

Chapter 35

Bradford stood frozen by the bed, his body a battlefield. The scent of her, sweet and intoxicating, was a physical presence in the room, wrapping around him, pulling him under.

His hands, which had been so gentle moments before, clenched into fists, the knuckles white. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the sight of her, the perfect, pale curve of her throat, the soft rise and fall of her chest.

He forced himself to move, to complete the task. He blindly dipped the cloth in the basin and reached for her face. But without his sight, his other senses were magnified, screaming. The touch of her skin, even through the damp cloth, was an electric shock. His fingers brushed against the silk of her hair, and a low growl rumbled deep in his chest.

He couldn't do this. He was losing.

His control shattered. His eyes snapped open, no longer the calm gray of a soldier, but the glowing feral crimson of a wolf. His gaze fell to her neck.

And he saw it.

A faint, but unmistakable mark on the side of her neck. A bite mark. Enzo's mark.

A wave of jealousy so potent, so corrosive it was a physical poison, flooded his system. It burned away the last of his reason. This was his Matron. His. And she bore the brand of another male.

An instinct, ancient and absolute, took over. He had to erase it. He had to cover it. He had to claim what was his.

He lunged, his head dipping down, his mouth opening. His canines, sharp and white, extended, ready to sink into her soft flesh, to overwrite the insult of his rival's claim with his own.

He was a millimeter from her skin. The heat of her body was a furnace against his lips.

BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.

A shrill, electronic sound cut through the haze of his bloodlust. The medical monitor by the bed was flashing red. Her heart rate had spiked in her sleep, a subconscious reaction to the imminent danger.

The sound was a bucket of ice water to his face.

Protect the Matron.

The command, his deepest, most fundamental programming slammed into his consciousness, overriding the Frenzy.

He recoiled as if he had been burned, scrambling back from the bed, stumbling, his legs weak. He crashed against the far wall, his breath coming in harsh, ragged gasps.

What had he almost done?

He stared at his own hands, horrified. He had almost become the very monster he had sworn to protect her from.

With a cry of self-loathing, he staggered to the medical cabinet in the corner of the room. He fumbled with the latch, his hands shaking. He found what he was looking for: a thick, pre-filled syringe. A high-dose emergency inhibitor.

He didn't hesitate. He ripped the cap off with his teeth and plunged the needle deep into the muscle of his own thigh, slamming the plunger down.

The effect was instantaneous. A wave of icy cold shot through his veins, a chemical winter freezing the fire of the Frenzy. The pain was excruciating, a deep, grinding ache that felt like his very bones were being turned to ice. But it worked. The feral crimson in his eyes faded, leaving behind the exhausted gray of a man who had just returned from war.

He slid down the wall, his body trembling with the aftershocks, and buried his face in his hands. He had failed. He was unworthy.

After a long time, he forced himself to his feet. He splashed cold water on his face, the sting of it a welcome punishment. He finished his task, gently cleaning her face, tucking the velvet blanket around her. His movements were full of a new, heartbreaking reverence.

He spent the rest of the night standing by the window, a silent, miserable sentinel, watching over her as the cold of the inhibitor seeped into his soul.

Hours later, as dawn approached, a soft sound from the bed made him turn.

Anja was stirring. She let out a soft moan, her eyelids fluttering. She was waking up.

He was at her side in an instant, his heart in his throat. "Mistress?" he whispered, his voice hoarse. "Anja? Are you alright?"

She blinked her eyes slowly, focusing on him. She frowned, a little wrinkle appearing between her brows. "Bradford?" she murmured, her voice thick with sleep. She pushed herself up on her elbows, looking at him. His hair was a mess, his uniform was rumpled, and he was covered in a sheen of sweat. "What happened to you? You look terrible."

A flush of shame and panic spread across his face. He dropped to one knee by the bed. "I did nothing Mistress," he said, his voice a desperate, pleading rush. "I swear on my honor. I did not touch you."

Her gaze drifted past his shoulder, to the medical cabinet. She saw the discarded syringe lying on the floor. An empty syringe.

Her eyes softened. The confusion on her face melted away, replaced by a dawning understanding. He hadn't been sick. He had been... fighting For her.

A wave of warmth, of a feeling she couldn't quite name, spread through her chest. She had pushed him away, questioned him, and he had still chosen to hurt himself rather than risk hurting her.

"How long was I out?" she asked, her voice gentle, changing the subject.

As she sat up, she noticed she was wearing a clean, soft silk nightgown. Someone had changed her out of her sweat-soaked clothes. Someone had cared for her. Intimately. But with respect.

The memory of him catching her in the Citadel, of his strong arms holding her, resurfaced. The feeling of absolute safety. It was a feeling she wasn't used to.

This was different from Enzo's passionate, possessive claiming. This was a quiet, steady devotion. A love that chose restraint over release. It was, in its own way, far more moving.

She reached out her hand and gently touched his cheek. His skin was rough with stubble, his jaw tight with tension.

"Thank you, Bradford," she whispered.

He froze at her touch, his eyes widening. He looked like a wild animal that had never known a kind hand. Then, slowly, tentatively, he leaned into her palm, a great, shuddering sigh escaping his lips. He closed his eyes, a lone tear escaping and tracing a path down his cheek. He was a giant, brought to his knees by a single, gentle touch.

