

Dump One Loser, Gain Six Husbands. Chapter 6

In the sterile, blue-lit command center of the High Command Headquarters on Capital Prime, Captain Bradford Vaughn stared at a holographic star map. Data streams from the Tenebris Sector flickered on a secondary screen, but his mind was still back at the testing center. Red icons pulsed ominously, marking the latest incursions of insectoid hive ships in the Tenebris Sector. His brow was furrowed in concentration, his mind running through a dozen different tactical simulations.

A sound pierced the low hum of the command center. A shrill, high-frequency alarm that cut through everything.

It came from the military-grade comms unit strapped to his wrist. The screen was flashing a violent, urgent red. It wasn't a combat alert. It was a signal he had never seen before, a priority level that superseded even a direct order from the High Command. A mandatory directive from the core of the Commonwealth itself.

"Clear the room," Bradford barked, his voice rough.

His subordinates snapped to attention, their eyes wide with confusion, but they obeyed without question. They filed out of the command center, sealing the heavy blast door behind them.

Alone, Bradford strode into a small, soundproofed privacy chamber in the corner of the room. He raised his wrist, and the comms unit projected a holographic document directly onto his retina.

It was a legal contract, stamped with a seal he had only ever read about in textbooks. A glowing, golden S.

His first thought was that the sensor readings from the testing center hadn't glitched after all. He had felt her power when he knelt at her feet, but S-Class? That was a tier of legend he never dared hope for.

Then his eyes scanned the text. S-Class Female, Anja Compton. Mandatory Consort Bonding Contract.

His heart, a steady, disciplined muscle trained through years of combat, hammered against his ribs like a trapped animal. The genetic corruption that was a constant, low-level hum beneath his skin, a legacy of a thousand battles, flared with a sudden, desperate hope. This was it. The cure. The anchor he thought he would never find.

Below the legal text was the high-resolution photograph from her official file. The same face he had looked up at from the stone steps only hours ago. Anja Compton.

His breath hitched. The visceral pull he'd felt at the estate was now codified into a soul-binding law. He instinctively reached out, his fingers clad in black tactical gloves, and tried to trace the line of her cheek in the empty air.

The comms unit vibrated again, a different alert this time. An incoming holographic call from his mother, Meredith Vaughn.

He accepted. Her image flickered to life, her face flushed with an emotion he had never seen on his stoic, aristocratic mother before: pure, unadulterated hysteria.

"Bradford!" she shrieked, her voice so loud it was distorted. "The girl you escorted! The results just went live! An S-Class! Our family has been chosen by the stars!"

In the background, he could see one of her own Consorts, a retired admiral named Aaron, smiling and giving him a thumbs-up.

"We're selling the mining rights on Cygnus X-1," Meredith continued, speaking at a frantic pace. "And the shipping fleet. It's all being liquidated. We have to assemble a proper dowry for you to present to her. The Vaughns will not be outdone! We will give her the best of everything!"

Bradford's jaw tightened. The word "dowry," applied to him, a decorated captain of the Special Forces, was deeply humiliating. But he didn't argue. He knew the truth. For the chance to bond with an S-Class female, his pride, his family's fortune, his very life-it was all a paltry price to pay.

"Bradford, are you listening to me?" his mother demanded. "Forget the bugs. Forget the border. Your duty is to her now. Go to her. Immediately!"

The call ended. Bradford stood in the silent chamber, taking a single, deep, shuddering breath. He calmed his racing heart, pushing down the surge of hope and terror.

He strode out of the privacy chamber, his face once again an impassive mask. He walked directly to the base commander's office and submitted a formal request for leave.

"Reassignment to permanent guard duty, Captain? You only just returned from the testing center. The hive is pushing hard-"

Bradford simply forwarded the S-Class directive to the commander's terminal. The older man's eyes widened. He stared at the screen, then back at Bradford, his expression shifting from annoyance to pure, unadulterated envy. He slammed his approval stamp onto the digital form without another word.

"Good luck, son," he said, his voice hushed. "Go make us proud."

Bradford didn't waste a second. He sprinted to his personal barracks, stripping off his dusty, blood-flecked combat fatigues. He took the fastest, hottest shower of his life, scrubbing away the grime and the lingering scent of ozone and alien blood.

He put on his finest dress uniform, a deep charcoal gray with silver piping. He checked his reflection, adjusting the collar, smoothing a non-existent wrinkle. He even fumbled with the knot of his tie, a piece of formalwear he hadn't touched in years, his fingers suddenly clumsy and thick.

A secure data chip, containing the access keys to the newly liquidated Vaughn family assets, was pressed into his hand by a family retainer who had appeared as if by magic. He pocketed it.

He ran to the hangar bay where his private vessel, a sleek, military-grade scout ship, was kept fueled and ready. He bypassed all pre-flight checks, firing up the engines with a roar that echoed through the hangar.

The ship shot out of the bay, climbing into the skyline of Capital Prime at a velocity that pushed the inertial dampeners to their limit. He set a direct course for the Compton estate. The short flight across the capital's skyline felt longer than a journey through hyperspace.

During the brief, silent minutes of the journey, he kept her picture displayed on the main viewscreen. Anja Compton. His Matron.

He clenched his fists, his gloved knuckles creaking. He would be her shield. Her sword. He would be the most loyal, the most devoted, the most indispensable guardian she could ever ask for. He would be her dog.

As the ship descended toward the familiar stone steps where he had first knelt, his heart hammered. He was back.