

Chapter 26

Lawrence stared at the flashing red light on the secure terminal, his heart hammering against his ribs. His hand trembled as he reached out and pressed the green 'accept' button.

The official seal of the Commonwealth Eugenics & Pairing Directorate, intertwined with the insignia of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, bloomed on the screen. He braced himself. It was probably the final execution order, delivered with all the pomp and circumstance the bureaucracy loved so much. His finger hovered over the command that would flood the cellblocks with nerve gas.

Then his eyes fell on the text.

Request for Access: Approved.

Visitor: S-Class Matron, Anja Compton.

Purpose: Humanitarian Psionic Aid.

ETA: 0800 tomorrow.

The words didn't compute. He read them again. And again.

A sound, a choked, strangled gasp, escaped his lips. Then another. And another. He stumbled back, collapsing into his worn metal chair. And then he began to laugh.

It wasn't a happy sound. It was the hysterical, broken laughter of a man who had been staring into the abyss for so long he had forgotten what the sun looked like. Tears streamed down his face, carving clean paths through the grime on his cheeks.

He slammed his hand on the intercom button, his voice a raw, joyous roar that echoed through the entire facility. "Full sanitation protocol! Now! I want this place clean enough to eat off the floors! Security teams, full dress uniform! She's coming! By the gods, she's actually coming!"

Miles away, in a world of sunlight and roses, Anja closed the confirmation message on her tablet with a satisfied smile. The Directorate had even offered a full fleet escort. She had politely declined. A massive military presence would only agitate the very patients she was trying to treat. She would go with her own security detail.

With the day's business concluded, a new, more pressing need made itself known: a deep, gnawing hunger. The purifications and the planning had left her utterly ravenous.

Enzo, ever attuned to her needs, seemed to sense the shift in her mood. He stood up, smoothly shrugging off his multi-thousand-credit suit jacket. He began to unbutton his cuffs, rolling up the sleeves of his pristine white shirt to reveal strong, corded forearms.

"The kitchen," he announced, "is mine tonight."

Bradford bristled. "Mistress requires nutritionally balanced, military-grade rations for optimal..."

Enzo shot him a look of withering pity. "You want to feed this goddess your nutrient paste? That's not food, Captain. That's survival. She deserves a feast."

Bradford, outmaneuvered and once again reminded of his complete lack of finesse, fell silent. He retreated to his secondary role, sullenly setting the table with the finest silver and lighting fragrant, expensive candles.

Anja took a seat at the kitchen's marble island, propping her chin on her hand. She watched, fascinated, as Enzo moved about the state-of-the-art kitchen. He was a whirlwind of controlled, efficient motion. His knife skills were breathtaking, a blur of flashing steel that reduced vegetables to perfectly uniform pieces. He moved with the confidence of a master, a stark, captivating contrast to the brutal killer she knew him to be.

She popped another one of the Bio-Cores from his earlier gift into her mouth, letting the sweet, clean energy dissolve on her tongue. It was a pleasant, slow-burning warmth, a far cry from the explosive power of direct purification, but it was deeply comforting.

Soon, an aroma so intoxicating it made her stomach ache with need filled the air. Enzo placed a plate before her with a flourish.

Beef Wellington.

The golden-brown puff pastry was a perfect, intricate lattice. Slicing it open revealed a layer of savory mushroom duxelles, prosciutto, and a core of the most perfectly pink tender filet mignon she had ever seen. The rich, earthy scent of black truffle oil rose in a fragrant cloud.

Enzo picked up a knife and fork, but not for her. He carefully sliced off the perfect bite, the very heart of the steak, and speared it with a fork. He leaned across the island, holding it to her lips. His dark eyes, his true eyes, were locked on hers, filled with a look of intense, focused devotion.

Anja's mouth opened on instinct. The flavors exploded on her tongue—the flaky pastry, the savory mushrooms, the impossibly tender beef. A soft, involuntary moan of pure pleasure escaped her lips.

"Good?" he murmured, his voice a low, satisfied rumble.

She could only nod, her eyes half-closed in bliss.

He smiled, a slow, deeply satisfied smile. He reached out with his thumb and gently, deliberately, wiped a tiny smudge of sauce from the corner of her lips. The gesture was so intimate, so possessive, it made her heart skip a beat.

Across the room, Bradford watched, his hand gripping the stem of a wine glass so tightly he was surprised it didn't shatter. He was losing. In every arena that wasn't a battlefield, he was hopelessly, pathetically, losing.

"So," Anja said, her voice a little breathless as she savored another bite he offered her. "The Citadel. What's the worst-case scenario?"

Bradford seized the opening grateful to be back on solid ground. "Total system failure," he said, his voice all business. "A chain reaction of psionic detonations. The entire facility could become a crater. The psionic fallout alone would be lethal for miles."

Enzo, while continuing to feed her, scoffed. "He's being dramatic. The ravings of a few broken soldiers are nothing in the face of a true S-Class. Their madness will break against you like waves on a cliff."

His supreme, arrogant confidence was, strangely, more reassuring than Bradford's cautious, realistic assessment.

The dinner ended, a surreal mixture of fine dining tactical planning and shameless flirtation. Anja felt the tension of the day finally begin to melt away.

"I need a bath," she announced, feeling warm and full and deeply relaxed.

Enzo's dark eyes glittered. He gave a slight, formal bow.

"Of course," he said, his voice a low, velvety purr. "I've already taken the liberty of drawing one for you."