

Chapter 21

The piercing shriek of the alarm was a physical assault. Red lights pulsed through the diningroom, painting the elegant space in strokes of harsh, urgent crimson.

Anja froze, a forkful of pancake halfway to her mouth. The name echoed in the sudden, ringing silence.

Enzo Guy.

The man from the file. The one with the lazy, predatory grace and eyes that promised nothing but trouble.

Across the table, Bradford's transformation was terrifying to behold. The warmth, the gentle humor, the tender adoration—it all evaporated in an instant. His face became a mask of cold, possessive fury. His gray eyes, which had been soft just moments ago, hardened into chips of ice.

He rose slowly from his chair, not with a sudden jerk, but with the coiled, deliberate tension of a great beast preparing to strike. His body seemed to expand, filling the space around him with a suffocating aura of menace.

His hand, large and calloused, drifted down. His fingers came to rest on the hilt of the military-grade combat knife strapped to his belt.

The heavy oak double doors to the diningroom, which had been firmly shut, began to move. Not with the polite slide of an automated system, but with a deep, groaning sound, as if an immense, invisible force was pushing against them from the other side.

Bradford's fingers tightened on the knife's grip. His muscles bunched, a low growl rumbling deep in his chest. He moved with fluid speed, placing his body squarely between Anja and the doors. A living shield of muscle and rage.

With a final, splintering crack, the doors were thrown open.

A wave of unnatural cold washed into the room, a blast of arctic air that smelled of ozone and winter frost. It swallowed the warm, fragrant air of the diningroom, chilling the sweat on Anja's skin. White mist billowed across the marble floor, swirling around Bradford's boots.

A single, sharp sound cut through the lingering shriek of the alarm. The crisp, confident click of expensive custom-made leather shoes on polished stone.

A figure emerged from the fog.

He was tall, impossibly elegant, and moved with the fluid grace of a panther. He wore a deep blue, bespoke suit that probably cost more than a small starship, tailored to fit his lean, powerful frame perfectly. His hair was the color of spun silver, and his eyes, when they lifted to scan the room, were a startling, piercing shade of ice blue.

Anja's breath caught in her chest. Her gaze was snagged by his, and she felt a jolt, a primal recognition that went deeper than thought. It was like looking into the eyes of a wolf.

"System AI Unit 01," a calm, electronic voice announced from the ceiling speakers, "now confirms the identity of the visitor. Registered Consort, Mr. Enzo Guy."

Bradford's knife was already half-drawn, the gleam of dark metal visible at his hip. His voice was a low, deadly command, colder than the frost creeping across the floor.

"Halt. Do not approach the Matron."

Enzo Guy completely ignored him. It wasn't a defiant act; it was the casual dismissal of someone swatting away a gnat. His ice-blue eyes were fixed solely on Anja, a look of intense, almost obsessive focus. A slow, arrogant smile stretched his lips, the signature smirk of a man who owned the world and knew it.

He walked directly towards the dining table, his path taking him right past the six-foot-four wall of incandescent fury that was Bradford Vaughn.

He stopped a single step away from Anja.

Then, in a movement of shocking fluid grace, he dropped to one knee.

He took her hand, the one still holding the fork, and gently uncurled her fingers. His touch was shockingly cold, like holding a piece of ice. He brought her hand to his lips and pressed a soft, lingering kiss to the back of it.

Anja flinched at the cold, a shiver running up her spine. She tried to pull her hand back, but his grip was surprisingly strong, a velvet trap.

He lifted his head, his ice-blue eyes locking with hers. They were filled with an undisguised, almost reverent adoration. His voice, when he spoke, was a low, resonant baritone, a smooth, cultured American English that

sounded like cello music.

"Anja. It is an honor to finally meet you in person."

A violent tremor shook the room. Anja looked past Enzo's shoulder and saw the silver cutlery on the table vibrating, dancing on the linen tablecloth. Bradford's psionic ability, his control over metal, was leaking, fueled by a jealousy so potent it was a physical force.

Bradford took a heavy step forward, his massive frame blocking Enzo's view of Anja. His voice was a serrated blade.

"You were not announced. You have trespassed on private property. Explain yourself."

Enzo slowly rose to his feet, his movements unhurried. He casually brushed a non-existent speck of dust from the knee of his perfect suit. He looked Bradford up and down, a flicker of amusement in his cold eyes.

"I do not need to announce my return to my own home," he said, his voice dripping with condescending sweetness. "And I certainly don't need to report to the help."

That did it.

The air crackled with raw power. Bradford's right arm dissolved into a blur of shimmering liquid metal, reforming in a heartbeat into a wicked, black blade that ended in a razor-sharp point.

Enzo didn't flinch. The temperature in the room plummeted. A beautiful, deadly filigree of frost spread from his feet, racing across the marble floor, encasing the legs of the chairs and table in a layer of glittering ice.

The two Alpha-Plus powers slammed into each other in the center of the room. The invisible impact was like a physical blow. The air grew thick and heavy, pressing in on Anja, making it hard to breathe. Her chest tightened, and a wave of dizziness washed over her.

They were going to destroy her house.

Enough.

SMACK.

Anja slammed her palm flat on the solid oak table. The sound was sharp and loud, a gunshot in the tense silence.

Both men froze, their heads snapping towards her.

"Stop it," she commanded, her voice low, cold, and filled with an authority she didn't know she possessed. "Both of you. Now. Put your powers away. This is my house, not a gladiator pit."

Bradford's rage-filled eyes widened, a flicker of panic and hurt flashing through them. He had displeased her. The black metal of his arm melted away, receding back into flesh and blood. He took a step back, his head bowed. "My apologies, Mistress."

Enzo, ever the opportunist, let the frost recede. The arrogant smirk returned to his face, but his eyes held a flicker of cunning. He smoothly pulled out the chair right next to Anja, the one Bradford had been so careful to leave empty, and sat down, crossing his long legs.

He leaned in close, his voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper that sent another shiver down her spine. "My sincerest apologies, Anja. I confess, the thought of finally meeting you drove me to a moment of temporary insanity."

Anja stared at him, momentarily stunned by the sheer audacity of his excuse. He was a master of his craft.

She needed to change the subject. Now.

Her eyes fell on the military scanner still sitting on the table, its screen glowing with her failure.

"Mr. Guy," she said, her voice crisp and businesslike. "You are a man of the world. A non-military perspective, perhaps. Tell me, what is your opinion of an F-Class ability rating?"

Enzo's gaze flickered to the scanner. A spark of genuine interest, the keen assessment of a predator spotting new prey, lit his ice-blue eyes.

"F-Class," he murmured, tapping a thoughtful finger against his lips. "In the world of commerce, Anja, 'unclassified' does not mean 'worthless'. It means 'rare'. It means 'untapped potential'. It means a market inefficiency waiting to be exploited."

He leaned closer still, his voice dropping even lower. "The Commonwealth's history is littered with stories of psionic abilities that couldn't be quantified by their crude instruments. Support abilities. Catalysts. Amplifiers."

Hope, sharp and painful, flared in Anja's chest. "Is there a way to test for something like that? A non-official way?"

Enzo's smile was slow and dangerous. He gestured vaguely between himself and Bradford. "Psionics, at its core, is about the interaction of energy. Not a one-way street. If your power cannot be projected outward..." He let the sentence hang in the air.

"Then it might require a high-level energy conduit," he finished, his eyes

gleaming. "A vessel. A catalyst, to catalyze the catalyst."

Bradford, who had been listening in stony silence, let out a low growl. He knew exactly what this slick, silver-haired bastard was suggesting. He was offering himself up as a test subject. A guinea pig.

Anja stared down at her own hands, her mind racing. And deep within her, that small, warm seed of unknown energy, the one she'd felt that morning gave a faint, curious pulse. As if it recognized the truth in his words.