

Chapter 30

Anja walked past them both, her bare feet silent on the cool marble floor. She didn't head towards the military shuttle Bradford had prepped, nor did she glance at the sleek, black starship Enzo had summoned.

She walked to the center of the massive, circular landing pad, where a third ship rested.

It was a vessel of breathtaking beauty and obscene luxury. Not a military craft, not a private jet, but a super-yacht of the stars. Its lines were fluid and elegant, its hull a shimmering pearlescent white that seemed to drink the morninglight.

"We're taking this one," she announced, turning to face the two stunned men.

"But, Mistress," Bradford stammered, "that is the Seraphina's Grace. It belongs to Isadora Kensington."

"It did belong to her," Anja corrected him with a small, secret smile. "It was a gift. An apology, for some slight against my mother decades ago. A token, to curry my favor."

She had played her hand perfectly. By choosing a neutral, third-party asset, she had validated neither of them, while asserting her own absolute authority. She was not a prize to be fought over. She was the one who set the rules.

Bradford and Enzo exchanged a look, a silent, grudging truce passing between them. They had been so focused on their own rivalry, they had forgotten who was truly in charge.

They fell into step on either side of her, a silent, formidable escort, as she ascended the ramp into the flying palace.

The two-hour journey to X92 was a masterclass in strained civility. Enzo played the part of the perfect host, personally mixing her iced fruit juices and ensuring her seat was perfectly reclined. Bradford, in turn, handled all communications with the regional air traffic control, his voice a crisp, professional bark of military jargon. They were two predators circling the same kill, forced into a temporary, uneasy alliance.

As the ship descended, the view outside the viewport shifted from the lush green of the capital world to the desolate, ochre-and-brown wasteland of the prison moon.

On the ground, Director Lawrence Donovan stood against the howling, grit-filled wind. He wore his full dress uniform, the one he had been

awarded on the day of his promotion to General, its dark fabric now a stark contrast to the endless dust. He had been standing there for an hour, a lone, unmoving statue of desperate hope.

He had seen the manifest. He knew Captain Vaughn of the legendary Vaughn family was part of the escort. The fact that such a man, a lion of the military aristocracy, was serving as a mere bodyguard spoke volumes about the power of the woman he served.

A sound, a low hum that grew into a powerful roar, cut through the wind. The Seraphina's Grace broke through the dust clouds, a slash of brilliant white against the bruised sky. It settled onto the Citadel's blackened, battle-scarred landing pad with a whisper-soft hiss.

The ramp lowered.

Lawrence snapped to attention. "Salute!" he roared.

He and his senior staff, all dressed in their best uniforms, slammed their fists over their hearts in the highest form of military honor. "We welcome the Matron!" their voices boomed in unison.

Anja appeared at the top of the ramp. She wore a simple, black, high-collared tactical coat, her hair pulled back in a severe, elegant knot. She was flanked by her two consorts, a dark angel and a stone-faced soldier. She was not a guest. She was a queen, come to survey her domain.

She gave Lawrence a curt nod, her eyes sweeping over the desolate landscape, taking it all in.

"There will be time for formalities later, Director," she said, her voice cutting through the wind, clear and sharp. "Take me to your worst cases. Now."

Lawrence's heart soared. No hesitation. No fear. No disgust. Just a pure, focused sense of purpose. This was the one.

He turned and led the way, his back ramrod straight for the first time in years.

As Anja stepped into the Citadel, a wave of her power, a silent, invisible ripple of pure, S-Class psionic energy, washed through the facility.

And in the dark, filthy cells, the screaming stopped.

The frantic clawing at the walls ceased. The guttural, inhuman roars faded into whimpers, then silence.

From the depths of the madness, hundreds of pairs of eyes, red-rimmed and bloodshot, turned towards the source of that clean, cool, soothing energy. For the first time in years, a flicker of hope, of lucidity, pierced the fog of their corruption.

Anja walked down the long, oppressive corridor. The walls were made of a dark, pitted metal, scored with deep gouges from claws and teeth. The

air was thick with the stench of despair, blood, and unwashed bodies. She wrinkled her nose in distaste.

Instantly, Bradford and Enzo moved closer, their own powerful Alpha auras flaring, creating a protective bubble around her, pushing the foul air away.

Wrapped in their strength, Anja straightened, her expression hardening into a mask of grim determination.

Lawrence watched her, his admiration growing with every step. He handed her a data slate. "The Omega Block, Mistress. These are the files for the inmates within. All are above ninety percent corruption."

Anja took the slate. Her eyes scanned the names. Generals. Admirals. War heroes. The men who had built and defended the Commonwealth, now left to rot in this hellhole. This wasn't just a rescue mission. It was a political goldmine.

They reached a final, massive blast door, its surface scarred and dented from the inside.

"Beyond this point," Lawrence said, his voice trembling, "the psionic contamination is... extreme. It can overwhelm an unprotected mind in seconds."

Anja didn't answer. She simply stepped past him, placing her own hand on the biometric scanner.

With a deep, grinding groan of protesting metal, the great door began to slide open.

A wave of raw, chaotic, screaming energy, black and viscous as tar, erupted from the opening. It was the collective agony of a hundred broken souls, a hurricane of pure, undiluted corruption.

It slammed into Anja, whipping her coat around her, tearing at her hair.

She didn't flinch. She didn't take a step back.

She met the storm head-on, her eyes blazing with a fierce, holy light.

And she took her first step into the abyss.