

The Colony - Pushing Her To The Limits

A story about the last female aboard a spaceship. Needing to have larger and larger pregnancies to help her colony stay alive.

DAY 0 — THE DISCOVERY

Athena Pierce blinked her emerald green eyes open, breath catching in her throat as the cold of cryosleep clung to her bones. The sterile glow of overhead lights reflected off the smooth titanium walls of the female command wing. Her blonde hair, tied in a simple ponytail before entering stasis, was still neatly in place, her fair skin pale against the white cryo-gown.

She sat up, small and steady, her 4'11" frame dwarfed by the pod's structure. Muscles ached as they reawakened, and her mind flickered through the protocols she'd rehearsed for years.

Female Command Captain Athena Pierce. Ark Colony Designation: Eden Initiative.

She wasn't the leader of the entire ship—that authority belonged to the male-led central council—but she was the highest-ranking officer assigned to the **female crew and logistics division**, a position of trust and critical oversight.

Or... she had been.

A sharp **klaxon** split the air, followed by a sterile AI voice:

“Warning. Critical breach in Habitation Wing Theta. Atmospheric loss detected. Emergency airlock seal initiated.”

Athena staggered to the nearest terminal. Her fingers trembled as she keyed in a security override. The screen flashed red:

— FEMALE DORMITORY PODS 02–20: SEVERED

— STATUS: LOST.

— BIOSIGNALS: NULL.

All the other cryopods. Gone. Her crew—her friends, her responsibility—ejected into space. The wing had physically detached. There would be no rescue.

She was alone.

The **Command Assembly Hall** hadn't been used since launch—twenty years ago, when humanity watched the Ark ascend through the ash-colored skies of a dying Earth. Now, it echoed with tension.

All **99 surviving male crew members** sat in staggered rows, stiff-backed, some still pale from stasis. The ten senior male captains stood at the front, the semicircle of authority that ran the Ark's core leadership: captains of engineering, terraforming, security, and long-term colonial logistics. **Captain Athena Pierce** stood just beyond them, slightly off-center, neither invited nor asked to leave.

And they all knew it.

The room was heavy with grief. The projection hovering at the center of the table showed what had been lost.

Twenty female crewmembers.

Five support engineers. Six medical experts. Four biologists. Three robot surrogate wombs. One planetary scientist. One pilot.

Athena stared at the image in silence. It wasn't just people—it was infrastructure. A quarter of their colonization plan had vanished in one silent catastrophe.

Captain Brevik, thick-jawed and perpetually irritated, cleared his throat. "First order of business: what's salvageable?"

Dr. Rennick, head of logistics, shook his head. "Wreckage scattered. We lost the cryo systems, half the artificial womb banks, and every bio-genesis terminal. What didn't depressurize was vaporized."

"Could we send out a recon drone? Or a manned skiff?" Athena asked, stepping forward.

Several heads turned, surprised she spoke.

"There's a twenty-eight-hour window before radiation corrupts the deep cryo-coding," she continued. "If we deploy a salvage team now, we might recover—"

Captain Rhodes waved her off. "We're not wasting fuel chasing ghosts."

"We have reserves for orbital corrections—"

"Those reserves are for colonization landing vectors. You want to burn through it gambling on *corpse retrieval*?"

Athena's jaw clenched. "I want to save genetic infrastructure. We don't need their bodies. We need their **code**."

Brevik scoffed. "And risk a full breach of the ship for it? You're not thinking long-term."

"I *am* thinking long-term," she snapped. "We're on a ship designed for two-gender propagation and mixed-skill resource expansion. We've lost half the plan. You're panicking and shutting down options."

“Enough,” Commander Harlan said quietly.

The room stilled.

He turned to the other captains. “Let’s talk reproduction. That’s what matters now. Survival of the species. What do we have?”

Dr. Rennick adjusted his glasses. “We have no artificial wombs in the medbay, intact. We have frozen zygotes—but they’re cross-sourced and require a female host or a stable artificial incubator. Both now gone.”

Brevik leaned on the table. “So, what? We’re down to basics. That’s it. Natural reproduction.”

Captain Morgan hesitated. “With... one woman?”

Everyone glanced at Athena, who was now quietly seething, arms crossed, eyes narrowed.

“There’s got to be another way,” someone muttered.

Another man offered: “Genetic duplication? Clone lines? Use male donors to rewrite the genome—”

“Not viable over multiple generations,” said Dr. Rennick. “We’ll hit inbreeding thresholds in thirty years. Less.”

Silence fell.

Finally, someone whispered the thing none of them wanted to say:

“She’s the only way forward.”

Athena’s stomach tightened. She stepped forward again, voice steady.

“Then treat me like a captain. I should be part of this planning, not... your contingency.”

The captains didn’t respond. Some avoided her gaze. Others simply turned back to the projection. Even now, after all she’d accomplished, they were retreating into their own power structure. She was outside the circle.

A symbol.

Not a voice.

As the meeting broke apart into hushed side discussions and speculative plans, Athena stood alone at the edge of the hall, unacknowledged.

They were already deciding what would happen **to** her.

Not with her.

Not *by* her.

And that, she realized, was the true loss—not the cryopods, not the equipment, but her agency.

For now.

DAY 1 — MEDBAY BRIEFING

The sterile white lights of the **Ark's MedBay** hummed softly over the table's display, where three medical officers and **Dr. Rennick**, head of Ark Bio-Medicine, stood huddled. Screens floated in the air: hormone charts, fertility tables, tissue viability maps, and a stark red header above them all—

"REPOPULATION PROTOCOL: EMERGENCY REWRITE (REVISION 0.3)"

They spoke in hushed, clinical tones. Numbers. Projections. Timeframes.

Athena wasn't among them.

"Assuming one gestation every eleven months with postnatal recovery," **Dr. Kessler** was saying, "we're looking at one child per year, maximum. Maybe two with accelerated protocols, but that carries risk."

"Too slow," muttered Rennick. "At that rate, she produces maybe twenty before she hits dangerous hormonal degradation. And that's assuming no complications."

"And that's still a century away from stability," added Dr. Zahir, the youngest. "By then, most of us will be dead. It's not fast enough. It's extinction in slow motion."

The door **slammed open**.

"Then maybe don't plan my extinction *without me*."

The room froze.

Athena stood in the doorway, fists clenched, eyes blazing with fury. She had ditched her uniform jacket, now in a plain black undershirt and cargo pants, still flushed from running through two decks. The IV from her post-cryosleep rehydration port still dangled from her wrist.

Kessler straightened. "Captain Pierce. You weren't scheduled—"

"I *wasn't invited*, you mean," she snapped, stepping in. "I'm the only woman on this ship, and you're planning how to use my body without even giving me a seat at the table?"

Zahir opened his mouth to object, but Athena cut him off with a glare. "This isn't a theoretical. This is *me*. My health. My time. My consent. You don't get to draw charts and ignore the human being at the center of them."

There was a long silence.

Finally, Kessler spoke, voice low and brittle. "Captain Pierce... this isn't personal. It's biological necessity."

She stepped right up to the table, slamming her palm beside the projected charts.

"Then I suggest you make it personal. Because I'm not a system. I'm not a petri dish. If you want a future, you talk to *me*. Or you get nothing."

Kessler studied her for a long moment.

Then, reluctantly, he nodded.

"...She's right. From this point forward, Captain Pierce is *in* the planning team. Full authority on protocol development."

The others hesitated, then slowly nodded in agreement.

Athena took a breath. The fire in her chest still burned, but it was steadier now. Controlled.

"Now let's talk facts," she said, pulling up a secondary panel. "Your current projections are a joke. One child per year? That's not a survival strategy, it's a eulogy."

Rennick frowned. "We can't bypass basic biology. Even the most fertile female body needs months of recovery."

"Then we change the rhythm," Athena said. "What about selective hormone manipulation? Controlled ovarian hyperstimulation? Embryo banking? We've done it on Earth—push the body to produce six, eight viable eggs per cycle."

Kessler raised a brow. "And then what? Implant them all?"

"Not at once," Athena said, though even she wasn't sure. "But if you want numbers, you better start thinking like a damn fertility clinic, not a nursery."

Zahir leaned in, hesitant. "There's a theoretical—*theoretical*—framework for accelerated gestational cycling using tailored nutrition and adrenal suppression."

“Side effects include organ strain, vascular instability, total endocrine collapse,” Rennick added grimly.

Athena’s eyes flicked between them. “We can talk risks. I’m not saying yes to anything yet. But if you’re going to ask me to save humanity with my *womb*, then I’m going to make sure it’s done *on my terms*.”

Kessler gave a thin, grim smile. “Fair enough.”

The room had grown quiet again, but this time, not from discomfort — from focus.

Athena leaned over the glowing display, her ponytail brushing her shoulder, eyes scanning the hormone projections. Her small frame was tense with concentration, not fear. Now that she had a voice in the room, she intended to use it.

Dr. Rennick tapped a diagnostic diagram floating in midair. “We start simple. Controlled **fertility stimulation**. Low-dose gonadotropins. Nothing invasive. Monitor ovarian response, see how your body reacts after cryostasis.”

Athena nodded, her fingers resting lightly on the edge of the display. “If I don’t respond well?”

“We stop,” Rennick said firmly. “This is not about forcing anything yet. It’s about understanding what you can handle.”

Kessler added, “We’re not going to overload your system just to chase numbers. Not yet. Your size alone—” he paused awkwardly.

“I’m 4’11”, I’m aware,” Athena said dryly. “You can say it.”

He offered a stiff smile. “Yes. Your stature means we have to be mindful. Too much stimulation too fast, and we risk systemic collapse — ovarian torsion, internal swelling, stroke.”

Kessler leaned forward, fingers flicking through secondary tabs. “We’ll monitor your vitals constantly. Blood pressure, hormone levels, nutrient absorption. And if you tolerate the early cycles well—”

“—Then we escalate,” Kessler finished. “Larger doses. Faster recovery windows. Implantation prep. And eventually... embryo stacking.”

Athena’s brow furrowed. “Stacking?”

Rennick hesitated. “Multiple embryos. Carried simultaneously.”

Athena’s lips parted slightly in surprise. “Twins? Triplets?”

“Possibly more,” Kessler said carefully. “It’s not common, but it’s possible with careful management. But only if your body can sustain it. And we don’t attempt that unless we have no choice—or unless you approve.”

Athena crossed her arms, staring at the floating chart in silence.

“...And the point of that would be speed,” she said at last. “Faster reproduction. A chance to get the population curve going upward before we age out.”

Kessler nodded. “Exactly. If you can carry multiples, and if the children are viable, we buy ourselves time. By then—maybe twenty years from now—we’ll have female offspring. More options. Genetic diversity.”

Athena’s voice was flat. “So the idea is to use me to build a generation of daughters. So I’m not the only one anymore.”

“Yes,” Rennick said quietly. “That’s exactly the goal.”

She looked between them.

And slowly, nodded.

“Then start small. The first round. Low dose. Monitor everything. And *don’t* make assumptions about what I can handle because I’m short.” Her green eyes narrowed slightly. “I’ve carried a ship and a crew. I can carry this.”

Kessler offered a subtle, respectful nod. “Understood.”

Athena straightened. The weight of the moment settled around her like armor, not a burden. She wasn’t just surviving anymore.

She was planning.

Leading.

As she stepped out of the MedBay, heading to her quarters, the ship around her hummed faintly with life — artificial gravity, oxygen filters, lights flickering on deck by deck.

The Ark had been designed as a seed.

Now, she was the soil.

And the world they would build would begin with her.

The sterile lights of the Bio-Lab hummed quietly above rows of suspended nutrient tanks. Inside, cellular cultures shimmered — barely visible clusters, multiplying in the amniotic-blue fluid. Along one wall, gene sequencing monitors blinked with rows of green-lit stability markers.

The **cloning program had begun.**

DAY 2 — CLONING INITIATIVES AND FIRST IMPLANTATION

The sterile lights of the Bio-Lab hummed quietly above rows of suspended nutrient tanks. Inside, cellular cultures shimmered — barely visible clusters, multiplying in the amniotic-blue fluid. Along one wall, gene sequencing monitors blinked with rows of green-lit stability markers.

The **cloning program had begun.**

“Three candidates selected,” Dr. Rennick announced, pulling up the profiles on the central display. “All Tier-One Health Index, genetically diverse backgrounds, minimal hereditary risks.”

Athena stared at the profiles in silence. Men she’d seen around the ship, now being rebuilt from scratch — **Private Ellis, Lt. Ramirez, and Dr. Zahir.**

“Why clones?” she asked quietly, arms crossed.

Kessler stepped forward, folding his hands behind his back. “Because we can’t afford spontaneous mutation. ‘Natural’ reproduction carries too many unknowns — especially in an environment with elevated radiation exposure and stress-based epigenetic drift. Clones, at least, start clean.”

Zahir nodded. “They won’t be carbon copies in personality. Environmental factors will shape them. But genetically, they’ll be as close to ideal stock as we can create from the resources we have left.”

Athena exhaled slowly. “And the first test...”

Kessler turned to her, not cold but clinical. “We’ll implant all three embryos simultaneously. They’ve passed early-stage stability scans. We need to know if your body can support high-order multiples.”

She looked up at him, jaw tight.

“I’m five feet tall on a good day. If this goes badly—”

“We’ll monitor every variable,” Rennick interrupted gently. “At the first sign of rejection or physiological instability, we’ll terminate one or more embryos to preserve your health.”

Athena looked down at the cold metal floor. “So they’re disposable.”

Kessler didn’t respond.

After a beat, she nodded. “Fine. Do it.”

The procedure was fast, almost unceremonious. Sedation. Sterile gloves. Transfer pipettes. The chamber was quiet but tense — not reverent, not emotional, but weighted with significance. Even among the officers present, there was a shared awareness that something irreversible was happening.

Athena rested in the post-op recovery unit, the cool synthetic sheets tucked around her slim frame. IV lines traced from her arm to monitors tracking uterine pressure, hormone levels, blood flow. Her fair skin looked even paler against the faint blue hospital light.

Kessler checked the monitors. “Implantation successful. No immediate rejection signs. Hormone alignment is progressing.”

Athena opened her eyes slowly. “So I’m officially a lab now.”

Rennick offered a small smile. “You’re the future, Captain.”

Athena didn’t smile back. “No. I’m the experiment.”

The embryos were microscopic, barely clumps of cells. But inside her, **three lives** had begun, seeded from gene-stable clones of men she barely knew, all riding on whether her body — small, tired, already pushed to the edge — could withstand what no human woman had ever been asked to endure alone.

DAY 3 — EXPLORATION

Athena’s boots echoed softly against the composite flooring as she walked down the main corridor of **Deck 4**. It was the first time she had left the medical wing since the embryo implantation — not because she was ordered to rest, but because she needed space. Air. Something that didn’t smell like antiseptic or expectation.

She felt the subtle difference already — the sluggish pull of increased progesterone, the aching fullness in her lower abdomen, like something delicate had settled inside her. Something growing.

But today wasn’t about medicine.

Today, she needed to **see** what she was doing this for.

CAFETERIA MODULE

She passed through the auto-locking bulkhead into the **cafeteria** — a wide, open space with long metal tables, sleek meal replicators, and food storage units stacked in refrigerated lockers. The air smelled faintly of synthetic coffee and starch. A few men sat clustered at the far end, eating in near silence. A few glanced up as she entered — most looked away quickly.

Athena ignored them and moved to the large viewport spanning the wall.

Stars drifted outside, slow and endless, against the dark canvas of deep space. Somewhere out there was the debris of the destroyed female dorms. Somewhere out there, twenty lives had ended in silence.

Her reflection stared back at her — short, lean, a woman far too small to carry the weight now resting on her shoulders. She looked away.

HYDROPONICS BAY

Next stop was the **hydroponics farm**, tucked deep inside the Ark's midsection. Rows of vertical trays stretched from floor to ceiling, filled with green — kale, spinach, tomatoes, soy, herbs. Robotic arms moved methodically, misting roots, checking pH levels. The air was humid and rich with the scent of growth.

This was life. Fragile, calculated life. It comforted her.

Chief Agronomist Velasquez was hunched over a cluster of fungal samples.

He looked up as she approached and gave a nod of respect. "Captain."

She returned the nod, watching droplets cling to broad leaves under artificial light. "Still stable?"

"For now. Water reclamation's holding. We've got food for three years, maybe four if rationed tight."

Athena looked at the green stretching endlessly upward.

"Make it last," she said. "You'll need to feed children soon."

Velasquez paused, then offered a small, quiet smile. "I hope so."

LEISURE MODULE

Finally, she wandered into the **leisure deck**. It had always felt indulgent during simulations on Earth — a space with nothing but calm. It was circular, with soft lighting, padded benches, even

a glass-walled meditation room. Screens displayed rotating scenery: forests, ocean shorelines, even simulated cityscapes.

No one was here.

She sat on a bench near the artificial river stream, watching holographic koi flicker through pixel-water. A soft, slow tune played from the ceiling — synthesized strings and wind instruments designed to soothe cortisol levels.

Athena let her head rest back against the bench.

Her abdomen ached faintly — a tight, heavy sort of tug she was starting to recognize. A reminder of what had been done. Three embryos, cloned and chosen, now taking root inside her.

She placed a hand lightly against her stomach.

“Don’t make me regret you,” she whispered.

But in truth, she didn’t regret *them*.

She regretted that **this** was the world she’d bring them into — sterile, lonely, and desperately watching her every move like she was both saint and specimen.

DAY 32 — FIRST SIGNS

Athena stood in front of the mirror in her quarters, eyes tracing the subtle curve of her abdomen.

She was still small — short, slight — but the change was undeniable. Where before her stomach had been flat and toned, now there was a faint, soft bulge just below her ribs. Her clothes felt tighter, and a low ache had settled into her lower back, a dull, persistent reminder of what was happening.

She reached down, pressing her palm gently against the curve. The rounded outline was just noticeable — perhaps six weeks into a typical human triplet pregnancy, but she knew better. With her, it would be more pronounced, faster.

Accelerated growth.

Her breath caught as the reality of what she was carrying — three embryos, three potential futures — began to sink in. Her mind still hadn’t fully caught up to the physical sensation. Each day felt like a new chapter, a new kind of responsibility. A new kind of fear.

The door slid open, and Athena turned toward it. **Dr. Kessler** stood in the threshold, clipboard in hand, eyes immediately scanning her face. “Ready for today’s checkup?”

“Always,” Athena said, her voice a little tighter than usual. She forced a smile and nodded toward the corridor. “Lead the way, doc.”

The MedBay felt like a sanctuary of cold efficiency as Athena reclined on the padded table, her uniform top pulled up just enough to expose her abdomen. The hum of machines filled the space, and the soft sound of Dr. Rennick adjusting the ultrasound probe broke the silence.

“Alright, Captain,” Dr. Rennick said, her voice gentle. “This may be a bit cold.”

Athena’s breath hitched slightly as the cool gel was applied to her skin. The sensation was familiar, but it felt different this time. More personal. Her own body, altered beyond its natural scope, about to be displayed for others.

She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Take a deep breath,” Rennick instructed. “Let’s see what we’re working with.”

The display blinked to life — first a soft white glow, then black-and-white waves of shifting images. It took a moment for Athena to focus, but when she did, the sight was unmistakable.

Three faint, **flickering heartbeats**.

The first one, a tiny, pulsing blur of light in the far right corner of the screen. Then the second. Then the third, side by side, each tiny flicker of life, already beginning their slow journey through her.

The medical team watched intently as Rennick adjusted the probe, studying the screen.

“Triplets. All viable,” she murmured. “No signs of abnormalities. They’re healthy. A little smaller than average, but everything checks out for their stage.”

Athena’s breath left her in a long exhale, her heart pounding in her chest. She stared at the screen, watching those tiny heartbeats flutter with a kind of wonder, mixed with an unmistakable sense of awe and fear. Three lives. Three futures.

“They’re moving,” Athena said quietly. Her voice trembled slightly, more to herself than anyone else.

“We’re still early,” Kessler observed, leaning in, studying the scan. “It’s only been about 30 days. We’ll need more time before we get full readings on growth rates and organ development. But the fact they’re all showing distinct signs of life this early is promising.”

Rennick turned to Athena, her expression soft but serious. “We’re entering the critical phase now. We need to keep monitoring your body’s response — your nutrient intake, your cardiovascular health. Carrying multiples at this pace... it’s unprecedented. We’ll do everything we can to help you sustain this.”

Athena nodded, but the weight of their words sank in. **Sustain this.**

Her stomach fluttered with discomfort as she sat up, the sensation of the embryos moving in tandem a constant reminder of the delicate balance she now had to maintain.

Later that evening, Athena stood in front of her mirror again, examining the small but undeniable bump, fingers lightly grazing over her skin.

The ultrasound had confirmed it — the embryos were growing, thriving even. It was everything they had hoped for. But it also meant something she hadn’t fully come to terms with.

She was carrying **three future generations.**

But for all the medical advancements, for all the confidence the team had in their procedures, there were still countless variables — **variables she had no control over.**

She placed a hand on her belly again, feeling the faint pulse of life within. It was surreal. Not just the biology of it, but the weight of it. She wasn’t just a captain anymore. She wasn’t just a leader or a survivor.

She was the **mother of the Ark’s future.**

It was terrifying, but in the silence of her quarters, Athena allowed herself a moment of peace. The stars outside were constant, unmoving. But inside her, everything was changing

DAY 60 — SHOWING

By Day 60, there was no hiding it.

Athena’s uniform had been swapped out for a modified version, loosened at the midsection, seams reinforced with stretch-fiber panels. Still, the curve of her stomach was unmistakable — rounded, forward, and firm. She looked, by Earth standards, to be **well into the second trimester**, though it had only been two months since implantation.

Everywhere she walked now, eyes followed her.

Some glanced in awe. Others with concern. A few with quiet, bitter envy.

The halls of the Ark — sterile, metallic, humming with recycled air — felt different now. **She was the anomaly**, the growing, walking symbol of their survival. And her body, once small and lithe, now carried more weight — physically and symbolically — than any ship or reactor onboard.

The cafeteria was half-full during cycle break. Meals were pre-portioned, nutrient-focused, but Athena had special trays now — protein-heavy, supplemented with folates, iron, and caloric boosts to match her rapidly increasing metabolic load.

She moved slowly, with a careful awareness of her changing center of gravity, and sat down at an empty table near the hydroponic screen. A few murmured greetings came from surrounding tables — respectful, but distant.

Then a soft clatter of a tray sliding onto the bench beside her.

“Permission to sit, Captain?”

Athena turned and offered a faint smile. **Bucky Lorne** — nurse, midwife, soft-spoken but sharp-minded. Late 30s, brown curls tied back, sleeves rolled to the elbow. He was one of the few crew members who treated her like more than a subject.

“You don’t need permission, Bucky,” she said, her voice quieter now. “You’re the one person here who might actually understand what’s going on in this body.”

He chuckled softly, setting down a bottle of water and taking a bite from his ration bar. “Well, I’ve helped plenty of mothers on Earth get through triplet births. But none of them were accelerating growth in deep space with no viable NICU backup.”

Athena winced. “Thanks for the reassurance.”

He gave her a sympathetic look. “Just saying... we’ve crossed into uncharted territory.”

She rested her hand on the swell of her belly, gently tracing the arc. “I feel them sometimes. Pressure shifts. Flutters. It’s... early, but they’re active.”

Bucky nodded, face growing more serious. “That’s a good sign. But listen, Athena—implanted embryos like these, especially clones, don’t tolerate premature delivery. If they come early, even at ninety-nine percent development...”

“They won’t survive,” she finished for him.

He nodded. “There’s no uterus in the Ark other than yours. No artificial wombs. No exo-incubators. If your body gives out early, we lose all three.”

Athena’s expression tightened. “That’s not going to happen.”

Bucky gave her a long look, not challenging her confidence — but testing it.

“You're tough. But you're also barely five feet tall and already carrying more than most bodies your size ever have. Your organs are already displacing. And we haven't even hit the heavy stretch yet.”

She turned to look out the viewport — at the stars, unmoving, infinite.

“Then I'll stretch,” she said. “As far as I have to.”

Later, in the quiet of the hydroponics corridor, Athena walked slowly between the rows of green. Her hand never left the firm curve of her belly. Her breathing was deeper now. Her steps slower.

Bucky's words stayed with her.

She was carrying three lives. They were counting on her not just to survive — but to endure, for months, in a place where failure meant extinction.

No second chances. No backups.

She pressed her palm against her stomach, feeling the faintest ripple — a gentle shift, like a feather moving underwater.

“Not yet,” she whispered. “You stay in there. As long as it takes.”

The plants around her swayed softly beneath the misting nozzles — a small, artificial jungle, quietly thriving — just like the life inside her.

DAY 140 — CARRYING FOR THE ARK

The walls of MedBay were familiar by now — sterile white, faint hums of machines, always smelling faintly of antiseptic and synthetic linen. Athena lay back on the cushioned recline table, belly rising high and heavy from her small frame, her breathing slow but labored.

She was **20 weeks in**, and to the untrained eye, she **looked well and truly full term**. The triplets, nourished by intense hormonal stimulation and round-the-clock monitoring, had grown large and healthy — larger than any recorded gestation for this stage.

Dr. Rennick moved the ultrasound wand across Athena's bare, taut abdomen, carefully watching the monitor. The gel spread easily, and the probe glided over her stretched skin, already lined faintly with pink from the sudden expansion.

"Here we go..." Rennick murmured, narrowing her eyes as the first flutter of movement came into view.

Three distinct, wriggling shapes filled the screen. Limbs kicked, heads shifted. Heartbeats pulsed strongly in unison.

"Wow," Rennick said under her breath. "They're... ahead of schedule. By at least two weeks in size."

Athena winced, pushing herself up slightly on her elbows. "That good or bad?"

Rennick hesitated. "Both. They're thriving — incredibly so. Strong bones, visible muscle mass. But your body is... well, to be blunt, you're at **full-term size**. And we're only halfway."

Athena looked down at herself. Her belly rose like a perfect dome beneath her stretched fabric top, sitting heavy on her hips. Her posture had changed in the past two weeks alone — now leaning backward to compensate for the weight, hands instinctively pressed to her lower back when she stood. Even walking had slowed.

"I feel it," she said simply. "They're heavier every day."

Dr. Rennick offered a sympathetic nod. "We'll monitor closely for signs of strain. The implants can't come early — not even by a week. The next few months are going to be... tough, Captain. You're pushing limits we haven't studied before."

Athena gave a tired smile. "What else is new?"

Moving through the corridors took twice as long now. Her stride was cautious, hips swaying with the added mass, hand resting almost constantly under her bump for support. The central hallway lights reflected gently off her taut silhouette.

Everywhere she went, **eyes followed her** — but it was different now. There was no tension. No skepticism.

Just respect. Admiration. And whispers.

Some crew members offered shy smiles. Others stopped their work entirely as she passed. Words were soft, reverent.

"Captain Athena."

"She looks incredible."

"She's holding up better than anyone thought."

A young engineer from Maintenance offered a protein bar and a nervous grin. “Congratulations, ma’am. We’re all pulling for you.”

Athena accepted it with a nod and a quiet “Thank you,” then moved on slowly.

In the cafeteria, the usual hum of conversation dimmed slightly when she entered. She made her way to the center of the room — her usual spot now — and slowly sat down with a sigh of effort, one hand steadying her large belly as she lowered herself.

Bucky, already seated, gave her a proud nod.

“Halfway,” he said simply.

“Feels like I’m carrying the whole Ark in here,” Athena said with a tired laugh.

“In a way, you are,” he replied. “You’ve become more than a symbol. You’re living proof this place — this mission — still has a future.”

Athena rubbed the side of her belly, feeling one of the triplets shift under her hand. A slow, heavy turn.

Her body ached. Her spine throbbed by evening. But deep inside, where the pressure was constant and growing, she felt **life** — active, healthy, undeniable life.

And despite everything, despite the discomfort and the impossibility of it all... she smiled.

DAY 200 — SOLUTIONS

By Day 200, Athena had become monumental.

She moved in slow, calculated steps — shoulders pulled back, spine arched dramatically, both hands cradling the heavy curve of her belly with every motion. Her once-sturdy posture had long since vanished beneath the sheer mass of her midsection, which now **jutted far beyond her hips**, high, round, and impossibly firm.

She wore a custom-made uniform: a large stretchy bodysuit able to contain her belly, and provide that extra support. Even with it, **her gait was a slow, deliberate waddle**, each step a conscious act of balance.

She was not just pregnant — she was **overwhelmed** by pregnancy. Her abdomen strained outward, skin stretched tight and glossy with tension. The triplets were large, active, and competing for space.

And she still had **three months to go**.

She sat on the exam table, breath coming in shallow, measured puffs. Even breathing had become a challenge — her lungs pressed high by the upward shift of organs and the unrelenting pressure from below. Her thighs couldn't close fully anymore. Even sitting was difficult.

Dr. Rennick entered with a tablet and a grave expression.

"We need to talk about the next phase," she said.

Athena looked down at herself, then back up. "You don't think I can make it."

Rennick hesitated. "I think your body is doing something never intended for its size. You've surpassed Earth gestation for triplets by nearly a month... and you're only in your seventh."

Athena shifted, wincing. Her belly nudged the edge of the table with a solid thump. "But I *have* to make it. If they come early—"

"They won't survive," Rennick finished. "Which is why we've developed a solution."

She pulled out a small case. Inside were three vials of amber fluid, already drawn into auto-injection syringes.

"It's a hormonal steroid compound. Designed to help your body adapt to the growth, and halt preterm uterine strain. It doesn't stop growth — but it strengthens the uterine wall, slows dilation, and suppresses any chance of early contractions."

Athena blinked. "So I can carry them... all the way."

"To **Day 300**," Rennick said. "Ten months. The outer limit of viability for this program."

Athena hesitated, then rolled her sleeve up. "Do it."

Dr. Rennick pressed the first injector to her arm, then the second into her hip. The third went directly into the upper curve of her belly — a cold sting beneath tight skin.

"You'll feel it soon," Rennick said. "The rigidity will increase. Your uterus will become less flexible — to resist giving way under pressure."

As she rose — carefully — she could already feel a subtle difference. The tightness. The firmness. Her stomach, already solid, now felt like a **swollen drum**, barely yielding beneath her touch.

When she walked through the central corridor, conversations hushed. Crewmembers parted instinctively, clearing her path. They stared not just at her size now — but at the sheer **effort** behind every step.

“Seven months,” someone whispered.

“Gods, she looks overdue with six.”

Athena’s chin stayed high. Her back ached. Her skin itched. Her hips screamed by nightfall. But she held herself steady. Every congratulation, every gasp, every stunned glance — they reminded her:

She was carrying the future.

DAY 230 — FLOATING

The days had blurred.

Athena sat slumped into the same reclining chair she’d been living in for over a week, a large pillow wedged behind her aching back, both hands resting atop her belly like a shelf. The leisure room’s vidscreen flickered with muted reruns of old Earth dramas, but her focus drifted in and out. She couldn’t remember how the episode began, or whether she’d seen it already.

Her belly was massive now. Unignorable. The thin fabric of her suit clung to every curve — stretched to its limit. At **8 months**, she looked like a woman who had gone several weeks **past** her due date, and still had weeks to go. The **Day 200 injections** had kept her womb firm and stable, but hadn’t slowed the growth. The triplets were large and active, often squirming and pressing against the taut wall of her abdomen with enough force to make her flinch.

“Ugh,” she grunted as she tried to shift positions. Her lower back screamed in protest.

She needed to **move**. Or at least feel like she could.

That’s when she remembered the pool.

The Ark’s **hydrotherapy and recreation wing** had been mostly empty in recent months. With food production, engine maintenance, and terraforming prep taking priority, no one had time for swimming, but Athena had one job and 1 job only; that was growing her litter.

As Athena stepped into the wide chamber — flanked by gleaming tiles, humidity clinging to the air — she was alone.

The Arks pool glistened in soft blue light, slightly steaming. Heated. Clean. Chemicals in the water making her very buoyant, and the heat safe for the babies.

She made her way to the edge, one arm wrapped protectively under her belly, the other gripping the rail. With effort, she sat on the side of the pool, dangling her feet into the warm water. Then, carefully, she **lowered herself in**.

The sensation was instant.

Weightlessness.

The massive strain on her back vanished. The water cradled her, took her burden, let her breathe again. She floated slightly backward, arms spreading out like wings, belly buoyant beneath the surface — still enormous, but now a gentle globe suspended in warmth.

For the first time in weeks, she **smiled with genuine relief**.

She drifted in circles, letting the warmth seep into her tired limbs. The babies stirred slightly, gently this time, as if even they could feel the change.

Her belly was hot to touch, it had become a round and tight furnace, taking on a slight pink hue from the temperature with little stretch marks thanks to the injection.

A couple hours later, she emerged slowly, wrapped in a large towel, making her look like she was smuggling a beach ball as it hung off her naked body, her cheeks pink and expression lighter. For the first time in days, her muscles didn't scream with every step. She made a mental note to **return here daily**, as long as she could.

She passed two younger crewmembers in the corridor on her way back — both paused mid-conversation and straightened at the sight of her and her belly now peeking through the large towel.

“Captain,” one said, nodding with quiet respect, trying not to stare at her large taut dome.

Athena returned it with a tired but firm look. “Carry on.”

She waddled onward — still huge, still aching — but for the first time in days, she felt **like herself again**.

DAY 250 — CELEBRATION

The cafeteria had never been this full.

All 99 men, the ten senior male captains, and the core Ark leadership stood shoulder to shoulder in the long communal hall, voices hushed in anticipation. Trays were loaded with freshly picked greens, cultivated root vegetables, and even a few cuts of lab-grown protein — the **first full harvest** from the hydroponic farms. For the first time since cryosleep ended, they were eating something not from a ration packet.

It was a **landmark day** — not just for the food, but for the survival of the colony.

She entered slowly from the main corridor, supported gently on one side by Nurse Bucky, the other by a small handrail she gripped firmly. The crowd quieted instantly.

Athena's belly **preceded her by nearly a foot**, full and impossibly round, high and wide on her petite frame. She was glowing with a flushed warmth, a visible sheen on her face from exertion, but her eyes were sharp and steady — **emerald green and resolute**.

She wore a custom maternity uniform — one that had been altered half a dozen times to accommodate her steady growth. The fabric clung to the full arc of her womb, emphasizing the triplet load she carried. Even those who had grown used to her size stared again, struck by how *much* she had changed.

At **8.5 months**, she looked — according to more than one whisper — like someone overdue with triplets. A feat few had even studied, let alone seen.

She made her way to the front table, easing down into a reinforced chair made just for her. The strain on her back was immense now, and her breathing came in short bursts between words. Still, she nodded gratefully to the crew.

Captain Ellas, one of the ten senior male officers, stepped forward. The lights dimmed slightly as he raised a glass of champagne and addressed the room.

"Today marks a turning point in our survival. Against the odds, our engineers, botanists, and labor crews have **completed the full hydroponic harvest cycle** — ahead of schedule. Not only that, they've finished constructing the modular cold-storage bays and waste-composting loops, which means..."

He smiled.

"...we don't just have food. We have **excess food**. Stored. Safe. Sustainable. For the first time, we've moved beyond surviving — we're preparing to **thrive**."

A wave of cheers and applause rippled through the crowd, with several crew members clapping each other on the backs, beaming with pride.

Ellas continued, voice rising.

"This is what colonization looks like. Hard work. Sacrifice. Adaptation. And we would be remiss not to honor someone else — someone who is quietly carrying more than any of us possibly could."

He turned, gesturing to Athena.

"Captain Athena. Who, in the face of loss, isolation, and unimaginable strain, chose to stay. Chose to step forward. Chose to carry our future."

He raised his glass higher.

"To our workers. To our mothers. To. The Ark!"

A roaring cheer followed. Some banged the tables. Others stood. But all eyes turned to Athena.

Athena blushed, but smiled softly as she adjusted in her seat — her belly rounding forward like a globe, visibly taut beneath the fabric.

She let the wave of applause wash over her. This moment was about more than pregnancy. More than survival. It was about purpose. It was about momentum.

The cafeteria buzzed with energy. Real food, real flavor — and for the first time in months, laughter.

Athena ate slowly, leaning back in her seat between bites, occasionally shifting to relieve pressure on her ribs. Her legs were swollen, her abdomen tight as a drum, and sitting for long periods had become increasingly difficult. But tonight, for once, it didn't matter.

Everywhere she looked, people were smiling — talking, planning, dreaming. **Hope** had returned to the Ark.

After the meal, a small team from engineering presented her with a surprise: a hand-carved wooden plaque, made from the recycled casing of a defunct navigation panel. It simply read:

ATHENA – FIRST MOTHER OF THE ARK

Most of the crew were returning to their quarters, some lingering at the edges in conversation, while others stood near Athena's table, nodding respectfully as they passed.

She remained seated, her body grateful for the support. The sheer *weight* of her stomach had become undeniable — she could feel it in every breath, every shift, every beat of her pulse in her lower back. The strain was immense, but somehow... it felt worth it tonight.

Across from her, **Bucky**, the midwife nurse, sat with a half-finished tray and a warm expression.

“You did good today,” he said softly, sipping from a glass of water.

Athena smiled, brushing a strand of blonde hair behind her ear. “They did good,” she said, nodding toward the farming crew. “I just showed up.”

“What do you mean? You’ve been working non stop 24/7. Growing your brood, ‘*Showing up*’ with three lives growing inside you and carrying the hopes of a dying colony isn’t nothing,” Bucky replied, leaning forward. “You’ve already done more than any of us could’ve asked.”

She looked down at her belly. It rose high, tight, almost domed — the outline of one of the babies had shifted a moment ago, pushing to one side. “I think they know it, too.”

There was a pause. Then, quieter:

“Do you ever think about what happens after?” Bucky asked.

Athena’s gaze lifted. “You mean... after they’re born?”

He nodded. “The Ark still needs you. We all know it. But have you thought about how many times? About where this goes in a year? Five years?”

She exhaled, slowly. “I think about it too much.”

Another pause.

“I don’t want to be just a womb,” she said finally, voice soft but steady. “But I also... I know I might have to be. For a while. Until there are more like me.”

Bucky’s eyes were gentle. “You’re not *just* anything. But yeah. You might be the first. And it won’t be fair. But it’ll be remembered.”

Athena gave a short nod. Then she looked at the table in front of her — several crewmen still nearby, lingering, respectful but curious. She reached to her sides, unfastening the front seam of her bodysuit. With slow, careful movements, she rolled it down from her shoulders to just under her belly, revealing the full, bare curve of her abdomen.

The conversations nearby hushed.

She leaned back, letting her belly rest fully on the table in front of her, supported and spread across the warm surface. It rose and fell slightly with each breath, skin tight and glowing, the faint shimmer of veins just beneath.

One of the younger technicians — James, barely out of his twenties — glanced over, eyes wide.

“Would you like to feel?” she asked, her voice calm.

James blinked. “Are you sure?”

She nodded. “They're part of all of you too.”

Gently, reverently, James stepped forward and laid his hand on the slope of her warm belly, it had almost no give, stretched tight as a drum. Others followed — one or two at a time — each placing a palm, feeling the faint movements beneath, the subtle push of life growing fast within.

No one said much. There was a quiet awe in the moment, like watching stars move.

Athena closed her eyes for a moment, breathing in. She had never felt more exposed — or more powerful, like a great fertile goddess, feeling her worshippers massage her ever growing womb.

DAY 270 — DUE DATE LOADING

She braced herself in the corridor doorway, breathing shallowly through her nose. Her center of gravity had completely shifted; her abdomen jutted out before her like a tight, forward-facing dome. It moved with each breath, every step, each motion causing a subtle ripple across her skin-tight bodysuit. Her pace was glacial — each leg swing forced her to brace her hips, and the pressure on her lower back had become nearly unbearable.

Her small frame — barely 4'11" — was simply never built for this.

And yet here she was.

She leaned on the handrail as she turned a corner, beads of sweat forming at her hairline. Her belly brushed the corridor wall once — not from carelessness, but because there was simply *no room left* in front of her. She grunted softly and kept moving.

A pair of engineers passed her going the opposite direction. One offered a kind smile, the other quickly looked away — overwhelmed, perhaps, by the sheer **magnitude** of what she was carrying. Most of the Ark had gotten used to it by now. Some still whispered in awe. A few avoided her altogether, unsure how to speak to someone who bore *everything*.

When she finally reached the **medical waiting lounge**, and one of the relaxing recliners, her knees trembled.

The temperature was warm and low-lit, and only a few crew members were there. A soft hum of music filled the air. Athena didn't speak. She didn't have to.

One of the med-aides quietly stood from the wide **zero-gravity recliner** in the corner and gestured for her to take it. She gave them a grateful nod, waddled over with slow, deliberate steps, and sank into the cushion with a long, shaky exhale.

Her belly rose high into the air, massive and taut, barely able to shift even as she lay back. The pressure eased only slightly — but it was *enough*. She rested her hands on the crest of her stomach, feeling the warmth of her own skin, the faint movements beneath.

Later that evening, Athena sat resting on that same reclining couch in the medical lounge, cooling gel under her aching feet, a tray of nutrients untouched beside her, a nurse massaging cream into her blemish-free, perfectly round sphere of life.

Across the medbay wall, beyond the semi-transparent divider curtain, several senior crew members — including two of the **male captains**, along with the **chief geneticist Dr. Harlan** — were deep in discussion.

“She’s done remarkably well considering her frame,” one said.

“She won’t be able to repeat this easily,” Dr. Harlan added. “Her abdominal wall is near max tolerance, and the spinal compression is starting. She won’t last another full-term cycle at this rate.”

“Which is why we need to consider augmentation,” another captain said, almost casually. “Hormonal suppression in between cycles. Maybe engineered elasticity in the abdominal tissues. We have samples from the old clone lines — could enhance her resilience.”

“She’s our best — our *only*— viable vessel,” one captain continued. “If she doesn’t carry the next sets, we lose momentum. The future of the Ark depends on efficient breeding, not comfort.”

The word hit her like a slap.

Vessel.

She pulled herself upright slowly, her belly shifting with the effort. She cleared her throat once, loudly.

The room went silent.

“I may be the only one who can carry them,” Athena said from behind the curtain, “but don’t confuse my *sacrifice* for *submission*.”

Struggling to get up with the help of the nurse, she slowly made her way over to the group, barely bare and jutting forward as she cradled it.

She pulled the curtain back, standing fully, the weight of her massive belly straining against her suit, her hands firm beneath it.

“I will not be modified like equipment. I’ll carry these three.. But I’m not your breeding machine.”

Bucky, who had just entered with a datapad, stopped short and immediately walked to her side.

The room was stunned into silence.

Eventually, one captain muttered, “She heard everything.”

Dr. Harlan nodded. “Good. Then she knows we’re trying to keep her alive.”

Athena’s eyes narrowed.

“Then start by treating me like I am.”

Dr. Harlan took the lead, clearing his throat. “You’re nearing maximum viable expansion. At this point, the strain on your musculoskeletal system is bordering on critical. If we want you to safely recover after the birth... we need to plan for what comes *next*, now.”

Athena exhaled slowly, watching them intently, while rubbing circles around her overtaxed womb..

“So this is the part where you ask when I’m ready to carry again.”

“It’s more than that,” said Harlan. “We’re not just thinking about your next cycle. We’re considering how to *structure the future of reproduction on the Ark*. Efficiently. Sustainably. And... ethically.”

Captain Ellas leaned forward, folding his hands. “You are the most valuable human on this ship, Athena. What you’ve done — what you’re still doing — it’s beyond commendable. But we can’t rely on just one body. It’s too dangerous. For you. And for the mission.”

She nodded slowly. “So what are you proposing?”

“We didn’t want to bother you,” Harlan said, offering a gentle smile. “But we’d like to talk — about next steps.”

Athena groaned faintly but waved them forward. “Don’t tell me you’re already thinking about the next pregnancy.”

“We have to,” Captain Ellas replied, pulling up a stool. “This first cycle is nearing its endpoint, and while it’s been a remarkable success... we’re still centuries away from sustainability. Even with three births every year, we’d all be dead before the population reached critical mass.”

Athena slowly sat up, gritting her teeth as the mass of her belly shifted. “So? You want more. I figured.”

“We’re exploring it carefully,” Dr. Harlan added quickly. “You’ve adapted well so far — far better than any models predicted. But we know your frame has its limits.”

She looked at him flatly. “So how many are we talking?”

Bucky stepped forward with his tablet. “If we use improved **embryo stabilizers**, newer **uterine support scaffolding**, and continue regulated **growth hormones**—we could safely consider six.”

Athena blinked. “*Sextuplets*? You want me to carry double?”

“There are risks,” Dr. Harlan admitted. “But you’ve already carried triplets under hormonal acceleration. You’ve proven more adaptable than we anticipated.”

Captain Ellas leaned forward. “We’re not demanding it. We’re asking what *you* think you can handle. If we can keep your uterus reinforced early on, and strengthen your pelvic and abdominal structures ahead of time, we might be able to mitigate some of the strain.”

Athena let her eyes drift down to her belly — impossibly round, stretched taut over the three lives inside her. Her back ached constantly. Her hips burned when she stood. And she hadn’t seen her own feet in nearly two months.

“...What happens if I can’t carry Six?”

“Then we terminate and plan for fewer,” Harlan said. “Or shorter cycles. Or rotate surrogates if viable alternatives emerge.”

“We’re not looking to break you,” Bucky said, his voice gentle. “We’re trying to build around you.”

Athena exhaled slowly, hands resting on her firm, elevated stomach. “...Start prepping me for six. But I want full oversight. No doses without my signoff. No secret modifications.”

Captain Ellas nodded. “You’ll be fully briefed every step.”

“And if I decide three is the max?”

“Then three it is,” Bucky said. “You’re not a vessel, Athena. You’re the foundation.”

She leaned back again, gritting slightly as her belly settled heavy across her lap.

“Then let’s see how strong this foundation can be.”

She turned and walked out — slow, swollen, but unshaken.

DAY 290 — BIRTH DAY

The lights in the **Ark's medical bay** glowed soft and sterile, casting warm reflections on the steel and glass. Everything was quiet — not because there was nothing to do, but because every motion was precise, rehearsed, and solemn.

Today was the day.

Athena sat upright on the reinforced medical recliner, the massive curve of her belly dominating her petite 4'11" frame. The triplets inside her had grown strong, large, and—if the scans were right—fully developed.

Cloned, but hers nonetheless.

A full medical team surrounded her: **Dr. Harlan** led the prep, with **Bucky** stationed near her side, gloves already on. Nurses moved silently around the room, laying out sterilized tools, IV lines, and small neonatal capsules lined with temperature-controlled gel.

Athena breathed in deeply, one hand resting high on the dome of her abdomen, the other low beneath it. Her bodysuit had been carefully split open to give access, the fabric peeled away to reveal her stretched, veiny belly — firm, warm, and *ready*.

“How do you feel?” Bucky asked gently, kneeling beside her.

She smiled softly, rubbing slow circles across her side. “Heavy. But... calm. I think they’re ready.”

Captain Ellas stood just outside the room, observing through the viewing window. She gave Athena a nod — not as a commander, but as a witness. Today, everything changed.

“Vitals are strong,” said one nurse. “Uterine pressure is stable. No signs of rupture.”

“Alright,” Dr. Harlan said. “We’ll begin. Athena, we’ll assist with a guided natural delivery, just as we rehearsed. If any complications arise, we’re ready for emergency extraction.”

Athena closed her eyes for a moment, taking in the last quiet seconds of stillness. She whispered to herself, hand still stroking the very place where life had grown over the last 290 days.

“Let’s bring them home.”

The cries rang out in sequence — strong, piercing, healthy. The room that had been filled with tension just hours ago now held something sacred.

Three newborn boys, each wrapped gently and resting in warming cradles. Identical in many ways, but unique in expression. Breathing. Alive.

Athena, sweat-slicked and exhausted, reclined in silence as Bucky cleaned the last of the instruments. Dr. Harlan checked each of the infants methodically before giving a proud, quiet nod.

“They’re perfect.”

Captain Ellas stepped into the room, gazing down at the children with reverence. “You’ve just saved our mission, Captain Athena.”

Athena turned her head, eyes glassy but steady. “We saved it. This is just the beginning.”

She looked to the side, to the clear incubators, her chest rising and falling slowly.

There would be more challenges. More plans. Perhaps another pregnancy in time.

But for now, all she had to do was rest — and listen to the soft, perfect breathing of **the first three sons of the Ark**.

DAY 320 — THE NEXT PHASE

Twenty days had passed since Athena gave birth, and the Ark’s atmosphere had subtly changed.

Where once the halls were quiet and uncertain, now they buzzed with a different energy — the energy of hope. The infants, the firstborns, were thriving in the medical nursery under round-the-clock care. Athena, meanwhile, had spent the last three weeks slowly regaining her strength, with daily therapy, nutrient rebalancing, and postnatal monitoring.

She stood now in **MedBay Room C**, wearing a fresh pale-blue bodysuit designed for comfort and flexibility. Her blonde ponytail was shorter now — she’d cut it herself during recovery — but her emerald green eyes were clear and bright. Her body, though not fully returned to its old shape, looked strong. She was healing.

Dr. Harlan tapped through readings on a nearby terminal, while Bucky adjusted one of the new reinforced reclining chairs with built-in abdominal support.

“You’ve responded well to recovery,” Harlan noted. “No tearing, no lasting stress fractures. Pelvic integrity is solid. You’re already showing signs of uterine elasticity returning to baseline.”

Athena stretched her arms behind her back with a soft groan. “Feels like I ran a marathon through space... but yeah. I’m ready.”

Bucky grinned, holding up a vial filled with a faint lavender serum. “This is the new **Growth Regulation Compound**, version 2.3. Engineered from your hormone feedback during the first pregnancy — it should allow your body to better accommodate accelerated embryo development while minimizing stress on your organs.”

Athena eyed the serum. “Side effects?”

“Minimal,” Harlan replied. “Slight fatigue, rare nausea. But it’s been simulated for six-embryo viability. That’s our next target.”

She stepped forward slowly, placing a hand on the recliner’s edge. “Six,” she echoed.

“We’ll go slow,” Bucky said. “The embryos will be stagger-implanted over 48 hours, so your body doesn’t react violently to the sudden load. And we’re using **natural fertilization models** this time — selected pairings from top-ranked male genome donors. That means... genetic diversity.”

Athena blinked. “Including...?”

Harlan nodded. “Yes. Female offspring are now viable. Your daughters, potentially.”

That gave her pause. She hadn’t let herself imagine it — girls, women — a future for the Ark that didn’t just rebuild, but *balanced*. A future that could become sustainable... without putting everything on her shoulders alone.

“When do we begin?” she asked.

“We’re ready whenever you are,” Bucky replied. “But we recommend tonight. Your hormone cycle’s aligned, and the uterine lining is optimal.”

Athena took a long breath, then lowered herself carefully into the chair. The material adjusted to her frame, cradling her lower back and hips. She rested a hand over her lower stomach — flat now, but not for long.

“Let’s do it,” she said quietly.

Harlan handed her a small tablet. “Then here are your donors. You can choose from the selected genomes. We’ve already optimized for healthy female chances.”

As she swiped through the profiles, her expression turned thoughtful. This wasn’t just science. This was legacy.

In the corner, the med team prepared the embryos — six of them, natural and full of potential.

Athena lay reclined in the specialized gestation chair, her bodysuit rolled down to her hips, abdomen prepped and cleaned. Around her, the medical team worked with quiet urgency, ensuring that every tool, vial, and monitor was in its precise place. The lights were dimmed to a soft golden hue—intentionally soothing, a change Athena had specifically requested after the stress of her first delivery.

Dr. Harlan stood at her side, gloved and ready. A tray beside him held the six **natural embryos**, each carefully cultured and stabilized. They were small—almost invisible inside the nutrient suspension—but held the colony’s most meaningful hope yet.

“You’ll feel a little pressure,” Bucky murmured at her side, prepping her IV line. “But this version of the uterine matrix compound should keep everything smooth and evenly distributed. We’re going to do two insertions now, two in four hours, and two more before dawn.”

“Like loading cargo into a tight bay,” Athena muttered, smirking faintly.

Harlan gave a short chuckle. “Let’s just make sure the bay stays intact this time.”

He nodded to the team. The first two embryo injectors hissed softly as they were inserted, the fluid warm as it entered her uterus under controlled micro pressure. Athena exhaled, her body tensing just slightly, then relaxing.

“Two down,” Bucky said. “Vitals holding.”

Athena kept still, her hand resting on her lower belly.

Harlan looked down at her. “We’re going to get through this one even better, but we want to hear from *you*, Athena. Carrying six is going to be a challenge—likely double the strain of last time. We need to know what you want *built* for support.”

Athena nodded, her mind already working through the details. “First thing I want is **custom maternity wear**. Something more supportive than last time. I don’t just need something to wear — I need clothes that will *support* my frame as I carry these embryos. I’ll need **adjustable abdominal support**, and the fabric needs to be breathable and flexible. As my body grows, the weight distribution will shift, and I need something that will help with that — especially with my hips and lower back.”

Dr. Harlan nodded. “We can integrate some of the same fabric technology we use for the **support exoskeleton**, but for clothing. It’ll offer more support, especially as the pregnancy advances.”

“I want my quarters **expanded**, too. Last time I could barely turn around by month eight. Add a med recliner, personal restroom, and keep it near hydrotherapy.”

“Done,” Harlan nodded. “We’ll relocate you by Month Five.”

“I’ll also need a **personal care team**,” Athena continued. “A dedicated team to help me with day-to-day needs — bathing, dressing, and anything else that becomes difficult as I get bigger. I need my independence, but it’s not realistic to expect I’ll be able to do everything myself.”

Bucky made a note. “We’ll ensure the team is properly trained to assist you when necessary, but also with the discretion and respect you need. You’ll have someone available for whatever you need.”

Athena shifted in the chair again, trying to find a comfortable position. “I also want a **physiotherapy and stretching program** developed. The weight of six embryos will likely strain my muscles and joints more than last time. I want a daily program of **stretching exercises, massages, and muscle strengthening** — specifically for my pelvis, hips, and back. I’ll need to stay as mobile as I can, and that means staying ahead of any muscle tension or stress.”

Dr. Harlan gave a nod of approval. “A personalized stretching regimen will help keep you flexible and ease any discomfort. We’ll assign a physiotherapist to you immediately.”

Athena paused for a moment, then added with a soft sigh, “And lastly, I need a **robotic mobility augmentation** — something like an exoskeleton formula to help me move around once the weight becomes too much. It’ll be designed for my body, custom bio-engineered to support my abdomen, my back, and assist with walking and bending.”

“Absolutely,” said Bucky, with a gleam of excitement. “We’ve been looking into enhanced mobility suits, specifically for pregnancies like yours. We’ll build it with adjustable support sections and sensors that monitor how much weight you’re carrying and provide the necessary adjustments as you move.”

Athena took a deep breath, her posture relaxed but determined. “I want this pregnancy to be as smooth as possible. If I’m going to carry six healthy embryos, I need to be able to rely on these systems and on the care team. We can’t afford any risks this time.”

Dr. Harlan nodded solemnly, his eyes locking with hers. “We’ll make sure everything is ready. And if anything changes, we’ll be on top of it.”

With that, Athena’s attention moved to the embryos in the nearby incubator, ready for the next phase. She exhaled softly, knowing that despite all the preparations, the real journey was only just beginning. But for the first time, she felt prepared — supported — and ready to carry the weight of their future.

DAY 327 — PREPARATION

Athena stood by the large observation window of the medical bay, her hand resting lightly on her slightly rounded belly. Despite only being a week into her pregnancy, there was already a visible change — a soft swelling or bloating that hinted at the life growing inside her. She knew it would only get more pronounced from here, but for now, the initial stages felt like a delicate dance of preparation.

The quiet hum of the medical bay was punctuated by the steady footsteps of **Captain Hendrick**, one of the highest-ranking officers on the Ark, tasked with assembling Athena's **care team**. His role was to ensure that the personnel selected for her needs were capable of offering the right combination of medical expertise, physical assistance, and emotional support.

The door slid open, and Hendrick stepped inside, his serious expression softened slightly upon seeing Athena standing by the window.

"Athena," he greeted, his voice calm but full of purpose. "We've begun selecting candidates for your **personal care team**. We're looking at medical assistants, physiotherapists, and even some trained nurses who specialize in high-risk pregnancies. You'll have everything you need."

Athena nodded, her gaze still focused on the window. "Good. I'll need them. I have specific needs — they can't just be general assistants. They'll have to understand the **physical strain** and **emotional toll** carrying six embryos will take. I can't afford any mistakes."

Hendrick approached the table, pulling up a list of candidates on a **holographic screen**. "We've narrowed it down to a few who have the right expertise. Some of them already have experience working with **artificial gestation** and **high-risk pregnancies**. The rest will undergo additional training."

He tapped a few buttons, bringing up profiles. Athena scanned them, nodding in approval at the thoroughness. She had known Hendrick for years, and the captain's competence was something she trusted. He would select the best candidates, no question.

As the meeting progressed, **Captain Wendigo**, the leader of the **bioengineering division**, entered the room, holding a data pad with a series of notes.

"Captain Hendrick, Captain Pierce" Wendigo greeted, offering a polite nod to both of them. "I've been reviewing the bio-engineering requests for Athena's next pregnancy, and we're ready to begin the next phase of **genetic modifications** and embryo enhancements. We'll need approval to start researching specific genetic profiles for the embryos, as well as tailoring the **hormonal** and **biological factors** to support Athena's body as she carries six."

Athena turned to Wendigo, her expression sharp. "I've made it clear that we need to do this **safely**. No genetic anomalies like last time. I want a higher chance of survival and growth for each one. We can't afford mistakes with these embryos, especially if we're going to create daughters this time."

Wendigo nodded, understanding her request completely. "We're looking into specific enhancements. The **embryos** will be natural this time, but we'll tailor them for the best **genetic balance** and **health**. We'll also be enhancing **genetic diversity** to avoid inbreeding risks, especially given the low female population. But we need to establish the right **biological growth compounds** and hormonal levels before implanting them."

Athena paused, considering the stakes. "I trust you'll get it right. I can't afford to fail on this."

Wendigo bowed his head slightly. “We will make sure of it. We’ll also incorporate **monitoring systems** to track the embryos’ growth in real-time. We want to ensure your body can handle the increased load, and if any issues arise, we’ll adjust treatments accordingly.”

With a quick glance at Hendrick, Athena gave a decisive nod. “Let’s move forward then. But I need to know everything before anything is finalized. No surprises.”

A few hours later, the medical bay was buzzing with activity as the care team took shape. **Captain Hendrick** was busy finalizing the team, speaking with medical assistants and organizing the schedule of care for Athena. **Captain Wendigo**, meanwhile, was deep in discussion with the bioengineering and genetic teams, reviewing the hormonal formulations, genetic profiles, and the specifics of Athena’s physiological needs.

The **care team candidates** began arriving one by one, each selected for their expertise and understanding of the unique challenges ahead. A few were already familiar to Athena, having worked on various projects aboard the Ark.

Dr. Marcus, an experienced **nurse** specializing in high-risk pregnancies, was one of the first to be introduced. He had a calm and soothing demeanor, which would be essential in helping Athena maintain a sense of peace throughout the pregnancy. His training in **psychological support** would also play a key role, ensuring Athena’s emotional well-being as she navigated the strain of carrying six embryos.

Sergei, a **physiotherapist**, arrived next, immediately discussing the specialized **stretching program** with Athena. He was experienced in working with high-risk patients and understood how essential flexibility, mobility, and muscle support would be during this pregnancy.

There was also **Cam**, a worker who had experience working with **robotic mobility assistants**. He had been briefed on the custom exoskeleton they would be developing for Athena and was eager to ensure that Athena would have **full autonomy** as much as possible, even when her pregnancy reached its most difficult stages.

“While we find more members, I’ve made sure the team has been briefed on your needs,” Captain Hendrick said, looking over Athena’s shoulder. “We’ve selected those with experience in **high-risk pregnancies** and **multiple gestations**. They’ll be ready for anything, and each of them understands the stakes.”

DAY 380 — SURPRISE

It had been two months since Athena began carrying the embryos, and the changes in her body were impossible to ignore. She had already surpassed the size of a typical **seven-month**

human pregnancy with a single child, and she could feel the strain on her small frame with each passing day. Despite the challenges, she had accepted the enormity of her role in the survival of the Ark — a role that was becoming more complex with every new development.

Today, she was back in the **medical bay**, ready for her routine **ultrasound**. The room was quiet except for the faint hum of the monitors. Athena reclined in the comfortable chair, her hands resting lightly on her **swollen belly**, her thoughts briefly wandering to the future.

The door to the room opened, and **Dr. Harlan**, the lead physician, entered with his team. His usual calm and professional demeanor was slightly strained, a sign that today's scan was going to be more significant than usual.

"Athena," he said, approaching her with a gentle smile. "How are you feeling?"

Athena nodded, her hand resting on her belly. "Heavy. But I'm managing. I know it's only going to get worse."

Dr. Harlan paused before speaking again, his expression serious. "You're carrying a lot more than we originally anticipated. We need to confirm some things."

Athena raised an eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

He gestured toward the screen, and the gel was quickly applied to her abdomen. As he began the ultrasound, Athena could see the familiar shapes of the embryos flicker to life on the screen. Tiny, fragile figures, still in their early stages, their hearts beating gently, each a part of her.

Dr. Harlan adjusted the settings on the monitor, his eyes flickering back and forth between the screen and his data pad. "It looks like... there's been an unexpected development. You're not carrying six embryos anymore."

Athena's heart skipped a beat. "What do you mean? I thought we implanted six."

"We did," he confirmed. "But the **fertility and growth hormone treatments** we've been using seem to have had an unforeseen effect. Several of the embryos have **split** into **twin embryos**."

Athena's eyes widened as she processed the information. She was no stranger to the unexpected — after all, the very nature of their mission had been built on the unknown — but this was beyond anything she had prepared for.

Dr. Harlan continued, his fingers flying over the controls as he zoomed in on the scan. "You're now carrying **nine embryos**, Athena. Half of them have split. There are now **three sets of twins**."

A moment of stunned silence filled the room. Athena blinked, her mind struggling to absorb the full weight of what Dr. Harlan had just said.

“**Nine?**” she repeated slowly, her voice betraying a hint of disbelief. “I had three, and was prepared to double it to carry six, but nine?”

Dr. Harlan nodded, keeping his gaze on the screen as he zoomed in on the individual embryos. “This growth acceleration is unlike anything we’ve seen before. We knew the hormonal treatments would enhance development, but this is a rapid cellular change. The embryos are splitting much faster than we expected.”

Athena placed her hands on her stomach, feeling the weight of her decision and the unknown consequences of it. “Is it... safe? For me and them?”

“We’re monitoring closely,” Dr. Harlan reassured her. “Your body is adjusting to the changes, though it will take more effort to ensure the pregnancies proceed safely. The risk of preterm labor has now increased, and we’ll need to make adjustments to your care.”

Athena closed her eyes for a moment, processing the gravity of the situation. “Nine... nine children.”

The weight of those words seemed to hang in the air for a moment, as if the room had become both a medical facility and a sanctuary. Athena’s thoughts turned to the future — not just for herself, but for the Ark and its future.

“Are the embryos healthy?” Athena asked, her voice steady but filled with concern. “Are they developing properly?”

Dr. Harlan nodded. “They’re healthy so far, and the **twin embryos** are as well. The biggest challenge now is your body’s ability to handle the increased growth. We’ll need to adjust the hormonal treatments to support the additional embryos. It’ll be a balancing act to ensure that you and all nine embryos thrive. You say the word, at anytime, and we can terminate them.”

Athena nodded slowly, her gaze moving back to the screen. She could see the tiny beings there, unaware of the turmoil their existence would bring, but also their importance. They were more than just cells now — they were the future of the Ark, of humanity itself.

“I’ll manage,” Athena said, her voice firm, though there was a quiet vulnerability in it. “We’ll manage. Just make sure we’re doing everything we can.”

Dr. Harlan smiled softly at her. “I’m organising an emergency meeting. We will. And we’ll be with you every step of the way,”

Her vision blurred as the tears welled up in her eyes. She had been so determined, so resolute in her duty to the Ark, to the future of humanity, but now it felt like the weight of the task was crushing her. Her small frame, already stretched to its limit, couldn’t bear the thought of carrying even more life. Nine lives. She wasn’t sure how she could do it.

She stumbled down the hallway, her breaths shallow, her heart a storm of conflicting emotions. She had been so focused on surviving, on being strong, on doing what needed to be done for the Ark. But in that moment, all that strength seemed fragile, like it could shatter with a single breath.

She didn't know where she was going, but her legs moved almost instinctively toward the quieter parts of the Ark — away from the buzz of medical activity, away from the hum of the corridors. She needed space, time to gather herself, to make sense of the flood of thoughts that were overtaking her.

She found it — a small, secluded room, tucked away in a corner of the Ark. It was barely a storage closet, but the air inside was still, and the dim light felt like a protective cocoon. Athena slid against the wall and collapsed to the floor, wrapping her arms around her knees as the tears broke free.

Her chest heaved with each sob, her face buried in her hands as the reality of the situation hit her with full force. She wasn't just a vessel for the Ark's future; she was a woman, a human being, someone with her own fears and vulnerabilities. And in that moment, it all felt too much.

Nine embryos. Nine lives. The weight of that responsibility made her feel like she was drowning.

The tears eventually slowed, leaving Athena with an aching heaviness in her chest. She sat there in the quiet darkness of the corner, trying to steady her breath and calm her racing thoughts. The silence around her was the only thing that felt real now. It was an odd comfort — a brief reprieve from the relentless pressure that seemed to follow her everywhere.

She thought about what had happened in the medical bay. The scan. The sudden news of the nine embryos, the three sets of twins. Her mind had tried to process it, but it was too much, too fast. She had wanted to be strong, to accept whatever came her way, but this... this was more than she could have ever imagined. She wasn't prepared for this.

What if she couldn't carry them all? What if her body wasn't strong enough to sustain this pregnancy? What if she wasn't enough?

The questions echoed in her mind, sharp and painful, but she forced herself to focus on something else — her duty, the Ark, the people depending on her. She had known this wouldn't be easy. She had signed up for this mission, knowing the risks. The future of humanity was at stake, and she had agreed to carry that burden.

But this? This was something entirely different. This wasn't just about the Ark's future. It was about her future, too.

Athena took a slow, shaky breath and wiped her eyes. The tears had stopped, but the rawness remained. She had to pull herself together, to regain control. There was no time for breakdowns. Not when the future depended on her.

“I can do this,” she whispered to herself, her voice barely audible. “I have to.”

She pushed herself off the cold floor, her body aching as she stood. It took everything in her to force her legs to move, to head back toward the heart of the Ark. She had responsibilities to meet, plans to discuss. The crew would be waiting for her, and she couldn't afford to falter.

But as she walked back toward the bustling corridors, a quiet thought settled in her mind, one that had been too hard to face until now:

She wasn't sure how she was going to do this.

But somehow, she would.

DAY 440 — ATHENA'S GROWING BURDEN

Four months had passed since Athena's body had begun adapting to the sudden, overwhelming responsibility of carrying nine embryos. The transformation had been rapid, and it seemed as though she was growing with each passing day. Her body felt different — heavier, more strained — and every movement had become a reminder of how much weight she was bearing, physically and emotionally.

Her **belly** had swollen dramatically, now double the size it had been at the two-month mark. Where once there had been only the subtle curve of her pregnancy, now her abdomen was round, stretched tight under the fabric of her suit. If anyone were to walk by, it would be impossible to mistake her for anything but pregnant — and deeply so. It wasn't just that her belly had grown large; her breasts had shot up 3 bra sizes, sitting at an uncomfortable F-cup. Her hips had widened to accommodate the new passengers inside her womb. And the growth hormone has added some extra weight on her legs, and inches on her height, to help her manage.

Athena moved slowly through the corridors of the **Ark**, her every step deliberate and cautious. The weight on her growing frame was beginning to take its toll. It wasn't just physical exhaustion anymore — it was the constant awareness that she was carrying more than her body was naturally built to handle, a human once, pregnant with octuplets only made it just past 20 weeks, and she was locked in to carry nine until term. She had been prepared for challenges, but this was far beyond anything she had expected.

She passed by one of the observation windows, glancing at the stars outside. The black void of space was comforting in its endlessness, yet it also reminded her of how alone she and the Ark

were in this mission. There was no turning back, no real help beyond the walls of the ship. This was her responsibility — her mission, just as it had been when she first took on the role of captain.

As she approached the **medical bay**, she could feel the familiar **tingle of anxiety** creeping up her spine. It wasn't that she feared the doctors or the examinations — but rather the constant reminder that her body was being pushed to its limits. Would she be able to manage this for the entire ten months? Would she be able to **sustain** all the embryos?

She reached the door and entered, finding Dr. Harlan already waiting for her with the medical team.

"Athena, it's good to see you," Dr. Harlan greeted her with a warm but concerned smile. "How are you feeling?"

Athena shifted on her feet, trying not to wince as her back ached from the pressure of her growing belly. "Heavy," she replied. "I feel like I'm carrying a small planet in here."

Dr. Harlan chuckled lightly but quickly sobered. "You've certainly surpassed our expectations in terms of size. We've been monitoring your condition, and your body is holding up remarkably well — but the strain is becoming noticeable."

She could see the concern in his eyes. Even he knew the situation was delicate. "I've been doing alright," she said, though her voice betrayed the weariness she felt. "Just... tired. It's hard to move sometimes, and I feel like I'm always out of breath."

"That's natural," he reassured her. "The additional, but exponential growth is taking its toll, but you're still progressing well. We'll get you settled for the ultrasound and go over some more details. We'll need to assess the development of the embryos, and how they're adjusting to your body's current state."

Athena nodded and lay back on the examination table, her eyes instinctively drawn to the screen as the medical team prepared the ultrasound equipment. The sensation of the cold gel on her belly was jarring, but she had long since grown accustomed to it.

Dr. Harlan began the scan, his fingers moving across the console as the soft hum of the machine filled the room.

Athena glanced at the monitor. There they were — the nine tiny, growing embryos, each one a flickering shape on the screen. The twins were becoming more pronounced now, their development accelerating as they continued to grow.

"Everything looks stable for now," Dr. Harlan said after a few minutes of scanning. "The embryos are developing well. However, we're noticing some signs of **accelerated growth** due to the hormonal treatments. You're going to be larger than any pregnancy we've ever seen — certainly larger than a typical multiple pregnancy would be at this point."

Athena couldn't help but glance at the screen again, her heart heavy as she saw the cluster of embryos growing steadily. The responsibility weighed on her chest.

"Is everything alright with the embryos?" she asked quietly.

"They're healthy, for now," Dr. Harlan said, offering a reassuring smile. "But as we suspected, the **growth hormones** are causing a rapid pace of development. Your body is adapting well, but we'll need to keep a close eye on things to ensure that the pregnancy doesn't progress too quickly. We can't risk premature birth."

Athena nodded, her mind already racing ahead to the next challenge. She knew the risks — she had been trained for this mission — but knowing and experiencing were two very different things.

"I'm ready for whatever comes next," Athena said, her voice steady. "Just make sure they're all okay. I don't want to fail them."

Dr. Harlan gave her a soft, understanding look. "We won't let you fail them, Athena. We're in this together. But we need to start preparing for the next phase of your care. As you can see, you're growing faster than anticipated, and we'll need additional support soon."

Athena looked down at her belly, her hands resting on the swelling curve. Her eyes flickered with a mix of determination and uncertainty. It was becoming clear that this journey was not just a biological experiment anymore. It was a life-altering mission — not just for the **Ark**, but for her, as well.

DAY 460 — ATHENA'S WALK THROUGH THE ARK

Athena's body had become a living testament to the **Ark's mission**, a visual representation of what they had hoped to achieve — the future of humanity. At five months pregnant with **nine embryos**, she looked as though she had been carrying them far longer, her belly stretched to a size that defied the expectations of any normal pregnancy.

Her movement was slow, deliberate, as the weight of her **swollen abdomen** made every step an exertion. She wasn't used to feeling so cumbersome, but after four months of this, it had become her reality. Even though the **medical team** had ensured she was equipped with **supportive gear** — a reinforced bodysuit designed to relieve some of the pressure on her body — there was only so much they could do.

She was a **symbol of hope** for the Ark, but there were moments when she couldn't escape the feeling that she was a **vessel**, a burden, as much as a leader. She had yet to find a balance between the role she had been thrust into and her own humanity.

As she walked through the corridors, her footfalls echoed softly against the cold steel floors. It was quieter today than usual, the routine of the Ark going on around her as she made her way toward the **crew lounge**.

She saw several crew members working in the hallways — engineers double-checking equipment, research assistants discussing the latest data, and medical staff moving between departments. Athena was used to being noticed by now; her pregnancy had become unavoidable, and everyone she passed couldn't help but stare, eyes lingering a little longer than usual.

She walked into the lounge, where a few crewmates were gathered, chatting as they went over data or simply taking a break. As soon as she entered, they paused and looked up, offering smiles.

“Captain Athena,” greeted **Bucky**, a midwife and nurse who had been a consistent source of support. His eyes softened with genuine care as he rose from his chair. “How are you feeling today?”

Athena managed a small smile, though the exhaustion in her eyes was evident. “Heavy,” she said. “But I’m managing.”

She didn't want to elaborate. It wasn't as if they didn't know what it felt like for her. They could see it in the way she moved and the weariness in her voice.

Bucky was one of the few who always seemed to know what to say, though, and today he gave her a reassuring nod. “You're doing amazing, Captain. We've all got your back. You know that, right?”

Athena nodded, though she didn't feel as confident as her words suggested. “I know.”

At the far corner of the room, one of the engineers, **Captain Wendigo**, called out to her from a table where he sat with several others. “Captain, come over here. We were just discussing your progress.”

She made her way over, her steps slow, the weight of her belly swaying slightly with each motion. She could feel everyone's eyes on her — some sympathetic, others perhaps just curious. The crew had watched her transform over the last few months, and she knew they saw her as more than just a leader now. She was **the Ark's future**, whether she wanted that responsibility or not.

Wendigo slid a data tablet across the table toward her, a series of **genetic simulations** showing projected growth patterns for the embryos. “We've been reviewing your latest scans and

adjusting the genetic sequences for future generations. We've noticed that the **growth acceleration** is proceeding faster than expected, and we're considering adjustments for the next cycle."

Athena looked at the data, not fully understanding all the technical terms but recognizing the urgency in Wendigo's voice. "How are they doing?" she asked, her hand instinctively resting on her belly, as if trying to comfort the small beings growing inside her.

"They're growing, Captain," Wendigo said, a flicker of respect in his voice. "At this rate, we're looking at **a full term in five months**. You'll be ready sooner than we thought." He looked at the others gathered around, some nervously, others more thoughtfully. "We've never seen **growth rates** like this before. But you're managing. For now."

Athena let the weight of his words sink in. It was still so strange to think of herself as **this large**. There were times when she felt like an experiment, a specimen to be studied, more than a leader. But she couldn't afford to let herself think that way. Not anymore. The future of humanity rested on this.

As Athena turned to leave, she stopped by the **café**, where a few more crewmates were eating their meals and chatting. A couple of **young medical officers** waved her over. She smiled softly and made her way to the table, where they offered her a seat. It was clear that the pregnancy had brought her closer to the people on board, as they all seemed to take a vested interest in her health and well-being.

"**Captain Athena**, how's the pregnancy treating you?" one of the officers, **Benson**, asked. Benson had always been a gentle presence in the Ark's leisure room.

"Honestly? It's becoming harder to move around," Athena admitted with a sigh, taking a moment to relax in the chair, her back aching from the constant weight. "But it's manageable. I'll push through."

Another officer, **Jaxon**, who had been keeping track of the crew's food consumption and nutrition, leaned in. "How's your appetite? We're adjusting the menus to meet the growing needs of the embryos. I've been ensuring we're offering more **high-protein meals** to support the accelerated growth."

Athena smiled faintly. "I can eat an entire meal in one sitting these days. My appetite is insatiable."

Everyone laughed lightly, but Athena could see the underlying concern in their eyes. The weight of her situation wasn't lost on them. But they respected her too much to treat her as anything less than a fellow crew member.

As the day wore on, Athena continued her slow tour of the Ark. She spoke briefly with the **farm workers**, who were busy adjusting the crops in the bio-domes to make sure they had enough supplies for the next phase of the colony's growth. The thought of **future generations** becoming more self-sustaining made her heart swell with pride, though it was also a stark reminder of what was at stake.

Finally, she made her way to the **medbay** again, where Dr. Harlan and his team had just finished reviewing the most recent tests. "Everything looks stable, Athena," he said, looking over the data one last time. "But we'll need to keep monitoring you closely. I suggest a few days of rest to help your body prepare for what's to come. You're making great strides."

"Thanks, Dr. Harlan," she said, offering him a soft smile. "I'm going to need all the rest I can get."

She left the medical bay with a feeling of quiet **resolve**, though the reality of what was coming next began to settle on her mind. The Ark had one mission — to survive and thrive. And **she** was central to that. The idea weighed heavily on her, but it also filled her with a sense of pride. The journey ahead would be difficult, but Athena was more determined than ever to see it through.

DAY 440 — TROUBLING GROWTH

Athena's body had transformed into something unrecognizable, a living testament to the genetic science fueling the Ark's mission. Now at **6 months pregnant**, she was visibly larger than ever, her belly having doubled in size from when she was just 4 months along. She looked as though she had been carrying the **nine embryos** for a lot longer than six months, her frame struggling to keep up with the accelerated growth of the babies inside her.

She was beginning to feel the physical strain more and more, as her once modest **frame** had grown to **5'4"**, heavy and cumbersome, with G-Cup breasts, and sizeable lower half, to accommodate her humongous pale orb of life. She had never been very tall or large to begin with, but now, she was almost unrecognizable — her body stretched to its limit as she carried the future of humanity. Every step she took sent a ripple of pressure across her abdomen, a constant reminder of the responsibility she bore.

As Athena walked slowly down the hall, her thoughts were scattered. Her hand instinctively rested on her round belly, a gesture that had become second nature. She wasn't sure if it was for comfort or just out of habit. The truth was, she felt like a walking contradiction — part leader, part vessel. She had never imagined her life would take this path, but here she was, carrying nine children that would help **rebuild** the colony, one embryo at a time.

In the **crew lounge**, Athena found a quiet moment to rest. She had just walked from the **medbay**, where they had performed routine scans to ensure everything was progressing smoothly. According to Dr. Harlan, her **uterus** was holding up well, despite the unprecedented size. Still, she was exhausted.

She sank into a seat, trying to make herself comfortable. It wasn't easy with her stomach now nearly **double the size it had been** a month or two ago. She was officially outgrowing her maternity bodysuit, and while the **support bands** helped, there was only so much they could do.

As she sat there, **Bucky** — one of the midwives who had been with her since the beginning — joined her. His face was friendly, but there was concern in his eyes. “How are you feeling, Captain?” he asked gently. “Your belly’s definitely growing faster than expected.”

“I feel... heavy,” she said with a sigh, her fingers lightly tracing the **curved surface** of her abdomen. “It’s hard to move around these days. I can barely sit without feeling like I’m going to tip over.”

Bucky smiled sympathetically but didn’t make light of the situation. “It’s going to get more challenging, Athena. But you’re handling it well.” He paused, then added, “You’re the strongest person I know.”

Athena laughed softly, but it was more out of exhaustion than humor. “I don’t feel strong, Bucky. I feel like I’m constantly on the verge of breaking.”

DAY 510 — THE BROODMOTHER

The sunless glow of the artificial lighting in the medical bay flickered softly as Athena sat on the examination table, the faint scent of antiseptic filling the air. The medical team had been preparing for this day for weeks, running tests on her body, particularly her bones, muscles, and overall physical health. After months of carrying nine embryos, the strain on her body had only intensified. Her belly, swollen and heavy, seemed to grow by the hour, each movement a reminder of the burden she now bore.

Athena had gone through a series of **bone density treatments** in the last few days. **Calcium injections** and **bone density boosters** had been administered in an attempt to prevent fractures or skeletal damage from the relentless weight she was carrying. She was receiving the best care possible, but even with that, the toll on her body was undeniable.

When she stood, it was with the help of two assistants, their hands steady on her shoulders and waist. She could feel the strain in her back and hips, the familiar discomfort that had been

growing more pronounced as the pregnancy advanced. Each step required her to shift her body weight carefully, her hands instinctively clutching her swollen abdomen for support. The doctors were pleased with her recovery, but the truth was clear—her body was nearing its limits.

Despite the discomfort, Athena was determined to continue. She made her way slowly, carefully, from the medbay to the cafeteria. Every movement was sluggish, every breath a little more labored. She could feel the eyes of the crew on her as she passed by, their gazes filled with a mixture of admiration, awe, and concern. She couldn't blame them—she didn't know how she was managing either.

The cafeteria buzzed with activity as the crew gathered for another routine meeting. Today, however, was more than just a gathering—it was a celebration. The **Ark's survival efforts** had reached a major milestone.

As the team filled the room, murmurs of excitement rippled through the crowd. Athena's entrance caused a brief lull. She entered the cafeteria slowly, or more so her belly first, a couple moments later, she did with the help of an assistant on each side.

Every eye in the room turned to her. The **medical gown** she wore was draped over lightly with her belly slightly visible beneath the fabric, but it was the sheer size of her belly that commanded the most attention. She looked every bit the symbol of sacrifice and strength—though her slow steps and exhausted expression told another story.

Captain Hendrick stood and motioned for everyone to quiet down. His voice was strong and respectful as he spoke, honoring the efforts of the entire crew. "Today, we are here to celebrate not only the **completion of our farming efforts**, but the success of our survival. We've reached another milestone, and we owe it to the dedication of everyone here. But we would be remiss if we didn't acknowledge the reason we're still standing—**Athena**."

The room fell into a respectful silence, and the crew applauded. Athena stood there, her hand resting on her belly, a soft smile playing at her lips. The praise was appreciated, but the weight of her reality was still pressing down on her, both physically and mentally.

"Captain Athena Pierce has given more than any of us could ever imagine," Captain Hendrick continued. "She carries the future of this colony, and her strength is an inspiration to all of us. Athena, we thank you."

Athena smiled weakly and nodded as she slowly made her way to the podium. Her legs felt heavy, and she was struggling to catch her breath, placing her hands on the small of her back, while an assistant on each side, held her belly and shoulders up, but she stood tall, facing the crew. She cleared her throat before speaking.

"I've often said that this journey we're on is about more than survival. It's about rebuilding, about fighting for the future. But this isn't just my journey—**this is all of our journey**." Her voice rang

out, strong but weary. “I might carry the weight of our future physically, but we are all carrying it together in a different way. Your strength, your commitment—it all matters. And I’m thankful for every one of you.”

She paused for a moment, her hand resting on her belly as she felt the subtle movements of the embryos inside distracting her. “We’ve been through so much, and we’ve overcome what seemed impossible. But what lies ahead will be harder. We will need to push the limits of what we can endure, both as individuals and as a colony. I ask you all to continue to be strong, just as you have been, to support me, but also to support one another. We’re in this together. Thank you.”

The crew clapped again, louder this time.

As she slowly unsheathed her huge womb, letting the hospital gown slide off, the crowd gasped before cheering.

All eyes were on her and her maternal orb. It has reached the point where it looked like a pale beachball was attached to her front. Her pale skin had taken on a pinkish hue and was riddled with small stretchmarks and veins across the tight surface. To say she was big was an understatement.

After the speech, Athena was carefully escorted to a table at the back of the cafeteria. The crew had returned to their meal and conversations, but Athena felt the weight of her reality pressing heavily on her. She tried to make herself comfortable, her back aching from the long-standing and the continuous strain on her body.

As she settled into her seat, her belly resting on top of her thighs, surpassing her knees, her mind wandered. **Was this really what the future held?** She had already been through so much, and now, with nine embryos growing inside her, the strain was becoming unbearable. Would she make it to full term? Would she be able to carry more in future pregnancies?

She wasn’t sure, but one thing was certain—**she had to keep going.**

A few moments later, **Bucky**, the nurse who had been helping her through her recovery, appeared at her side. “How are you really doing, Athena?” he asked, his voice filled with concern.

Athena sighed softly and rubbed her belly, the familiar weight of it pressing into her hands. “I’m... doing what I need to do,” she said, her voice tight. “But every day feels like more of a fight. My body—I can’t keep up anymore. It’s hard to keep smiling through it all when I can feel every step, every movement, i can’t even reach halfway round my belly.”

Bucky nodded sympathetically, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. “You’re doing more than anyone could ever ask of you, Athena. But if you ever need more help, or if you just need someone to talk to, you know we’re here for you. We’re a team.”

Athena gave a small smile, grateful for his words. “Thank you, Bucky. I think I just need a moment to breathe. To catch my thoughts.”

As the day came to a close, Athena retired to her quarters. She settled herself onto the bed, surrounded by pillows to support her growing belly. She looked like an ant queen laying with her belly almost larger than her, The room was quiet, a stark contrast to the bustle of the cafeteria earlier. She closed her eyes for a moment, allowing herself to simply rest.

DAY 540 — CONTACT

The day began like any other. Athena, now **eight months pregnant** with her huge fertile orb, floating like an island in the water. She had just finished her morning float in the heated pool, her body briefly freed from the unbearable heaviness it bore. Assisted by three friends, she was drying off and preparing for her stroll to the anti-gravity chamber when a **loud, unfamiliar tone** echoed through the Ark’s hallways.

The automated voice of the ship’s AI, **AVA**, cut through the silence:

“Attention. Proximity alert. Unidentified vessel approaching. All crew to protocol stations.”

Athena blinked, stunned. In all their time drifting beyond known star systems, this had never happened. She tightened her grip on the towel wrapped around her large watermelon sized breasts, leaving her heaving womb naked, and glanced toward the wide observation window across the corridor. Outside, in the shadowed backdrop of distant starlight, a **sleek, organic-looking vessel** was slowly gliding toward them. Not a rock. Not space debris. A **ship**.

Command Deck:

All ten male captains stood around the holo-table, projections of the foreign vessel shimmering in blue light. Athena, escorted there despite protest, stood off to the side wearing her maternity bodysuit, rolled up under her bust, leaving her massive belly exposed and cradled in both hands (*well as much as she could reach*). Even standing, having her belly resting on the counter in front of her for support, was a feat, but she needed to hear this firsthand.

Captain Hendrick’s voice was clipped. “No weapons signatures detected, no broadcasts yet—just passive scans and matching speed. They’re *shadowing* us.”

“They’re smart,” muttered Wendigo. “Matching trajectory. They knew we’d notice them.”

Then, **AVA’s voice returned**, this time calm but firm.

“Incoming transmission. Language partially deciphered. Displaying visual.”

A hologram blinked into view. A humanoid—tall, with slate-gray skin, long limbs, and luminous, bioluminescent eyes. The being wore a thin, high-collared suit of iridescent weave. It raised a hand in greeting.

“We see you, travelers. We mean no harm. We are the **Velari**. Our path crossed yours by star-bend. We seek dialogue. Exchange. Coexistence.”

There was a long silence.

An emergency meeting convened in the board. Though exhausted, she was central to the Ark’s survival—and now, to its diplomacy. Captain Hendrick turned to her as the discussion grew heated.

“They’ve requested an **exchange of envoys**,” he said. “One of theirs will come aboard the Ark. One of ours will go to their vessel.”

Athena raised an eyebrow. “Are you seriously considering sending someone to a ship we know nothing about?”

“They’re asking for peaceful exchange. No weapons. No subterfuge.” Wendigo spoke this time, eyes locked on her. “And they know you’re carrying our offspring. They offered medical supplies, perhaps even advanced gestation stabilizers.”

Her breath caught. “They... *know*?”

“They scanned us. They’re far more advanced than we thought.”

The crew debated late into the day, ultimately agreeing. At 1800 ship-time, under strict protocols, the Ark opened its docking bay. A **Velari commissioner**, accompanied by two silent attendants, stepped aboard.

In return, **Captain Brenner**, a diplomat by training, crossed into the alien vessel with monitoring equipment sewn into his suit.

Athena sat in her private chamber, a secure med-unit nearby monitoring every heartbeat inside her. The Velari ambassador, named **Rellin**, had greeted her with a calm nod earlier that day, his glowing eyes lingering curiously and intently on her swollen form.

“You bear many lives,” he had said. “That is not common among your kind.”

“No,” she replied. “But it might become our future.”

He had nodded. “Then perhaps your future and ours may intertwine.”

Later that evening, the crew gathered in the **diplomatic hall** — a section of the Ark rarely used, now cleaned and lit with soft bioluminescent overheads to mimic Velari aesthetics, as a show of respect.

The Velari envoy **Rellin** stood tall at the center of the gathering, his attendants presenting a series of **gifts** in sleek black cases: glowing crystalline seeds, liquid nutrient compounds, and a **data crystal** said to contain generations of Velari biological and sociological knowledge, specifically a lot of chapters about breeding and fertility.

In return, Captain Hendrick and the Ark crew offered **samples from their hydroponics lab**, a personal datapad with historical logs from Earth, and a set of titanium tools crafted from the ship’s machine shop. The exchange was conducted in ceremonial silence until Rellin finally turned toward Athena.

He studied her with a gaze that was neither invasive nor leering, but **intensely observant**.

“You are called Athena,” he said, his voice like chimes filtered through water. “You are a bearer. Matron. Queen. Broodmother. Fertility Goddess. The singular source of your colony’s new genesis.”

Athena, seated with her massive belly cradled in her lap, offered a shy and cautious nod. “That’s right. Though not exactly by choice at the start.”

Captain Wendigo cleared his throat. “She volunteered. But we work as a team. She’s supported—”

Rellin raised a gentle hand. “I do not question your structure. I question hers.” He turned back to Athena. “You are revered. Yet isolated. Burdened. Are you... content? Respected for your importance?”

There was an awkward pause among the Ark’s leadership. Athena blinked, unsure how to answer. “I’ve accepted my role,” she finally said. “It’s not easy. But it’s necessary.”

Rellin tilted his head. “Among the Velari, such roles are sacred. Our Queens are central to all decisions. Worshipped, protected, obeyed.” His voice softened as he stepped forward slightly. “We have lost ours to time and sickness. And now... seeing you...”

Captain Hendrick frowned. “Where are you going with this?”

Rellin turned, addressing the captains now with quiet solemnity.

“We offer her another path. A place among us — as our Queen.”

Gasps fluttered across the room.

“She would live not as a burden, nor a vessel, but as a sovereign. Our knowledge, our protection, our reverence. We would ensure her comfort, and her lineage would rule ours. Think on it. There is no urgency. But the offer is... sincere.”

Silence fell over the diplomatic hall.

Athena sat frozen, her hands unconsciously running over her taut belly, exploring as much as she could reach. For months, she had lived at the center of attention, yet outside true power. Now, another species—another future—had placed a **crown in her hands**.

The silence in the room was sharp and heavy, broken only by the soft humming of the life support systems and the slow rhythmic beeping of Athena’s portable vitals monitor. All eyes were on her — the captains, the crew, the Velari envoy. Even the AI AVA fell silent.

Athena shifted slightly in her seat, the movement slow and careful as she adjusted the weight of her massive belly. The physical strain of late pregnancy was always with her, but this moment brought a different weight — one of meaning, of consequence.

She looked up at Rellin, her emerald eyes steady. “You’ve caught me off guard,” she said softly.

Rellin inclined his head. “It is not meant to be pressure. Only possibility.”

Athena drew a slow breath. “You see me as a queen... but here, I’ve been a vessel. A necessity. One they couldn’t afford to lose, but not someone they could afford to listen to either.”

The captains exchanged uncomfortable glances.

“I’ve carried life because I had to. But I *chose* to keep going. I chose to do this again,” she continued, her voice gaining strength. “Because I believe in what we’re building here. I believe we can survive. And I believe I deserve a say in how we do it.”

She turned her gaze to the ten captains. “You need to hear me now. I’ve earned that.”

No one interrupted. Even Hendrick kept his mouth shut.

Then Athena returned her attention to Rellin. “Your offer... is kind. And tempting. I’ve never been offered respect like that, not so openly. But I won’t leave my people—not now. Not when they need me most.”

There was a pause.

Then she added, quietly, “But if your people and mine are going to survive out here, we might both need each other.”

Rellin's expression shifted—subtle but warm. He nodded deeply. “Yes, Spoken not just like a Queen... but a true matron of worlds.”

The council chamber felt colder than usual, despite the stable climate controls. The Ark's leadership — the ten male captains, key medical and research personnel, and Athena — were seated in tense silence as **Rellin**, the Velari envoy, stood at the front of the room. His tone was respectful, but his words were weighted.

“We have observed the challenge your people face,” Rellin began, gesturing toward Athena with open palms. “You've centered your colony's hope for biological continuation on a single female. Admirable, but unsustainable.”

Athena narrowed her eyes. “We're aware. We're managing.”

Rellin continued, ignoring the edge in her voice. “Your survival — and ours — could be bolstered through an alliance. In exchange for a genetic partnership, we offer you hydrocore generators, atmospheric processors, fetal bio-support chambers, and regenerative bioengineering treatments capable of expanding gestational thresholds far beyond your current capacity.”

“Define ‘genetic partnership,’” said Captain Hendrick warily.

“We propose a shared use of your Matron,” Rellin said without hesitation. “Athena would remain among you — but carry combined broods, with both Velari and human-engineered embryos. This would increase genetic variation, population growth, and the speed of your species' reestablishment. In return, we ensure her survival, support every pregnancy, and offer scientific advancements your colony will not achieve for another century.”

The room was still. Then Elan leaned forward. “So... you want her to breed for both species?”

“Yes.”

Athena tensed, instinctively placing her hands over the swell of her belly. “I'm not a farm,” she said coldly.

Rellin bowed his head. “We do not view you as such. We view you as the rarest element in the galaxy — a genetic linchpin. A foundation.”

Captain Mora muttered, “A queen in one hand... and a broodmare in the other.”

“I will not *belong* to anyone,” Athena said firmly, her voice loud in the silent room. “And I certainly won't carry your young just because it's *efficient*.”

“Of course,” Rellin said smoothly. “Which is why this offer is only that: an offer. You choose. But if your survival matters... consider that we can help you do what your body will not withstand alone.”

There was silence again — not the silence of hostility, but of serious thought.

Finally, Hendrick said, “We’ll reconvene privately. The offer will be considered... carefully.”

The Velari ship’s interior was bioluminescent and organic — a stark contrast to the Ark’s steel precision. Athena sat across from Rellin and two Velari biogeneticists, one of them clearly female by their unique crest coloration.

“I’ve agreed to consider it,” Athena began, “but I need to know... what would it *mean* to carry Velari young? Physically. Psychologically.”

Rellin inclined his head. The female scientist, **Shi’vaal**, answered first.

“Velari embryos are semi-symbiotic in early development. They do not implant in the same aggressive manner as your own. Instead, they integrate slowly with the uterine lining, supported by neurochemical bonding agents. Your body would perceive them as a partial extension of self — less rejection risk, less inflammation.”

Athena raised an eyebrow. “And later in the pregnancy?”

“Mass will exceed human norms. Much more than your current carrying capacity. However, we can augment bone density, respiratory efficiency, and fluid distribution using adaptive hormonal regulators. You would not suffer the same compression injuries or muscular strain.”

“And the babies?” she asked. “Would they be... human? Velari?”

“You could carry both species in your womb. Or, we can make a hybrid,” Rellin said calmly. “Not by DNA, but by influence. You would raise them human, but they would carry markers that help bond our peoples — language receptivity, shared pheromone recognition. Cultural bridges born from biology.”

Athena exhaled slowly. “So I wouldn’t just be a vessel. I’d be raising ambassadors.”

“Precisely,” said Rellin.

She stood again, her thoughts swirling. “Then I want full control over timing. Over how many. Over everything.”

“You shall have it,” Shi’vaal promised.

DAY 570 — UNITY

It had been a month since the humans and Velari finalized their agreement to cohabit and collaborate aboard the Ark. The changes were everywhere. Smooth, semi-organic walls lined corridors that once echoed with the cold clank of alloy boots. Velari engineers had retrofitted the hydroponic bay into a bioluminescent fusion of their own nutrient systems with human

agriculture. And in the far wing, an entirely new med-bay had been grown — literally — using Velari biological architecture, pulsating gently like a living lung.

In the heart of this transformation was Athena.

At nine months pregnant, her body had reached an unprecedented size — the result of carrying nine advanced-stage embryos, supported by the Velari's biomechanical enhancements. Her belly extended far before her, heavy and taut, its underside now resting gently on a supportive bio-droid, following her whenever she stood. A slow pulse occasionally rippled across her stretched skin, visible signs of life moving within. She was almost 400 weeks pregnant. Nine babies larger than full-term size each, making her almost immobile, if weren't for the new Velari help.

She no longer moved unaided. Two assistants, human and Velari alike, helped her transition from quarters to leisure spaces, to the central med-bay where she underwent daily scans. Her body, while functioning remarkably well under the strain thanks to Velari osteo-bonding treatments and adaptive hormone stabilizers, was clearly extending her limit.

And yet... Athena glowed.

In the newly constructed central chamber — a kind of amphitheater meant for diplomatic councils and shared events — she stood (or rather, perched on a heavily reinforced stool) during the monthly assembly. Humans and Velari alike applauded her presence as Captain Hendrick opened with news of the hybrid research lab's completion, and the first batch of shared communications relays.

"She is not only the future of humanity," Rellin, the Velari emissary, proclaimed before the crowd, "but the mother of unity itself."

Athena flushed, smiling graciously but tiredly. She rubbed the side of her massive belly, which had begun to tighten at irregular intervals — not quite labor, but her body's early warnings. She said nothing aloud, but her eyes drifted toward the chamber's entrance where two Velari guards now stood permanently posted.

There had been... whispers. Not everyone aboard the Ark had agreed to this union. And now that her due date was approaching, the whispers had begun to grow louder.

As the meeting ended and the applause echoed again, Athena leaned over to her closest aide, Bucky, her ever-loyal midwife companion. "Can you feel it?" she whispered. "Something's coming."

He gave her a concerned look and nodded. "Yes, Captain. And it's not just the babies."

DAY 600 — LOCKDOWN

The lights dimmed in the central corridor.

Not flickered — dimmed.

Emergency red runners ignited along the floor seams, a soft but urgent alarm pulsing through the ventilation shafts. The soft hum of the Ark's usual life-sustaining rhythm paused for one heartbeat too long.

LOCKDOWN INITIATED.

The robotic voice echoed through every chamber of the Ark. Doors hissed shut, sealed with magnetic clamps. Every non-essential system dropped into standby. A chill settled over the crew.

Athena had just been escorted back to her quarters, waddling with slow, swaying steps, one arm on her back arch, another holding the underside of the great weight of her unborn children. She had been halfway through requesting extra thermal supports for her bed when the power flicked — and then the door behind her snapped shut.

“Bucky?” she called, turning slowly — but the med-bay assistant was gone. No sound. Her aides had been separated from her.

Suddenly, a shape emerged from the shadow of her quarters.

She froze.

A man — one of the Ark's engineers, someone she barely remembered from her early cryo briefings — stepped forward, a matte weapon in hand. Not Velari tech. Human.

He was shaking.

“I'm sorry, Captain,” he said, voice brittle, eyes rimmed with weeks of sleepless obsession. “You're not supposed to give them our future. You're... not supposed to carry their kind.”

Athena tried to step back, made impossible by her belly. The bio-robot support under her belly tried to help, but her large size, making movement slow and awkward. Her breath quickened.

“They aren't taking over. We're not breeding with parasites,” he spat. “I had to do something before they turn you into... into their queen.”

A sharp hiss sounded behind her. Gas. The emergency vent had been tampered with.

The last thing she saw was the red glow of the lockdown warning reflecting off the curved wall — and then, darkness.

Meanwhile, in the bridge, chaos broke loose.

“Captain Athena is off the grid.”

“Section C-7 is sealed beyond command override.”

“The lockdown wasn’t triggered by our system... it was manually breached from the inside.”

Captain Hendrick slammed his palm against the console. “Get every available security unit and Velari guard moving. We find her. Now.”

Rellin, the Velari envoy, stood with eyes glowing faintly. “She is carrying more than just life. She is the bridge between our peoples.”

He turned, deadly calm. “And if she dies... the alliance dies with her.”

Athena drifted in and out of groggy awareness.

Cool air rushed past her flushed face as she lay reclined on something soft, humming, floating. The steady low thrum beneath her wasn’t the Ark’s familiar medical systems — it was a **hover transport platform**. Straps had been carefully fastened across her chest and just below the curve of her massive belly, leaving her immobilized but alive.

The traitor — the same engineer who’d confronted her — now stood alongside two other humans in unmarked grey jumpsuits. Both looked hardened, wild-eyed, with patchy stubble and makeshift gear. Between them, a **reprogrammed cyberdroid** floated ominously — its diagnostic panel flashing red, optics glowing amber.

“System override complete,” the droid chirped. “Bio-sign priority: cargo containment.”

Cargo. That was how they referred to her. To the nine unborn lives inside her.

Athena fought a rising wave of nausea and tried to speak — but her throat burned from the knockout gas. She blinked rapidly, trying to track where they were headed.

The walls here were unfamiliar — part of the **abandoned cargo wing**, long-sealed since Ark’s launch. The rebels must have carved out a hideaway weeks ago, right under the crew’s nose.

“We’ll hold her here until we can arrange a transfer pod,” one of them said.

“You’re insane,” another snapped. “You think the Velari won’t find her? We should’ve just spaced her—”

“No.” The leader cut him off with a glare. “We need her alive. They don’t risk a war unless their queen’s still breathing. We trade her for a full disengagement.”

“And if the Velari refuse?”

“We blow the vent. With her on it.”

Meanwhile, on the Ark’s command deck...

Velari and human officers worked feverishly to decrypt the rogue cyberdroid's location logs. A silent tension filled the air as medical leads pleaded for haste — Athena’s vitals had gone dark on the bio-tracker, but her uterine signals still pinged faintly.

“She’s alive,” Bucky insisted, watching the screen, tears in his eyes. “And those babies are full term. She’s running out of time.”

Captain Hendrick turned to Rellin. “Can your drones reach them faster than our teams?”

The Velari emissary’s spines flared open in a sign of determination. “Yes. But I will not send machines alone.”

Location: Sealed Cargo Wing – Level 9, Sector E

The air inside the derelict cargo wing was stale and tinged with old coolant. Long-abandoned crates and collapsed shelving units formed jagged shadows under the flickering emergency lights. At its center, Athena lay reclined on the hover transport, her immense and exposed belly rising like a small hill.

The rebels — eight of them, including two from engineering and one ex-military — took turns pacing, watching the perimeter. Despite the tension, none of them raised a weapon toward her. They were frightened, desperate, but not vicious.

“We’re not monsters,” the leader — a gaunt man with sunken eyes named **Cassel** — said to her quietly. “We know who you are, Athena. What you’re doing for us. But the Velari — they’re not human. We can’t give them control of our future.”

“I never said they were in control,” Athena replied through a hoarse voice. “They offered to help... not take over.”

Another rebel, a younger boy in engineering overalls, crossed her arms. “You don’t get it. Every system they’ve touched — they’ve made us dependent. The food replicators, the gravity upgrades, even the medical scaffolding around your uterus. They’re planting roots.”

Athena winced as a small kick stirred under her ribs. The babies were restless, perhaps aware of her stress. She instinctively placed her hands on her fertile and overtaxed mount, rubbing around attempting to soothe her babies. She took a slow breath.

“Roots grow both ways,” she said. “They need us too.”

Location: Cargo Wing – Outside Barricaded Bulkhead

The situation had become precarious.

The heavy bulkhead to the cargo wing had been sealed and reinforced from the inside by the rebels. Welded plates and magnetic locks made breaching it nearly impossible without causing catastrophic decompression or damage to the adjacent oxygen recycling system.

Wendigo examined the structural scans with concern. “If we force entry, even with precision cutting, we risk a collapse in the east side of the deck. The pressure systems are old. The shockwave might rupture the wall.”

Captain Hendrick clenched his jaw. “We can’t let Athena stay in there much longer — she’s full term. If anything happens...”

Inside the sealed room, Athena shifted on the hover stretcher, her belly prominent and taut. The babies were active again. Her breath was shallow but calm — she knew panic would only make things worse.

One of the rebels, the younger man named Darrick, stood by the makeshift comm panel they had rigged. He blinked when the static cleared and Captain Hendrick’s voice came through.

“We know who you are. We don’t want this to end in blood. Open the door. No one has to get hurt.”

Cassel motioned for Darrick to respond.

“This was never meant to be an attack,” Darrick said carefully. “We just want guarantees. Protection. And that the Valeri don’t overwrite our future.”

Athena sat up slowly and motioned for the comm. “Let me speak to them.”

Her voice crackled through the external speaker.

“This ends now. I’m coming out of here safely. But I need your word: no one dies. No arrests. No revenge.”

There was a pause. Then Wendigo’s voice: “Captain Athena, you know harboring mutineers—”

“No,” she interrupted. “This is about survival. Not punishment. We don’t need martyrs. We need unity.”

The Velari envoy T’sahri approached Hendrick. “If they will release the matron, we agree to amnesty. Peace is preferable to dominance.”

Cassel’s voice came back, quieter now. “We want assurance that humans won’t become a subspecies in their plans.”

Captain Hendrick replied, “Athena is still human. She leads us. That doesn’t change.”

There was a long, tense pause.

Inside the cargo hold, Athena sat quietly on the hover platform, hands braced against her belly as the rebels argued. Her pregnancy had left her immobile, the mass of nine advanced-term children anchoring her in place. She breathed deeply, trying to stay calm, but the strain was building.

Cassel barked, “They’re stalling! We should broadcast demands wider—”

“No,” said **Darrick**, stepping forward. “This was about leverage, not war. We’ve already pushed too far.”

Mira turned sharply to him. “What do you mean?”

Darrick looked at Athena — sweat beaded on her pale brow, her green eyes unfocused, her frame visibly straining. Something in her expression—determined, human, maternal—cut through his doubt.

“We’re not killers,” Darrick said. “And if we let her stay here, she might die. So I’m getting her out.”

Cassel growled, “You’ll doom everything—”

But Darrick was already moving. He gently released the magnetic clamps anchoring the hover platform, gritting his teeth as the overtaxed motors groaned under Athena’s weight.

“Come on,” he muttered. “Hold together.”

Athena’s eyes widened. “What are you doing?”

“Getting you out of here before someone panics and blows us sky-high,” he said simply. “Can you hang on?”

She nodded, dazed, as the platform lurched into motion — slow, jittering, every few feet setting off warning beeps. They crept through the narrow secondary access corridor, Darrick guiding her through emergency lighting, the walls closing in.

Behind them, Cassel shouted in fury, but Darrick sealed the side passage behind them.

“Sir! We have movement on Deck 8. One of the cargo emergency hatches is opening. It’s... it’s her.”

Gasps filled the hallway as the secondary doors slowly hissed open, revealing **Darrick**, coated in sweat, pushing the sputtering hover platform into view. **Athena** lay atop it, visibly exhausted but unharmed, legs spread to make room for her gigantic womb.

Athena emerged slowly, escorted by the surrendered rebels, her form huge and graceful, hands resting under her gravid belly.

The med team rushed forward, and Darrick raised his hands.

“She’s safe,” he said. “I did what you couldn’t. Arrest me if you want.”

But Athena shook her head. “No arrests. No more splinters.”

The captains hesitated, then nodded — reluctantly.

And from above, the Velari envoy watched silently, whispering to an aide in their musical tongue. “She chooses harmony over fear. This one is worth following.”

The rebels laid down their tools and were quietly led away for questioning — but not in cuffs all except **Cassel**.

Bucky rushed to Athena’s side, pressing his hand gently on her taut womb “You alright?”

“I will be,” she murmured. “But they’re ready. I think it’s time.”

Hendrick called over the med-evac team.

“Clear a path,” he ordered. “Let’s bring the next future into the world.”

Six hundred days since cryo-wake. Ten months pregnant – each baby measuring 50 weeks in size, for a combined total of her being the equivalent to 450 weeks pregnant.

Athena lay propped up, nearly motionless, her enormous belly dominating the reinforced bed beneath her. The pregnancy had taken her body beyond anything imaginable — her belly was immense, heavy and hanging off her frame with great force, stretching nearly to the floor when standing, her breathing shallow, her skin flushed with the effort of supporting nine rapidly developing lives.

A team of both **human and Velari medics** bustled around her, quietly preparing instruments and final scans. Her vitals were stable, but she was clearly exhausted—her body pushed further than it ever had been.

“Heartbeat signatures are all strong,” reported one of the doctors. “All nine are viable. It is time.”

Athena took a deep breath and nodded. “Let’s do this.”

Labor began quickly. The Velari-assisted birthing chamber responded to her contractions with real-time adjustments—temperature, gravity modulation, muscular support. Her body, already conditioned for high stress, responded with intense waves of effort.

“First one crowning,” called out Bucky, monitoring closely. “Head presenting.”

With a shuddering cry, Athena delivered the first—a **girl**, then came another. **A boy.**

“Two out, seven to go,” Bucky murmured. “Vitals holding.”

The births continued—painful, exhausting, but steady. Athena pushed through them all.

“Number nine—another male,” announced Selnir at last. “All born. All alive. Four female. Five male.”

A soft cheer filled the room as the babies were carefully lifted into nutrient cradles, each one wrapped in gentle biosilk. Athena, drenched in sweat, smiled faintly as the team surrounded her.

Captain Hendrick stepped in alongside Bucky and Wendigo, the three exchanging glances.

“She did it again,” Wendigo said, exhaling slowly. “Nine healthy offspring. It’s... incredible.”

Rennick approached with a small data slate. “With this result, we can calculate safe capacity for the next implantation cycle.”

Wendigo nodded. “Her body adapted to nine with assistance. But we need to be careful. Every cycle brings strain.”

Athena cracked open one eye, still catching her breath. “I can hear you, you know.”

Rennick grinned. “You’re allowed to rest.”

But Athena raised a hand. “No. If you’re deciding what’s next for my body, I want in.”

Wendigo crouched down. “Of course. We’re thinking... we try **more**. With your improved bone density, uterine elasticity, and the Velari’s hormone regulation implants, it’s possible.”

“Eight male. Eight female. Balanced,” added Rennick.

Athena leaned back, thinking. “Just... make sure I can walk next time.”

Everyone chuckled, relieved by her humor. But they knew the reality—they were pushing biology to its edge, forging a future one impossible birth at a time.

DAY 620 — PHASE 3

The MedBay lights dimmed slightly as **Dr. Selvine, Kessler, Rennick,** and **Athena** stood around the large central holographic table. Above it hovered a color-coded 3D model of Athena’s uterus, annotated with charts, vitals, and statistical projections. It had been 20 days since the historic birth of nine hybrid children—and the medical and command teams were preparing for what would be their most ambitious step yet.

Athena, dressed in a deep navy compression suit that now hung loosely on her recovering frame, folded her arms. Her body was healing quickly thanks to Velari regenerative therapies, but she knew what was coming next would test her beyond anything before.

“You’re really proposing eighteen?” she asked, eyes narrowing at the numbers highlighted in blue, silver, and green.

Kessler inclined his head, the shimmer of his crest catching the light.

“Six fully human embryos. Six Velari. Six hybrids, blended from both. Balanced. Optimized. With the latest hormone regulation serum and pelvic reinforcement mesh, your body can endure it. We’ve run over two hundred simulations.”

Rennick added, flipping a data screen to her:

“And we’ll monitor development at a cellular level this time. No unexpected twin-splitting like last cycle. Controlled, precise. You’ll carry exactly eighteen.”

Athena exhaled, placing one hand on the edge of the table to steady herself.

“That’s double what I just did.”

Dr. Selvine, his elegant Velari frame moving with fluid calm, stepped forward. His voice carried the soft, melodic lilt of their kind.

“We would not ask this if we were not certain of your safety, Matron Athena. Your body has already shown remarkable adaptability. With Velari neuro-motor support and gravity modulation, you will move with far greater ease than before. And we will remain beside you, every step.”

“And,” Kessler added gently, “you would not carry them alone. We have prepared an entire support habitat just for you. Low-gravity zones. Nutrient immersion suites. Voice-linked monitoring. We’ve even tailored your meals to account for metabolic partitioning.”

Athena was silent for a long moment. She looked down at her abdomen, still faintly marked by the stretching of her previous pregnancy. She remembered the weight. The struggle. The pain. But also the pride—when she saw the nine children in the nursery, alive and thriving.

“Eighteen...” she whispered. Then I looked up. “And how long until implantation?”

Rennick smiled.

“Today. If you say yes.”

Athena inhaled deeply, closing her eyes.

“Then get the cradles ready. Let’s do it.”

Around the table, the air seemed to still as the decision was locked in. The screens changed, showing embryo assignments: six from Earth stock. Six from the Velari gene pool. And six... carefully crafted hybrids—future beings of a new shared destiny.

The next generation was about to begin.

The sterile atmosphere of MedBay was punctuated only by the hum of advanced equipment and the low voices of the medical team. Athena lay back in a custom reclining chair, the air was thick with anticipation, as Dr. Selvine, Kessler, and Rennick prepared the carefully selected embryos for implantation.

“Everything is ready,” Kessler said, his tone steady but with a hint of awe as the holographic screens around them flashed data, showing the perfect alignment of the embryos. “Six human, six Velari, and six hybrids.”

Athena’s gaze remained steady on the team, her heart racing as she felt the weight of the decision. This time would be different. This time, they were hopeful. But there was also fear—fear of the unknown.

“Begin the implantation,” Athena spoke, her voice firm, though she could feel her nerves under the surface.

Dr. Selvine nodded and activated the machinery. The medical team’s hands worked quickly, and with precision, the embryos were introduced. Athena could feel a slight pressure, but nothing out of the ordinary. It was all too familiar—a routine procedure at this point.

But then... something unexpected occurred.

A low hum filled the room, and the color of the Velari embryos on the monitor shifted, turning a deep, unnatural shade of purple. The biological readings began fluctuating wildly. A soft electronic beep echoed, growing in frequency, and suddenly the holographic screens before them exploded with data.

“Dr. Selvine?” Rennick’s voice was tight with confusion, “There’s something wrong.”

Dr. Selvine’s eyes narrowed, quickly scanning the data. “The Velari embryos... they’re not following normal development. They’re multiplying.” Her voice was calm but laced with concern.

“What do you mean, multiplying?” Athena’s voice faltered as she felt a sudden, inexplicable pressure in her abdomen.

Kessler adjusted his glasses, leaning closer to the holographic screen. “They’re dividing—rapidly. This is unprecedented. I don’t understand.”

Athena’s eyes widened, her hands gripping the sides of the chair as she felt a strange sensation in her womb—something akin to a deep, pulsing thrum. Her body seemed to react, as if responding to the unnatural process unfolding within her.

“No,” Dr. Selvine whispered under her breath. “This shouldn’t be happening. The accelerated cell division... it’s not just splitting into twins. It’s... it’s creating more.”

Before anyone could say more, a sharp pain shot through Athena’s abdomen, causing her to gasp. The team rushed to her side, frantic to stabilize her.

“Athena, stay with us,” Rennick said, his hand hovering near her arm, unsure whether to intervene.

Athena closed her eyes, breathing deeply through the wave of discomfort. “It’s... fine. Just... don’t panic.”

“We need to do a full scan,” Kessler urged, pulling out a handheld device that immediately projected an ultrasound display. The room fell silent as they all stared at the new scan.

What appeared before them was a shifting, irregular pattern. There were more than just the expected embryos—dozens, in fact. The Velari embryos had continued to multiply, splitting into clusters of cells at a rate that was far beyond any normal biological process. The scan indicated multiple layers of growth—some of the embryos now seemed to be fused together.

“This is impossible,” Dr. Selvine breathed, looking at the holograms in disbelief. “This growth... It’s like they’re forming entire systems.”

Athena’s eyes fluttered open, trying to process what was happening to her. “What... does this mean? What’s going on inside me?”

“We don’t know yet,” Kessler replied, his voice tense. “But this... this is something we have never encountered. The Velari genetic material is reacting far beyond its expected capabilities. They’re creating more than just offspring. This could lead to... something entirely new.”

Athena winced, feeling another pulse from within. “You said... accelerated growth and growth hormone. But this wasn’t planned.”

Dr. Selvine bit her lip, contemplating the situation. “The Velari technology may have caused a genetic anomaly. It’s too early to fully understand, but the rapid multiplication could result in a completely different form of hybrid.”

Athena’s mind raced. There was no turning back now, and the implications of what was happening to her were becoming clear. Not only would she be carrying the first true hybrid offspring—this would be a new line, one that would forever change the future of both species.

“Can you fix this?” she asked, her voice small but determined.

“We’re not sure,” Kessler replied, glancing nervously at Dr. Selvine. “But we’ll keep monitoring. We have to stabilize the situation before it accelerates any further. We can’t allow the embryos to continue this rate of development—if they do, the physical strain on your body could be too much.”

“We’ll do everything we can,” Dr. Selvine assured her, though the uncertainty in her voice was clear. “But this... this is uncharted territory.”

The room fell into an uneasy silence as the medical team rushed to adjust their plans. Athena sat back in the chair, feeling the growing tension inside her, knowing that whatever happened next—she and the rest of the Ark were on the precipice of a new chapter in human and Velari history.

But would it be one they could survive?

Athena awoke with a start, her breath shallow and her skin clammy with sweat. The lights above her in MedBay were dimmed, casting a soft golden glow across her trembling form. The silence was broken only by the soft hum of machines monitoring her vital signs. She blinked up at the ceiling, disoriented, her entire body aching with an unfamiliar heaviness.

As she shifted slightly, her arms instinctively went to her belly—and froze.

It was huge.

Where before there had been early swelling, now there was full, undeniable weight. Her hands pressed against the taut dome, her skin stretched to its limits. She looked eight months pregnant, with a singleton... despite it having been barely **twelve hours** since implantation.

The door hissed open and Dr. Selvine entered, flanked by Kessler and Rennick. Their faces were pale, tight with concern. Dr. Selvine moved to Athena's side immediately, her long fingers already tapping across the holo-screen above the bed.

"You're awake. That's good," she said softly, though her voice trembled.

"What... what happened to me?" Athena asked, her voice hoarse.

Kessler exhaled slowly. "Your body went into immediate gestational acceleration. The Velari embryo cluster—whatever anomaly caused them to multiply—it triggered a rapid developmental cascade."

Athena's eyes widened. "Twelve hours ago I was barely showing—how can I look like this already?" She gestured weakly to her belly, which now rose high and round above her, her skin already showing signs of strain and tension.

"They've multiplied, a lot. But it's slowed luckily." Rennick said bluntly, though his voice held a note of awe.

"We've never seen anything like it," Selvine added. "It's not just your belly. Internally, your body has undergone enormous metabolic rebalancing. Bones, organs, muscle—everything is adapting at an accelerated pace. And..." she hesitated, glancing down at the display.

Athena's pulse quickened. "And what?"

"You're... locked in," Selvine said quietly. "The pregnancy is sealed. Biologically speaking, your womb has committed to a full term—forty weeks. No early induction, no intervention. Your hormonal signature and uterine matrix are locked. We *can't* remove them without killing both you and the offspring."

Athena's head fell back against the pillow. "So I'm just stuck like this? For... months?"

"Yes," Kessler confirmed, "unless we can find a way to decelerate the process. But right now, your body is sustaining them and adapting—but at a steep cost."

Dr. Selvine turned to the others. "We'll need to move her to a reinforced chamber with full gravitational dampeners. And we must begin bone and tissue reinforcement treatments *immediately*. Otherwise, she won't survive the weight by the third trimester."

Athena closed her eyes, the weight of her belly making it hard to breathe—not just physically, but emotionally. She felt like a prisoner in her own body, with a future no longer entirely hers.

"And the offspring?" she asked, eyes still closed.

“We counted thirty-two viable signatures,” Rennick said. “Most of them Velari. Some hybrid. A few human.”

Athena swallowed, a wave of dread and awe washing over her. “Thirty-two...”

To be continued.