

Chapter 32

Anja closed her eyes, shutting out the dim, oppressive reality of the isolation cell. Her consciousness dove through the point of contact, plunging into the abyss of Darius Stone's mind.

She found herself in a nightmare.

His Psionic Landscape wasn't a place; it was a state of being. A churning bottomless swamp of black tar, thick and suffocating. Tendrils of shrieking madness lashed out at her, born from years of agony and isolation. This was the 99 percent. It was a living breathing entity of pure despair.

Anja felt a flicker of her own humanity, a pang of horror for the man trapped within this hell. But she ruthlessly suppressed it. Pity had no place here. This was a surgical theater, and she was the surgeon.

She drew a deep breath in the physical world, and in the psychic one, she unleashed her power.

A sun of pure, golden light erupted in the heart of the darkness.

She didn't let the energy wash over the landscape like a gentle rain, as she had with Enzo. This corruption was too old, too deeply rooted. It required a more aggressive approach. She shaped the golden light, spinning it into thousands of razor-sharp, microscopic scalpels.

With a single command, the swarm of light-knives descended.

They sliced into the black tar, not randomly, but with terrifying precision. Anja's mind worked like a supercomputer, identifying the densest knots of corruption, the most virulent strains of psychic poison, and targeting them for annihilation. The black sludge sizzled and dissolved wherever the golden light touched it, breaking down into inert, neutral energy.

It was a brutal, exhausting process. She was not just cleaning a surface; she was performing a deep-tissue excision, separating the disease from the man. She felt a fierce determination rise within her. The Commonwealth had abandoned these men. She would not. She would leave no trace of the sickness behind.

She pushed deeper, her psionic scalpels cutting away layers of pain that were fused to the very neurons of his being. This was the oldest, most stubborn corruption, the scars of forgotten battles and unforgivable orders.

As she tried to excise the final, deepest core of the darkness, a black, pulsating heart of pure agony, she met unexpected resistance.

The corruption fought back.

It latched onto her own psionic energy, trying to drain her, to pull her down into the swamp with it. A sharp, splitting pain shot through Anja's head. A hairline crack appeared in her own mental defenses.

Her internal reserves plummeted. A warning klaxon blared in the back of her mind. Psionic Exhaustion Imminent. Neurological Damage Possible.

She had a choice. Risk her own sanity to save this one man completely, or make a strategic withdrawal.

The pragmatist in her won.

With a final, decisive cut, she severed the connection to the deepest knot of corruption, leaving it isolated and contained, but not destroyed. She pulled her energy back, the golden sun receding from the psychic landscape.

Her body in the physical world swayed. The sudden disconnect was dizzying.

A strong arm wrapped around her waist, steadying her. Bradford had moved without a sound, his body a solid wall of support at her back. She leaned against his hard chest, her eyes still closed, and allowed herself a single, precious second of rest. The scent of him—clean soap, gunmetal, and pure, unwavering loyalty—was an anchor in the swirling chaos.

She took a breath, then opened her eyes.

The change in Darius was instantaneous and profound.

The jagged black scales on his neck and face were receding like a dying tide, revealing pale, human skin beneath. The scarlet inferno in his eyes had been extinguished, replaced by a dazed, deep brown. He blinked, once, twice, as if waking from a long, terrible dream.

On the control panel, the red numbers of his corruption index were in a free fall. 99%. 95%. 90%. 85%.

Lawrence stared at the monitor, his mouth hanging open. His hand, holding a data slate, trembled so violently that he dropped it. It clattered to the floor, but no one noticed. He looked from the impossible numbers on the screen to the serene, powerful woman leaning against her consort, and his world tilted on its axis. He wasn't looking at a Matron. He was looking at a miracle. Tears of raw, unadulterated joy began to stream down his face. This would change everything.

Enzo, ever the opportunist, was already at Anja's side, pressing a small vial of high-potency nutrient fluid into her hand. "Drink," he murmured, his voice a low caress. "Replenish your strength."

She drank it gratefully. As the cool liquid soothed her throat, she felt the mass of neutral energy she had just absorbed from Darius begin to settle in her own core. It was a warm, satisfying hum, a promise of new power.

Her own reserves were not just refilling; they were expanding.

Darius took a deep, shuddering breath, the first clean breath he had taken in years. He looked down at his own hands, flexing his fingers. He was weak, exhausted, but he was himself. He was sane.

He tested the titanium restraints. They felt flimsy, unnecessary.

Lawrence, jolted out of his stupor, scrambled to the control panel. "Release restraints!" he choked out.

With a series of loud clicks, the locks disengaged. The heavy metal shackles fell away, clattering onto the platform.

Darius Stone rose from the chair. He was unsteady on his feet, his body gaunt and wasted under the bulk of his psionic projection, but he stood. He stood tall.

He faced Anja, and with a precision that years of madness had not managed to erase, he brought his heels together and raised his hand to his brow. It was a perfect, textbook military salute. A gesture of ultimate respect from a resurrected legend to his savior.