

Chapter 23

The wolf ear, impossibly soft, brushed against Anja's cheek again. It was a deliberate, feather-light caress that sent a jolt of pure, unadulterated static through her nervous system.

Her rational mind, the part of her that was a scientist, a pragmatist, simply shut down. It was utterly, completely, and irrevocably overwhelmed.

"Don't think" Enzo's voice was a low, hypnotic murmur against her skin, the vibration traveling directly into her skull. "Just feel. Follow my heartbeat."

She took a shaky breath, inhaling his scent—a sharp, clean mix of cold air, expensive cologne, and something wild and musky that was purely him. And in that moment of sensory overload, with her mind blissfully blank, she felt it.

The tiny, warm knot of energy in her abdomen didn't just stir. It ignited.

A warm, golden stream, no longer a hesitant thread but a confident current, surged up her arm. It flowed from her palm, through the thin barrier of his shirt, and plunged directly into the solid wall of his chest. It felt less like she was giving something away and more like he was pulling it from her, a willing, eager siphon.

For a few seconds, nothing happened. The world remained exactly as it was. Anja's heart sank. Another failure. She prepared for the familiar wave of disappointment.

It never came.

Instead, Enzo let out a sharp, ragged gasp, his entire body going rigid.

His ice-blue eyes, which had been glowing with a soft, feral light, suddenly exploded with a brilliant, blinding azure radiance. It was like looking into the heart of a star.

A visible wave of power, a shimmering distortion in the air, erupted from him. A terrifying bone-deep cold slammed into the room. The elegant leather sofa across the living room, a priceless antique, was instantly flash-frozen, a thick layer of crystalline ice encasing its surface with a loud crackle.

Enzo stared down at his own hands as if they belonged to a stranger. He could feel it. A bottleneck in his psionic core, a barrier he had been fighting against for years, had just been... nudged. It hadn't broken, but it had trembled.

"My God," he whispered, his voice hoarse with disbelief. He looked at Anja, his expression a mixture of awe and raw, naked hunger. "My output. My total power output... it just spiked. By at least three percent. Maybe five."

Bradford, who had been watching with the coiled stillness of a waiting cobra, went rigid. The metal dagger he had placed on the table crumpled in his fist, crushed into a worthless ball of scrap.

"Three percent?" Bradford's voice was a strangled croak.

He knew what that meant. For an Alpha-Plus, for a being who had already reached the pinnacle of their genetic potential, a one percent increase was the work of a decade. A five percent increase was a miracle. It was a legend.

He lunged forward, his earlier animosity forgotten, replaced by a frantic, scientific fervor. He grabbed Anja's arm, his eyes burning with an almost manic intensity. "Mistress! Do you understand what this means? Your ability... it's not F-Class. It's not a failure."

The two men, mortal enemies just moments before, looked at each other over her head. And for the first time, they were in complete, absolute agreement.

"It's an Amplifier," Bradford breathed.

"A Catalyst," Enzo corrected, his voice filled with reverence. "The rarest, most sought-after support ability in the history of the Commonwealth."

Anja stared at her own hand. The one that had touched him. It looked the same. Plain. Unremarkable. But it had performed a miracle. A wave of dizziness, of pure, dizzying elation, washed over her. She had power. Real power. The kind that could make kings.

"We must test the limits," Bradford said, the soldier in him taking over. "Duration. Cool-down period. Energy cost."

For the next half hour, the living room became a laboratory. Anja, guided by their instructions, performed a series of short, controlled bursts of energy transfer into Enzo. Each time, the result was the same: a measurable, significant spike in his power output.

And each time, it left her feeling a little more drained, a little more tired.

Finally, she collapsed onto the one remaining unfrozen armchair, her

forehead beaded with sweat, her body trembling with exhaustion. But her eyes were brighter than they had ever been.

Enzo watched her, a flicker of genuine concern crossing his features. He snapped his fingers.

The front door opened, and one of the estate's silent, robotic butlers glided in, carrying a large, black, metallic briefcase.

Enzo took the case, placing it on the table in front of Anja. He pressed his thumb to a biometric scanner, and with a soft hiss, the case opened.

Inside, nestled in custom-cut black foam, were hundreds of shimmering crystalline objects. Bio-Cores. Each one pulsed with a soft, internal light, radiating a palpable aura of pure, concentrated energy. They were all top-grade. The kind of resource that could buy a small moon.

He pushed the case towards her. "A small gift," he said, his tone casual, as if he were offering her a box of chocolates. "To help you replenish your reserves."

Bradford stared at the case, his face a thunderous mask. The value of its contents was staggering. It was more than his entire family's liquid assets, ten times over. He was a soldier. He had honor, loyalty, and strength. But in this arena, the crass, brutal world of wealth, he was utterly, hopelessly outmatched. The frustration was a bitter acid in his throat.

Anja, however, had no such qualms. She picked up one of the cores, a beautiful, sapphire blue crystal. The moment her skin touched it, she felt a warm, pleasant energy flow into her, soothing her fatigue.

As she absorbed the energy, she noticed Enzo was still breathing heavily. The initial euphoria of the power boost had faded, leaving behind a subtle strain.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "Your corruption level... did the test affect it?"

Enzo was silent for a long moment. A bitter, self-mocking smile touched his lips.

"My corruption level," he said, his voice quiet, "is at ninety-four percent."

The number hung in the air, cold and deadly. Anja and Bradford both sucked in a sharp breath. Ninety-five percent was the point of no return. The line where the man was lost forever, and only the beast remained. He was standing on the edge of a cliff.

"But... how?" Anja stammered. "You seem so... normal. So controlled."

For an answer, Enzo didn't speak. He simply reached up and unbuttoned his collar further, pulling the fabric aside.

On the side of his neck, just below his jawline, was a patch of skin that was no longer skin. It was tough, leathery, and covered in a fine layer of coarse, silver-gray fur. The beast was not at the door. It was already inside, clawing its way out.

"This," Enzo said, his voice laced with a profound, weary bitterness, "is what control looks like. My hair, my eyes... they were not always this color. This is the price of holding back the tide. Of fighting a war on the inside every second of every day."