

Chapter 33

Lawrence scrambled forward, his hands shaking so badly he could barely hold the portable scanner. He aimed the device at Darius, a beam of blue light sweeping over the former Vice-Commander's body.

Darius stood perfectly still, his arms slightly outstretched, cooperating fully. He felt like a man reborn, the crushing weight of the corruption lifted from his soul. He could feel his own psionic core, battered and bruised but whole, slowly beginning to hum with its old power. He could already imagine it—a return to the 7th Fleet, a chance to face the Hive on his own terms.

The scanner beeped, and the final results flashed onto its holographic screen.

Lawrence stared at the number, his breath catching in his throat. 79%.

A single, choked sob escaped his lips. It was a safe number. A manageable number. It was a number that meant Darius Stone was no longer a monster on death row, but a veteran in need of therapy. It was a number that was, according to every medical text in the Commonwealth, scientifically impossible.

Darius lowered his arms and turned his full attention to Anja. His gaze was filled with a profound, reverent awe.

"May I have the honor of knowing my savior's name?" he asked, his voice a gravelly rasp, rough from years of disuse.

"Anja Compton," she replied simply, offering no title, no rank. The name alone was enough.

"Anja," Darius repeated, tasting the name. He nodded, a look of deep respect on his face. Then his gaze shifted, moving to the silent, formidable man standing guard at her side. His eyes, now sharp and clear, narrowed in recognition. He took in the uniform, the posture, the Void Wolf insignia.

"Captain Vaughn," Darius said, his voice gaining strength. It was a statement, not a question.

Bradford snapped to attention, his back ramrod straight. "Vice-Commander Stone. It is an honor, sir."

The two men looked at each other, a silent understanding passing between them. They were brothers in arms, warriors who had both stared into the same abyss. Darius had fallen in. Bradford had been pulled back from the brink.

Darius stepped forward and clapped a hand on Bradford's shoulder. It was a gesture of camaraderie, of shared experience. "She is a treasure, Captain," he said, his voice low and serious. "The Commonwealth has entrusted you with its most precious asset. Do not fail."

"I will not, sir," Bradford replied, his voice thick with conviction.

Darius turned back to Anja. "Matron Compton, may I request your private comm frequency? I have a feeling my future endeavors may be of interest to you."

Anja knew the value of a connection like this. A resurrected S-Class hero would have immense political capital. "Of course," she said, nodding to her wrist terminal. "Unit 01, establish a secure link."

The connection was made. A moment later, Anja's terminal chimed.

A notification popped up in her vision. INCOMING TRANSFER: 1,000,000 COMMONWEALTH CREDITS. FROM: DARIUS STONE.

Anja stared at the number, her eyes widening. A million credits? For ten minutes of work?

Darius saw her expression and smiled, a faint, weary curving of his lips. "The going rate for unsanctioned S-Class purification on the black market," he explained. "Consider it a professional consultation fee. My accounts have been frozen for years. It's the least I can do."

Anja quickly composed herself, a thrill shooting through her. This wasn't just a mission of mercy. It was a business. A very, very profitable business.

Just then, a soft chime echoed in her mind. A system notification from her own body. The energy she had absorbed from Darius, combined with the nutrient fluid, had pushed her to the edge. Upgrade threshold approaching.

Darius gave her a final, deep bow. "I must report to High Command. There are... arrangements to be made." He strode out of the room, his steps already more confident, a legend walking back into the world.

Anja sank onto a small sofa near the now-empty restraint chair, feeling the first real wave of fatigue hit her. The adrenaline was wearing off.

She had only a few moments of peace before the corridor echoed with the sound of heavy footsteps. Two guards, clad in heavy armor, escorted another man into the room. This one wore the tattered remains of a 7th Fleet officer's uniform.

"Executive Officer Gregory Callahan," Lawrence said, reading from a new file. "Corruption level: ninety-two percent. He's been in a semi-comatose state for three months."

Anja looked at the unconscious man being strapped into the chair. He was another high value target. Another font of power. Another paycheck.



And the final push she needed to break through her own limits.

"Mistress," Bradford said, his voice low and concerned. He could see the faint tremor in her hands, the exhaustion in her eyes. "You've done enough for one day. We can come back tomorrow."

"No," Anja said, her voice firm. The hunger for more power, for that next level, was a burning fire in her gut. It was stronger than her fatigue. "I can do one more."

She stood up, pulling her gloves back on with a sense of grim purpose. She walked towards Gregory Callahan, ready for the harvest.

Enzo, who had been watching silently from the corner, subtly gestured to a nearby environmental control. The temperature in the room dropped by a few degrees, a cool, refreshing breeze washing over Anja. It was a small gesture, but a welcome one. She was ready.

