

Chapter 11

Bradford felt it like a dam breaking.

For years, the genetic corruption had been a constant pressure behind his eyes, a low-level static in his blood. Now, a wave of pure, clean energy surged through him, washing away the filth. It was like breathing clean air after a lifetime in a toxic mine. The relief was so profound, so absolute, that his body trembled with the sheer pleasure of it.

He looked down at the woman in his arms.

Anja was pale, her skin almost translucent, and there were faint blue shadows under her eyes. She had poured her own life force into him, a stranger she'd known for less than a day, and saved him from the brink. A feeling so fierce and powerful it felt like a physical blow slammed into his chest. It was more than gratitude. It was worship.

Anja leaned against his solid frame, her own breath slowly steadying. The exhaustion was bone-deep, a leaden weight in her limbs. But beneath it, deep in the core of her being where her psionic power resided, she felt a new clarity. A sense of expansion. It was as if she had flexed a muscle for the first time and discovered it was far stronger than she'd ever imagined.

She flexed her fingers, testing her own state. Tired, yes. But not broken.

"You need to replenish your electrolytes," Bradford's voice was a low rumble against her ear, rough with emotion.

He gently disentangled himself, his movements careful as if she were made of glass. He moved to the kitchen's hydration station and quickly dispensed a tall glass of pale blue liquid. He knelt before her, holding the glass to her lips with a hand that was rock-steady.

She drank, the cool, slightly salty water soothing her dry throat. She managed half the glass before leaning back with a sigh.

"Thank you."

He wanted to pull her back into his arms, to hold her and never let go. He wanted to promise her his life, his soul, everything he was and ever would be. But he clamped down on the impulse, forcing the disciplined soldier to take control.

"The air is stale in here," he said, his voice still thick. "The rose garden is just outside. Fresh air will help with the dizziness."

Anja nodded, the idea of cool night air appealing. She let him help her to her feet, his hand a warm, solid presence on her arm. She smoothed down her silk robe, feeling a little unsteady.

They walked side-by-side through a set of elegant French doors, stepping out onto a stone terrace. The night air was cool and smelled of damp earth and the heavy, sweet perfume of Damascus roses. Moonlight silvered the leaves of the manicured bushes and glinted off the water of a large, ornate marble fountain in the center of the garden.

The silence and the sheer, unapologetic luxury of the place were a balm. For a moment, Anja forgot the impossible reality of her situation. She wasn't a college student from Earth. She wasn't a strategic asset of an interstellar empire. She was just a woman, in a beautiful garden, on a quiet night.

She took a deep breath, the floral scent filling her lungs, and closed her eyes. She felt safe. Absolutely, completely safe.

CRACK.

The sound was sharp and sudden. The snap of a dry branch under a heavy foot. It came from the decorative hedge that bordered the far side of the garden.

Anja's eyes flew open, her heart giving a painful lurch in her chest. She took an instinctive step back, a jolt of adrenaline erasing her fatigue.

Bradford's transformation was instantaneous.

One second, he was the gentle, concerned caretaker. The next, he was a predator. His entire posture changed. His shoulders broadened, his muscles bunched, and his eyes, when they swept towards the sound, went from soft gray to cold, hard flint.

He moved with blinding speed, his arm shooting out to hook around her waist, pulling her behind his massive body. Her soft front collided with a back that was suddenly as hard and unyielding as a wall of stone. She could feel the staggering heat of his muscles coiling under his shirt, ready to spring.

She felt the sudden tension in his back, a brief rigidity that vanished as quickly as it came. His every sense was focused on the shadows under the hedge. His right hand drifted down, his fingers brushing against the handle of the military-grade combat knife strapped to his thigh.

A wave of terrifying pressure rolled off him, the silent, suffocating aura of a high-level predator. He was a wolf guarding his den, and anything that dared to intrude would be torn to pieces.

Hidden behind that wall of muscle, breathing in the faint scent of cedar and old gunpowder that clung to him, Anja's fear vanished as quickly as it had come. It was replaced by a profound, unshakable sense of security.

A figure stumbled out from behind the hedge, tripping into the moonlight.

He was a mess. His cheap suit was rumpled and stained with dirt, a fresh tear in the knee of his trousers. His sandy blond hair was disheveled, with a leaf stuck just above his ear.

Anja peered around Bradford's shoulder.

Her sense of security curdled into pure, unadulterated annoyance.

It was Kenny McDaniel.

He ignored Bradford completely, as if the six-foot-four wall of lethal muscle was nothing more than a piece of furniture. His eyes, wide and

feverish, were locked on Anja. They burned with a toxic mixture of jealousy, disbelief, and a desperate, clawing greed.

"You knew," he hissed, his voice cracking. "You knew all along, didn't you? You were an S-Class, and you let me think you were nothing. You were playing me! Watching me make a fool of myself!"

His face twisted, the features contorting with a rage born of spectacular regret. He was finally, truly understanding what he had thrown away. It wasn't just a woman. It was a kingdom.

His expression suddenly melted into one of theatrical remorse. Tears welled in his eyes. "Anja, my love. I was wrong. So wrong. I see that now. My heart has been empty since I left this house."

He was trying to tap into the old Anja's feelings, the pathetic, desperate love she had held for him.

He took a step forward, his hands clasped together in a pleading gesture. "Please. Give me another chance. We can sign the contract again. Right now."

He was so caught up in his own pathetic drama that he didn't seem to notice the man he was trying to walk past. He even had the audacity to lift his chin and give Bradford an arrogant, dismissive glance, a silent command for the hired help to get out of the way.

Bradford didn't move. The knuckles of the hand gripping his knife were bone white. A slow, terrible smile stretched his lips, a baring of teeth that held no humor, only the promise of extreme violence.

