

Chapter 160 - Anima

The imposed minute dragged like an hour—my idea, yet somehow I was the one suffering for it. Every second itched under my skin, nerves twisting tighter each time I glanced up and found both of them studying me in silence.

I briefly considered flicking open the System Interface, burying myself in Perk menus just to escape the weight of their attention, but that felt wrong.

I'd dropped danger into their laps and asked them to really think about whether they wanted to know more; the least I could do was sit with the discomfort instead of hiding behind flashing menus and glowing icons.

So I focused on my breath instead. Slow and steady, forcing stillness into muscles that wanted nothing more than to fidget their way out of my body.

Mercifully however, the minute eventually passed.

I exhaled and gestured for them to decide.

"Misha will not let *Friend* Ela deal with dangerous things alone," Misha announced immediately, her head-tufts going ramrod straight. "Misha will stay and listen!"

Jade followed, slower but with surprising weight behind her words. "Jade will also listen, even if Ela says it's dangerous... But Jade appreciates the choice—greatly."

There was something fierce in her gaze when she said it—flinty and resolved in a way I hadn't expected to see from her like this.

While I hadn't expected her to leave either, this was... different.

"So Jade will stay," she continued, head tilting, mouth curving into the beginnings of a smirk, "and choose to potentially be in danger, if it means learning what kind of nonsense is going on with the blank named Ela in front of Jade."

It blindsided me.

Not the danger-acceptance part, but the soft jab buried in the middle of it.

Misha reacted like Jade had fired a gun in the shop, her eyes widening, tuft-plumes stiff with alarm as she stared at Jade like she'd just insulted the Gryplik's entire ancestry.

And I broke.

Laughter tore up through my chest, messy and helpless.

Relief, nerves, Misha's horrified confusion—it all hit at once.

Jade just sat there with that smug little smile growing by the second, while Misha remained baffled, frozen in place like her brain needed a few extra moments to catch up.

By the time I got control back, my eyes were wet, my ribs ached, and I wiped my face with the back of my hand, breathing easier than I had all day.

“Thanks. Both of you. Truly,” I started, gathering my thoughts as best I could—surprisingly easy now after the outburst of relief from having the two decide that I was worth the trouble.

I still didn’t entirely trust Jade’s intentions on the matter, as she could just as likely be listening in to run straight to Vega, but something in the way her eyes had screamed of conviction when talking about the choice I had given her, made me feel more at ease than it probably should have.

But Intuition, strangely enough, was on my side for once.

Whether they meant it had been utterly duped by Jade or I was actually on the right track for once, however, was impossible to say.

“So... Here’s the full story, then: When Ela awakened from the incident that had almost ended Ela’s life, around two months back, Ela became aware of a different sort of... Energy, for lack of a better word.”

Both of them were watching me with rapt attention now, all prior jovialities forgotten; full focus mode.

“An energy that seems to be part of the very world we’re living in—some people even call it the World, with a capital W, although Ela is not sure what that is all about yet. That energy is colloquially called Anima, as far as Ela knows. It might be known as something else for different cultures than the one here in Delta, but Ela has not investigated enough to be able to tell one way or another. Either way, this Anima is the reason for just about everything strange that either Misha or Jade might have realized or suspected about Ela.”

Jade leaned back slightly, arms crossing as she frowned in thought.

“So... if this Anima stuff is everywhere—this capital-W ‘*World*’ business—how has Jade never heard of it? Vega never mentioned anything like that. None of my sisters did either. One would think ‘*all-encompassing cosmic energy*’ would’ve come up at least once, at some point.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but Misha beat me to it.

“World,” she repeated softly, the word landing with unusual weight.

Her eyes were unfocused, drifting somewhere far past the piles of merchandise around us.

“Yes... Misha remembers hearing that. Not Anima. But *World*. Always capital W.”

Both Jade and I turned toward her as she continued, slowly piecing together a long-buried memory.

“When Misha was younger, before coming to Neo Avalis, before Delta...” she murmured, the cadence of her voice shifting into something almost reverent, “some of the Learned spoke of

the World in their teachings. That the World is not only a place, but something that moves. Something that thinks. Something that even... *interferes* at times.”

Her tufts flicked with agitation as she tapped a finger rapidly against her chin.

“But Misha did not listen well,” she admitted, cheeks puffing in embarrassment. “Misha preferred to build things. To take things apart underneath the table. To see how the little pieces work.” She hunched slightly. “Perhaps Misha should have listened better... Maybe then Misha would understand more of what has been happening to Ela.”

She looked up again, wide ruby-bright eyes filled with concern and curiosity in equal measure.

“Not Anima,” she repeated, more firmly now. “But the World... yes. *That*, Misha remembers hearing about.”

That... was surprising, but also not surprising at the same time.

Gryplik had been the predominant species on the planet once upon a time, according to the wiki pages I’d sifted through in my past life. If anyone still had scraps of pre-Rapture knowledge about this capital-W World stuff, it made sense it would be them.

And considering how hard they had supposedly fought during the Twilight Wars, despite their physical weakness... Things were starting to make a whole lot of sense, in a way.

Still. That I hadn’t connected those dots earlier felt like a pretty embarrassing oversight in hindsight—but what else was new, really?

*‘I already know other species exist. Why **wouldn’t** they have completely different knowledge bases? Pull it together, Sera.’*

After all, if the Gryplik had hints of this—then what about the Irush? The Olark? Anyone else? There could be thousands of puzzle pieces lying around the planet about this stuff, and I’d been cramming myself into one corporate-controlled city.

‘I really need to stretch my wings, talk to more people, get out of Delta—’ I cut the thought off with a grimace. *‘Right. After the fifty-seven things I’m already juggling. One crisis at a time, Sera. Take it slow or you’ll end up on some Ripper’s table again.’*

I forced myself to refocus and met Jade’s stare.

“Ela understands,” I said. “Ela had the exact same reaction when Ela first learned about Anima. Even now, Ela barely has the beginnings of an education in it. But...”

I took a slow breath, feeling both sets of eyes lock onto me, “Ela can show Jade and Misha proof. *Real* proof of its existence.”

Their reactions were instant—Jade leaning forward like a wolf scenting a challenge, Misha’s pupils going wide, tufts shooting up.

I stood from the makeshift seat and motioned for both of them to follow me toward the closest stretch of bare wall—grateful, for once, that Misha’s Emporium was large—and tall—enough to offer plenty of flat surfaces despite the chaos.

“Jade might remember what’s about to happen, but probably hasn’t had the time to fully process it with everything else going on. For Misha, though... this will be new,” I warned, making sure I had their full attention.

Their eyes tracked me as I started to casually jog straight toward the wall, which earned a startled squeak from Misha right before my feet hit the wall like they were magnetically drawn to them.

It didn’t require any effort on my part to change my actual orientation—no elongated step, no strange muscle movement to have my feet and legs bend at weird angles to let me solidly touch the new “ground” that was the wall—as [Wall Runner] naturally activated.

‘That feels a lot more fluid than it used to, doesn’t it...?’ I couldn’t help but think, remembering back to the last time I had consciously used the Perk.

It had been a long time, no doubt, but I definitely remembered having to spend a bit more effort on my part to really “get” the effect and have it naturally continue from my normal movements.

Below me, Jade and Misha could only stare, wide-eyed, as I jogged up the wall like physics had politely taken a smoke break.

Misha’s ruby eyes sparkled up at me, head tilted so far back she nearly toppled over.

“Ela is incredible...!” she breathed out, a wide, green-toothed grin stretching across her face.

Jade, meanwhile, had her arms crossed tight against her chest, eyebrows drawn low. “Fuck me... I—Jade *knew* that was weird and tried to figure it out. But Jade just assumed it was some top-shelf cybernetics or a hidden bionics package,” she muttered, squinting like she could brute-force the logic back into the scene. “Seeing it now though? That’s no augmentation tech Jade’s ever heard of; that’s for sure.”

Misha tilted her head, thoughtful in the way only a Gryplik could be I figured—half scholar, half gremlin—humming softly before speaking, “There *do* exist cybernetics and bionics capable of such things. But Misha can confirm Ela does not have them.”

Her tufts twitched with emphasis as she continued, “It would have been *very* obvious during the Ripper’s treatment—far too few internal modifications for the technology to function. So unless Ela is filled with black-site experimental tech—which, if Ela *is*, please let Misha study it, *Friend* Ela! Misha promises to be very gentle while peeling off the skin!”

Jade shot her a thoroughly horrified look.

“—then whatever this Anima actually is, *must* be the culprit.”

She nodded several times in quick succession, ruby eyes glinting like she had just uncovered a grand conspiracy, the kind of confidence only someone *utterly* certain of their own genius could pull off.

I quickly returned to the ground, feeling the pull on the strange inner reserve of energy that [Wall Runner] used to function, having been stretched by my demonstration, but not having been close to running out yet.

'That is also an upgrade to before, isn't it...? I wonder what determines all of this? Maybe Reflex for the gravity-switching stuff and Anima for the reserves...? I really wish I had some more time to properly create test cases and write down this information in a wiki page somewhere, damnit!'

Coming to a stop next to the two of them, I decided that this wasn't quite conclusive enough—it wouldn't be for me, at least.

"Ela has one more thing to show," I said once I caught their eyes again. "But Ela needs Jade and Misha to check Ela's hands first."

I held them out.

Misha immediately latched onto one like a kid handed a new puzzle box—pressing, bending joints, poking tendons with scientific glee.

Honestly, I shouldn't have been surprised. It was Misha.

Jade, meanwhile, just stared at me, waiting for the rest of the instructions.

"Check for any bionic, cybernetic, or genetic enhancements," I clarified. "Ela will show something... strange. If Jade and Misha confirm Ela's hands are one-hundred-percent human beforehand, that's irrefutable proof this comes from Anima. Not tech."

She considered that for a beat before nodding.

Then she got to work—careful visual scan first, eyes narrowed for seams or synth-skin imperfections. When she found none, her examination turned even more methodical.

Fingertips traced along knuckles, feeling for plates or hidden seams.

She tested joint flexibility, range of rotation, tension in my palms, methodically going through a sort of checklist.

Something she had likely been taught by Vega or her sisters, about figuring out if somebody's physiology was potentially altered or not.

Meanwhile, Misha was studying my hands like they were a work of art, quietly muttering to herself in Gryplik about the tendon actuation and whether my hands were more flexible than a normal human's my age, side-eyeing Jade every-so-often as if to compare—her guess was that yes, they were.

They took their sweet time with the inspection.

A full minute of poking, bending, pressing along bone structure, and occasionally tugging at individual fingers like they were trying to detach them just to see what would happen.

My hands had never felt so... *scrutinized*. Awkward didn't even begin to cover it, but I grit my teeth and let them finish—this was the whole point, after all.

Eventually, both stepped back.

"Human," Jade concluded, more reluctantly than she probably intended. "Just... better than I've seen with anyone our age. So... *annoyingly* human."

Misha nodded rapidly, pupils blown wide with fascination. "Far more flexible than baseline human, yes. Strong tendon resilience. Very impressive. Misha approves greatly!"

I rubbed my hands together, more to shake off the lingering weirdness than anything else.

"Good. Now, Ela needs something durable to demonstrate the next part," I said. "Preferably something Misha doesn't mind getting destroyed."

Misha vanished into the maze of merchandise with a determined trill immediately.

Thirty seconds later, she returned lugging a scrap slab of durasteel about the size of my torso. Way more than I had been hoping for—definitely more than a casual demonstration needed—but this was Misha.

If she was going to provide a prop, she was going to overdeliver, no doubt.

The plate clanged heavily as I set it upright, leaning it against the closest workbench.

I stepped back, making sure there was a clear gap behind the strike zone. If this worked like I thought, I really didn't want to put a hole through Misha's table.

"Okay," I said, glancing once at each of them. "Stand back."

They did—Misha bouncing on her heels like she was about to witness fireworks, Jade crossing her arms but unable to hide the spark of curiosity snapping in her eyes.

I took one slow, deep breath, letting it sink deep and heavy into my lungs.

'Time to show them what Anima can really do... and hopefully not make a complete ass of myself in the process.'

I let my thoughts drift back several weeks, to a certain evening in the back of Mr. Shori's stall, when I had first consciously come into contact with Anima.

This time, it felt... cleaner. Easier.

Like my body actually understood what I was asking of it instead of fighting me the whole way.

I let my fingers move, tracing invisible patterns in the air—those strange, jagged shapes that the technique had burned into my muscle memory.

Sigils meant to coax Anima outward, meant to *cut*.

The flow of energy surged almost immediately, quicker than I expected, threading through each tendon like live wire.

The cramps came a heartbeat later.

Not quite as unbearable as back then, but still very much in the “*this is extremely stupid and you’re definitely moving in a way that’s damaging something*” category.

Reflex made the movements precise anyway—every flick and curl of my fingers perfectly on point, even as the pain dug deeper.

Twenty seconds in, the pressure built—like holding a storm inside my palms.

Thirty seconds, and my hands trembled, muscles drawn tight as bowstrings.

That familiar tipping point finally hit—too much energy to keep caged.

I breathed out, focused everything forward, and gave the internal command:

‘[Anima Razor]’

—

—

PoV: Jade

When Ela had suddenly asked her to come to Misha’s Emporium that morning, Jade hadn’t really known what to expect.

The other girl owed her an explanation, yes, but Jade hadn’t intended on insisting to receive it right away. Ela had nearly died just a few days ago, to protect her, after all.

Something like that bought you a few weeks of recovery before anyone reasonable came knocking on your door to ask questions.

Now, however, the other girl wasn’t just completely and utterly fine, rather than the husk that Jade had expected to meet when she had shown up, but instead was thriving with a level of energy that was truly stupid to behold.

‘And she looks both even more solid and far more agile than ever before too... Is that how she does it? She just almost-dies and somehow comes out stronger as a result? How does that even make sense?’

But the strangest thing of all, was Ela's insistence that all of the strangeness that was clearly some kind of black-site technology from a major corp, was some weird energy that permeated everything?

Now that... That was a step too far.

Or so she had thought.

But Ela really *did* run up that wall, like she vaguely recalled from when the girl had saved her the first time around. But seeing it from a different angle and without fear, adrenaline and relief coursing through her every vein... That had definitely been anything but technology she was aware of.

Apparently, as the Gryplik had claimed, this was something that existed as tech, but not something Ela could have chipped—just like the speedware that Jade had seen first-hand with the Valir brat.

'Also something she can't possibly have chipped unless it's black-site tech... But then again, I've already established as much.'

She had even told Vega about her thoughts on the matter, after that whole debacle, and he had agreed.

Not directly, but implicitly—just like Vega always did. He never said things outright when implication worked better, and Jade had learned to read that silence.

He was just as convinced as she was that Ela was some sort of black-site project, a lab-grown asset or experiment that had gone horribly wrong—or terrifyingly right, depending on what the corpos behind her might've been aiming for.

So the whole “running up the wall like gravity was a polite suggestion” thing could, *in theory*, be explained with prototype black-site tech.

That was the box Jade had tried to shove it into, even though it was a box with fraying edges and no bottom. A black-site human was already a safety red flag she wanted *nothing* to do with—but she was too deep to back out by now, attached by both circumstance and Vega's interest alike.

And then Ela had done the most unnerving thing.

She'd offered her hands—openly, calmly—and told them both to check for alterations.

It was one of the first things Vega had drilled into the Gems: Learn to tell when a body was modified. Spot the synth-flesh seams, track joint tolerances, note unnatural smoothness in tendon glide.

If someone had implants, you had to know—preferably before they used them on you.

The inspection Jade had done was basically muscle memory; finger pressure, rotation test, skin elasticity, nail-bed responsiveness. Misha's examination had been messier but no less thorough, her enthusiasm making up for technique.

And together, they'd found a grand total of fucking *nothing*.

Ela's hands were completely natural—no alloy substructure, no carbon-fibre rebar, no micro-servo articulation.

Just human flesh, bone and musculature.

Human—yet unnervingly limber, responsive, and strong in tiny fine-motor ways Jade would've sworn weren't possible in this short amount of time without serious augmentation.

That was the part that left her quietly staring at Ela as she prepared the next part of her strange demonstrations.

Because Jade *remembered* the last time they'd gone out together and she'd had a close look at the other girl's capabilities.

To the gun shop, the incident with the Valir brat and his crew—Jade had been faster back then, barring the speedware moment. More limber and agile too.

She wasn't imagining that. She *knew* it.

And now, only a couple weeks later—maybe even less—Ela had seemingly completely eclipsed her... Or been pretending to be far less than she was from the very get-go, which seemed utterly impossible.

'How the fuck does someone improve like that?' Jade thought, throat tight. *'How do you go from normal to... **this**... without major alterations?'*

All those thoughts and half-formed theories shattered the moment Ela started twisting her fingers through the air—slow, deliberate, and *wrong*. Not wrong like sloppy, but wrong in that *nothing* about a human hand should bend like that.

Jade found herself frozen, eyes locked to the strange choreography, unsure whether she was more horrified or fascinated by whatever it was that she was seeing.

The other girl's movements were incredibly precise, yet made no logical sense at all, her fingers clearly cramping and hurting under the strain—visible from the grimace on Ela's face and the shallow breaths between clenched teeth every time her fingers moved in a way that clearly wasn't meant to be done.

Pain, without hesitation.

Intent, without doubt.

She almost wanted to ask the other girl to stop out of concern, but then she felt *something*.

Something strange.

A buzz—not sound, not sight, but something like electricity across the skin, like static rolling through the room and pooling in Ela’s palms.

It was faint, nothing she would’ve noticed if she hadn’t been watching like a hawk.

Something was moving—gathering—pulled toward Ela as if the air itself obeyed her.

The strange current continued to gather more and more as Ela continued her strange hand motions, Jade trying to figure out if it was some sort of rogue’s cant, like Jade and the Gems used among themselves, but if it was some kind of cant, it was like nothing she had ever seen before.

None of the signs seemed to repeat, at least not in a way that she could tell, which would make language practically impossible. Nor were the signs easy enough to signal to be useful in any circumstance but a demonstration like this, making it completely useless for any real-world application.

No, this was clearly something else.

‘But what...? Is it an activation sequence for some other kind of implant?’

But Ela didn’t have any implants—both Misha and herself had already confirmed as such first-hand and also second-hand through watching the Ripper do his work.

Ela’s final gesture snapped the moment tight.

She sucked in a shaky breath, shoulders tense—then the air *screamed*.

A high, razor-thin vibration tore through the workshop, sharp enough to feel behind the teeth and in every bone.

Both Jade and Misha jerked in surprise as something—energy, force, whatever the fuck it was—shot out from Ela’s palms like compressed air given a blade’s edge.

Then, with a smooth, almost casual swipe of her hand, Ela dragged that invisible edge across the durasteel plate.

Silence dropped. The vibration died.

Ela staggered a step, sweat at her temple, breaths coming shallow.

“T... There,” she managed, voice strained but steady enough. “That should do it, yes?”

They just stared at Ela for a second, both of them clearly trying to process what they’d just seen.

Then Misha’s head snapped toward the durasteel plate.

Without a word, she rushed over and crouched down to inspect it like a priceless relic had just dropped from the heavens.

The plate hadn't been dented. It hadn't been scored or gashed or torn.

It had been sliced—*perfectly*.

A clean, surgical cut straight through durasteel, like someone had taken an industrial monowire and just... drawn a line.

Misha's fingers traced along the freshly exposed edge, careful and reverent, her tufts trembling. "This... This is not possible. Durasteel does *not* cut like this. It shears... melts... warps. But this... This is perfect..."

She looked up at Ela, eyes huge, pupils blown wide. "*Friend* Ela did this? With only Ela's hands? No tools? No blade?"

Ela opened my mouth to answer, but Jade beat her to it—her voice low, almost wary. "That wasn't tech."

She wasn't asking. She had decided.

"Jade knows enough now to say that wasn't tech. That wasn't even close."

Her gaze drifted from the bisected durasteel to Ela's hands, then slowly up to her eyes.

"That was... what Ela called Anima. Right?"

Ela simply nodded, running her hands through her black and cyan-coloured hair.

A heavy silence followed.

Then Misha snapped back into motion, standing so quickly she wobbled.

"Jade is correct! This must be the Anima!" She pressed her palms together like she was praying, eyes practically sparkling. "Misha must relearn everything Misha thought Misha knew..."

Jade swallowed, tension rippling through every part of her body.

"Okay," she said quietly. "Jade believes it now. Or... Jade believes enough not to call utterly Ela insane anymore..."

She dragged a hand through her hair, breath uneven in her chest. "Holy shit."

The dam behind her restraint cracked right there—no hesitation, no subtlety—just raw want.

"So..." she exhaled, her eyes flicking between Ela's hands and the bisected plate as she couldn't decide which of the two was more terrifying to behold, "when is Ela going to teach us how to use this Anima stuff? How to do *that*?"

Her hand shot out toward the ruined durasteel, still warm from the cut, and Misha held it up like a relic. The Gryplik's eyes shimmered with unrestrained hunger, tufts standing tall, and she turned toward the girl like a starving scholar faced with the universe's last library.

Misha didn't even *try* to hide the interest.

Jade felt it too—that bone-deep, electric thrum of yearning.

Because if this was real—if Ela could *teach* this—then Jade would never be the slow one in the Gems again.

Never be the liability in Vega's shadow again.

Never be dead weight on a mission where one mistake could put her in a body bag.

Never have to rely on Ela to drag her out of death's jaw once again, for what would be the third time in a row.

She could be *more*.

Just like Ela...