

Dump One Loser, Gain Six Husbands. Chapter 8

Bradford stepped through the grand archway of the front door and into the dimly lit foyer. The air inside was warm and smelled faintly of old books and lavender. After the sterile, recycled air of his ship, the scent was intoxicatingly domestic.

His eyes, accustomed to the darkness of a battlefield, adjusted quickly. He saw her.

She was standing in the center of the living room, bathed in the soft, golden glow of a single lamp. The wine-red silk of her robe seemed to drink the light, outlining a figure that was far more delicate and slender than he had imagined from her photograph.

The moment he saw her, it hit him. A wave of scent, a psionic presence so powerful it was like a physical blow. It was sweet, like honey and night-blooming flowers, a fragrance that spoke directly to the most primal part of his DNA. It promised peace. It promised sanctuary. It promised an end to the gnawing corruption that had been his constant companion for years.

His breath caught in his lungs. Every muscle in his body went rigid, his combat instincts screaming at the sheer, overwhelming power emanating from her. But it wasn't a threat. It was a promise.

He strode forward, his boots silent on the thick rug. He stopped exactly two meters in front of her, a respectful, non-threatening distance. And without a moment's hesitation, he dropped to one knee, his head bowed low.

"Mistress Anja," he said. His voice, which could command a battalion through the roar of plasma fire, came out as a rough, strangled whisper. "Captain Bradford Vaughn, reporting for duty."

Anja was startled by the sudden, solemn gesture. It was one thing to see it on the steps outside, in a formal military context. It was another entirely to have this huge, powerful man kneeling before her on her living room rug while she was in her pajamas. She took an involuntary step back.

A nervous cough escaped her. "Stand up, Captain. Please."

Bradford rose to his feet in a single, fluid motion. The height difference was staggering. He loomed over her, a mountain of a man, and she had to crane her neck to look up at him. She could feel the heat radiating from his body.

He wouldn't quite meet her eyes. A faint blush colored the tips of his ears as he reached into the inner pocket of his tunic. He produced a thin card, fashioned from a polished black and gold metal that seemed to absorb the light. He held it out to her with both hands, a formal offering.

"This is... a preliminary offering," he stammered, the word 'offering' sounding awkward and clumsy on his tongue. "From my family. To you. The first transfer of our core assets. To assist with any... expenses you may have."

Anja stared at the card. It represented a fortune so vast it was almost incomprehensible. Billions. Maybe more. All being handed to her by a man she'd just met.

She didn't take it immediately. Instead, she looked up at his face, at his averted eyes and the tension in his jaw. "Why?" she asked softly. "Why go to this extent?"

Bradford finally met her gaze. His eyes were a startlingly intense gray, filled with a sincerity so raw it was shocking. "It is the duty of a Consort to provide for his Matron," he said, his voice low and serious. "To ensure her comfort and security. It is the absolute baseline. The very least I can do."

His simple, direct honesty disarmed her. There was no guile in him, no hidden agenda. Just a profound, unwavering sense of duty. She reached out and took the card. Her fingers brushed against the back of his hand. His skin was warm and calloused, and the moment they touched, a tremor went through his entire body, a barely perceptible shiver, as if he'd received an electric shock.

The atmosphere in the room thickened, suddenly charged with an unspoken tension. Bradford's gaze dropped from her face, darting around the room as if looking for a distraction. It landed on the low table beside the sofa.

He saw the half-used tube of pink nutrient paste.

His expression changed instantly. The nervous reverence was gone, replaced by a deep, scowling frown. "Is this what you had for dinner?" he asked, his voice a low growl of disbelief.

Anja glanced at the offensive tube. "I was tired," she said with a shrug. "And I don't know how to work any of the... advanced culinary equipment in the kitchen."

A look of profound, almost painful sympathy crossed Bradford's face. It was followed by a fierce, protective glint in his eyes. Without another word, he began shrugging out of his formal tunic.

He draped the heavy garment over the back of the sofa, revealing the simple black, long-sleeved shirt he wore underneath. The thin fabric stretched taut across the powerful muscles of his chest and shoulders.

"If I may, Mistress," he said, his tone leaving no room for argument, "I request permission to use your kitchen. No S-Class female should be forced to consume industrial garbage."

Anja stared at him, a slow smile spreading across her face. The deadly soldier was gone, replaced by an indignant head chef. The contrast was utterly delightful.

"Permission granted, Captain," she said.

He gave a curt nod and turned towards the kitchen. "Unit 01, direct me."

Anja followed him, leaning against the doorframe of the massive, state-of-the-art kitchen. It was a gleaming expanse of stainless steel and white marble that she had been too intimidated to even touch.

Bradford, however, moved through it with an air of complete confidence. He rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, exposing powerful forearms crisscrossed with the faint, silvery lines of old scars. Veins stood out in sharp relief against his skin.

He opened the door to a large, walk-in cold storage unit and emerged a moment later with a thick, beautifully marbled steak and a handful of fresh-looking vegetables. He worked with an economy of motion that was mesmerizing to watch. He chopped the vegetables with swift, precise strokes of a large knife, the blade a blur of silver. He seasoned the steak, his large hands surprisingly gentle.

Soon, the steak was sizzling in a hot pan, the sound filling the silent house. A rich, savory aroma of searing beef and melting fat wafted through the air. It was a smell from her old life, a smell of comfort and satisfaction.

Anja's stomach let out an embarrassingly loud growl.

She watched him, her arms crossed, a genuine smile on her face. She had expected a soldier. A guard. She had not expected this. She had not expected to be cared for.

She watched the focused look on his face as he basted the steak, the way the muscles in his back shifted under his shirt. And the look in her eyes slowly changed from amused appreciation to a deep, hungry craving that had nothing at all to do with the food.