

Chapter 14

Bradford stood under the spray of the shower, the water as cold as he could make it. It sluiced over his skin, but it did nothing to cool the fire raging in his blood. The memory of her kiss, the taste of wine on her lips, was branded into his mind. It was a fire that cold water could not quench.

He shut off the water, drying himself with rough, angry motions. He pulled on a pair of loose, black sweatpants and stalked out of the bathroom. He needed to focus. He needed to regain control. His mind defaulted to what it knew best: tactics. Security.

He had chosen this guest room for a reason. A quick scan of the estate's blueprints on his terminal had shown him it shared a wall with the master suite. It was the optimal tactical position from which to guard her. A perfect kill zone for any threat that might approach her room.

But the walls were soundproofed. He wouldn't be able to hear a subtle threat. A silenced weapon. A muffled cry.

He sat on the bed, the same spot where she had sat just moments before, and opened his military-grade terminal. His fingers flew across the holographic keyboard. He wasn't just a soldier; he was a specialist in infiltration and cyber-warfare. The estate's high-end civilian security system was a child's toy to him.

He found the environmental control subroutines and, with a few lines of code, created a targeted override. He disabled the acoustic dampening field within the single wall separating his room from hers.

He told himself it was a necessary security precaution. A tactical adjustment. He was lying.

In the master bedroom, Anja lay in her massive bed, staring at the ceiling.

Her lips still tingled. On the tablet beside her, a small, discreet notification icon appeared. System Security Protocol 3.14 has been modified by an S-level user.

She tapped it. A log file appeared, showing the lines of code Bradford had just written. She saw exactly what he had done. He had turned off the soundproofing.

A slow, wicked smile spread across her face. This stoic, disciplined soldier was far more interesting than she had thought.

Two can play at that game, Captain.

Her fingers danced across the screen, and with a flick of her thumb, she authorized a reciprocal change, disabling the soundproofing on her side of the wall as well.

The effect was instantaneous.

In his room, Bradford froze. The dead silence was suddenly replaced by a symphony of soft, intimate sounds. The rustle of silk sheets as she shifted her weight in bed. The soft thud of her bare feet hitting the plush carpet. The whisper of fabric as she moved towards her bathroom.

His hearing, already enhanced by his lupine genes, was now focused and unfiltered. He could hear the faint hiss of the faucet, the splash of water against porcelain. The sound of her humming a soft, tuneless melody as she washed her face.

Every sound was a new form of torture. His breath grew heavy, catching in his throat. His mind, against his will, supplied the images. Anja, in the opulent bathroom, her skin damp, her hair loose around her shoulders. The memory of her kiss, her taste, her scent, crashed over him.

It was the final trigger.

The comms unit on his wrist let out a piercing shriek. A red light flashed frantically. WARNING: GENETIC CORRUPTION LEVELS RISING. FRENZY PERIOD IMMINENT.

A wave of heat and pain washed through him. It was too soon. It shouldn't be happening for months. But the proximity of his S-Class Matron, the overwhelming sensory input, the taste of her on his lips-it had kickstarted the process.

He let out a pained grunt and stumbled towards his tactical bag, which he'd left by the door. His hands shook as he fumbled with the clasp, pulling out a military-issue auto-injector. A high-dose suppressant. He jammed the needle into his thigh without hesitation.

The cold liquid flooded his system, and for a moment, the fire receded. He leaned against the wall, his forehead beaded with sweat, his body trembling.

Then, from the other side of the wall, he heard her start to blow-dry her hair. And she was singing. A light, happy little song from some old Earth movie. The sound, so innocent and carefree, was the most seductive thing he had ever heard.

The suppressant failed. The fragile dam of chemical control shattered, and the corruption roared back, ten times stronger than before.

His vision tinged with red. His fingernails lengthened, hardening into sharp claws that bit into his own palms. He felt the bones in his ears begin to shift, to elongate.

He bit down on his lip, drawing blood, trying to fight it. He grabbed two more injectors and slammed them into his bicep, one after the other. An overdose. He knew it was dangerous, but he was desperate.

The chemical cocktail warred with his biology. His muscles began to spasm uncontrollably. The empty injector slipped from his numb fingers and clattered onto the hardwood floor.

It was no use. The drugs were useless against a force this primal. The more he fought it, the more his body screamed for release, for the purification only she could provide.

He clapped a hand over his own mouth, stifling the guttural growl that was rising in his throat. He couldn't let her hear. He couldn't let her know what a monster she had chained herself to.

In the master bedroom, Anja switched off the hair dryer. The sudden silence was profound. And in that silence, she heard it.

A heavy thud from the other side of the wall.

Followed by a low, pained sound. The sound of someone breathing through gritted teeth, a desperate, ragged gasp for air.

She frowned, her playful mood vanishing. The sound was wrong. It was the sound of real pain.

Something was very, very wrong with her soldier.

