

Chapter 22

Anja lifted her head, her gaze shifting between the two powerful men who flanked her. On one side, Bradford stood like a stone fortress, his expression a thunderous mask of suspicion and jealousy. On the other, Enzo lounged in his chair, a picture of relaxed, predatory confidence.

She had to know. The uncertainty was a physical itch under her skin.

"Prove it," she said, her voice quiet but firm.

Enzo's smile widened. He didn't say a word. He simply raised a hand and snapped his fingers.

The motion was crisp and elegant. On the table, a tall glass of room-temperature lemon water instantly froze solid. A delicate web of frost spread from its base, and the glass emitted a faint, high-pitched creak as the water expanded into a solid block of ice.

He slid the frozen glass across the table towards her. "A simple projection of elemental energy," he said, his voice smooth as silk. "The baseline for any high-tier power."

Bradford let out a sound of pure contempt, a low snort from the back of his throat. He placed his own hand, palm down, on the heavy, silver-plated tray in the center of the table.

There was no flash, no sound. The solid metal simply melted under his touch, collapsing into a shimmering molten puddle. With a subtle flex of his fingers, the liquid metal flowed and reshaped itself, hardening in an instant into a wickedly sharp tactical dagger, its surface swirling with the dark patterns of his unique metallization.

They were like two magnificent birds of paradise, displaying their plumage for the female. A silent, deadly contest of power and control.

Anja ignored them both. She took a deep, centering breath, closing her eyes. She reached inward, searching for that tiny, warm knot of energy in her abdomen. It was there, a faint, elusive thread. She focused on it, trying to grasp it, to coax it, to will it into action.

She opened her eyes, her gaze fixed on a single, perfect white rose lying on the table. She extended her hand, palm out, and pushed. She poured all of her focus, all of her desperate hope, into that simple gesture.

Move. Just a little. A tremble. A flutter. Anything.

Ten seconds stretched into an eternity.

The rose lay perfectly still. The air in the room remained undisturbed. Not a single mote of dust shifted.

Nothing.

A wave of cold, crushing disappointment washed over Anja. She slowly lowered her hand, the shame so intense it felt like a physical weight in her chest. It was true. She was a dud. A broken S-Class.

Enzo and Bradford exchanged a quick, almost imperceptible glance. Their own heightened senses confirmed it. There had been no psionic energy released. Not even a flicker.

Enzo's long, elegant fingers tapped a soft, thoughtful rhythm on the icy arm of his chair. "Interesting," he murmured. "Not elemental. Not kinetic. It must be an internalized ability."

He stood up, his movements fluid and silent. He walked behind her chair, his presence a palpable weight at her back. He didn't touch her, but she could feel the cold radiating from his body.

"Perhaps you are aiming at the wrong target," he suggested, his voice a low, seductive whisper in her ear. "Trying to project energy into empty air is like shouting into a vacuum. It needs a medium. A receiver."

He leaned down, his lips almost brushing her ear. "Place your hand on my chest. Don't try to push the energy out. Guide it. Into me."

"That is an unacceptable risk!" Bradford's voice boomed, cutting through the intimate moment. "Mistress, you cannot! His internal state is unknown. Your energy could react unpredictably with his corruption, causing irreparable harm! To him, and more importantly, to you!"

He stepped forward. "If a test subject is required, I will serve. My system is stable."

Enzo let out a low, dismissive laugh. "Stable?" he purred, not even bothering to look at Bradford. "My dear Captain, I can smell the military-grade suppressant you injected this morning from across the room. Your core is locked down tighter than a fringe-world vault. You are a dampened receiver. Useless for this experiment."

Bradford's face went white, then flushed a dark, furious red. He opened his mouth to retort, but no words came. It was true. He had taken a dose to manage the lingering effects of his Frenzy period. He was, for the moment, a dud.

Anja's mind was racing. Her initial fear, the fear of harming Enzo, was fading, replaced by a cold, scientific logic. Her own power, this tiny, pathetic spark, couldn't possibly harm an Alpha-Plus powerhouse like him. It would be like trying to take down a battleship with a spitball.

She stood up and turned to face Enzo. "If you feel anything," she said, her voice firm, "even a twitch, you tell me. Immediately."

A flicker of triumph, hot and bright, flashed in Enzo's ice-blue eyes. He gave a slight, almost imperceptible nod. With a deliberate, theatrical slowness, he undid the top two buttons of his immaculate white shirt, revealing a tantalizing glimpse of a hard, sculpted chest.

Anja took a breath. She reached out a trembling hand.

Her palm made contact with the warm, smooth fabric of his shirt. Beneath it, she could feel the solid wall of his pectoral muscle, the steady, powerful beat of his heart.

She closed her eyes, trying to find that elusive thread of energy again. She pictured it as a stream of liquid gold, flowing down her arm, through her palm, and into his body.

One second. Two. Three.

Nothing. It was like pouring water into a bottomless well. No feedback. No connection. No effect.

She opened her eyes, the familiar sting of failure burning behind them. She started to pull her hand away, a bitter resignation settling in her soul. She couldn't even give her power away.

"It's alright, Mistress," Bradford's voice was a gentle balm, full of a sincere, painful pity. "Your psionic ability is your strength. That is all that matters. You are the Matron of House Vaughn, regardless of any secondary trait."

His words, meant to be comforting, felt like a cage. A beautiful, gilded cage where she would be treasured and protected, but never powerful in her own right. The emptiness in her chest ached.

She was about to give up, to retreat into the safe, boring role of a protected Matron.

But then Enzo moved.

His hand shot out, his cold fingers wrapping around her wrist, stopping her retreat. He pulled. Hard.

She stumbled forward, her body colliding with his. The air was driven

from her lungs in a startled gasp. They were chest to chest, his other hand coming up to cup the back of her head, his fingers tangling in her hair. Her face was inches from his, his cool breath ghosting across her forehead.

His ice-blue eyes began to glow, an intense, feral light emanating from their depths.

And then the world tilted on its axis.

Two soft, silver-gray, impossibly fluffy wolf ears sprouted from the top of his head. They twitched, once, twice, the soft fur brushing against her cheek.

Anja's brain short-circuited.

All thought, all frustration, all disappointment, was wiped away by a single, overwhelming primal thought.

So. Fluffy.

Her heart, which had been heavy with failure, gave a sudden, violent lurch, hammering against her ribs like a trapped bird.