

Chapter 15

Demetri Contreras POV:

I wasn't really asleep. The bitter concoction Haven had forced down my throat made my head swim and my limbs feel like lead, but I clung to a sliver of consciousness.

I could feel her gentle, precise movements as she wrapped my face in clean linen. Her fingers were steady, moving with a strange, reassuring rhythm.

This woman... Haven Kramer. She was nothing like the rumors. No tears, no fear, not even a hint of disgust.

Her words echoed in my mind.

"What you look like is irrelevant to me. Our fates are bound together. Therefore, I must heal you."

So cold. So practical. And so... effective.

I had assumed she would be just another pawn, a foolish girl easily frightened away. I was wrong. I heard her speak in a low voice to her maid, Phoebe.

"He's asleep. Let's get something to eat."

Eat? What was there for them to eat? My thoughts were sluggish.

I heard the faint clink of a bowl. Then Phoebe's voice, small and choked with emotion.

"My lady, there's so little... You eat it. I'm not hungry."

With immense effort, I forced my eyelid open just a crack. I saw Haven holding one of the bowls from the kitchen. The same thin, watery broth. She was pushing the few pathetic scraps of vegetable into Phoebe's bowl, then lifting her own to drink the clear, foul-smelling liquid.

They were sharing my scraps. No, not even scraps. It was pigslop.

A black, silent rage burned in my chest. Cliffie Villarreal. That stupid, greedy woman. When I was well, she would be the first to be purged.

Haven finished the broth quickly. "Eat," she told Phoebe, her voice calm and determined. "You need your strength. We'll solve the food problem tomorrow."

Solve it? How?

A flicker of curiosity sparked within me. I watched her slender back. In the dim candlelight, she looked fragile, but her spine was ramrod straight.

A strange emotion stirred in my chest. I was supposed to hate this woman, this political bride forced upon me. But right now, I couldn't muster any ill will toward her. I even had a fleeting thought that perhaps... I should give her a way out of this hell. Once she healed me, I could give her gold, freedom, send her far away from all of this.

The thought surprised me.

Around noon, Phoebe returned from the kitchens, her face even more grim. The food on the tray was not just thin, it was spoiled, giving off a sour, nauseating smell.

Haven took one look at it, said nothing and had Phoebe throw it away. They shared the last of their own dry bread.

I lay with my eyes closed, listening to their hushed conversation.

Phoebe was worried. Haven was reassuring her.

"Don't be afraid," I heard Haven say. "This afternoon, I'm going to deliver a 'gift' to Mrs. Villarreal."

Her voice was quiet, but I could hear the ice underneath. My curiosity grew. What was this seemingly delicate woman planning?

In the afternoon, I sensed Haven stand up. She said to Phoebe, "Bring that tray of spoiled food from noon. Come with me."

Phoebe's voice trembled. "My lady, where are you going?"

"To the kitchens," Haven's voice held a hint of a cold smile. "No, to the servants' dining hall. I imagine Mrs. Villarreal is enjoying a rather luxurious lunch right about now."

I heard them leave the room. In the darkness, where no one could see, the corner of my mouth tilted up in a slight, grim smile.

The show was about to begin. I would continue my "slumber" and see just how big of a surprise she could deliver.

