

## ***The Allocation Message***

Sandra Toretto giggled as she stepped through the door of her apartment. “Just drop those suitcases anywhere,” she said to the Buddies who had helpfully carried her luggage from the train station. “I’ll handle orientation.”

Sandra was a statuesque woman, her hair cascading down her back and her eyes gleaming with studied innocence. Her hourglass figure was the result of careful exercise, nutrition, and a few quiet surgeries while visiting the Grey Zones, and her business suit was, like most clothing in the Network’s territories, perfectly cut to match her figure.

The Buddies nodded, piling the suitcases on one side of the room, and left as Sandra took off her suit jacket and sighed happily. “All right, dear, let’s get you out of there,” she said, walking over and opening the largest suitcase. She looked down into it with satisfaction. “We’ve got a lot to get through!”

The woman that was revealed couldn’t so much as look up in response, although thanks to the small earbuds Sandra had given her before flying home from Las Vegas she could certainly hear her new mistress clearly. Therese was a small woman, much paler than Sandra, her short pixie-bob cut swept out of her eyes. She was still wearing half of her former outfit, a set of blue belts that bound her arms tightly to her side and stretched from her neck to her waist, but below that she was naked aside from the sex toys Sandra had thoughtfully given her for the trip, plugging both of her holes and vibrating on edge for hours. She’d been folded over into a ball, head pressed against her knees and feet pushed into her back, and then vacuum-sealed for transit, her only lifeline to the outside Sandra’s occasional cryptic comments about her new ‘internship’.

Now, as Sandra pressed the button that detached the vacuum sealing and pulled her new toy out of her packaging, Therese looked around in confused fear. The apartment seemed innocent; a bit more sparse than what a manager in the Conglomerate would have, but much roomier than her own tiny room. Her muscles were weak, and protested as Sandra carefully helped her to a chair. “Please,” she said, throat dry. “I want to go home.”

“Oh, silly, you are home! You’ve been allocated to this apartment.” Sandra leaned in, and her voice dropped to a low whisper. “And I wouldn’t say anything about any *other* home if I were you. Demonstrating preference for a non-Network locale is considered a sign of Unwellness, and you don’t have nearly enough social credit to be worth treatment yet.” She leaned back, smiling brightly. “But don’t worry! I’m here to help. I have a message from one of your predecessors for you.” She turned to the table. “Aida, play the onboarding message, please.”

A projector winked on in the base of the table, casting a holographic person into the empty chair opposite Therese. She looked to be about Therese's age, a pleasantly round woman in her mid-to-late twenties with brilliant scarlet hair that fell down in bangs over her eyes and pale skin, wearing a simple form-fitting jumpsuit. Her mascara was streaked with tears, but she had a forced smile fixed on her face as she looked at where Therese was sitting.

"Hello, <Therese>." The simulation stuttered slightly as it added Therese's name digitally. "My name is Rhonda, and I am just finishing my four-month posting as a Temporary Foreign Worker for Sandra. Today is my Allocation Day, and I'm about to find out where I'll be posted next." She leaned forward, putting her hands on her breasts seductively. "As a Temporary Foreign Worker, your duties are to serve your Host Agent in whatever ways she wants." She swallowed. "No matter what," she added. "Remember, your social credit is based on the good that you put out into the world. And remember, the good that you do is based on the social credit of the people that you do good for. Your happiness..."

She trailed off. "Temporary foreign workers are expected to express gratitude for being brought to such a superior culture," she said. "Remember that. Please. If you do well, and are happy, you will demonstrate your value to the network, and become a citizen. If not..."

She broke off, looking at what Therese could only assume was an announcement. "It's my Allocation," she said breathlessly. "I'm going to be..."

Rhonda's eyes went wide, and she stared past the camera. "No. No, please. Not Surrogacy, Sandra, I'll do anything, I won't whine about the wax, I'll train my ass for you, please don't send me to Surrogacy -!" As she spoke, a Buddy had stepped silently into the frame behind her, a six-foot tall man with a blank expression and slightly silvered skin. It reached down and put a hand on her head, and she yet out a strangled yelp as a jolt of electricity scrambled her muscles. She fell backwards, lips struggling to protest as the Buddy calmly and efficiently stripped her naked before dragging her off-camera.

The message ended, and Therese turned to look at Sandra. "What...?"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that, silly girl. Rhonda wasn't my most *recent* Worker. She was just the most... illustrative." Sandra smiled. She reached down, running her hand over Therese's cheek as the woman stared up at her in horror. "I'm sure that a smart cookie like you will do a much better job serving my needs, and will get a much better Allocation for your efforts. Just remember - the algorithm is always watching us, and will be paying attention to how happy you make it. It will not be paying attention to how *unhappy* I make you, because you are not a citizen and your happiness is expected. So be happy!" She gently pressed a finger against Therese's lips. "Smile."

Therese understood the threat perfectly. She nodded, forcing her face into a smile, and said, “Of course, Miss Sandra. Whatever you want.”

“See? I knew a Conglomerate girl could figure it out. Rhonda was from the Authority, so much slower to learn that her so-called Doctrine was outdated.” Sandra ruffled Therese’s hair, and stood her up again. “Now, we are going to take a shower together, and you’re going to help me clean up. And you’re going to be very *nice* about it, because the algorithm is wat-ching!”

She stood up, grabbing the leash that was dangling by Therese’s breasts and giving it a tug. “Come along, worker. You’re going to love it here. You won’t be able to imagine another life!”

Therese let herself be pulled to her feet, nodding. “Yes, Miss Sandra,” she said.