

Chapter 24

Anja stared at the patch of coarse fur on Enzo's neck. It was a stark, brutal testament to the war he was fighting within himself. A war he was about to lose.

A strange, unfamiliar emotion surged through her. It wasn't pity. It was a fierce, protective impulse, a primal need to fix what was broken. She had the power. She had just seen it, felt it.

And she had a new theory to test.

"I can fix it," she said, her voice ringing with a certainty that surprised even herself. "I'm going to purify you."

Enzo's head snapped up, his ice-blue eyes widening in shock, then flaring with a wild, desperate hope. Before Bradford could even open his mouth to protest, Enzo was on the floor, dropping to one knee before her. He bowed his head, offering himself up with a gesture of complete and total surrender.

"My life is yours," he whispered, his voice thick with emotion. He took her hand and pressed it firmly against his forehead. "My soul is yours to command."

He had completely lowered his psionic shields. It was an act of absolute, terrifying trust. He was giving her the keys to his mind, to his very being.

Anja closed her eyes. She didn't hesitate.

She drew on her S-Class psionic power, not as a gentle stream, but as a focused, razor-sharp blade. She plunged it through her palm, directly into his mind.

Her consciousness was ripped from her body and thrown into a desolate, frozen wasteland. His Psionic Landscape. A vast, windswept ice field under a perpetually gray sky. But the air wasn't empty. It was choked with a thick, swirling black fog, a toxic miasma of corruption that pulsed with malice and despair. The 94 percent.

It was horrifying. But Anja felt no fear. She felt anger.

She reached down into her core, to that warm, golden seed of her catalyst ability. She pulled on it, not coaxing it this time, but yanking it forth. She wove it into her psionic blade, transforming it.

The golden energy erupted from her, not as a stream, but as a sun. It exploded into a shower of golden rain, a torrent of pure, cleansing light that fell upon the blackened ice field.

The black fog shrieked a soundless scream of agony that echoed in her mind. It recoiled from the golden light, trying to flee, but there was nowhere to go. The light was everywhere. The fog sizzled and dissolved, evaporating like mist in the morning sun, breaking down into its base components, into raw, neutral energy.

The process was brutally efficient. And brutally draining.

Anja felt her own psionic reserves plummeting. The golden sun began to dim. She grit her teeth, pushing harder, pouring every last drop of her strength into the final assault.

After what felt like an eternity, but was likely only ten minutes, the last wisp of black fog dissolved. The ice field was clean, gleaming under a now-clear sky.

She had done it.

She severed the connection, and her consciousness snapped back into her own body with a violent jolt. She collapsed back into the armchair, gasping for air, her body drenched in a cold sweat. The world swam before her eyes.

A sound, a long, primal howl of pure, unadulterated release, tore through the room. It wasn't human. It was the cry of a wolf greeting the moon after a lifetime in a cage.

Enzo threw his head back, his body trembling. The patch of fur on his neck was gone. His skin was smooth and unblemished.

But that wasn't the most shocking change.

His hair, the color of spun silver, was darkening at the roots, a wave of rich, glossy black cascading down. His eyes, no longer the cold, piercing blue of ice, were shifting deepening into a warm, dark, liquid black.

Anja stared, her exhaustion forgotten. "Your... your hair," she stammered. "Your eyes. Why did they change?"

Before Enzo could answer, a cold, mocking laugh cut through the air.

Bradford stood by the wall, his arms crossed over his massive chest. He tapped his wrist terminal, and a holographic image flared to life in the center of the room. It was a wanted poster. A man with dark, slicked-back hair and cold, black eyes that held a killer's spark.

"He didn't tell you?" Bradford sneered, his voice dripping with triumphant disdain. "Our Mr. Guy isn't just a businessman. The silver hair, the blue eyes... that's not his natural coloring. It's a side effect of prolonged, high-level corruption. A very convenient disguise."

He pointed a thick finger at the face on the wanted poster. "Meet 'Ghost'. The most prolific, and expensive, bounty hunter on the galactic black market. His kill count is legendary. And his natural hair color, as you can see, is black."

The air in the room went from triumphant to glacial in a heartbeat. Bradford had played his trump card. He had exposed Enzo not just as a killer, but as a liar. A fraud.

Enzo's face, now framed by his true black hair, was a mask of stone. He didn't deny it. He simply turned to Anja, and for the first time, she saw something other than arrogance or desire in his eyes. She saw fear. A raw, naked vulnerability.

"It's true," he said, his voice low and rough. "I've done... terrible things. But every credit, every kill... it was all to build a fortune large enough a status high enough to one day be worthy of standing in the presence of an S-Class female. To be worthy of you."

He looked like a lost child, confessing his sins, terrified of being cast out.

Anja looked from the dangerous man on the wanted poster to the desperate man kneeling before her. She thought of her own past, her own secrets. She thought of the cold, pragmatic world she came from.

She should have been scared. She should have been disgusted.

Instead, a slow, wicked smile spread across her face.

"I don't care who you were," she said, her voice clear and strong. "I only care who you are now. And right now, you are mine."

The relief that washed over Enzo's face was so profound it was heartbreaking. He lunged forward, burying his face in her lap, his shoulders shaking with silent, wracking sobs. He kissed the hem of her robe, her knees, her hands, swearing oaths of eternal, unwavering loyalty.

Bradford stared, his face a mask of pure, dumbfounded disbelief. His master stroke, his checkmate move, had not only failed, it had backfired spectacularly. He had just made his rival seem tragic, romantic, and deeply devoted. He wanted to punch a hole in the wall.

Just then, Anja gasped. A new sensation was flooding her body. The 70% of her energy she had poured out was rushing back in, but it wasn't just

returning. It was bringing friends. The raw, neutral energy from Enzo's purified corruption was being absorbed into her own core, reinforcing it, expanding it.

She felt stronger. Not just rested. Fundamentally, quantifiably stronger.

"L... I think I just leveled up," she whispered, the realization dawning on her.

Bradford's head snapped up, his personal drama forgotten in the face of this new, earth-shattering revelation. He stared at her, his military mind connecting the dots. "The legends... the old texts speak of it. Psionic Refeeding. A trait so rare it was thought to be a myth. The ability to grow stronger by cleansing others."

The three of them looked at each other, the implications of this discovery settling upon them like a physical weight.

Anja was no longer just a catalyst. She was a predator in her own right. A creature who could grow infinitely powerful, fueled by the sickness of others.

A fierce, burning ambition, an emotion she had never truly felt before, ignited in her soul. She was done being a protected treasure. She was done being a passenger.

She looked at the two powerful men who were now utterly, completely hers.

"I need more," she declared, her voice ringing with a newfound, terrifying authority. "Find me more. Find me the most corrupted, the most dangerous, the most hopeless cases in the entire Commonwealth. I need to get stronger. And I need to do it now."