

Chapter 10

The air in the kitchen crackled with a sudden, terrifying energy. Bradford's breathing was harsh and ragged, each exhale a pained grunt. He took a staggering step back, his hand pressed against the counter for support.

"Captain? Bradford, what's wrong?" Anja asked, her own playfulness instantly evaporating, replaced by a cold knot of fear. She pulled her hand back as if burned.

A piercing, high-pitched alarm suddenly shrieked through the house. It wasn't the polite chime from before; this was a full-blown, Code Red emergency alert.

"WARNING!" Unit 01's voice blared, stripped of all its polite programming. "EXTREME LEVELS OF GENETIC CORRUPTION DETECTED. SUBJECT: BRADFORD VAUGHN. CURRENT CONTAMINATION INDEX: 89 PERCENT. CRITICAL THRESHOLD IMMINENT."

Anja's blood ran cold. The memories she'd inherited supplied the horrifying context. 90 percent was the point of no return. The point at which a male's consciousness was completely consumed, turning him into a feral, mindless beast. He was seconds away from losing control.

Bradford let out a choked cry of pain and collapsed to one knee, his head bowed, his powerful body trembling with the effort of fighting his own biology. Sweat poured down his face, his teeth clenched so hard she could hear them grinding.

"Mistress... run," he forced out, his voice a guttural rasp. "Get out of the kitchen. Seal the room. Highest defense protocol. Now."

He was telling her to lock him in. To abandon him.

"I will not," he snarled, more to himself than to her, "I will not harm you." He

would rather his own body tear itself apart than lay a single hand on her.

Anja looked at him, kneeling on her kitchen floor, a magnificent, powerful creature brought low by an agony she couldn't imagine. He was fighting for her. He was trying to protect her, even as his own mind was being torn apart.

Her fear was replaced by a surge of something else. A fierce, protective instinct. A profound sense of responsibility. This man was hers. His problem was her problem.

She didn't run. She moved forward.

She knelt in front of him, ignoring the blaring alarms and Unit 01's frantic warnings. She reached out and grabbed his hand. It was burning hot, the skin feverish, the muscles underneath bunched into knots of solid iron.

Bradford's head snapped up, his red-rimmed eyes wide with shock and horror. "No! Let go!" he roared, trying to pull his hand away.

But she held on, her grip surprisingly strong. "Be still," she commanded, her voice shaking but firm.

She closed her eyes and focused inward, searching for the power the testing center had found. It was there, a warm, dormant pool of energy deep inside her. She reached for it, not with her mind, but with her will. She pulled.

A torrent of warm, brilliant blue light erupted from her. It flowed down her arm, into their joined hands, and poured into Bradford's body.

The world dissolved.

Anja's consciousness was ripped from the kitchen and thrown into a maelstrom. She was standing in a desolate landscape, a battlefield of the soul. A blizzard raged, the snow black with ash and soot. The air smelled of blood and spent plasma. This was his mind. His pain.

In the center of the storm, she saw him. Not the man, but the wolf. A

massive, charcoal-gray dire wolf, its fur matted with blood and ice. Writhing, shadowy tendrils of black smoke were wrapped around it, tightening, constricting, trying to suffocate the life out of it. The genetic corruption.

He was losing.

She walked through the blizzard, the psychic storm not touching her. She reached the struggling wolf and, without fear, placed her hand gently on the side of its head, right on one of its soft, tufted ears.

The moment she touched him, her blue light exploded outwards. It was a sun in the darkness, a wave of pure, cleansing energy that vaporized the black tendrils on contact. The blizzard ceased. The smoke vanished.

In the real world, the tension in Bradford's body suddenly went slack. The deep, pained lines on his face smoothed out. His ragged breathing evened, becoming deep and steady. He felt a cool, soothing wave wash through him, quenching a fire that had been burning for years. It was the most profound peace he had ever known.

In his mindscape, Anja kept pouring her energy into him, her light pushing the last remnants of the corruption back, compressing the darkness into a small, inert ball in a far corner of his soul.

She felt her own strength begin to fade. The power was immense, but it was draining her physical reserves at an alarming rate. A dizzying wave of fatigue washed over her.

She gritted her teeth, holding on for a few more seconds until she was sure he was stable. Then, she severed the connection.

Her eyes snapped open. The world swam back into focus. The alarms were silent. The kitchen was quiet. The wave of exhaustion hit her like a physical blow, and her body went limp. She started to fall backward.

A strong arm wrapped around her waist, catching her before she hit the floor. Bradford. He was on his feet, his eyes clear and lucid, the terrifying

red glow completely gone. He pulled her into his arms, holding her against his chest as if she were the most precious thing in the universe.

"Contamination Index: 45 percent," Unit 01 announced, its voice back to its calm, neutral default. "Status: Stable. Alert cancelled."

Bradford held her tight, his face buried in the crook of her neck. She could feel his body shaking with the aftershocks of the ordeal. A wetness seeped through the silk of her robe. He was crying.

"Matron," he choked out, his voice thick with unshed tears and a devotion so absolute it was humbling. He knew what she had done. He knew the cost of such a deep, invasive purification. She had risked her own psionic stability to save him.

Anja was too tired to speak. She just leaned her head against his shoulder, her body boneless with exhaustion. She weakly lifted a hand and reached up, her fingers finding the soft, black wolf ear that had now fully manifested at the side of his head. She gave it a gentle scratch.

"Nice," she murmured, a faint, tired smile on her lips. "Very soft."

He let out a shuddering breath, a sound that was half sob, half laugh, and held her even tighter.

Far away, in a penthouse apartment overlooking the glittering spires of Capital Prime, a man named Enzo Guy leaned forward, his eyes fixed on a complex data screen. An anomalous, high-intensity psionic energy signature had just appeared on his long-range sensors. It was unregistered. Unidentified. And it had flared to life in the exact location of Anja Compton's private estate.

A slow, predatory smile spread across his face.

"Well, well," he purred to the empty room. "It seems the little soldier is already making things interesting."