

Chapter 19

Anja took refuge in the small, luxurious changing room attached to the gym, her cheeks still burning. She stripped off the wet robe, her mind replaying the last few minutes in a mortifying loop. She had completely lost control. One look at his body and she had turned into a giggling, blushing teenager.

A polite knock sounded at the door. "Mistress," Bradford's voice called from the other side, respectful and subdued. "I have your clothes."

She opened the door a crack, just wide enough to stick her arm out. A bundle of soft, cream-colored fabric was pressed into her hand. She snatched it inside and immediately bolted the door again.

Bradford stood in the hallway, listening to the click of the lock. He could picture her on the other side, flustered and beautiful. He was winning. The thought sent a fresh wave of heat through him. He turned and strode into the adjacent bathroom, forcing himself under another brutally cold shower to regain some semblance of control.

A moment later, Anja's voice, muffled by the door, called out, "Bradford?"
"Yes, Ma'am?"

There was a pause. "You, uh... you didn't bring any underwear."

Bradford, who was in the middle of drying his hair, froze. His entire plan, his smooth, calculated seduction, had been derailed by a single, idiotic oversight. He had been so focused on her, on the sight of her through the wet silk, that the most basic detail had completely escaped him.

His ears turned beet red. "My deepest apologies, Mistress! An unforgivable error!" He immediately commanded Unit 01 to dispatch a new set of lingerie via the estate's internal pneumatic tube system. A small, silent drawer slid open at the base of the changing room door, and he awkwardly pushed the delicate items through.

Ten minutes later, they were seated opposite each other at the sun-drenched breakfast table. A platter of fluffy pancakes, a pitcher of dark maple syrup, and a pot of steaming black coffee sat between them. The air was thick with a lingering, unspoken awkwardness.

Anja decided to break it. She set down her fork, her expression turning serious.

"The reason I came to find you this morning," she began, "is because I discovered something. A new energy. Inside me. It's not my psionic power."

Bradford's playful, predatory mood vanished. The soldier snapped back into focus. "Describe it, Ma'am."

"It's like a warm current," she explained. "In my abdomen. It's very weak, but it's there. I don't understand how abilities work here. Besides the psionic kind."

He nodded, processing the information. "It would be easier to show you."

He held out his right arm over the table. He took a slow breath, and Anja could feel a subtle shift in the energy in the room.

Then, she watched, mesmerized, as his skin changed. A shimmering, liquid-like substance spread from his shoulder to his fingertips, hardening in an instant. His arm of flesh and blood was replaced by one of solid, gleaming black metal, the surface swirling with patterns like Damascus steel.

Anja leaned forward, her eyes wide with wonder. She reached out and tapped it with her fingernail. It made a clear, ringing tink sound.

"Wow," she breathed. "That is... incredibly cool. Can it stay like that forever? We could make armor out of it."

Bradford's arm returned to normal as quickly as it had changed. "No, Ma'am. It's called Metallization. It consumes a vast amount of my core energy to maintain. Once the energy is depleted, the effect ends."

Anja felt a flicker of disappointment, but her mind was already racing.

Energy. It all came back to energy.

"So what is mine?" she asked, the urgency back in her voice. "What is this seed inside me?"

Bradford picked up a piece of pancake with his fork, doused it in maple syrup, and leaned across the table. "Open," he commanded softly.

Distracted, she obeyed without thinking. He placed the sweet, warm pancake in her mouth. The burst of flavor was a pleasant shock, and by the time she realized how intimate the gesture was, it was too late.

He leaned back, a gentle smile in his eyes. "Speculation is pointless," he said, his voice calm and reassuring. "When we are finished with breakfast, I have a portable military scanner in my gear. We can do a preliminary analysis. Privately."

Anja, her cheeks full of pancake, nodded, a blush creeping up her neck again. The promise of answers, and the simple, domestic intimacy of the moment, was a potent combination.

Bradford watched her chew, a look of pure, unadulterated adoration on his face. This was what he was fighting for. Not just her safety, but these quiet moments.

A test that would define the next chapter of her life was about to begin, right here at the breakfast table.



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