

Dump One Loser, Gain Six Husbands. Chapter 9

Bradford placed the plate on the polished marble of the dining table. The steak was a perfect medium-rare, sliced to reveal a juicy pink center, resting next to a colorful medley of roasted vegetables. The presentation was simple, elegant, and made Anja's mouth water.

He pulled out a heavy, carved redwood chair for her, his movements as precise as a military drill. "Mistress."

Anja sat down, but Bradford didn't move to take the seat opposite her. Instead, he stepped back, assuming a formal parade rest posture behind her and to her left. A silent, imposing guardian.

She sighed, picking up her fork. "Captain, we're going to have to establish some ground rules."

"Ma'am?"

"Rule number one," she said, turning in her chair to look up at him. "When I eat, you eat. Sit down."

Bradford hesitated, a flicker of conflict in his eyes. "Mistress, with respect, the protocol for a Consort is clear. I am not to be seated at the Matron's table unless explicitly invited for each meal."

Anja raised an eyebrow and gave him a flat, unimpressed look. "Consider this a permanent, standing, non-revocable invitation. In this house, my rules are the only protocol that matters. Now, sit."

A strange look crossed his face. His heart gave a powerful thud against his ribs. The quiet authority in her voice, the casual way she dismissed centuries of tradition, it wasn't offensive. It was thrilling. He felt a surge of fierce, possessive pride. This was his Matron.

Obediently, he pulled out the opposing chair and sat.

Anja cut into the steak. The meat was incredibly tender, melting in her mouth in a burst of rich, savory flavor. A low, involuntary sound of pure pleasure escaped her throat.

Across the table, Bradford's face flushed a deep red. He quickly looked down at his own plate, his ears burning.

To break the suddenly charged silence, Anja decided to make conversation. "So," she began, "tell me about the Tenebris Sector. What's it like on the border?"

Bradford immediately straightened in his chair, his fork and knife set down. He slipped back into the role of a soldier giving a report. "Hostile, Ma'am. The primary threat is the Insectoid Hive. We engage in daily skirmishes to maintain the perimeter. The work consists of patrols, extermination of scout parties, and reinforcement of defensive fortifications."

He spoke in a clipped, professional monotone, but Anja could read between the lines. The casual mention of "extermination" and "skirmishes" hinted at a life of constant, brutal violence. As he

described a recent engagement with a particularly nasty type of burrowing creature, she noticed it. A fleeting, crimson flicker deep in his gray eyes. A spark of bloodlust, expertly suppressed but still there.

"How long is your leave?" she asked, genuinely curious.

"Six months, Ma'am," he answered immediately. "However, my commission is at your disposal. If you require my permanent presence, I can submit my retirement papers tomorrow morning."

Anja almost choked on her food. He was willing to throw away his entire career, his life's work, just like that. For her. The sheer, unconditional devotion was terrifying and, if she was being honest, deeply flattering.

"That won't be necessary, Captain," she said quickly. "I... I appreciate a man who has his own life. His own purpose."

Bradford stared at her, his fork frozen halfway to his mouth. He looked at her as if she had just sprouted a second head. In the Commonwealth, a Consort's only purpose was his Matron. His career, his ambitions, they were all secondary, tools to be used to better serve her. For a female to not only acknowledge but value his independence was unheard of. It was a gift of respect he had never expected.

The last of his carefully constructed inner walls crumbled. The formal respect he held for her rank morphed into a fervent, burning devotion to her as a person. He would die for this woman. Happily.

The rest of the dinner passed in a comfortable, easy silence. When they were finished, Bradford stood and began clearing the plates without being asked.

Anja carried her water glass and followed him into the kitchen, leaning against the cool marble of the central island as she watched him efficiently load the plates into the automated dish sanitizer. His movements were economical and graceful, a stark contrast to his massive size.

As he turned his back to her to wipe down the counter, she saw it again. A distinct, vertical bulge under the fabric of his black shirt, running from his lower back downwards. In the relaxed, domestic atmosphere, his control must have slipped. A tail. A real, wolf-like tail, was trying to press its way out.

Anja's eyes lit up. Her fascination with the bestial traits, her primary weakness, flared to life. She was overwhelmed by a sudden, childish impulse.

She set her glass down on the counter with a soft click. Tiptoeing silently, she came up behind his large, powerful frame. He was still focused on cleaning, oblivious.

She reached out a single, curious finger. And she poked the bulge.

The reaction was immediate and violent.

Bradford's entire body seized, a massive jolt as if he'd been hit by a high-voltage current. The cleaning cloth fell from his hand. A plate he was holding slipped, and he only just managed to catch it before it shattered on the floor, his reflexes saving it at the last second.

He spun around to face her, his chest heaving. His face was pale, his eyes wide with shock. And the red glow she had seen earlier was back, no longer a flicker, but a raging inferno that seemed to consume his irises.

"Mistress," he gasped, his voice a low, dangerous rasp. "Don't."