

Chapter 15

Anja stood in the middle of her bedroom, listening. The strained breathing from the other side of the wall continued, punctuated by a low, guttural sound that made the hair on her arms stand up.

She thought back to the kitchen. The alarms. The way his body had trembled. This felt different, but also terrifyingly similar. His genetic corruption must be flaring up again.

Without a second thought, she pulled on her silk robe, tying the sash tightly. She walked out of her room and down the short, dimly lit hallway to his door.

She raised her hand and knocked, the sound loud in the silent house.

"Bradford?" she called out softly. "Are you alright?"

Inside, the sound of her voice was like a physical blow. Bradford, who had been about to stumble into his bathroom to douse his head in cold water, froze solid.

She's here.

He squeezed his eyes shut, summoning every last ounce of his military discipline. He forced the blood-red haze from his vision. He mentally shoved the emerging wolf ears back under his skin, a painful process that felt like tearing muscle. He dragged himself to the door, his body feeling like it was filled with lead.

He opened it just a crack, using his large frame to block the view into the room.

The soft, warm light from the hallway spilled over him. He was shirtless, his skin gleaming with a sheen of sweat. The perfectly sculpted muscles of his chest and abdomen were thrown into sharp relief. Water droplets from his

earlier shower still clung to his skin, tracing paths down his torso and disappearing below the waistband of his low-slung sweatpants.

Anja's breath caught in her throat. Her brain, for one spectacular moment, simply stopped working. All her concern, all her worry, was wiped away by the sheer, breathtaking beauty of the man in front of her. It was like looking at a statue of a war god, brought to life. She swallowed, her mouth suddenly dry.

Bradford saw the flicker of heat in her eyes, the way her gaze was fixed on his chest. A primal, possessive pride surged through him, and he unconsciously straightened, his muscles flexing.

Then he remembered his state, the monster he was barely keeping caged. His voice, when he spoke, was a low, rough rasp, shredded by his effort at control.

"Mistress. Is there something you require?"

The sound of his voice, thick and gravelly, snapped her out of her trance. A hot blush crept up her neck. She forced her eyes up to his face.

"I heard a noise," she said, her own voice a little shaky. She pointedly looked at his forehead, which was beaded with sweat. "You don't look well. Is it your corruption again?"

His heart hammered against his ribs. He couldn't tell her the truth. He couldn't say, I'm in heat for you. The sound of you breathing is driving me insane. The shame would be unbearable.

He dropped his gaze, unable to meet her clear, concerned eyes. "It is nothing, Ma'am. A minor energy fluctuation. I knocked over a chair." He saw her eyes flick to his arm, to the tiny, fresh puncture marks from the injectors. He knew she didn't believe him.

"If you're unstable," she said, taking a step closer, "I can help. I can try to purify you again."

As she moved, her scent washed over him. Honey and night-blooming flowers. The sweet, intoxicating perfume of an S-Class female. It was like throwing gasoline on a bonfire.

His hand, hidden behind the door, gripped the wooden frame so hard he felt splinters dig under his fingernails. The sharp pain was a welcome anchor in the storm of his senses. His mind was a battlefield. His duty screamed at him to refuse, to protect her from himself. His instincts roared at him to drag her into the room, to lock the door, to claim her.

The soldier won. Barely.

He took a half-step back, creating a sliver of distance between them. "No," he said, his voice strained. "You are still recovering from last time. Your health is paramount. I will handle this myself."

The rejection was so firm, so absolute, that Anja stopped. She saw the raw agony in his eyes, the desperate struggle. She didn't understand it, but she respected his boundary.

"Alright," she said softly.

He reached back into the room, grabbing a black silk robe from his bag and shrugging it on, covering the distracting expanse of his chest. "Allow me to see you back to your room."

The walk was only a few feet, but for Bradford, it was the longest journey of his life. He kept a careful six inches of space between them, his entire body rigid with the effort of not reaching for her. He could feel the warmth of her body, smell the clean scent of her hair. It was exquisite torture.

At her door, she turned. "If you need anything," she said, her brow furrowed with worry, "anything at all, you tell Unit 01. That's an order, Captain."

He dropped to one knee, a gesture of both respect and desperation, needing to put his head below the level of her gaze. "I will not let you come to harm, Ma'am. Not even from me."

She gave him a small, uncertain smile. "Goodnight, Bradford."

She slipped into her room, and the door clicked shut behind her.

The sound of the latch was like a starting pistol. Bradford's control finally snapped. He sagged against the hallway wall, his head thrown back, a silent scream trapped in his throat. He dragged in a deep, shuddering breath, trying to pull the last lingering traces of her scent from the air.

The long, mad night had only just begun.

