

Chapter 34

Anja placed her hand on Gregory Callahan's forehead. The skin was clammy and cold. She ignored the warning bells of exhaustion screaming in her own mind, focusing on the task at hand.

She plunged into his consciousness.

It was another swamp, thick and choked with the black poison of corruption. But this one was different from Darius's. It was quieter, a place of silent, screaming despair.

Anja grit her teeth and unleashed her power. The golden light, her signature weapon, tore into the darkness.

The purification was easier this time, the corruption less ancient and entrenched. But Anja's own reserves were dangerously low. With each pulse of golden energy she sent out, a sharp, stabbing pain lanced through her own skull.

Her forehead was beaded with cold sweat. She was walking a razor's edge. Pushing too hard now could cause permanent damage to her own psionic core, a price she was not willing to pay.

She brought Gregory's corruption down to eighty-five percent stable, but not fully cleansed—and then she pulled back, severing the connection.

She stumbled back a step, her vision tunneling. Gregory's violent tremors had ceased. His breathing, which had been a shallow rattle, evened out.

Lawrence was already there with the scanner. "It's a miracle," he breathed, looking at the numbers. "Another one." His terminal chimed as Gregory's personal accounts, triggered by the sudden improvement in his medical status, automatically authorized another massive payment.

Anja saw the credit notification flash in her vision. She managed a weak, satisfied smile. Then she turned to Lawrence. "I'm done for today," she said, her voice barely a whisper. "I need to leave."

"Of course, Matron! Right away!" Lawrence barked, clearing the corridor, granting her every priority.

Anja turned to walk towards the exit.

And the world went black.

Her legs gave out from under her. The last of her strength, the very last drop, was gone. She was falling, a dead weight, towards the hard metal floor.

She never hit it.

Bradford moved with the explosive speed of a predator. He crossed the room in a single bound, his arms wrapping around her before she could fall, scooping her up against his chest.

His face was a mask of cold fury. He held her tight, his hand checking the pulse at her neck. It was faint, but steady. She was just unconscious. Exhausted.

"Out of my way," he snarled, his voice a low, dangerous growl.

He didn't wait for a reply. He charged down the corridor, a force of nature, with Anja held securely in his arms. Enzo was a step ahead of him, clearing the path, his usual smirk replaced by a look of grim concern.

The journey back to the estate was a blur. The private cruiser tore through the atmosphere at a reckless speed. Bradford sat in the main cabin, holding Anja, refusing to let her go. Her wrist terminal glowed softly, displaying her vital signs. The diagnosis was clear: Severe Psionic Exhaustion. Not life-threatening, but close.

The ship landed. Bradford carried her directly to the master bedroom, the one with the oversized bed and the silk sheets. He laid her down as gently as if she were made of glass.

Enzo appeared at the doorway. The two men had a brief, tense exchange. Enzo would handle the Citadel's follow-up paperwork and secure the perimeter. Bradford would stay. He would be her caretaker. Her guardian.

The door closed, leaving them alone.

Bradford stood over the bed, looking down at her. She was so pale, so still. So vulnerable. A fierce, protective instinct, so powerful it was a physical pain, surged through him.

Then, a soft, golden light filled the room. A holographic notification box materialized in the air above Anja's sleeping form.

[Psionic Core has reached absorption capacity. Upgrade sequence initiated. Cooldown: 12 hours.]

She had done it. She had pushed herself to the brink and had been rewarded. A wave of pride washed over him, quickly followed by a renewed sense of duty.

He went to the bathroom and returned with a basin of warm water and a soft cloth. He sat on the edge of the bed, preparing to wipe the cold sweat from her brow.

He dipped the cloth in the water and gently touched it to her forehead.

Her skin was burning hot.

The moment his fingers brushed her feverish skin, something inside him snapped.

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 +120 Points at most

A jolt, like a high-voltage current, shot through his body. The blood in his veins turned to fire. The air was suddenly thick with her scent, the scent of an S-Class female, amplified a thousand times by her exhaustion and vulnerability. It was an irresistible siren call to the beast he kept chained in the dungeons of his soul.

His breath hitched. His heart hammered against his ribs like a war drum.

He recognized the feeling with a sickening lurch of horror.

His Frenzy Period. It was back. And this time, there was no lock on the door, no wall between them. Just him, a predator on the edge of losing control, and his helpless, unconscious Matron.

For you