

## Chapter 13

Kenny scrambled backward on the wet grass, his hands slipping in the mud. He looked like a trapped animal, his eyes wide with primal terror as the silhouette of Bradford Vaughn detached from the doorway and began to advance on him.

"Stay away from me!" he shrieked, his voice thin and reedy.

Bradford closed the distance in two silent, impossibly fast strides. One moment he was by the door, the next he was looming over Kenny, a mountain of shadow against the moon.

His hand shot out, clamping around Kenny's throat. The grip was like iron. He lifted the smaller man off the ground with one arm, as effortlessly as if he were lifting a child's doll.

Kenny's feet dangled uselessly in the air. He clawed at the unyielding wrist, his face turning a blotchy purple as his air supply was cut off. Gurgling, choking sounds were all he could manage.

Bradford's face was a mask of cold, controlled fury. Under Article 7, Section 4 of The Matron's Covenant Act, he had full authority to neutralize any threat to his Matron's safety with whatever force was necessary. He didn't say a word. He simply drew his arm back and slammed Kenny's body against the sharp, carved edge of the marble fountain.

There was a sickening crunch of bone breaking.

Kenny's choked gurgle turned into a piercing scream of agony as the impact shattered at least two of his ribs. Bradford released his throat, and Kenny collapsed to the ground, curling into a fetal position, clutching his side and sobbing in pain.

Bradford looked down at the pathetic, writhing form. He planted a heavy, leather-booted foot squarely in the center of Kenny's chest, pinning him to

the ground.

"She," Bradford's voice was a low, deadly growl, "is the most precious treasure in the Commonwealth. She is the Matron of House Vaughn." He pressed down, and Kenny coughed, a spray of blood speckling the white marble. "And you are less than dirt."

Upstairs, in the master bedroom, Anja sat in a plush armchair, a glass of deep red wine in her hand. On the tablet resting in her lap, she watched the scene in the garden unfold in crystal-clear, high-definition.

She watched the man who had been so gentle and nervous with her just an hour ago transform into a brutally efficient instrument of violence. She saw the cold precision in his movements, the utter lack of hesitation.

She wasn't afraid. She wasn't disgusted.

A slow, secret thrill curled in her stomach. This raw, savage power, this terrifying capacity for violence—it was all for her. It was on her leash. It was her shield.

She took a slow sip of her wine, the rich, dark fruitiness coating her tongue. He was perfect.

In the garden, Bradford saw that Kenny had finally passed out from the pain. He removed his foot with a look of distaste, then deliberately wiped the sole of his boot on a patch of clean grass.

He straightened his uniform and tapped the comms unit on his wrist.

"Central Precinct," he said, his voice cold and official. "This is Captain Vaughn. I am reporting an attempted assault on an S-Class female at these coordinates. The suspect is neutralized and requires medical transport and incarceration." He paused. "Charge him under Article 7 of The Matron's Covenant Act. Maximum penalty. Exile to the Cerberus V gravity mines. The magistrate will rubber-stamp it within the hour."

He cut the connection. The whole process took less than thirty seconds.

A formal conviction under Article 7 would follow, but the outcome was already certain. Kenny McDaniel was going to the gravity mines.

With the trash taken care of, he smoothed his shirt, the predator receding, the loyal soldier returning. He turned and walked back into the house.

He moved silently up the grand staircase, assuming Anja would be asleep. He reached the door to the guest room that Unit 01 had assigned him and pushed it open.

And froze.

She was there. Sitting on the edge of his bed, dressed in a fresh silk nightgown, the tablet still glowing in her hands. She looked up at him as he entered.

Bradford's blood ran cold. His heart felt like it had dropped into his stomach. She had seen everything. The rage. The cruelty. The blood.

He immediately dropped to one knee, his head bowed in shame and terror. "Mistress," he choked out, his voice trembling. "... I can explain. I am not a monster. I was only... Please, do not hate me. Do not be disgusted by me."

He was terrified. He had just found this anchor for his soul, this beacon of light. The thought that he might have already shattered her image of him, that she might now see him as nothing but a violent beast, was an agony worse than any physical pain.

Anja set the tablet aside. She stood up and walked towards him, her bare feet silent on the thick carpet. She stopped in front of him, looking down at the powerful soldier who was now trembling before her like a frightened child.

A soft laugh escaped her lips.

She reached out, her fingers gentle but firm, and hooked them under his chin, tilting his head up until his desperate, fearful eyes met hers.

She saw no fear in them. No disgust. Only a deep, possessive approval. And

something darker. Something that looked like hunger. ○

Anja leaned down.

She pressed her lips to the corner of his mouth. It wasn't a soft, hesitant kiss. It was firm, deliberate, and tasted of expensive red wine. A mark of ownership. A reward.

Bradford's entire world exploded into white light. His brain simply shut down. The shock of the gesture, the taste of her, the scent of her skin so close—it was too much. He could do nothing but remain frozen, kneeling on the floor.

She pulled back after a moment, her eyes glittering in the dim light.

"Go take a shower," she commanded, her voice a low, husky murmur. "You smell of blood."

Then she turned and walked out of his room, the sway of her hips a silent promise.

Bradford remained on his knee for a full ten seconds, completely stunned. Then, as if a switch had been flipped, he shot to his feet. A wild, ecstatic fire blazed in his eyes.

"Yes, Ma'am!" he barked to the empty doorway.

He stood there, clenching and unclenching his fists, the feeling of her lips still burning on his skin. The carefully constructed cage of discipline he had built around his desires had just been shattered. And the beast inside was roaring with triumph.



Win a free reading opportunity! >>>

Check