

Chapter 20

Anja wiped her lips with a linen napkin and pushed her plate away. "Okay. I'm ready." The anticipation was a tight knot in her stomach.

Bradford chuckled, a low, warm sound. "Eager to discover your path to galactic domination, Ma'am?" He stood and walked over to the black tactical bag he had brought into the dining room.

He unzipped a side compartment and produced a device that looked like a sleek, metallic clamshell. As he opened it, it hummed to life, a soft blue light emanating from its core. A portable neuronc scanner. Military grade.

Anja's excitement suddenly evaporated, replaced by a spike of cold fear. This wasn't a toy. It was a serious piece of military hardware. What if it saw too much? What if it could detect the foreign, 21st-century soul inhabiting this S-Class body? The thought of being discovered, of being dissected on a lab table, sent a wave of nausea through her.

Bradford saw the color drain from her face, saw the flicker of panic in her eyes. He immediately set the device down.

"Mistress," he said, his voice soft and serious. "I have severed its connection to the military network. The device is completely air-gapped. All data will be stored on a single, encrypted local chip. No one will see the results but you and I. I give you my word. On my family's honor."

She looked into his eyes. They were clear, sincere, and filled with a devotion that left no room for doubt. She trusted him. It was a startling realization, but it was true.

She took a deep breath and nodded. "Okay. Let's do it."

She placed her palm on the cool, smooth sensor plate. The device hummed, and a thin, red laser beam swept from her feet to her head. The

entire process was over in less than three seconds.

A holographic screen materialized in the air above the scanner, displaying a cascade of complex biological data. It scrolled for a moment before locking onto a final summary page.

Anja leaned forward, her eyes scanning for the result.

And there it was. Two words, written in stark, official lettering.

F-Class. Unknown Ability.

The letter F seemed to mock her, a bright, scarlet brand of failure. Her mind went blank. All her hopes, all her excitement, all the potential she had felt, all of it curdled into a bitter, crushing disappointment. S-Class psionic. F-Class ability. It was a cosmic joke.

She turned to Bradford, her voice small. "F-Class? Does... does that mean I'm useless? A dud?"

Bradford was frowning at the screen, his brow furrowed in deep concentration. He wasn't looking at the F. He was looking at the word 'Unknown'.

"No, Ma'am," he said slowly, his mind working through the possibilities. "I don't think it means weak. F-Class is the designation the system gives to any energy signature that doesn't match a pre-existing profile in the federal database. It's not a measure of power. It's a measure of novelty. Your ability is something the Commonwealth has never seen before."

He looked up at her, his expression serious. "There is one way to get a definitive analysis. The Imperial Psionic Institute on Capital Prime. They can perform a deep-level cellular resonance test..."

"No," Anja said, the word coming out sharper and faster than she intended. A deep-level test. They would scan her down to her soul. They would find her. The transmigrator. The anomaly. The risk was too great.

She quickly composed herself. "No," she repeated, her voice calmer but

firm. "I don't want to be a lab rat for the Directorate. Not yet." She had other Consorts on the way. Powerful men from different walks of life. Maybe one of them would have access to a non-official, private method of analysis.

She had to play the long game. She would rather be thought a failure than be discovered as a fraud.

Bradford saw the look in her eyes. It wasn't just disappointment. It was resolve. He didn't understand it, but he respected it. His duty was not to question her decisions, but to support them.

"As you wish, Ma'am," he said, immediately closing the scanner and locking it. The holographic screen vanished.

He could see the cloud of disappointment still hanging over her. He wanted to see her smile again.

"In that case," he said, his voice shifting to a lighter tone, "might I suggest a tactical retreat to the holotheater? I believe there is an extensive library of 21st-century Earth romantic comedies. A cultural study, of course."

A genuine smile touched Anja's lips. The idea was so absurd, so normal, that it was exactly what she needed. "I think I'd like that, Captain."

She was about to stand up when a deafening alarm blared through the estate. Red emergency lights began to flash, bathing the tranquil dining room in a harsh, pulsing glow.

It wasn't an intruder alert. It was a priority access warning.

"WARNING," Unit 01's voice boomed from all speakers. "S-LEVEL ACCESS KEY DETECTED AND VERIFIED AT THE MAIN GATE."

The AI's voice paused for a microsecond before delivering the final, devastating blow.

"Announcing the arrival of your second legally bonded Consort. Mr. Enzo Guy."

Anja froze, the name conjuring the image from the file: a man with the dangerous, lazy grace of a panther and eyes that promised nothing but trouble.

Across the table, Bradford's face had transformed. The warmth, the humor, the tenderness-it was all gone. His face was a mask of cold, possessive fury. His eyes were chips of ice.

He rose slowly from his chair, his body coiling like a spring. His hand drifted down, his fingers coming to rest on the hilt of the combat knife at his belt.

The quiet, domestic peace was shattered. The battlefield had just arrived at their front door.

