

Chapter 17

Anja finally drifted off to sleep in the pre-dawn hours, her mind a chaotic swirl of mating cycles and anatomical charts. When she woke, golden sunlight was streaming through the massive window, pooling on the velvet comforter.

She stretched, a long, luxurious motion, trying to shake off the lingering awkwardness of the previous night. As she took a deep, centering breath, she felt it.

It was a subtle warmth, deep in her abdomen. A tiny, coiled knot of energy that was completely separate from the vast, cool ocean of her psionic power in her mind. It felt like a seed, dormant but alive, humming with a quiet, unknown potential.

She closed her eyes, focusing inward. It wasn't a memory or an illusion. It was real. A second power source. Something the original Anja had never known about.

A surge of intense curiosity, mixed with a healthy dose of anxiety, propelled her out of bed. She needed answers, and she knew exactly who to ask. Bradford was a career military man; if anyone understood the nuances of psionic abilities, it would be him.

She didn't bother with a formal dress. She simply tightened the sash on her silk robe and padded out of the room, her bare feet sinking into the thick hall carpet.

"Unit 01," she said to the air. "Where is Captain Vaughn?"

"Captain Vaughn has been in the subterranean gymnasium since 0500 hours, Mistress," the AI replied in its flat, electronic tone. "He is conducting his standard high-intensity physical conditioning regimen."

Anja raised an eyebrow. Five in the morning. The man's discipline was inhuman. She turned and headed for the private elevator that descended to the lower levels of the estate.

The elevator doors slid open with a soft hiss, and she was hit by a wall of warm, humid air. It smelled of sweat, ozone, and raw, masculine energy. The rhythmic, heavy clang of metal on metal echoed from the cavernous room beyond.

She stepped out, her movements quiet. The sight that greeted her made her stop dead in her tracks.

The gymnasium was a state-of-the-art facility, filled with gleaming chrome and black steel equipment. In the center of it, his back to her, was Bradford.

He was positioned under a squat rack, a ridiculously large amount of weight loaded onto the barbell across his shoulders. He was shirtless.

Sweat traced glistening paths down the broad, powerful planes of his back, disappearing into the waistband of his simple black athletic shorts. As he lowered himself, his powerful thighs and glutes bunched into solid knots of muscle, straining against the immense weight. Then he drove upwards, a controlled explosion of pure power, his entire body a symphony of perfectly coordinated strength.

Anja leaned against the cool metal of the doorframe, her mouth slightly agape. She felt like a voyeur, but she couldn't look away. It was the most primal, beautiful display of male strength she had ever seen. The original purpose of her visit was completely forgotten, erased by the hypnotic rhythm of his movements.

Bradford knew she was there.

He had sensed her the moment the elevator doors opened, the subtle shift in the air, the faint trace of her unique psionic signature. He saw her reflection in the large mirror on the wall in front of him. He saw the way she

was leaning against the door, her eyes fixed on his body. He saw the slight parting of her lips.

A jolt of pure, triumphant adrenaline shot through him. The exhaustion from his sleepless, tormented night vanished. The beast inside him, the one he had fought so hard to cage, stirred and purred with satisfaction. She was watching. She was impressed.

He didn't stop. He didn't turn around. Instead, he deliberately slowed his pace. He made each repetition a slow, deliberate performance, exaggerating the contraction and release of his muscles, a peacock displaying his feathers.

He finished his final rep, racking the massive weight with a deafening clang that broke the spell. He grabbed a white towel from a nearby bench and casually wiped the sweat from his face, his chest heaving.

Then, he turned to face her.

His gray eyes were dark, burning with an intensity that was anything but respectful. It was possessive. It was hungry. But his voice, when he spoke, was the epitome of military courtesy.

"Good morning, Mistress. Did you sleep well?"

Anja felt a hot blush flood her cheeks. She'd been caught staring. She pushed herself off the doorframe, trying to look casual.

"Very well, thank you," she stammered, her eyes betraying her by darting down to the hard planes of his chest before she could stop them.

He draped the towel around his neck and began to walk towards her, his long strides eating up the distance between them. He was a predator closing in on its prey, the air around him thick with a dangerous, intoxicating cocktail of sweat and pheromones.

He stopped less than a foot away, forcing her to crane her neck to look up at him. A faint, knowing smile played on his lips.

Anja looked up at the sharp, clean line of his jaw, at the pulse beating steadily in his thick neck. Her rational mind was screaming at her to run, but her body was frozen, caught in the powerful gravity of his presence.

