

Chapter 25

Bradford's face was a study in conflict. The soldier in him was appalled by the sheer recklessness of her demand. The consort in him was thrilled by her ambition.

He paced the length of the living room, his heavy boots silent on the plush carpet. "Mistress, it's not that simple," he said, his voice tight with frustration. He brought up a holographic map of the Commonwealth on his wrist terminal, a glowing representation of star systems and population centers.

"Any male whose corruption level exceeds eighty percent is immediately flagged by the Directorate," he explained, pointing to the densely populated core worlds, all glowing a safe, reassuring green. "They are forcibly sedated and placed in high-security medical quarantine. They are inaccessible. You can't just walk in and ask to 'borrow' them."

Anja frowned, staring at the sea of green lights. A bottleneck. She had just discovered the path to unlimited power, only to find it blocked by bureaucracy and public safety laws.

Enzo, who had been quietly observing from the armchair, let out a low, thoughtful hum. He leaned forward, his dark eyes gleaming with a dangerous light. He steepled his fingers, a black obsidian ring on his index finger catching the light.

"There is one place," he said, his voice a soft, conspiratorial whisper. "A place the Directorate doesn't like to talk about. A place where the rules don't apply."

Bradford stopped pacing. He turned, his eyes narrowing. "Don't even think about it, Guy. It's a suicide mission."

"What place?" Anja demanded, her gaze fixed on Enzo.

"On the barren moon of X92," Enzo said, his eyes never leaving hers, "there is a facility. A black site. They call it the Citadel."

"It's a tomb," Bradford spat, his voice laced with genuine fear. "It's where they send the ones who are too powerful, too famous, or too politically connected to be quietly euthanized. The ones who are already lost. Warlords, admirals, psionic geniuses who have gone mad. They are not

men anymore, Mistress. They are monsters, locked in cages, waiting to die."

Anja listened to his dire warnings, but her heart didn't feel fear. It felt a wild, exhilarating thrill. Monsters. Experience points. A treasure trove of power, all conveniently gathered in one place.

The risk was enormous. But the reward... the reward was everything.

"We're going" she said, her voice leaving no room for argument.

"Mistress, no!" Bradford pleaded.

"I've made my decision," she said, her tone hardening. She turned to him, her gaze sharp. "Captain, access the Commonwealth's high-clearance channels. I want to know the official procedure for gaining access to the Citadel."

Defeated, Bradford clenched his jaw and turned to his terminal. He knew when he had lost a battle. His fingers flew across the holographic keyboard, his military training taking over.

Anja stood over his shoulder. On the screen, a complex application form appeared. She didn't hesitate. She entered her S-Class authorization code, filling out the fields with brisk efficiency.

Under 'Purpose of Visit', she typed: Humanitarian Medical Aid and Psionic Resonance Therapy Research.

She hit 'Send'. A small green notification confirmed that the encrypted request was on its way, streaking across the galaxy to a forgotten moon at the edge of civilized space.

The scene shifted.

Thousands of light-years away, on a world scoured by perpetual dust storms, the Citadel stood like a black, jagged tooth against a bruised purple sky. It was a fortress of brutalist architecture, all dark metal and reinforced concrete, built to contain horrors, not to keep them out.

Inside, in a cramped, dimly lit control room, Director Lawrence Donovan stared at a bank of monitors, his eyes gritty and bloodshot. Each screen showed a cell. And in each cell, a figure paced, or screamed, or sat catatonically, lost in the prison of their own corrupted minds.

Lawrence had been a Major General once, a decorated hero of the Outer Rim wars. Now he was a warden, a glorified zookeeper for his own fallen comrades. He had volunteered for this post, unable to stomach the thought of his men being terminated like rabid dogs. He had come here chasing a ghost of hope, a hope that was now withered and dead.

He had just received another rejection from the Capital. Another polite, bureaucratic 'no' to his desperate pleas for more resources, for new research, for just one high-level female to attempt a purification. The noble ladies of the Core Worlds wouldn't be caught dead in a place like this.

He rubbed his tired face, the despair a physical weight on his shoulders. Maybe it was time. Maybe the kindest thing he could do was to finally open the gas vents and grant his men the mercy of a quick, clean death.

Back in the sun-drenched living room of the estate, Anja was already in motion. She was a general planning a campaign.

"Unit 01, inventory all tactical medical supplies and portable energy shields in the armory," she commanded.

Bradford and Enzo, their earlier rivalry momentarily forgotten in the face of a shared mission, huddled over a holographic blueprint of the Citadel.

"The primary ventilation shafts are a weak point," Bradford muttered, tracing a line with his finger. "If we have to evacuate, this is our route."

Enzo, using his own back-channel connections, was already placing orders on the black market. "I've secured three personal-grade void shields. They'll withstand a direct hit from a berserker-class psionic."

Anja watched them, a sense of profound security washing over her. She was not alone. She had her sword and her shield.

This wasn't just about her. This was about them. It was about solving a problem the entire Commonwealth had given up on. If she could succeed, if she could walk into that heart of darkness and bring those men back from the brink, she wouldn't just be a Matron. She wouldn't just be an S-Class.

She would be a god.

She took a deep breath, her eyes hard and clear. She was ready.

In the dusty, despair-filled control room of the Citadel, a sudden, piercing beep shattered the silence. It was a sound Lawrence hadn't heard in years. The dedicated, high-priority comms channel from the High Command. A channel reserved for messages of the utmost, galaxy-altering importance.

His head snapped up, his heart stopping in his chest.