

Dump One Loser, Gain Six Husbands. Chapter 7

Anja sat curled on a massive leather sofa in the estate's grand living room. A fire crackled in the hearth—a hyper-realistic holographic projection, but it still gave off a comforting, ambient warmth. She had just ended the call with her mother, Vivian Compton.

Her mother's holographic form had appeared, lounging on a beach chair on some tropical resort planet, a margarita in hand. When Anja broke the news about her S-Class status, the glass had slipped from Vivian's fingers and vanished into the holographic sand.

The initial shock had quickly morphed into triumphant glee. "Thank the stars!" Vivian had crowed. "I knew that worthless Mcdaniel boy was holding you back! An S-Class! My daughter!"

Then Anja had mentioned the five mandatory Consorts.

Vivian's excitement had immediately shifted to giddy, gossipy curiosity. "Five of them? Show me! Let me see their files!"

When Bradford Vaughn's name and portrait appeared, Vivian had sucked in a sharp breath. "Oh, honey. Be careful with that one. The Vaughns are old military blood. They breed their sons to be loyal, but they are dangerous. Absolute predators. He's a beast, Anja. Make sure you're the one holding the leash."

The warning, meant to be cautionary, had only sent a thrill of anticipation through Anja. A dangerous beast, all for her. The idea was more appealing than it should be.

The call ended, and the hologram of her mother vanished, leaving Anja alone in the quiet room. A wave of exhaustion washed over her. The psionic test, the flood of information, the emotional whiplash of the day—it was all catching up to her. Her neck ached, a dull throb from the mental strain.

Unit 01 glided silently to her side. A small compartment in its chassis opened, and a robotic arm extended, offering her a sealed tube.

"A primary nutrient supplement, Mistress," the AI announced. "To aid in your psionic recovery."

Anja took the tube. It was filled with a thick, pinkish paste that smelled faintly and artificially of strawberries. It looked like toothpaste. With a sigh, she unscrewed the cap and squeezed a small amount into her mouth.

The taste was cloying and chemical, the texture gritty. It was food reduced to its most basic, joyless components. She grimaced, screwing the cap back on and tossing the tube onto the low table in front of her. God, what she wouldn't give for a greasy cheeseburger and fries. A real pizza. Anything with actual flavor.

It was in that moment of quiet melancholy that a soft, two-tone chime echoed through the room. It wasn't an alarm, but a notification.

"Mistress," Unit 01 said, its optical sensor blinking blue. "A visitor has arrived at the main gate. They possess S-level security clearance."

Anja sat up straight, her fatigue forgotten. S-level clearance? There could only be one person...

"Show me the gate camera," she commanded, her heart starting to beat a little faster.

The holographic fire in the hearth was replaced by a live security feed. It showed the massive, wrought-iron gates of her estate, illuminated by soft landscape lighting.

And standing just outside them, a man.

He was tall and broad-shouldered, a silhouette of pure power against the darkness of the night. He was dressed in a deep charcoal-gray dress uniform with silver piping, the formal military attire doing little to hide his formidable physique. He stood perfectly still, his back ramrod straight, like a guard on duty.

It was him. Bradford Vaughn.

Anja's eyes widened. She glanced at the antique grandfather clock in the corner of the room. It was almost midnight. He had come straight from the border. He must have flown for hours at top speed without stopping.

The camera zoomed in on his face. His expression was stoic, unreadable. But she could see his hands, clenched into tight fists at his sides. He wasn't calm. He was nervous.

This dangerous beast, this predator from a powerful military family, was standing outside her gate in the middle of the night, waiting, like a lost package waiting to be claimed.

A strange, warm feeling spread through her chest. It was a potent combination of amusement, power, and a surprising flutter of tenderness.

She stood up from the sofa, suddenly aware that she was only wearing a simple, wine-red silk robe and matching sleep shorts. She quickly tightened the sash around her waist and ran a hand through her hair, a futile attempt to look more presentable.

She took a deep breath, her heart thudding a steady rhythm against her ribs.

"Unit 01," she said, her voice clear and firm. "Open the main gate. And deactivate all internal defenses."

"At once, Mistress."

On the screen, the heavy iron gates began to swing inward with a low, deep groan of powerful machinery.

Bradford's posture, if possible, became even more rigid. He watched the gates open, his jaw tight. Then, he took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and took his first, deliberate step onto her property.

