

Chapter 16

A moment after Anja's door closed, Bradford stumbled back to his own room, locking the door behind him. He engaged the highest level of physical lockdown, a series of heavy metallic bolts sliding into place with loud, final thuds. He was caging himself in. He leaned against the cold metal, the sounds of Anja settling into bed on the other side of the wall a fresh wave of torture.

Meanwhile, Anja lay in her own bed, staring at the canopy above. She couldn't sleep. His face, twisted in that agony of restraint, was burned into her mind. The needle marks on his arm. His desperate refusal of her help. It didn't add up.

She sat up and grabbed her tablet. She wasn't a damsel in distress. She was a scientist, a problem-solver. And this was a problem.

She accessed the Commonwealth's central database, using her new S-Class clearance to bypass the usual security protocols. In the search bar, she typed a series of keywords: Alpha-Plus male. Unscheduled energy spikes. Suppressant use. Proximity to female.

The system cross-referenced the terms in milliseconds. A single file was returned, its classification level marked in crimson: Physiological Primer for S-Class Matrons.

She opened it.

The screen filled with dense medical text, diagrams, and hormonal charts. But the summary at the top was brutally clear.

Frenzy Period (Colloquial: Mating Heat): A cyclical hormonal and psionic surge in Alpha-Plus males, characterized by elevated body temperature, muscle spasms, and a significant, temporary spike in genetic corruption. The primary trigger for an unscheduled Frenzy Period is prolonged

exposure to the pheromonal signature of a genetically compatible, high-class female, particularly an S-Class.

Anja's hand flew to her mouth, her eyes wide with shock.

Mating heat.

He wasn't sick. He wasn't having a relapse. The stoic, disciplined, terrifyingly competent Captain Bradford Vaughn was in heat. For her.

A blush so hot it felt like a fever spread from her neck to the roots of her hair. She finally understood his desperation, his refusal to let her near him. It wasn't about protecting her from his violence. It was about protecting her from his desire.

Just as her brain was threatening to melt from the sheer, mortifying revelation, her wrist terminal chimed with an incoming call. Grateful for the distraction, she answered it immediately.

A full-sized hologram of her mother, Vivian Compton, shimmered into existence at the foot of her bed. Vivian was lounging in a cabana, a turquoise ocean sparkling behind her, a half-empty glass of something pink and frothy in her hand.

"Darling!" Vivian chirped. "You're all over the net! Tossing that McDaniel trash out on his ear. I'm so proud of you!"

Anja managed a weak smile. "Thanks, Mom."

Vivian took a sip of her drink, her eyes narrowing slightly. "But I have to admit, I'm a little confused. You've changed. The Anja I knew would have been catatonic. She would have locked herself in her room for a week."

Vivian leaned forward, her holographic image becoming sharper. "She cried for three days when Kenny forgot her birthday. She was even going to use her trust fund to buy him that ridiculous star-yacht he wanted. And now... this. You're a different person."

Anja's heart froze. This was it. The question every transmigrator dreaded.

The moment when someone who knew the original person too well noticed the cracks in the facade.

Her mind raced, desperately searching for a plausible explanation.

She forced a bitter, world-weary smile onto her face. "The girl who loved him died the day he stood in this room and told the old Anja she was worthless. When I woke up in this body, I finally saw him for what he was. A parasite."

Vivian stared at her for a long moment, her expression unreadable. Then, her face softened, the suspicion melting away, replaced by a wave of maternal sympathy and pride.

"Good," Vivian said, nodding firmly. "It's about time. In this galaxy, darling, a man is an accessory, not a life goal. You treat them well, you keep them happy, but you never, ever let one think he's in charge."

She sighed dramatically, swirling her drink. "Speaking of which, you wouldn't believe the trouble I'm having. My number three and number four got into a fistfight over who got to come with me on this vacation. I had to put them both in timeout. Men. They're such children."

Anja listened to her mother's luxurious complaints, getting a clearer picture of the world she now inhabited.

"Anyway," Vivian said, her smile turning sly. "To help you get started with your own little collection, I've sent you a welcome gift. A bit of family wisdom."

The call ended, and a second later, a new file appeared on her tablet. It was encrypted, titled simply: The Consort Codex.

Curiosity overriding her embarrassment, she opened it.

The first chapter heading was: Pheromonal Balancing: A Practical Guide to Managing Multiple Frenzy Cycles. It was accompanied by a series of very detailed, very explicit anatomical diagrams.

Anja slammed the tablet shut, throwing it onto the other side of the bed as

if it were on fire. Her face was burning. Her heart was pounding.

Sleep was now completely, utterly impossible.



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