It’s been a beautiful outing, but we’ll have to start heading back before long.

If only it could last a little longer...

“Hey, Ulfar?” Sarah’s voice comes from behind me.

“Yeah?” I call out without looking over my shoulder.

She pauses for long enough that I turn away from what I’m doing to face her. There’s that troubled expression again, more plainly than I’ve ever seen it. Is it finally time? Will she finally tell me how she feels?

“What’s wrong?” I ask and take a step closer.

“Nothing, it’s just...” She trails off, not meeting my gaze. “What happens if...” Sarah chews her lip, face flushing. When she speaks again, it’s barely above a whisper. “If something happens to the baby?”

The question catches me completely off guard. We were having such a great time, filled with passion and hope for the future. Where did this come from? “What do you mean?” I ask gingerly. “Are you sick or something?”

She shakes her head. “Nothing like that. I was just thinking about the contract we signed, is all. It made me wonder if the terms would still be valid if a mother lost the pregnancy.”

I feel like a blind man looking at a map and trying to figure out where he is. “What are you talking about?” I ask, my voice even. “All of the babies delivered by the ISA have been perfectly healthy. The nurses and doctors they have here are top tier, best in the galaxy. They won’t let anything happen to you or your child. And even if, stars above, something did happen, that wouldn’t be your fault.” Sarah looks like she wants to cry, and I take her in my arms, holding her close. I can feel her trembling, and I know it’s not just from the morning chill.

“I won’t let anything happen to you, Sarah,” I tell her firmly. “I promise. I’ll protect you and our child with everything I have.”

She looks up at me, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “Do you mean that?”

“Of course I do,” I say, stroking her hair. “I love you, Sarah. I’ll do anything to keep you safe.”

“I love you too,” she whispers, and then she kisses me fiercely. Tears run down her face and I kiss each of them away. My hands slip beneath her shirt, and I can feel the warmth of her skin under my fingertips. I want her so badly it’s like a physical ache.

We break apart eventually, panting for breath. Sarah's eyes are dark with desire, and I can see the same hunger in my own reflection in her gaze. We both know what we want.

"I want to mark you." The words come out without thinking. It's a serious, sacred matter in our culture, reserved only for one's lifelong mate. But I can't help myself. When I'm with her, I can't think about anything or anyone else. She's mine, and I would fight the entire galaxy to keep her by my side. "Make you mine. Breed you full of babies, start a life together..."

"Ulfar..." she whispers, and as we stumble back into the tent, I pull her onto the bedroll and push her down until her head rests on the pillow. I straddle her hips, pressing our bodies flush against each other. Her eyes widen when I move between her legs. She smells so fucking sweet. I lower my mouth to her neck, kissing along her jawline. "Oh gods," she moans, arching her body toward me.

Her strangled cry is the last straw. My sanity shatters and I throw caution to the wind, sinking my sharp teeth deep into the crook between her neck and shoulder. Sweet, hot blood flows over my lips and tongue, uniting us in a way that nothing else can.

Sarah screams in pleasure and pain, holding on for dear life as she trembles against me. As I lap at the wound and hold her close, I whisper those magical words in her ear:

"Now the entire galaxy will know that you are mine."

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:53 am

PREGNANCY CONFIRMED

SARAH

We return to the cottage in high spirits, and for a brief moment it almost feels normal. Like this could really be our life. Traveling and exploring and playing and loving one another with tender caresses and passionate words. But you know what they say about things that sound too good to be true...

I wake to the sound of my communicator tablet buzzing. Ulfar's still asleep next to me, which is odd. Usually he's up before sunrise, but I smile to myself when I think I must have really tired him out.

My heart sings at the sight of him lying there, defenseless in sleep. During the day, he's a fierce and intimidating alien alpha. But here, with just the two of us? I get to see a side of him that no one else does.

Still riding the happy high from our mini vacation, I yawn and roll over to check the notification on my tablet. When my eyes register the words, all the joy and lightness I felt winks out like an extinguished match.

Your time is nearly up. You know the right thing to do. Do not disappoint us.

The reality of the situation comes crashing in all over again, hitting me deep in the chest. Of course. It was foolish to think I could ever have a life with someone like him. I made a deal with some of the most dangerous people in the galaxy. I lied to the ISA. I lied to Ulfar.

And if I go through with this, I don't know if he'll ever forgive me.

My stomach cramps, seizing in on itself, and I press a hand to my gut with a wince. I let out a hiss at the sudden pain, and apparently it wasn't quiet enough because Ulfar shoots up in bed, concern immediately crossing his face.

"What's wrong?"

My head spins and I take a deep breath to try to hold it together. He's so kind. Always watching out for me. Always willing to lend a hand.

And this is how I repay him.

"I'm fine." I try to brush him off. I hastily clear the screen on the tablet and set it on the nightstand face down before turning back to him. "Maybe it was something I ate."

He frowns. "Do you need to see the nurse? I can take you."

"No, don't worry about it."

My tablet pings again and my panic intensifies for a brief second until I realize his comm did the same thing. So it's a message for both of us.

"You gonna get that?" I say shakily, hoping that whatever it is will change the subject.

When he pulls up the message, a coy smile flicks across his face. "Looks like you're going to the doctor after all."

"What?" I snatch the tablet from him.

This is an automated reminder that routine physicals will take place today at the central facility. All surrogates are required to attend. Thank you for your service!

Fuck! I almost throw the damn thing. So much for getting out of a doctor trip today.

“You were saying?” Ulfar says sweetly. I know he only wants the best for me, and I know I need to get this appointment taken care of, but what he doesn’t know is that if they confirm my pregnancy, I’ll be one step closer to the Syndicate. To leaving him.

I grumble and slide out of bed. Guess I’ll have to put clothes on after all.

* * *

Doesn’t matter if it’s on Earth or an alien world, the medical gowns they make you wear are never comfortable. I shift on the examination table, nervously checking my tablet while I wait for my lab results. I already know what they’re going to be. We all do.

But hearing that one simple word ‘pregnant’ in black and white will be the final nail in the coffin.

I hug my knees to my chest, willing away the fearful thoughts and trying to focus on my plan instead. When Ulfar and I left the clearing, I hid the book he gave me under a pile of leaves and rocks. Enough to where it was still visible, but easy to miss. Even though I felt terrible covering his gift with dirt like that, it was for a reason.

When Ulfar comes back to the cottage this afternoon after his meeting with Soren and the others, I’ll tell him I accidentally left my book behind. I’ll ask him to go look for it. It’s at least a half day’s trek back to the campsite, and with him gone it will give me the time I need to get off the planet.

I can't say I feel great about it, but at this point it's the best I've got. Having him here would only make it that much harder to leave. I may be strong, but even I don't think I could watch his heart shatter before me.

"Miss Khan?" The nurse's voice catches my attention and I look up, startled.

"Yes?"

She's beaming at me and holding a tablet in her hand, which can only mean one thing...

"Congratulations, my dear. You're pregnant."

And there it is. The finishing blow to my happily ever after. I try to give her a smile, but inside, my heart and my hope are melting.

I should be happy. As a child I always liked the idea of becoming a mother, but I never thought it would be...like this. Can I really go through with this, knowing that the baby will be Syndicate property? Can I really turn over my own flesh and blood to those scoundrels?

It doesn't matter. They never gave me a choice. I suck back a sob and hope it looks like tears of happiness.

"I know, isn't it exciting?" The nurse chitters on, and I'm only half listening. She pushes the tablet into my hands where it has a variety of forms and disclosures. It's probably better if I don't read the fine print in this case, so I gulp and swipe my finger dutifully across every dotted line.

"You've done the people of Aesirheim a great service. I've beamed information on next steps to your device, where you'll be able to track your baby's progress and

growth. You'll also receive reminders on follow-up appointments as well as your standing with the ISA. You will receive your stipend through the instructions in the app. Do you have any questions?"

I have a million of them, but none I can ask. Especially not to her. She's just doing her job. So I choke out a "no," and she leaves me to get dressed to leave.

* * *

I return home to an empty cottage. Ulfar must still be at his meeting, but all the better. That gives me some time to myself to strategize what to do next.

And to soak in the emotional impact of the news. I knew I was pregnant. Like Vi said, there was hardly any way I couldn't be.

But seeing it verified by the doctors reminds me that yes, this is all too real. This isn't a game or a fairy tale. This isn't one of my favorite stories where the good guys win and the couple finds a happily ever after. No. This is life. My life. And like it or not, I've been called to deal with it.

All of a sudden, the lights dim and then go out completely. I freeze, listening for any sounds, but all I hear is the eerie quietness. Maybe it was just a power failure. But these cottages are reinforced with multiple backup systems.

So what could it—

Just as soon as it started, the interruption disappears, the lights flickering back on like nothing ever happened. But on the viewing screen we use for movies, there's something else now. A notification that fills my veins with ice.

'One incoming call from Areo Khan. Do you accept?'

“Y-yes,” I stammer, eyes wide. My father. What is my father doing calling me here? And how did he bypass the network?

‘Call connecting... please stand by. For your privacy, this is a secure and encrypted feed. This call will end automatically in five minutes. Connecting now.’

The screen flashes to life, but I don’t see my dad’s face. I see just the bouncing lines of the audio levels staring back at me. A brief moment of static, and then—

“Sarah?”

I nearly burst into tears right then and there. That’s his voice all right. I didn’t realize how much I missed him, and that one single word dredges up every precious memory we have together. I know we don’t have long to talk, though. The intimidating countdown clock in the corner of the screen reminds me of that.

“Dad.” My voice comes out as little more than a whimper.

“Sarah, it’s me. We don’t have long, but I need you to know some things. Are you listening?”

“Yes,” I breathe.

“The...The dragon has flown the nest.”

To an outsider, it sounds like we’re simply discussing my favorite book series, Hidden Kingdom, but we agreed on this beforehand. It’s a code.

That means he’s not at home anymore. They’ve taken him somewhere. And that can’t be a good sign.

“Did Tanis ever find that treasure map?”

Where?

“His compass stopped working. The X didn’t mark the spot, after all.”

I don’t know.

“And what of the rangers?”

In other words, me. What will happen to me? What am I supposed to do?

“It looks like Tanis is headed back to the enclave. In the next two chapters, I bet he’ll meet up with them again. Maybe even sooner.”

Two chapters . Oh gods, that means two days. They’re coming here in two days.

“That sounds like quite the exciting book,” I intone diligently, belying the panic coiled in my gut. “I look forward to the ending. I’ll catch up on those chapters so we can continue our book club discussion. Thank you.”

There’s a lull in the discussion, having communicated the necessary message, and the timer ticks down the few minutes left.

There are so many things I want to tell him. So much weighs heavy on my heart and mind. I want to tell him about Ulfar. I want to tell him about Aesirheim. And most of all I want to tell him that I’ve changed my mind, that I want to stay here and have Ulfar’s child and live out the rest of our days together.

But I know that can’t happen. If the Syndicate could track my father down even this many years later, they could do the same to me. The cycle stops here.

“Dad?” I ask at last, voice wavering.

“Yes, my daughter?” His voice is softer now, and I can hear the tinge of exhaustion in his voice. I don’t know where they’re keeping him or if he’s in any danger, but I have to trust that the Syndicate will keep their word.

As long as I keep mine.

“I love you.” It’s what I settle on at last, but it’s far from enough. “I’ll see you soon.”

That’s the only saving grace I remind myself of as the seconds tick down. I might be leaving behind a planet and a man I’ve come to love, but I’m doing this for the sake of my family and my homeland.

Just like my dad did for me so many years ago.

“I’ll be waiting,” he says. “You are stronger than you think, Sarah. They may have our bodies, but they will never own our spirits. Remember that, my child.”

And with that, the connection cuts out, the lights dim once more, and the network resets just in time for Ulfar to open the door. I wrap my hands around my chest, bringing in my knees and trying to be as small as possible. I want to disappear. I want to go back, to make better choices, to change things. But how can I?

I am just one woman against a merciless galaxy. In the stories, the good guys always come out on top, no matter the odds.

But in real life? I’m faced with the cold indifference of fate. All I have to do now is stand tall and walk forward into the flames.

“Sarah!” He calls out in alarm, dropping his bag and rushing to my side. “What’s

wrong? What happened at the doctor's? Are you hurt?"

Not physically.

I sniff and wipe my eyes with my sleeve. I pack every emotion, every fear and feeling into a neat little box and lock it away, for both our sakes. "No, I'm not hurt." I look up at him through tear-blurred vision and smile through the pain. "The book you gave me, I can't find it, and I feel really bad because it was a gift."

He furrows his brow. "Did you look in the bedroom? Where we unpacked?"

"Yeah." Now for the hard part. "Do you think I could have left it at the campsite by mistake?" My face reddens at the memory. "We were a bit distracted by other things at the time."

Ulfar frowns. "Could be, but let's check everywhere around the house first. If we can't find it, I'll go and get it for you tomorrow. Deal?"

My heart thuds out a painful melody in my ears. A train hurtling down the tracks toward a certain disaster, and it's too late to pull the brakes. "Deal."

One last night with the man I've grown to love. One last night on this beautiful alien world. That's all I can let myself have. But for tonight? With the last moments of my freedom, I'm going to make sure it's a night to remember.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:53 am

STARBOUND

SARAH

I 'm up long past when Ulfar finally passes out, staring up at the skylight and thinking about my future. The cold, unfeeling stars twinkle back at me, oblivious to my plight. This is the last time I'll see them. This is the last time I'll lie in this bed.

Rolling over, I look at Ulfar one last time. His handsome face is relaxed in the peacefulness of slumber, and from this angle he looks almost like a statue of some ancient god. Outside of this cottage, he's a powerful and intimidating warlord, but with me? He's kind and gentle and the most caring man I've ever met.

Except he's no man.

With a sigh, I wonder if I'll ever find anyone like him again. He's basically ruined me for human men at this point, but the galaxy is large. Maybe one day I can save up and come back. Or visit another planet in the system. One where I won't have to worry about the Syndicate ever again.

This is it. The moment it was all leading up to. I don't know if I've got the courage to pull it off, but I've got to try.

First things first, though—I have to get Ulfar out of the house and make sure he doesn't suspect anything. He's planning to ride out to the campsite to look for my book today. It breaks my heart that I won't get to take it with me. I had to sacrifice his gift to use as a decoy.

The guilt and betrayal twist like a knife deep in my heart, but with it is also the fear of what will happen if I don't do this. So I take a deep breath and decide to give him the best parting gift I can think of.

Lifting the blankets, I duck my head underneath and move carefully between his legs, admiring the warm weight of his cock. He's got morning wood already, and the golden skin stretches taut over his thick shaft. My mouth waters at the sight. Dipping my head down, I press my tongue to the underside of his shaft, licking up until I reach the bulging head. The taste of him explodes on my tongue, shooting pleasure straight between my thighs as I adjust myself further.

His cock twitches under my tongue as I lick it again. I swirl my tongue around the head, tasting and savoring the drop of precum that forms there. I can still hear him breathing softly and easily. He hasn't moved. I wonder if I can make him cum like this.

As I open my mouth wider and suck the head between my lips, he lets out a sleepy moan. The sound of his pleasure drives me to do the same and I sigh around him, the vibrations of my throat stimulating him even more.

"Nngh," he mumbles sleepily, finally rousing enough to prop up on his elbows and toss the blanket off of me.

I look up at him, mouth full of cock, but my eyes are wide and loving. I know this will be the last time I'll get to see him like this, so I want to etch it into my memory as much as possible.

"Not that I'm complaining, but what's this all about?" he says with a smile, running a hand through his hair.

"What's the matter, you don't like it?" I give him another lick from root to tip while

squeezing his shaft with one hand while my other hand gently caresses his balls.

Ulfar throws back his head and hisses. “It’s not that, just, ahh—” His voice cracks as I suck him into my mouth again, even deeper than before. He’s so big I can barely fit anything past the head, but he tastes so damn good I find myself opening wider and wider for him.

“Sarah,” he pants, lifting his head to make eye contact with me again. “That’s really...you’re gonna...”

Spurred on by his exclamation, I swirl my tongue around the head and use my other hand to cup his balls, rolling them between my fingers before tugging them gently. The unexpected pressure sends him over the edge, shouting a curse as his fingers dig into my scalp.

Loads of hot, sticky semen burst into my mouth before I can react, dribbling over the sides of my lips when I can’t hold any more. It’s warm and slightly salty but has a musk and texture that’s uniquely him .

After swallowing as much as I can and wiping my lips, I look up at him with a flushed, hazy expression. The knowledge of what I’m going to have to do still weighs in the back of my mind, but at least this way, I have something to remember him by. “Good morning,” I say sweetly.

“Good morning to you too,” he says, still awestruck. “That was amazing.”

“I saw you were already hard this morning; I couldn’t just let that go to waste, could I?” I nudge him playfully.

“You’re ridiculous,” he teases back, ruffling my hair. “But that definitely woke me up, so I’m going to get ready to head out and get that book you left behind at the

campsite. Anything else you need me to pick up while I'm out?"

I shake my head. "No, that's it."

It will take almost a full day to get there, by which point I'll hopefully be long gone.

"Are you sure you're going to be all right here by yourself?" He lingers at the door, and he's not making this any easier.

"I'm sure," I insist. "Now go, you're losing daylight."

"All right," he says. "I'll see you soon."

"See you." The words hit harder than any physical blow. And with that, he's gone.

The cottage fills with an eerie quiet and the finality of what I have to do. I don't allow myself to dwell on it. I can't. If I stop to think, I'll change my mind and get cold feet. I can't let that happen.

So I turn my brain over to autopilot and go through the motions, throwing as many of my things into a bag as I can. I don't stop for anything that's not a necessity—I'll need to travel light where I'm going—but as I head for the door my gaze lingers on a hair clip on the mantelpiece. Intricately carved from the bone of an alien beast, it's inset with one of the heart-stones from the place Vi and I visited. Ulfar carved it for me. As a gift.

I sigh. It's just one of the many things he's done for me. One of the many ways he's gone above and beyond. I close my eyes and let out a breath. Tears start to well up, but I sniff them away. Then, I snatch the hair clip and shove it into my pocket before heading out the door and into the pale dawn.

First order of business—I need to see Vi. I already planned on getting lunch with her today anyway, but this is a little more urgent than that. She’s probably still sleeping at this hour, but I have to hope she won’t be too mad at me for waking her up.

When I knock on the door, hand shaking, it takes a few moments for her to answer. I’m about to give up and try calling her comm instead when the door opens, showing a very sleepy-looking Vi. Her eyes light up when she sees me, and she ushers me inside.

“Did I miss a memo or something? I thought we weren’t meeting until lunch today. Oh crap, did I sleep until lunch again?” She checks the time on her wrist and yelps. “It’s still the ass-crack of dawn, girl! What’s going on?”

Her mate, Djorn, steps into the picture, eyeing me warily. “Is this your friend?” he says in a low, rumbling voice that sounds like thunder. He’s just as tall and broad as Ulfar, and just as intimidating. He wears a large pelt draped over his shoulders, but his scarred, muscular chest is on full display. Are all Aesirheim males this huge? I resist the urge to turn away, and stand my ground.

“I’m Sarah,” I say, sticking my hand out to greet him. “Vi’s my friend. Nice to meet you.”

Djorn grunts. He doesn’t take any action to shake my hand, just continues watching me with those dark, deep-set eyes. Like a predator sizing up his prey, and not in the sexy way. “Veronica needs her sleep. She’s not been resting well, and she’s—”

“Oh, can it, Djorn.” I gasp at the irreverent way she speaks to him. I could never. “I can speak for myself. Now get out so the pregnant ladies can talk.”

I watch, shocked, at both her crass declaration and his reaction. What surprises me even more is that he actually seems to listen to her. He bows his head like an obedient

puppy. “As you wish, my love.” Djorn turns and leaves the room, and I hear the bedroom door shut behind him.

Vi watches him go, then turns back to me with arms crossed and an eyebrow raised. “All right, out with it. I knew something was up with you ever since we met at the center. Tried to give you the benefit of the doubt, we all got baggage after all. But you’re here with your bags like you’re going somewhere, and you’ve got this look on your face like you’ve seen a ghost...what’s going on, Sarah? Tell me.”

All the fear and stress and emotion of the situation crumbles around me. I have to tell someone, and it might as well be her. She wouldn’t betray me to the surrogacy agency, and maybe she can even help me get out of here. Because as much as I’d like to, I don’t think I can do this alone.

I sway on my feet, a sudden wave of dizziness washing over me. Vi guides me to the couch, where I sit down heavily. She takes the seat next to me, folding her hands and leaning forward. Her intense gaze doesn’t waver. Her brash personality is still there, but this time it’s tempered by genuine concern.

“All right,” I say at last, glancing around to see if anyone else is watching or listening. I don’t know if they have little recorders in these places to check up on us. Wouldn’t surprise me if they did. So I gesture for her to come closer. “I’ll tell you. But you can’t tell a soul, you got that? Not even Djorn. I’m serious.”

Her expression doesn’t change. She simply gives me a curt nod and signals for me to continue.

“So here’s what happened...”

* * *

“Shit, Sarah. I knew you had baggage, but this is...” She runs a hand through her undercut hair, letting out a breath. “I’ve dealt with them before. It’s not pretty.”

A chill runs down my spine at the thought, but also a sense of relief. She knows who I’m talking about. She knows I’m not crazy.

“What do you need?” Vi asks. Her face falls into a grimace. “Or rather, what are they asking?”

“I’ve got to get off the planet. My family, my entire home, is in danger if I don’t.”

She lets out a low whistle. “Even with your...” Vi gestures at my stomach. I can’t work up with words from the lump in my throat, so I just nod. “Okay. But it’s going to be dangerous, and if something happens, I can’t protect you.”

“I know.” It hurts, but I know.

“Here’s what we can do. I’ll help you get to the spaceport, but you gotta promise me something.”

“And what’s that?”

Her expression softens. “Leave a message for that man of yours.” She sees the shock on my face, and adds, “Oh, come on, I know you love him. Anyone could see that.”

Love . The word hits so much deeper when I know I might never see him again. “What would I even say? Will he understand?” I let out a shuddering breath. “Will he hate me?”

Vi thinks for a moment, then leans forward and squeezes my hand. “I don’t know. But if he’s anything like Djorn, he’ll want you to be safe. Whatever that means for

you. Hell, he'd probably go in guns blazing if he had the chance. But if you really care for him, Sarah, let him know. I'll help you write a message, and I can give it to him."

I really can't stop the tears now. As they tumble over my cheeks, I squeeze her hand in return. "Okay. Let's do this."

* * *

"Jeez, Sarah, act natural. If you keep jumping at every little thing, people are gonna think you're suspicious."

"But I am suspicious." I can't help it. The spaceport buzzes with activity, and humans and aliens come and go from every angle. Even with the crowd, I can't help but feel like I'm being watched. Like any moment someone will recognize me and haul me back to the center to face judgment by the ISA. Or worse, throw me straight into a prison cell.

"That's irrelevant." She waves her hand dismissively. "I know it's easier said than done, but if you wanna get out of here in one piece, you have got to look the part. Take a deep breath and say it with me, 'I'm supposed to be here.'"

I gulp. "I'm...supposed to be here?" Not very convincing.

Vi chuckles. "We'll work on it. Come on, let's check the timetables."

We weave through the throngs of people until we get to the giant holo board that shows all the arrivals and departures. Each row also has a capacity indicator that shows how full each car is, which is helpful for me because I want the transport to be as empty as possible if I can help it. After the last few cryptic messages from the Syndicate, I know I need to catch one of the shuttles to Yarilo-V Space Station, and

that they should have a messenger in wait to ‘collect the cargo.’

Maybe it’s just the sheer amount of stress, or maybe it’s morning sickness (probably both), but I nearly puke at the thought.

“Stay with me,” Vi urges, squeezing my hand again. “Yarilo-V, right?”

“Right.”

“Looks like there’s one here in an hour, but it’s full to bursting. Totally overbooked, no more seats available.”

I groan. “Aren’t there any others?”

She shakes her head. “Not til tomorrow.” Then she perks up, tapping her lip. “I’ve got an idea.” Vi turns to me, a mischievous grin on her face.

“Oh no, I don’t like that expression.”

“Do you want to get out of here or not?” she quips, looking me up and down. “Now...how do you feel about small spaces?”

“Uhhh...why?” I have an idea, but I don’t like where this is going...

“Yarilo-V is a giant economic hub station. Traders go in and out of there all the time with millions of different imports and exports. And it says this shuttle here is making a resupply stop at the station after landing. You know what that means?”

“That I have to exit through the gift shop?”

“No, that they’re bringing tons of empty storage containers to carry the goods back to

Aesirheim with them.”

The connotation finally sinks in, and my mouth drops open. “You want me to... what?”

* * *

This is either the smartest or the most stupid idea I’ve ever had in my life. I’m sitting hunched up in the fetal position inside a dark metal box, hoping I’ll get loaded onto the right ship at the right time. Vi distracted the couriers long enough for me to slip inside, and now I’m a sitting duck.

There are small slats in the metal for ventilation and I can see slivers of activity if I press my face to the cold walls. I hear voices and announcements echoing around me and then a shudder of movement. A mechanical whirring vibrates the container and I watch the spaceport pass us by. A smoother transition, then a slow sliding motion as the container tilts upward. We must be on a conveyor belt. I try to remember what the cargo loading area looks like.

A loud hiss and then the container tilts again, landing with a bone-jarring thump. I wince, but since it’s a small space and there are several tie-downs hanging from the walls, I’m able to grab on and steady myself. Now as long as the takeoff goes smoothly...

“Now departing Aesirheim Central Spaceport. This is the Starbound Shuttle with nonstop service to Yarilo-V Space Station. If you do not wish to go to Yarilo-V, please disembark immediately. All others, fasten your seatbelts and prepare for takeoff. Thank you for flying Starbound!”

As the engines roar to life, I can’t hold it back any longer. I pull out my tablet, send the confirmation code to the special contact to let them know I’m on my way, then

lean my head against the wall and cry my heart out.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:53 am

ADVICE FROM ORRI

ULFAR

It doesn't make any sense. I find the book easily enough, but it's so obviously put there on purpose. Why would she do such a thing, and then send me all the way out here to retrieve it?

Pulling the book out from under a pile of leaves and dirt, I brush it off the best I can with the hem of my shirt. If she didn't put it here, then who? Narrowing my eyes, I scan my surroundings and listen for any movement. Only the sound of the wind and the casual waves of the lake come back to greet me.

Something is off here. But the more I think about it, the more I can't figure out what it is. The thought eats at me like a thorn piercing my skin, and by the time I return to Enebris, I'm thoroughly confused.

This isn't like me. I'm an alpha, a warrior, and one of the elite few that served under Soren in the great war. So why can't I figure out this one small thing?

As I slip the book into Enebris's saddlebags, even she can tell something's up.

"I don't know, girl." I swing myself up onto her back and look up at the darkening sky. It's nearly sundown, taking me all day to get here, but I'm too antsy to stay the night. I need answers. "What do you think, huh?" I ask Enebris, leaning against her long neck and petting her mane, deep in thought.

She merely grunts in response, blowing air out through her teeth and pawing at the soft earth. Just as impatient as I am, I guess. I had planned on camping the night and then returning in the morning, but I don't think either of us would get much sleep tonight. So I turn around and urge Enebris forward into the setting sun.

* * *

The night wears on, but every step brings me closer to Sarah. To my home. And that's what it is, I realize with a great weight in my chest. Whatever happens, I want to be where she is. I didn't expect her to be anything more than a means to an end when this all started. A box to check off. A duty to perform. But she's so much more than that.

Every time I think about her radiant smile, her soft curves, or the innocent, vulnerable look on her face when she's fast asleep, I spur Enebris a little bit faster. It's well after midnight by the time we reach the outskirts of the main village, and farther still to reach the ISA cottages. There's a stable near there for my mount.

I'm debating whether to continue on back to the cottage, risking waking Sarah up in the middle of the night, when I see the light click on in my friend Orri's home.

He's up—but why?

My curiosity drives me forward, and before I know it I'm knocking at his door. Orri answers after a moment, eyes red and ringed with sleep deprivation. "Ulfar..." he starts, looking past me. "What are you doing here? And Enebris, too. What's wrong?"

"May I come in? I need to talk to you about something."

He looks over his shoulder. "Let me check with Bella. The babies have been keeping us up all hours of the night."

And sure enough, I hear the telltale wail of a fussy child coming from inside the house. That could be me soon, I realize. “Go ahead.” I wave him away. “Another few minutes out here isn’t gonna kill me.” It’s cold, but I’ve been through worse.

Orri chuckles, then goes back into the house. He returns a few moments later with his mate Isabella in tow. She’s holding an infant in her arms and looks even more exhausted, if that’s possible. “Come in, Ulfar. You’ll get sick if you stay out there all night.” I take Enebris and put my mount into their stable. She’ll be fine in there while I have this conversation.

Finally out of the darkness, I set down my gear and look around the small cottage. It’s nice—filled with handicrafts and soft, natural accents that make the place feel like an extension of the outdoors. A toddler, no more than a few years old, sits on the ground teething at a soft ring. Wide eyes look up at me, the cries stopping immediately as they take in the sight of the newcomer.

“Looks like they’ve been a handful,” I observe with a smile. I extend my hand toward the little one in Isabella’s arms, and the baby reaches out in turn, tiny digits gripping my index finger.

So small. So soft. Something melts inside of me at the touch, and it’s not even my child. Stars only know how much of a mess I’ll be when it’s my own kid. Speaking of which...

“I wanted to ask you something,” I start again, folding my hands and trying to find the words. I tilt my head at the couch, lined with animal pelts and looking warm and comforting after the long overnight trek. “May I?”

Orri nods, and I sigh in relief after taking a load off. “It’s about my assigned omega. Sarah.”

He gives me a knowing glance, then turns to Isabella and the children. “Why don’t you take these two back to bed? I won’t be long.”

“All right,” she says. “But don’t stay up too late. Come on, let’s go.” And with a surprisingly little amount of sniffing, the little one follows her, leaving us alone in the living room.

“So what’s this all about?” Orri asks at last. He sits down in the chair opposite mine, leaning forward and resting his chin on his hands. “It must be pretty serious for you to come all the way out here in the dead of night.” His face blanches for a moment. “Your mate, Sarah, she’s not...”

I bite back a curse. Of course he’d go there—he lost his first mate in a battle so many years ago. I should have known better than to worry him like that. Already I see flickers of that old memory flaring up, haunting his usually bright eyes.

“No, no!” I shake my head, trying to reassure him. “I’m sorry, it’s nothing like that. It’s more that...” I rub the back of my neck. It feels so weird to be open like this. I’ve never been good with my feelings. Always figured they were for other people to make a fit about. Not me. But this whole alpha and omega thing has thrown everything I know into question, and I’m desperate for answers. So I swallow my pride and continue.

“Sarah’s...been confusing, to say the least. One minute she’s happy and the next, she seems upset about something. Every time I talk about her family or her home world, she tenses up and won’t tell me what’s going on. I thought everything was going great, we even had a mini vacation and I told her about my intentions, but then she sends me on this wild aki chase to find a book she left behind, and I don’t know why.”

Orri thinks for a moment, then straightens. “Hmm. It does seem like she’s struggling

with something. Bella and I had our own share of struggles. You know well what happened between Zannah and I. Took a long time to come to terms with that. An even longer time to open up to Bella about it. She had scars too, but over time we managed to find a rhythm that worked for us.”

I stare at the ground, grimacing. “I’ve been trying, but it feels like it’s been one step forward and two steps back. I don’t know what I’m doing wrong.”

“Let me ask you this,” Orri says, voice lowering and becoming more serious. “Do you resonate with her? Do you think she is your heart-mate?”

Even the word activates something deep within me, a primal longing that can’t just be hormones alone. “Yes. I feel her within me, filling up all the spaces I never knew were empty. She is the one for me, Orri. I know it.” I pause and let out a sigh. “But I don’t know if she feels the same.”

He reaches out and pats his hand on mine. “You’re a smart man, Ulfar. We’ve traveled together, fought together, faced death together. And I can’t hope to know what’s going through your head right now, but I know how scared and conflicted I felt when Isabella resonated within me.” Orri’s face turns wistful for only a second, but then he continues.

“You and I, we’re soldiers. Always have been, always will be. That’s what we were trained for. And that’s still how our brain operates, even now. So look at it like a war campaign. Look at the lay of the land, as it were. Check your resources, do the necessary recon. Come up with strategies to achieve your objective, and of course, counter measures in the inevitable case that something goes awry.”

I nod, furrowing my brow in thought. It makes sense on the surface, but it’s always easier said than done.

“And Ulfar?” he pipes up once more. “Even if you do all that, you have to be prepared for the reality that she may not feel the same. She may not choose you, no matter what you do.” Orri’s throat bobs with emotion. “So understand that even the most well-planned campaign can have casualties.”

It’s a hard truth and sits heavy in my stomach, but that’s why Orri and I are friends. We’ve been there for each other through thick and thin, and he knows how to give it to me straight, even if it’s not what I want to hear.

So I lean back, mull over Orri’s suggestions, and try to come up with a plan. I’m just getting up to leave when I feel Orri’s hand on my chest.

“Hey. Don’t overdo it trying to rush back there tonight. You’ll be much clearer-headed in the morning, and it will be better for the both of you, believe me.”

“But she needs to—” He doesn’t understand. This urgency, this pull to be with my heart-mate, threatens to drown out all logic. If I can’t be with her, if I can’t find a way to make this right, I don’t know what I’ll do. And now that I have at least some semblance of a plan, I can’t wait around any longer. I have to take action.

Orri cuts me off, his stern expression one I’ve only seen on the battlefield. “She needs her sleep, and so do you. Stay here tonight. Go to her in the morning.”

I huff out a breath. The spinning in my brain slows, but only slightly. I grumble, looking up at him. “Is that an order?”

He gives me a sad smile and shakes his head. “It’s my recommendation, as your friend. Stay here tonight and get some rest. I’ll even make breakfast in the morning.”

I want to fight him on this, but I’m losing energy despite my anxiety to be with her as soon as possible. I’ve been traveling for nearly twenty-four hours straight. Maybe it

wouldn't be so bad to take a quick nap.

“Fine,” I say at last, pulling a fur off the couch and draping it over myself. “But I want those crispy skins you used to make for us when we were on patrol.”

He huffs out an amused breath and turns for the hallway. “I’ll see what I can wrangle up. Good night, my friend.”

“Good night, Orri. Thank you for talking some sense into me.”

“Any time. Good night.”

And with that, he clicks off the lights, leaving only the stars to watch over me.

In the morning , I repeat in my mind before sleep takes me. Wait for me, Sarah. I’m coming.

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Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:53 am

ALL ALONE

SARAH

I wake, groggy and disoriented, to the sound of sirens. On instinct, I call out Ulfar's name. And that's when the grim reality sets in.

He's not here anymore. I left him. And now I'm a pregnant stowaway on a ship to the nearest space station, where I'll willingly turn myself over to the most ruthless gang in the galaxy.

The sirens get louder, and I struggle to my feet. I can't see much from inside the small shipping container, and I try to peer through the small opening to no avail. My heart leaps into my throat, pounding furiously with every ear-splitting bleat of the alarm. I've got to get out of here!

I clamber around in the darkness, groping the walls in an attempt to find an escape latch. With a blinding suddenness, light fills the cargo hold at the same time an automated voice broadcasts over the speaker system.

Attention, all personnel: please evacuate all passengers to the cargo bay immediately. This is not a drill. Repeat, this is not a drill.

The cargo hold. Oh god! That means they're coming here! I beat at the walls ever more desperately, squinting against the sudden light. At last I find a mechanical lever that locks the container from the inside. Grunting, I throw all my weight behind it, wincing as the squeal of metal assaults my eardrums. With a final cry, the latch

comes free and I shove open the door just far enough to squeeze myself out.

Just in time for the cabin to fill with dozens of terrified passengers. I try to act natural and mingle among them. No one will care about a stowaway while the ship is under attack, but I don't want to take my chances.

A thunderous boom rocks the ship, knocking over everything that isn't tied down. Including us. I fall to the ground and my knee clangs against the hard metal floor. I cry out, pain shooting up my leg, but I'm far from the only one struggling. The entire cargo bay's transformed into a swelling, undulating mass of panicked passengers. More and more people fill the hold. Running, panting, screaming.

It's pandemonium, and I know deep in my gut the reason.

They're here.

"Stay away from the doors!" yells one of the ship's crew, bracing the exits with humming vibro-shields. Everyone packs in even tighter, making it harder to move or even breathe. Another jolt crashes into the ship, the alarms blaring even louder.

A deep, low thud echoes just beyond the doors. I freeze, unable to tear my eyes away.

Thud. The shields flicker, trying their best to withstand the assault.

Thud. Another flicker, and this time they blink out for an instant before coming back online.

Thud! The loudest yet. The shields fizzle and fade with an explosion of electricity. Sparks shower from the door like a firework.

With an awful, ear-rending screech, the door tears open, revealing the intruders at

last.

Masked, armored men storm into the hold, guns drawn. I can barely hear their commands over the clamor of panicked passengers and wailing klaxons. A horrible thought crosses my mind—maybe I should have stayed in that cramped container.

What if they're here for me?

The flashlights attached to their guns flare back and forth, blinding me when they zero in on my location. I try to hide behind a pile of boxes, but it's too late.

"Over here!" one of the soldiers calls into a headset. I back up, try to turn and run, but it's a dead end. They've got me cornered, and more soldiers are closing in fast.

With my night vision ruined by the glare of their flashlights, I can't tell what's happening in the rest of the cargo bay. I hear screams. Shouting. A crash, then...gunshots.

Silence.

Steel-toed combat boots stomp toward my location and a gloved hand shoots out, grabbing me by the shoulder, hard. I lose my balance and topple backward, but it doesn't matter. The mysterious assailant yanks me upright, clapping thick metal cuffs on my wrist before I can react.

"Get your hands off of me!" I scream, trying to aim a good kick between the man's legs. He came prepared for that too, using his own foot to hit the back of my knees. I crumple before him, cuffed and in pain, watching with horrified eyes as the men haul trunk-loads of expensive exports away. They don't seem to be taking anyone else prisoner, though, from what I can see with my limited vision.

Just me.

“Be good and follow along nicely, or I’ll have to knock you out.” He brandishes a vicious-looking syringe at me, and the sight of the glowing green liquid sends enough extra adrenaline down my spine to force me to my feet.

I try to be careful and watch where I step, but it’s not easy to keep my balance with the cuffs they’ve put on me. There are ankle cuffs too, just far enough apart for me to take awkward, shuffling steps forward. That, and a thick metal chain connects the wrist cuffs to a lead held by the soldier, ensuring I’m not going to go anywhere.

And where would I even go? This is a star shuttle in the midst of outer space. We’re a captive audience inside this metal shell. I’d never make it to an escape pod in time, especially in this condition, and it’s not like I can just leave out the door and make a run for it. Exposed to the lightless vacuum of space, I’d be dead in mere moments.

So I shuffle along, follow my cruel captors, and pray for the safety of my baby. For both our sakes.

As the airlock hisses closed and we’re boarding the other ship, I hear a chilling command from a highly decorated man who looks to be their leader.

“The others? No, don’t need ‘em. Leave none alive.”

My mouth drops open and I crane my head back to the ship, even as they shove me into a seat and the Syndicate vessel starts moving.

“No!” I yell against the empty blackness. I pound at the windows, but this time no alien in shining armor is going to come to my aid. The engines accelerate, the guards standing stoic and motionless while watching my every move. My wrists and ankles bound together, a chain attached to a nearby post like I’m some sort of dog. And

maybe that's all I am to them.

A piece of meat to be bought and sold. A bargaining chip. My hand goes to my stomach, where my baby has started to grow.

Nothing but a breeding vessel to give them more slaves.

I watch the Starbound, dark and derelict, as it grows smaller and smaller in the viewport.

"Do it," one of the guards says with a nod, and there's an ominous clicking sound. An explosion rocks the plundered shuttle, and with a sickening horror I see a crowd of tiny dots rushing out of the back end of the ship.

Oh my god. Those were people . They opened the airlock and jettisoned everyone left on the ship!

I can't keep quiet anymore. "How could you?!" I scream, stumbling to my feet and lunging for one of the guards. The chain stops me from going anywhere. "They were innocent!"

"They could have informed the authorities. Now calm down and go back to your assigned seat. You don't want me to get the warden, do you?"

I'm past the point of caring. Only the distant hope of my child's life keeps me from throwing it away completely. "You already got what you wanted, didn't you?" There are angry tears in my eyes, pain throbbing through my heart as I think of all the lives lost. They did nothing wrong. They were simply on the wrong shuttle at the wrong time...and it was all my fault. "You took me, I went with you and was good like you said!"

“That’s not enough. The Syndicate can’t afford any counterintelligence that could interfere with our initiatives. We simply had to eliminate the threat, that’s all.”

My stomach cramps, and I double over, one dry heave after another seizing up my muscles. My eyes burn and water, and yet still the guard sneers down at me like I’m some useless animal.

“Is that all they are to you?” I pant between labored breaths. “Just a ‘threat’? Just a number on a screen? What about all the families? All the lives you’ve ruined?”

“Irrelevant. Give up. There’s nothing you can do.”

“Are you even listening to me?” My voice breaks and I lunge toward him again. All my fight-or-flight instincts are kicking in. If not for myself, for my baby. I’ve got to get us out of here, and I’m ready to fight tooth and nail to do it.

Turns out a small human female against armored Syndicate goons doesn’t stand much of a chance. I know I’m outmatched, but I’m going to go down swinging.

I wrap my arms around the guard’s midsection, trying to head-butt him in the stomach and maybe grab the keys while he’s doubled over, but before I can blink he’s got me in a headlock and I’m struggling, gasping for air.

“Should have been a good girl and listened,” he hisses as I feel the sharp prick of a needle at my neck. There’s a final burst of panic, and then everything goes dark.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:54 am

A HEART-MATE'S VOW

ULFAR

O rri was right—not that I'd ever admit that to him. He'd never let me live it down.

A few hours of rest did me good. I wake feeling refreshed and more settled than I have since I left Sarah to head back to the campsite. After eating a quick breakfast and saying goodbye to Orri, Isabella, and the little ones, I get back on the road toward the cottages.

It won't be long now, and she'll be in my arms again. The entire ride there, I think about what Orri suggested. How I need to look at every angle. Think about how she feels and react accordingly. Of course, there is also the nagging realization that no matter what I do, she still might reject me.

That stings, but the urgency of it makes me push Enebris faster. I have to know for sure.

While we're following the riverbank back to the small village where the surrogate cottages are gathered, I notice one of Sarah's favorite flowers. She'd pointed it out to me on one of our late-night walks. A pale green center surrounded by thin white petals that spread out in three overlapping layers.

I pick a few and carefully wrap them in my furs. It will be a nice gift, a gesture of my affection. At least, that's how we court others on my world. I can only hope she feels the same.

When I reach the vicinity of the cottages, right away I can tell something's up. Usually her smell lingers in the air like the freshest perfume, calling me in like a beacon of hope and happiness. But as I walk through the deserted streets, there's none of that. My heart's pounding when I hitch Enebris outside and hurriedly punch in the code for the door.

"Sarah?" I call out, tearing through each of the rooms in turn. "Sarah? Hello? I'm back, and I brought you something!"

She's not here. That deep gnawing feeling grows stronger before taking up residence in my heart. I let out a breath and close my eyes. I backtrack on everything that happened before I left. Sarah and I both received a message that she needed a checkup at the medical center, we spent time together, and then she was going to visit her friend Vi.

A new worry dawns on me. What if something went wrong with the checkup that she didn't tell me about? What if she had to return to the medical facility, alone and too scared to talk to me?

It's as good a lead as any. So even though I want to wait here for her to come back, I have to go after her. If there's a chance she's in danger...

I won't stand for it.

Enebris huffs and looks at me with wide, confused eyes when I return so soon, strapping on the saddle and bridle all over again. "I know, girl," I say as I pet her. "I know you're tired, but just a little bit more for me, okay?" I tilt my head toward her and she boops the tip of her snout against my forehead. It's a gesture of trust and friendship we've built over the many long years we've grown and traveled and fought together.

“Just like old times,” I mumble to myself, mounting up and riding off toward the horizon once more.

* * *

Just as I’m about to reach the gated walls of the central ISA facility, I see another aki rider approaching out of the corner of my vision. They’re gaining fast and heading right toward me.

My hand strays to my weapon, my thighs squeezing tighter around Enebris’s back to let her know to stay alert. They don’t appear to have any weapons or even a proper saddle, it looks like. Maybe a child off on a joyride? The rider seems awfully small, and it’s not unheard of for the little ones to break into the stables before they’re ready.

But then the aki draws closer, and I realize with a shock that it’s not a child at all. It’s a woman. A human woman.

“Wait!” she cries out as soon as I’m in earshot.

Now I’m more curious than threatened. What in all the stars is a human woman doing chasing me down on an aki ? Aesirheim warriors take years of training and bonding to be able to control their mounts properly. And here she is, bounding toward us like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

If the situation weren’t so strange, I’d be impressed.

“Whoa.” I pull up on the reins, signaling Enebris to slow down. I want to see what she’s come all the way out here to say. Maybe she even knows something about Sarah.

The woman pulls up beside us at last, hair wild and windswept as she pants for breath. She looks familiar but my brain is too frazzled to remember.

“What is the meaning of this?” I ask.

“You’re Ulfar, right?”

“I am.” Another jolt of adrenaline. Oh stars, what if something really did happen to her?

“I’m Vi, Sarah’s friend. We’re both surrogates. She asked me to deliver a message to you.”

My eyebrows rise. I nearly drop the reins. “A message? Why? What’s wrong?”

“It’s...complicated.” She grimaces. “And not here. If you wanna see your girl again, get your ass in gear and follow me!”

I look over my shoulder at the tall, sterile white gates of the ISA. Then back at this wild woman riding one of our mounts and yelling at me to follow. Two paths diverged.

Is this what Orri was talking about when he said I had to consider all of the variables?

“She’s not in there,” Vi points out, gesturing at the center. “I saw her just recently, she gave me this letter. You can read it if you like, do that smell thing you alphas do. But we need to talk, and it can’t be here.”

With one last glance at the ISA complex, I square my shoulders and sink into battle mode. Nodding, I turn Enebris around and we rush off into the unknown.

Minutes later, we're inside Vi and Djorn's cottage and I'm poring over the handwritten letter. With every word, every sentence, my heart sinks further.

She cared. All this time, she cared.

So why did she have to leave?

"Do you believe me now?" Vi says after I read the note for the tenth time. I don't know what I'm expecting—for Sarah to pop out of the page or something?—but this is the last connection I have to her. The letter doesn't say why or where she's going, just that she had to leave and it wasn't her choice.

That she loved me.

"Where is she?" I croak, putting the letter down on the table and looking up at Vi. "Why would she do this? Why didn't she say something?"

A shadow passes over her face. "We all have secrets. Some of them are so big they eat us alive."

"But do you know what happened to her? Is she—" My throat closes up at the terrible thought. "Alive?"

"Oh, she's alive all right," Vi sighs. "They'll make sure of that." Then, under her breath, "Bastards."

"What are you talking about?" Part of me doesn't want to know, but I have to find her and discover the truth. I have to know what she's been hiding all this time.

"Tell me, Ulfar," she says at last, folding her arms. "Have you ever heard of the Syndicate?"

* * *

I haven't lost a lot of battles in my life, but one stands out among the rest. Soren, Rathgar, Orri and I were on a patrol mission through the outer reaches, looking for an illegal smuggling operation run by an organization called the Syndicate. We thought it would be an easy smash-and-grab operation. It wasn't.

We lost too many good men that day. Realized just how extensive their network reached, how much influence and firepower they brought to bear on their enemies. Even now sometimes I wake up panting from a nightmare reliving that awful day.

And now, Sarah has been taken by them. By the only enemy that's ever bested me. By the very thugs that still haunt my sleep at night.

I thought it couldn't get any worse when Vi told me the Syndicate was involved, but then she dropped an even bigger bomb on my heart:

They wanted the child.

My—no, our child.

A fury the likes of which I've never felt before surges through my veins, activating every possessive alpha instinct I have to claim, pillage, and destroy. Our intelligence showed that the Syndicate's forces had been largely wiped out years ago. I thought they were a long-lost foe, nothing more than a specter of the past haunting my memories.

But they fooled us once again.

I won't let them slip through my fingers twice.

“Thank you for letting me know,” I tell Vi, pressing my fist to my chest in gratitude. “You have done me a great service, and I am in your debt.”

She waves me off. “Oh, hush with all that formal crap. I don’t need anything in return. Go get your girl and give ‘em hell.”

I bark out a laugh. I like this one. She’s feisty. “That I can do.” I head for the door, rapidly formulating a plan in my mind. “May the stars guide you, Vi.”

“And you, Ulfar.”

With a salute, I’m back on the move. I know I can’t go to the ISA with this. They wouldn’t take kindly to one of their ‘assets’ going missing. It was my responsibility to look out for her, after all. I failed in my job as a man and as an alpha, and now I’m going to make it right.

The ISA with their regulations and red tape would take too long. Sarah could be on a Syndicate slaver ship right now, jetting off to who knows where. I have to catch up with them, and fast.

And to do that, I’m going to need a little help from my friends.

“Soren, you there?” I tap the comm at my ear as I ride toward our village. He’s the war leader and my superior, so he needs to know about this.

“What’s up, Ulfar? Thought you were on leave.”

“Change of plans. The Syndicate’s back.”

“What?! Are you serious?”

“Dead.” The wind whooshes through my hair and across Enebris’s fur. My eyes burn and my muscles ache, but I’ve come too far to stop now.

“How did you hear about this? What happened, Ulfar? Do I need to sound the alarm?”

“It’s my mate, Sarah. They took her. Right from under our noses.”

Soren’s curses are drowned out by the sound of a wailing siren echoing from his location. “Damn! Thanks for the intel—grab the boys and let’s move.”

The comm line clicks off and I roar a defiant cry to the heavens. If they think they can steal my heart-mate and live to tell the tale, they have another thing coming.

They might have beaten me before, but this time it’s personal. They’re going to pay for every drop of my kinsmen’s blood spilt. And if anything happens to Sarah, mark my words—I will go to the ends of the universe to eradicate them once and for all.

MIGHT OF AESIRHEIM

ULFAR

I 'm standing on the ship's bridge with Soren, Rathgar, Orri, and Djorn as we look out into the gathering expanse of space. We're just now leaving Aesirheim's atmosphere, and while the ship's engines roar in my ears, I'm hunched over the scanner with Orri looking for any trace of the rogue vessel.

"We're picking up activity near Yarilo-V," Orri says, looking at the monitor. "It looks like one of our transports was attacked en route yesterday afternoon."

Yesterday afternoon. That would have been right when I was away fetching that book for Sarah. Did she know? Was it all planned?

A looming fear sinks in and festers. What if Sarah has been with the Syndicate this entire time? What if she's a spy or agent sent to seduce me so that she could gain intelligence and leave when she'd seen enough? The thought makes bile rise in the back of my throat. Even if it's true, it's not the first time I've been betrayed. I swallow back the fear and focus on the mission. I'll find out if it's true soon enough.

"Why are we just now hearing about this?" I ask. "I shouldn't have had to wait until a human girl tracked me down to know there was a problem."

"You see this?" Orri points. It's a standard readout of the supply routes usually taken by the merchant ships.

“Yeah, it doesn’t look like anything to me.” I squint, trying to figure out what he’s getting at.

“Exactly. They scrambled the feed and overwrote the data to make it look like nothing was amiss. It wasn’t until we were airborne I noticed the anomalies.”

I growl. Memories of our last encounter still ring painfully in my head. “They’ve gotten smarter.”

Orri frowns, shaking his head. “That they have. Djorn, can you bring us in? Sending the coordinates over now.”

“Can do,” Djorn says from the pilot’s station. The ship tilts slightly, changing course toward the source of the anomaly.

I don’t know what I expected to see, but it wasn’t this. Cold, lifeless corpses float aimlessly in the vast void of space, surrounding the skeletal remains of a shuttle. It has been completely gutted and stripped of anything useful, picked clean like a vulture with its prey. I know only one enemy that would do such a thing.

“Syndicate,” I growl.

My eyes track what passengers I can see, but they’re too far away to get a good reading. If Sarah is one of them, I don’t know what I’ll do.

As we’re observing the situation, guard ships from Yarilo-V zoom in and start scanning the downed vessel. The guard ship hails us, and Soren brings up their leader on screen.

“Do you know what happened here?” a man with bug-like eyes and green skin says.

“It was like this when we arrived,” Soren states. He steps to the forefront, taking on the leadership role as he always has. “The culprits you are looking for are long gone.”

“Hmm...” the guard mumbles. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

“Retrieve the transmitter from that shuttle and check the logs. You’ll see that it was downed long before we arrived. We simply want to help.”

The guard captain looks behind him. He mutes the feed while he consults with another member of his team. After a few moments, he comes back online.

“What you say is correct. But how did you know that this had happened?”

“This ship departed from our world, Aesirheim. The Starbound was headed to your station and was attacked along the way. We have as much interest in figuring out what happened to our people as you do, wouldn’t you say?”

He lets out a series of fast-paced clicking noises, the antennae atop his head twitching rapidly. “Very well. I will provide what information I can, but the reclamation and salvage rights rest with Yarilo-V, since it is in our airspace.”

Soren frowns but doesn’t push. “I understand.” He probably knows there’s not much left to salvage anyway. I’m about ready to get out of here and try to follow the Syndicate’s trail to wherever they went next, but I have one burning question in my mind.

Thankfully, Soren appears to have the same one.

“Tell me, do you have access to the ship’s manifest?” Soren asks pointedly.

“I do. We were able to obtain the records intact, thank the stars. The cargo inventory

in particular will be most useful in determining the losses sustained.”

I have to bite back a retort. Typical merchant planet. Caring more about their precious goods and the number of coins than the lives lost.

“We are looking for a specific passenger who we believe was aboard that shuttle. Please check the manifest and send over a list of all human passengers, along with their current status.”

I shiver at how clinical he makes it sound.

“You have identified the fallen passengers, correct?”

“Oh yes, yes!” There’s that clicking again. “Though I hope you will understand, with a tragedy of this magnitude sometimes the data is not...complete.” He gives an apologetic-looking grin, but I know better.

“We await transmission of the requested logs. The sooner we can get them, the sooner we’ll be out of your hair.” He pauses for impact, then: “And the sooner you can salvage all that scrap. I daresay it would go for a pretty penny in the junkyard, wouldn’t it?”

That gets his attention. With scurried movements and exaggerated gestures, he barks an order to his teammate. Within seconds, we receive a notification on the ship’s console.

“Incoming transmission,” Orri says from the computer station.

“Let’s have it,” Soren says, and I hold my breath.

Orri taps a key, and the database appears up on screen, scrolling through a list of

unfamiliar names. There were nearly one hundred passengers aboard, most of them now deceased, but as the list scrolls to its end there's only one problem. Sarah's not listed anywhere.

Did I have it wrong? Was she never on the ship to begin with?

"I'm picking up a reading!" Djorn cuts in. His surprised tone shocks all of us, and I jerk to attention. "I had the idea to track the transmitter waves produced by the translators the surrogates use for the program. It wasn't easy, but I was able to lock on to the signal. It's faint, but if we follow it, I think we'll find your girl."

Hope surges anew. I peer at the star map Djorn has pulled up, showing a blinking cursor not far from where we are now. They must have had to stop to refuel, and that's good news for us. Means we can still catch up if we hurry.

"I went ahead and put out a distress call for Sarah's hometown, as well as a be-on-the-lookout request for the surrounding area. They won't escape our clutches this time." He cracks his knuckles, and I can tell he's jonesing for a fight. He was there during our failed encounter too, and I'm sure he wants redemption just as much as I do.

"Go after them, Djorn," Soren says, sitting back down in his chair. He clicks off the connection with the guardsman and pulls up the viewport. "Let's show them the true might of Aesirheim."

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:54 am

AWAKENING

SARAH

I don't know where I am. I don't know how long it's been. Everything blurs together, a muddled, sluggish dreamscape. Even when I'm awake, I'm not sure what's real anymore. The drugs in my system make everything too fuzzy to move or even think. I remember choking down lukewarm broth, and I remember voices. Then there's another sting at my neck, and I'm going under again.

One thing doesn't change throughout my ordeal, however—and it's the one sliver of hope I'm clinging to for dear life.

I don't know if I'm hallucinating from the drugs or if it's just a coping mechanism my brain dreamt up to shelter me from the trauma, but when I close my eyes, I see him. Hear him.

Ulfar.

He speaks to me. Holds my hand. Smiles down at me with that warm, forgiving glow that soothes my heart and stills my nerves.

But that can't be real, right? I left him. Betrayed him, and Vi, and the ISA and everyone. My stomach growls, a fluttering down below reminding me of the life I carry inside me.

A life that is now forfeit to these monsters.

I try to cry out, to lift my arms and pull myself out of this hell, but a wave of dizziness crests and soon I'm falling, falling back into the void of nothingness.

I don't know how long I stay like that. After a while, I almost welcome the oblivion. It means I get to see his face one last time.

* * *

I awake at last to the sounds of a medical device beeping. The steady, high-pitched chirp grates on my fractured nerves, but I have reason enough to realize that means I'm probably in some sort of hospital.

I can't hear the engines anymore, and I can't hear the hushed voices of the Syndicate cronies gathered around me, discussing my fate like I was a choice cut of meat.

Am I...saved?

I try to get up and fail, my arms still too weak to support myself. Squinting against the glare of harsh fluorescent lights, I try to take stock of my location. It's a small, sparse room, furnished with a bed, a side table, and a chair, but not much else. The door is closed and I don't see any knob, but there's a tablet mounted on the wall next to it.

I look around, trying to find the source of the beeping. The medical equipment I expected to see is nowhere to be found.

Still unable to right myself, I press a hand to my stomach, thinking about the child once more. Is the baby okay?

The baby is fine, a cynical voice in the back of my head says. They don't care about you, only the child.

That's the real cargo here.

I wince, a spike of pain cramping low in my gut. Before I have time to focus on it, the door slides open, and all my hopes of safety disappear.

Atraxia, leader of the Syndicate and all-around asshole, steps into the room with a tablet in hand and a self-satisfied smile on her face.

"Ah, good to see you're finally with us," she chirps. "We couldn't have you awake in transit, lest you decided to fight harder for your little friends on Aesirheim. You understand, right?" She flashes me a smile with all her teeth, but it doesn't reach her eyes.

When I don't answer, she continues. "We've run all the necessary diagnostics and I have to say, I'm impressed. The baby is practically perfect. Had I known that you'd be paired with an Aesir warlord, I would have put in a bid myself."

I clench my jaw, trying to avoid saying something I might regret. For now, I want her to keep talking. It will help me get my bearings, and perhaps reveal some useful intel that will help me get out of here.

"What?" Atraxia teases, leaning over the bed to show me her tablet. On the screen is a photo of me, and next to it a chat log scrolling by faster than I can keep track of. Numbers higher than I've ever seen in my life keep flooding in. Were those...bids?

For me?

"You're carrying something quite valuable," she says with a smirk. "It's not often I say this, but good job. You've done well, but don't think you're off the hook just yet. We still have to deliver the child and complete the transaction."

“I’m not a transaction!” I cry. I can’t hold it in anymore. “I’m a person, with thoughts and feelings and dreams and desires!”

Atraxia taps her chin for a moment, then slips the tablet back into the bag slung around her waist. “You’re right, actually. You’re not the transaction.” A pause, and her bug-like eyes fixate on mine. “The little one in your belly is.”

“Bastard!” I push myself up with all my might, trying to lunge toward her, but she easily dodges my clumsy blow.

“Ah ah ah,” she chides, shaking her head. “Behave, or I’ll have to put you under again.”

“Do it,” I growl. “See if I care.”

“Oh? That is not sufficient motivation?” She steps over to the tablet next to the door and presses a few keys. Even from this distance, I can see a photo of my father appear on screen. “Perhaps I should arrange for him to be terminated instead?”

“No!” Tears spring to my eyes. I flail uselessly on the bed. My body won’t listen to my brain, and all I can do is lie here and watch her threaten everything I hold dear. “Leave him alone! I did what you said, I came here and brought you the child, didn’t I?”

“Didn’t you? Well, that remains to be seen. I think we’ll keep watch over Areo a little longer. He’s come to enjoy our company, after all.”

“Liar,” I spit. “What have you done to him?”

A vile, hideous chuckle echoes off the walls, which suddenly feel too small, too cramped to hold the weight of my emotions. “What have we done with him? You

mean, give him the life he always wanted but could never have because of you?”

“...what?” A chill runs down my spine. She’s messing with me. Has to be. “What are you talking about?”

“Oh, would you like to see? I can take you to him right now, if you want. But I warn you, you might not like what you see.”

My heart’s flying faster than a land speeder, but I have to know if she’s telling the truth.

Would my father really abandon me like that? Would he really sell me out just to get me out of his hair?

He couldn’t. He wouldn’t!

But the fear still gnaws at me in the back of my mind. Gathering what little strength I have left, I pull myself upright in bed and steady my feet on the floor.

“I want to see him,” I say, determined. “Now.”

“Very well,” she says with a wicked grin. “But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

* * *

After a few moments, I’m stabilized enough to find my footing. Atraxia gives me a bottle of water, a rare kindness for someone of her ilk.

After being drugged for so long, I almost don’t drink it.

Then she rolls her eyes and takes a sip of it herself, and I decide to take my chances.

The water is cool, crisp, and refreshing, a pleasing balm against my parched throat.

We walk down an impossibly long corridor, every step echoing with eerie finality. I still have no idea where we are or even what time of day it is—this place has been completely windowless so far, giving it a prison-like atmosphere.

We finally reach the end of the hall and take a left. The narrow passageway opens up into a much larger circular area, with similar narrow offshoots spreading out in different directions.

I'm able to see a glimpse of the outside world for the first time, though it doesn't afford me much information. The vaulted ceilings of the central hub give way to a vast skylight, opened up to show the glittering blackness of space beyond. With this I can tell it is nighttime, but where I am is still anyone's guess.

They're messing with me.

I don't have much time to take in the sights, though, because a familiar voice calls out my name:

"Sarah, darling, is that you?"

My heart celebrates and sinks at the same time as I take in the sight before me.

My father sits at a brightly lit bar area with a cocktail in hand. Flanking him on both sides are two beautiful (and barely dressed) alien women with bright pink skin and head tails that trail down their backs. They giggle and press themselves against him, clearly enjoying themselves.

"Father..." The sound comes out as a choked gargle. "What are you..."

“Glad you could make it, sweetheart!” He extends his hands wide, giving me a satisfied grin. “Isn’t this place great? You’ve simply got to try the drinks—when they say they’re out of this world, they really mean it!”

“What the hell are you doing?” Fury and confusion rise within me in equal measure. Here I was, being drugged, held captive, and who knew what else, while he was drinking and consorting with these...women?!

It’s all too much to take in. I feel sick, doubling over to retch up the water I just drank. Atraxia is at my side, her smugness never fading for a second. She puts a gentle hand on my shoulder, but I bat her away.

“You see?” she says sweetly. “Your father has moved on. He’s come to understand that it’s useless to fight against the might of the Syndicate. We have eyes and ears across the galaxy, and even if you escape us for now, we will hunt you down to the ends of the universe. You’ll never know peace as long as there’s a price on your head. But see how nice it could be if you would just give in? Cooperate? Everyone has a price, my dear.”

I round on her next, fists clenched and ready for a fight. “What have you done to him?!”

Atraxia presses a shocked hand to her chest. “I haven’t done a thing. He simply decided to make the smart choice, is all.” Her gaze levels with mine. “Perhaps you should consider doing the same.”

“Never!” I cry, shaking with pain and rage. My own father...how could he do this to me? To us?

After all I sacrificed for him...

My stomach cramps again, and I double over as a coughing fit seizes me. The world spins on its axis, and at some point I hit the ground, but I don't remember much after that.

All I do remember is the pain. And silently praying to all the heavens that Ulfar will forgive me.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:54 am

CUFFS

ULFAR

One month. One month I've been without her.

One month too long.

I still remember the taste of her lips. Her smile when she looks up at me. Her tousled hair when she wakes up and pads into the kitchen, still blinking away sleep.

Those memories and more are burned onto my brain like a brand, and I don't think they'll ever leave. The fact that she's made such a permanent impression on me only cements the fact that she's my heart-mate.

And that I need to get her back as soon as possible.

We've been jumping from planet to planet, picking up clues and gathering intel, but I gotta hand it to them—the Syndicate knows how to stay hidden. Even the most cunning adversaries mess up sometimes, though. And once we find that opening, not even the gods will be able to save them from our wrath.

"I've got something," Orri calls, hunched over the computer.

"You've said that a million times by now," I groan, scrubbing a hand over my face. Despite myself, hope flares anew in my gut. Every time, it sours into disappointment when our leads don't pan out, but this time, maybe this time...

“No, man. I’m serious. Look.” He turns in his chair and gestures for me to come over. I suck in a breath, because even from this distance I can see the blinking cursor on the radar readout. There’s no doubt about it this time. It’s the ship we’ve been tracking for the last month, docked in the last place anyone would have thought to look.

“Got you,” I growl, every instinct rising within me to storm their base and kill everyone between me and Sarah. We’re so close now, right on their doorstep after a month of dead ends, and I’m not going to let them get away.

Heavy footsteps clomp across the bridge behind me, and I see Rathgar standing there, strapping on his armor and weapons with a determined look on his face.

“Heard there was gonna be some action,” he says, meeting my eyes. “Didn’t wanna miss out. Did we finally lock onto those sons of bitches?”

Orri nods. “As far as I can tell, they haven’t detected us in orbit yet. If we get in there, hit them hard and fast, they won’t have time to assemble their larger forces.”

“Remember what happened last time.” Soren’s sober voice cuts through our excitement. “We can’t make the same mistakes.”

I grimace. I remember all too well the devastating defeat we faced at the hands of the Syndicate all those years ago. But we have grown since then. We are stronger and better prepared. And this time, we have the element of surprise.

“I’ll be careful,” I promise Soren, but in truth, I’m not sure if I can be. My warrior’s blood is hot with desire for revenge. I know my battle brothers will back me up, but we still can’t afford to mess this up.

Rathgar holds out his arm and taps a cuff on his wrist, pulling up a holographic map of the compound below us. It’s shaped like a wheel, with a large central hub splitting

off into multiple long spokes. “I’m beaming the coordinates to all four of you. We’ll each take a different cardinal direction and meet up in the middle. Deal?”

“Deal.” I gaze at the glowing map on my wrist comm. Wait for me, Sarah. I’m on my way.

* * *

I’m at the south entrance and so far, so good. They haven’t noticed a thing. If I want to keep it that way, I have to stay stealthy. As much as I want to go in there guns blazing, I have to think about what’s best for Sarah.

If they have enough warning that we’re coming, they can move her, maybe even get her off the planet before we get to her location. And I’m not going to let that happen. Not again.

So I swallow the roar building in my throat and rush toward the door when the single guard turns his back. A single, quick blow to the back of his skull and he’s down for the count. One down.

I grab his hand and wave it over the scanner to register his fingerprint. With a beep, it accepts his credentials, and the door slides open.

I’m in.

A long, windowless steel corridor stretches out in a straight line in front of me. No sounds, no movement. No guards either. Odd. If they’re not patrolling that means they’re elsewhere.

Or we’re walking right into an ambush.

The good thing about this long corridor is that no one can sneak up on me. I can see anyone approaching from meters away. The bad news? Anyone else can do the same.

So when I hear footsteps approaching, there's nowhere to hide. Nowhere to run. I just have to arm myself and wait for the inevitable.

An unsuspecting guard rounds the corner and freezes the moment he sees me. We stand off like that for a fraction of a second, and I'm rushing him before he has a chance to radio in for backup. Blaster at the ready, I fire off a barrage of bolts as soon as I'm in range. He jolts and falls to the ground, twitching as the electric pulses shock his system.

He's a strong one, though, and his shaking hand moves to his belt. He clicks some sort of button on a panel strapped to his leg before looking up at me with a triumphant gleam in his eye. "You're toast," he coughs.

And then the whole place goes up in flames.

I cough and pull down my visor, switching on the filter as I struggle to pull clean air through my lungs. Eyes burning, I tear through the smoke and look for the exit. That little self-destruct trick may have slowed me down, but nothing will keep me from the love of my life.

The downside? That explosion alerted every guard in the compound, and they'll be converging upon my location in a matter of seconds.

"Got a little problem here!" I bark into the comm, hoping that the others are faring better than I am.

The channel opens, but all I hear is static and the sounds of gunfire. Great. So no one is coming to help me. Taking a deep breath, I summon up the shimmering holo shield

from my wrist unit. It won't last long, but if I can slice through enough of them to get to Sarah...

As the alarms sound off and bathe the corridor in red, I let out the primal roar I've been holding back.

No one captures my girl and gets away with it!

* * *

It's a fucking bloodbath. I scream and cry and shoot off blast after blast into those bastards. They fall like flies, twitching corpses piling up along the corridor as I rush for the center. With a whoosh, an electromagnetic pulse speeds toward me and plasters sweaty strands of hair against my forehead.

Frantically, I tap the comm at my wrist, but I know what the response will be. The bastards scrambled our electronics!

"Orri!" I bark into my earpiece. "Orri, come in!"

Only static and silence await me.

With a growl, my fingers close around the hilt of my blade. The sound of metal rings out in the dead air.

Looks like we're doing this the old-fashioned way.

Without a map, I've got to navigate based on feel. That's never been my strong suit, but if I'm ever going to see Sarah again, I have to figure this out. Ducking into a small alcove, I let out a breath and close my eyes, trying to home in on her location.

Or something like that. If Sarah is really my heart-mate, I should be able to sense her, right?

That's what my people believe, anyway. I never know what to believe about any of that supernatural fated-mates stuff, but my time with Sarah has me questioning everything. Orri told me that he could follow Isabella through their bond when she was lost and in need of help.

Would I be able to do that, too?

I squeeze my eyes shut tighter, trying to focus. I'm a soldier, not a shaman. I don't know how any of this is supposed to work and yet—

There it is. A spark of light, ever so faint, materializes in my mind's eye. It floats across the passage and then pauses, as if beckoning me to follow.

When I open my eyes, the same scene greets me. I don't question it. I just know I have to follow, and I'll find her at last.

I weave through the labyrinth of tunnels, following my senses and my instincts to lead me to Sarah. I don't run into any other guards, and I'm not sure if that's a good thing or not. But her smell fills my nostrils and her presence warms my soul. She's close. I can feel it.

We come to a crossroads and the spark leading the way sputters, fizzles, and dies. Cursing under my breath, I peer through the darkness and try to figure out which way to go next. My equipment is still jammed, and with it my communications and shield. But I'm too close to give up now.

As if in answer, a scream rings out from nearby and I recognize it at once.

“Sarah!” I roar and charge forward, down the lefthand path toward the source of the noise. Not once do I think that it could be a diversion or a trap. My senses are on full alert, my heart racing in time with each frantic, panted breath. It’s her. It has to be. She’s close!

And there, just out of the corner of my vision, I see it: a tall, bulky alien woman shoving a squirming, crying Sarah into cuffs and dragging her into another room. She doesn’t see me, but I’ve seen all I need to see.

I’m going in. And this time, I won’t fail.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:54 am

RESCUED

SARAH

The moment the sounds of sirens fill the air, I know.

Hope surges to life for the first time in what feels like ages, a heady brightness—maybe I might make it out of this after all. Something tingles deep inside me, an itch I can't quite scratch, and I recognize it as the feeling I had during those long, drugged-out dreamscapes.

It's Ulfar. He's close.

He came for me.

"Help!" I scream at the top of my lungs, hoping that he's close enough to hear me. The sounds of gunfire ring out from just beyond the door, and I hear shouts and the heavy sounds of footsteps.

Are those the Syndicate soldiers...or his?

"Help!" I cry out again, but this time it attracts the wrong kind of attention.

Atraxia herself bursts into the room, dragging my father in cuffs alongside her. I hop up, trying to duck her charge, but she's too fast. Her heavy alien bulk pins me to the wall, snarling. "What have you done?" she hisses into my ear. "Your little friends won't be able to save you."

Strong hands force cuffs onto my wrists, and they lock with an eerie digital beep. “No!” I scream, kicking out at her as hard as I can. It’s like kicking a brick wall—she doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t move an inch. The impact vibrates through my foot and leg, sending spikes of pain surging past the rushes of adrenaline.

I curse and snarl and spit, but none of it does any good. She’s got me. Me and my father both. Speaking of which...

“What are you doing here?” I growl at the man who calls himself my father. He’s not looking so high and mighty now. I’m still hurting from the sudden betrayal, surprised he doesn’t have anything to say for himself. I guess that just goes to show that the Syndicate can turn on anyone at any time.

“Sarah,” he wails, big eyes filled with fear and fatherly concern. “I’m so sorry to get you wrapped into this, so sorry...”

“What are you talking about?” I mutter, but a seed of confusion sows its way deep into my chest. “You sold out, remember? I saw you at the bar with those women. You acted like I didn’t even matter!”

His brow furrows in confusion. “The bar? Sarah, are you well? I’ve been in my cell this whole time. I think I would know if I saw my baby girl. Did they drug you too...? Oh, this is all my fault.” His face crumples into a dejected sob.

Two conflicting notions war in my exhausted mind. Is he telling the truth, or is this another manipulation? Or what if...

“You,” I snarl, turning on Atraxia. “You made all that up, didn’t you? To turn me against him. To make me lose hope.”

She chuckles. “My my, was it that obvious? And here I was hoping that the glamor

would last for a little longer...”

“You asshole!” I scream. I try to rear back and punch her, but the cuffs jar my shoulder and I hiss at another slash of pain.

“I’ve been called worse.” The sirens redouble their efforts, and Atraxia yanks me toward her. “Now come on. We’ve got to get out of here. You can have your little family reunion later.”

And that’s how I’m led, quite literally kicking and screaming, out of the cell block and into the main area once more. Guards and soldiers run to their stations with practiced efficiency, and I tremble at the sight of their weapons. Their soldiers are at least as broad as Ulfar, if not more, and the weapons look big enough to blast a hole through this entire station.

Do Ulfar and his team even stand a chance?

I squeeze my eyes shut and force that thought out of my mind. I can’t think about that now. I have to keep my wits about me.

I have to survive, and I have to get to him. Before it is too late.

* * *

Atraxia pulls us through a maze of back passageways, and all I can do is try to stay standing. She yanks on a chain attached to our cuffs and walks far faster than either my father or I, causing us to have to do an awkward stumble-run to keep from being dragged like sacks of potatoes.

All around us I hear the sounds of battle, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Frustrated tears well up in my eyes and spill over. I have to buy time, but how? If

they manage to get us into a transport and off-world, there's a chance I'll never see Ulfar or any of them again. It took this long for them to catch up to me—if I let them slip through my fingers...the Syndicate isn't keen on second chances.

Please, I call out to him in my mind. Please hurry. I need you. I have no idea if it will work or if it's simply a comforting fantasy, but I have to try.

We reach a shuttle bay where a speeder is already waiting. It's now or never, I realize, as the sounds of shouting and shooting grow louder.

As Atraxia turns her back to punch in the exit codes on the speeder's keypad, my father springs into action. He lifts his cuffed arms high, bringing both his fists down on the back of her skull. She wobbles and falls to her knees, but it's not over yet.

“What are you doing?!” she cries out in pain and rage. “Guards!!”

But no guards come to her rescue. They're all occupied elsewhere. My father wraps the chains connecting his wrists around Atraxia's slim neck, pulling them taut and cutting off her escape. She gasps and claws at the chain, but he's behind her and isn't letting go.

“The keys, Sarah! Get the keys!” he barks, glancing down at the device on her belt.

And then, with a booming digital hum, all the lights go out on the station. Everything goes still. The lights on our cuffs fade into darkness, and they click open.

“What—” my father gasps, looking around. All the power. Gone.

Did that mean—?

The momentary interruption may have broken our cuffs, but it gave Atraxia the

opening she needed as well. When the lock unlatched, she lunged forward, no longer bound by the chains around her neck. My father stumbles and loses his footing while Atraxia whirls around to face him, gun pointed right at his chest.

“No!” I scream. Everything seems to pass by in slow motion. I scan the surroundings, looking for something, anything that will help me get out of this. I have to save him!

“You really thought you could get the upper hand,” Atraxia taunts, looming over my father’s cowering form. “Fool. The Syndicate is more powerful than you’ll ever be. It’s a mercy I even left you alive.”

There’s a toolbox lying nearby, filled with several long, pole-like tools for working on the innards of starships. If I can grab one in time, I might be able to turn the tide.

“T-take me instead,” he wheezes, coughing. “I’m sorry, Sarah, sweet girl, I’m sorry...”

My hand closes around the cold metal and I lift it with all my strength.

“You’ve served your purpose,” she says coldly. “Now die.”

Like a champion baseball player, I swing the metal pole, and it crashes between her shoulder blades and she lets out a high-pitched, banshee-like scream. Her gun clatters to the floor and I lunge for it when a loud, powerful voice fills the open space.

“ATRAXIA!”

Heart pounding, I turn for the source of the noise, hoping against hope—

It’s him. Covered in blood and eyes aflame with the most feral battle lust I’ve ever seen, but it’s him.

He came.

“Ulfar!” I shriek, rushing forward. “Help! My dad’s—”

“Not so fast!” Atraxia screeches, tackling me to the ground and grabbing the gun once more. She’s got it pointed directly at my face. There’s no coming back from this. I crawl backward on my hands like a crab, looking for an out, but there is none. Ulfar roars and charges forward, but he’s still too far away to reach us in time.

I shriek, pulling my arms up instinctively to shield my face, and then I hear another voice, just before the blast.

“Sarah, no—”

Atraxia pulls the trigger, and then something hits me, hard, in the chest. An instant later there’s another sickening thump, followed by a gross wet sound and a growl of triumph. All goes silent at long last.

Air whooshes out of my lungs, leaving me wheezing and gasping for air. My eyes fly open to see my father’s body lying atop me, his face stricken but with a satisfied kind of peace. A warm torrent of blood oozes from his side and soaks into my shirt, pooling on the hard concrete floor.

“Dad!” I gasp, wrapping my arms around him. I wriggle out from underneath to try to get a good look at the wound, but it’s still so dark in here. “Dad, oh my god, Dad, no...”

At the last second, he took the bullet meant for me. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. We were supposed to get out of here alive, both of us!

With a pained groan, I roll over and notice the other motionless body on the ground.

It's Atraxia—or what's left of her. Her head's missing, leaving only a dark crimson stain where it should have been. And standing there, wiping off his blade with a grimace on his face, is Ulfar.

Just in the nick of time.

My father coughs and a weak, trembling hand reaches up to cup my face. Tears fall and splash onto his skin. I clasp his hand tightly, holding it to my face as all of the pain and fear and rage flood out of me at last.

“You did good, Sarah,” he says with some effort. “I love you.”

“Dad!” I scream again, but he doesn't hear me. His eyes flutter closed, and I am filled with a wave of terror. Is he dying??

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:54 am

A HAPPY ENDING

SARAH

“D ad!” My throat is raw from crying and screaming, but I can’t stop. After all this, after all we’ve gone through, he can’t be gone. He can’t. Ulfar’s at my back, wrapping his strong arms around me and whispering comforting words in my ear, but I may as well not hear them. Everything’s centered on my father’s still form in front of me. It doesn’t matter that Atraxia is no more, if this was the cost.

And then there’s Ulfar, seemingly unfazed by my betrayal and holding me tightly, keeping me from spiraling more than I already am, barking orders into a unit on his wrist as the lights come on in the compound once more.

“I’m sorry,” I sob over and over. I can’t think of anything else to say. No other words come to mind. I’ve done the unthinkable—forsaken my contract with the ISA, left my assigned mate, and possibly put all of Aesirheim in danger. How can he be here hugging me like this?

I wrestle my way out of his grip and turn around to face him. Blurred and tear-streaked my vision may be, but the man looking back at me is the same man I fell in love with.

No, I think. Not man. Alien.

At that, there’s a surging of something deep within my chest, a warmth that spreads from my core outward, all the way to the tips of my fingers and toes. That internal

‘itch’? Scratched at last. He’s with me, after everything I’ve done, he’s still with me. I’m still alive.

But my father...

“Don’t worry,” he shushes me, running a hand through my hair and down my back. “I’ve got someone coming to take care of him.”

“I’m sorry,” I say again, crumpling into his arms. I bury my face in his chest, unable to hold back the bone-shaking sobs that tear through me. “I never meant to hurt you, or leave you. I had no choice, and I was so scared...”

“It’s all right,” he reassures me. “We’ll talk later. Let’s focus on helping your father right now.”

Another alien comes rushing in, and as he gets closer I recognize him. He’s Vi’s mate, Djorn!

“What’s he—” I start, but Ulfar cuts me off with a kiss. I can hardly complain, though, when his lips are so hot and soft against mine. When his body fits against me like we were made to be together. I didn’t realize how much I’ve missed this.

“You’re so much better than dream you,” I say deliriously, only realizing how silly it sounds after I’ve said it.

“What?” Ulfar asks with a grin.

“Nothing,” I say, and for the first time in forever, I crack a smile.

Djorn kneels down next to my father, pulling out a med-kit and hooking sensors to his body with quick, practiced efficiency.

“Is he...” I’m almost afraid to ask. But if he was actually dead, then Djorn wouldn’t be doing all of this, right?

“Not dead,” Djorn says, his words short and clipped. He’s too focused on the task at hand. “Hurt, bad, but not dead.”

That’s a small relief but only barely dampens the panic. “Is he going to be okay?” My voice breaks, and Ulfar pulls me even closer.

“Not sure. Doing my best. Let me work.”

I choke out one more sob and turn back to Ulfar. He holds both of my hands and presses a kiss to my forehead. “You heard him. Let him work.”

“But...”

“He’s a damn good field medic. We’ll get him stabilized and in a stasis pod back on the ship. His body will do the rest.”

Right. Ship. Everything is happening so fast. Moving so fast. After over a month of a drug-induced haze, everything’s finally come to a head. Ulfar is here, and I’m in his arms, and I’m alive, and Atraxia is finished, and...

“Where are the others?” I ask, ideas and questions finally beginning to filter back in. “Djorn, and you...did anyone else come?”

He nods. “The whole gang. Soren, Rathgar, Orri, Djorn, and me.”

The gravity of his statement isn’t lost on me. Five of the planet’s most powerful and decorated warlords, teaming up to track down a single human female. Me.

“Why did you...” I whisper. The guilt is too much. I don’t deserve this, not after everything I put them through.

But Ulfar won’t hear of it. He shushes me quietly and kisses away my tears. “There’s something I wanted to tell you back at the lake. Something I should have said back then, but I guess I wasn’t brave enough to do so.”

My heart thuds once, painfully, waiting for an answer. “What?”

“I love you, Sarah.” His gaze, soft and warm, envelops me and fills me up from the inside out. Even the little one seems to take notice. There’s a faint but distinct fluttering deep in my belly and I gasp, pressing a hand over my navel. “Let all the stars be our witness, but you are my heart-mate, and I will never let anything happen to you again. No matter where you are, I’ll always come for you. Always.” He rests his forehead against mine, and the energy flowing off of him melds and mixes with mine, crystalizing in the center of my chest. “Will you be mine, Sarah? Now and forever?”

At this moment, it doesn’t matter if the entire world is burning around us. I have him, and he has me. As long as we’re together, there’s nothing we can’t face. “Yes.” I kiss his neck. “Yes.” I kiss his chin. “Yes,” I say the final time, leaning up to claim his lips in a fervent, passionate kiss.

“I’m yours.”

“Let’s get you out of here,” he mumbles, hefting me into his arms. This time, it’s not at all like being dragged along by cuffs and chains. He cradles me tenderly, lovingly, and for the first time since I left the planet, I feel safe.

* * *

Back aboard the starship, Ulfar and the rest of his battle brothers stand on the bridge and start running the pre-flight checks. Before we boarded, Djorn bandaged up my father and applied a reagent to his wound to stem the bleeding.

The downside? The treatment put his entire body to sleep, essentially. Some kind of space coma. It's better than letting him die, but he's going to be in the stasis pod for some time, Djorn says. At least until we can get him to a proper medical center.

Speaking of which...

"Where are we headed?" Djorn turns to me, fingers poised over the navigation panel.

I look around. "Me?"

He nods.

"What about Soren?" I point out.

"This is about you." His voice is firm, unwavering, but with a kindness I don't often see with the others. At least, not in public. "You've been through hell and back at the hands of those Syndicate bitches. What happens next is your choice."

My choice.

Something dawns on me, just then. Ever since this entire adventure began, everything I did was because I had to. Because I was afraid of the consequences if I didn't. But now, for the first time, I have a choice. A real choice.

I look up at Ulfar, who's been at my side this entire time. He squeezes my hand.

"What do you think?" he asks. "You can return to Aesirheim with us, or..." He

pauses, his hand resting on the small of my back. “There’s another option.”

“There is?” I perk up, curious.

He chooses his words carefully, but I can feel the conviction in them. “If you want, we will take you and your father back to Earth. After seeing how much you sacrificed to save your homeland and its people, it must be very dear to you. I couldn’t keep you from that, if that is your wish.”

The reality hits me in the chest. I could go home. Back to my bedroom, back to the library, back to lazy Sunday mornings.

But I’m no longer that scared little girl, whiling away her life while reading about adventures in books. I’m living my own adventure, right now, and I can’t wait to create the next chapter.

“You’re right,” I say, looking up into his eyes. “I love Earth. I love my town, and my work, and the people. But I learned something throughout all of this.”

“What’s that?” A warm, easy smile creeps up the corners of his mouth. I could look at that smile for the rest of my life.

And you know what? That would be my choice. My own. No one else’s.

“I learned that home doesn’t have to be a place. It doesn’t depend on material possessions or the house you live in or the clothes you wear. It’s about the person—” I think of my father “—or people, that make you feel at home. Accepted.” I blink away tears. “Loved.”

Ulfar gathers me into his arms, and I let out a shaky, relieved breath. So much tension I’ve been holding floods out of me, and I simply feel at peace. “You are my home,

Ulfar. You, my father, and my new friends.” I gesture around at the men on the bridge. “Remember when you bought me that book? The series we both liked to read?”

“Of course,” he says, smiling.

“Let’s make up a happy ending. Together.”

“It would be my pleasure,” he says with a smile, and then he leans down and kisses me as the engines roar to life and we set off across the galaxy once more.

Toward home. My new home.

Aesirheim.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:54 am

RIDDEN BY A GODDESS

ULFAR

TWO WEEKS LATER

Turns out, space travel is a lot faster when the Syndicate isn't leading you on a wild aki chase across half the galaxy. We returned home in record time, not only because I was anxious to spend some quality time with my mate, but because of our other precious cargo. Her father.

It's been two weeks now since we landed, and while he's still in the med bay, he's getting stronger by the day.

He woke up about a week in, thank the stars, and soon after was able to start talking again. He still mostly only wants to talk to Sarah, but I don't blame him. They've been through a lot together, and I'm sure he'll warm up in time.

What's important is that he and Sarah are safe. When I fell in love with Sarah, I knew that I would do whatever it took to keep her in my life. And when I saw just how much she cared for her father, I knew that same devotion extended to him as well.

He's a good man. I can tell that much just from our limited interactions. Kind. Strong. He would have to be to survive a nearly point-blank hit from a Syndicate star-blaster.

Sarah and I are back in my home, though not before some extensive interrogation by both the police force and the ISA. I was there to corroborate her story and provide

context, because I knew this would happen. I even brought back Atraxia's head as proof.

They weren't happy with her, that's for sure, but given the circumstances and the proof that she left the planet under duress, they decided she would not face expulsion or any other consequences. They did level a hard eye at me, however, and tell me to keep a good watch on her from now on.

Believe me, they're not going to have to worry about that one.

Pulling me from my thoughts, Sarah steps out of the bathroom, her thick hair piled in a towel atop her head. Another towel just barely covers her sensuous, curvy frame. Even from this distance and even under the towel I can see the swell of her belly starting to form.

With a rumble of approval I get up and go to her, one hand on the back of her head and one hand caressing her sweet roundness. "You look so beautiful like this," I whisper in her ear, loving the goosebumps that race across her flesh when I say it. Her skin is still flushed and slightly damp from the shower, but I'm about to heat it up even more.

I hook my fingers under the towel she's wearing, and it falls away easily, leaving her bare before me in all her glory. I can't help but suck in a gasp. I've seen her naked plenty of times by now, but occasionally I have to stop and pinch myself.

This girl is actually mine. I did it.

I never thought the mated life was for me. I thought that the whole alpha and omega thing was mostly bullshit, that I would never fall for something so silly. How wrong I was. I go to my knees in front of her, pressing my lips to her protruding belly button.

I rumble with pleasure, looking up at her. She smiles down at me, positively glowing. She was beautiful before, but it's nothing compared to how in her element she looks knocked up with my child. "I want you, Sarah. Want this." I slip my tongue lower, diving between her thighs. With a gasp, she clings to my hair and doesn't let go.

"I can't wait to see our baby," I say between licks. "But seeing you like this is so fucking hot."

"So are you," she hums with delight, pressing me harder against her mound. And what can I say? I've never been a man to turn down dessert.

She tastes so sweet like this. So perfect, like the honeyed sap of soft pink flowers that grow and climb in vines over the archway in the garden.

So mine.

Unable to wait any longer, I hoist her in my arms, and she lets out an adorable squeak, the towel on her hair falling away as well as I carry her to the bedroom. All the while she's squirming, laughing, playing.

This is the way it should be. This is what I was missing for all those years.

Now that I have it, I'm never letting her go again.

"You've gotta promise me something," I say, after laying her gently down on the bed.

"Yeah?"

I kiss her stomach, her hips, her chest. "Promise me your next pregnancy won't be this stressful."

She laughs and pulls me in, nuzzling her face in my chest. “There’s gonna be a next time? Already?”

“Absolutely. You’re stuck with me.”

Sarah writhes her hips up against mine, drawing a hiss from my throat. My cock, already hard, threatens to burst free from the confines of my trousers. Has she gotten even hornier while pregnant, or is that just my imagination? I can’t even blame the heat or the omega hormones this time.

“I think I can work with that,” she says. “But I have a request as well.”

“You know I’d do anything for you.”

“Anything, huh?” Her eyes flash with hidden glee and she grinds against me again. I like where this is going.

“What did you have in mind?” I rock my hips back into her in kind, making her arch her back. I’m a little worried about having sex on top of her like this, but she’s so alluring I can’t quite help myself.

“I want to ride you,” she says breathlessly, squirming again. “On top. Please.”

With her face so prettily blushed and her hips gyrating like that, how can I say no?

I pull myself off of her and lie back on the pillows, letting her take the lead. It’s unusual—usually I’m the one taking charge—but I’ve got to admit seeing this new side of her is addicting.

Sarah wastes no time. She makes quick work of my shirt and pants before taking in the view. “I love you,” she coos, pulling her hair to one side and leaning over me.

“Thank you for always being there for me.”

She looks like a goddess, dark hair surrounded by light as she straddles my hard, leaking cock. Her wide, motherly hips feel just right in my hands. Instead of sinking down onto me immediately, she takes a few moments to rock her hips back and forth, wetting my cock with her juices.

I know she’s not in heat, but her body’s producing slick all the same. It’s hot and tingly and fills the room with the smell of sex. The smell of her. She lets out a delighted sigh, throwing her head back as she grinds against my length.

Then her tight hole engulfs me one torturous inch at a time, and I swear I’m seeing stars. Sarah lets out a soft, keening moan when she finally reaches the base, supporting herself with one hand on my chest and another cradling her belly. I wish she knew just how gorgeous she looks like this.

“Fuck...” she pants, and I know it must be good because I haven’t heard her curse all that often. “You’re so deep inside of me. Almost like you’re filling my belly from the inside out.”

“Not yet I’m not.” I smirk. “That’s really what you want, though, isn’t it? To feel me coat your insides with my cum? Be stuffed so full that it’s leaking out of you?”

“Yes,” Sarah moans, her hips picking up the pace. With every bounce, her breasts sway to and fro, her thighs clench in anticipation, and her pussy throbs with pleasure. She sucks me deeper and deeper still, like even her cunt wants me to stay here forever.

Wouldn’t be such a bad way to go, if it was with her.

“After our baby is here, I’m going to take you to bed and put another one in you, just

so I can see you like this again. Just so we can do this again.”

“Nnngh.” Sarah sighs, one hand finding her left breast and tweaking the nipple as she continues to chase her pleasure. “I need you. Your cum. Please, I’m so empty, I need it...”

“Why didn’t you just say so, my love?” My words are sweet, but my thrusts are anything but. I piston my hips upward in time with her wails, giving extra force and friction every time she bobs up and down. Still panting heavily, Sarah leans forward, the round globes of her ass smacking against my thighs while she goes for shorter, deeper thrusts. I dig my fingers into her soft flesh, feeling her muscles tense to a building crescendo.

“So...full...” Her words turn into nothing more than breathy moans and then to higher-pitched cries, and with a final, enormous clench, she lets go at last. The rhythmic throbbing of her orgasm soon sends me over the edge as well, and I bury myself as deep as I can, letting out a possessive growl as I fill her to the brim.

This will be the first of many times tonight, I think. We have a lot of lost time to make up for.

Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 6:54 am

ULFAR

“They call it a tuxedo. Weird, huh?”

I step out of the dressing room and present myself to Orri, who’s wearing a similar outfit. The fabric is too tight, too itchy, too hot for my liking, but Sarah insisted.

“Why are we wearing these again?” Orri asks, fiddling with the cufflinks.

“Sarah wanted to have an Earth-style mating ceremony. On her world they call them weddings.”

“s,” he repeats. “And they suffocate themselves in clothes to do it?”

“Beats me.”

“Hey, I was thinking about something,” Orri says, running a hand through his hair. “These ‘weddings.’ Isabella told me that usually they happen before the child is born. Why wait so long?”

Stars bless him, he means well, but sometimes Orri can be a bit too nosy. It’s a good thing he’s my oldest friend. “In case you haven’t forgotten, our relationship hasn’t exactly been the most traditional one. Nor was yours, if I remember correctly.”

“Fair, fair.” Orri puts up his hands in defeat. “But won’t the baby make things a little more...complicated?”

“No more than having two mates in one lifetime,” I point out. His previous mate, Zannah, fell in battle, and Orri thought he would never love again. That is, until he met Isabella. Their love isn’t perfect, but it is real. I couldn’t be happier for them.

“Touché,” he relents, checking himself over in the mirror one more time. “Well, I’d better go join the others. The ‘wedding’ should be starting soon.”

Orri turns to leave, but when he’s in the doorway he stops. “Hey, Ulfar. I just remembered something.”

“Yeah?”

“I was right.”

A warm smile creeps up my face. The challenge he presented me long ago, when he and his mate Isabella were having their first child. At the time, I couldn’t conceive of anyone going so nuts over a woman. Especially a human.

But when Sarah came into my life, all the walls I’d drawn up around myself fell away. She inspired me to be a better man and a better alpha. And not only that, something else I thought I’d never be: a father.

* * *

The ceremony begins and I’m standing on a raised dais. A carpeted aisle splits the room in two, where rows of seating house all of our friends and family. It wasn’t cheap, but we even arranged for some of Sarah’s Earth friends to make the trip. An old-fashioned organ begins to play, and it begins.

Each of my Aesirheim battle brothers walks down the aisle, accompanied by their mates. Soren with Lara. Rathgar with Janie. Orri with Isabella. And even though they’re not formally mated yet, Djorn shows up with Vi.

They all walk down the aisle together as the organ plays. The women wear breezy white dresses that stop at the knee, while the men wear multi-layered tuxedos. The women look a lot more comfortable, if you ask me.

But as they take their seats and the organ begins a new tune, the itchy suit and the strange Earth customs don't matter anymore.

Because there's Sarah, walking down the aisle with her father, and she's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

She's wearing a gown of shimmering, iridescent fabric that gives off silver and lavender in the light. Delicate thread-work on the bodice creates patterns in the shape of constellations, and fiber-optic lights weave through the voluminous tulle. It's almost like she is the stars. As she walks down the aisle with my tiny daughter in her arms, I thank whatever god is watching.

She's the center of my universe, her and my perfect little daughter. And that's all that matters.

Soon she's standing up on the dais with me, and even her eyelashes shine with silver dust. Asgeir the priest stands between us, reading off some lines about harmony and union. I'm only half listening, because I'm too focused on the shine of her eyes, the flush of her cheeks. The shimmering, delicate details of her dress that glow with every movement.

And how could I forget our darling, perfect daughter? Baby Ember rests peacefully in her mother's arms, bearing witness to our union.

"Do you, Sarah, take this man to be your husband?"

She smiles up at me, and it's brighter than a starburst. "I do."

Asgeir turns to me next. “And do you, Ulfar, take this woman to be your wife?”

I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life. “I do.”

“Then it is my honor to now pronounce you man and wife. Ulfar, you may kiss your bride.”

When our lips touch, I pour into it a promise for the future. That I will be the best husband—and father—that I possibly can. And that I will stay by her side, come what may. Our energies combine and commingle, creating a symphony that could never be played with just one instrument. It’s a mix of both of us, and you know what?

It’s perfect.

THE END