

Chapter 17

Haven Kramer POV:

We returned to our room with a tray laden with roasted chicken, fresh bread, and vegetable stew.

Phoebe was still flushed with excitement. "My lady, you were magnificent! Their jaws were on the floor!" she chattered, her eyes bright.

I set a portion of nutrient-rich stew and mashed vegetables by the bed for Demetri.

The food problem was solved for now, but I knew it was a temporary victory. Trusting the goodwill of an enemy was the height of foolishness. I couldn't be sure Mrs. Villarreal wouldn't stoop to poisoning our food.

After Phoebe had eaten, I called her to a corner of the room.

"Phoebe," I said in a low voice, "you felt good about what happened in the dining hall, didn't you?"

She nodded enthusiastically. "Of course! That old witch deserved it!"

I shook my head. "That was just a stopgap. Remember when I had you tell Mrs. Villarreal that my family was sending representatives? Did you believe it?"

Phoebe paused, a flicker of uncertainty in her eyes. "Was it... not true?"

I looked at her, my expression serious. "Phoebe, I'm telling you this because you are the only one I can trust here. My father... he would be happy if I died in this place. No one from the Kramer family is ever coming to help us."

The color drained from Phoebe's face. She pressed a hand to her mouth, her eyes wide with fear.

"Then... what will we do?" she whispered, her voice trembling.

"We will rely on ourselves," I said, placing a reassuring hand on her shoulder. I laid out my plan. "I need our own kitchen. A place completely under our control, where no one else can interfere."

Phoebe stared at me. "But... how? Mrs. Villarreal will never allow it."

"Her permission is irrelevant." I took out a small velvet pouch containing the last of my personal money. "Tomorrow, I want you to speak with Silas, the butler." I gave her detailed instructions. "Tell him I require a small cooking setup installed in the antechamber of this suite. A portable magic-crystal stove, pots, pans. Have him purchase them in the city. Use this money, and charge any extra to my account."

As an Alpha's mate, I had rights to the family's funds. A man as shrewd as Silas would know that.

"Will he do it?" Phoebe asked, still hesitant.

"He will," I said with confidence. "For him, it's a small task that earns my favor and a chance to skim from the purchase. He has no reason to refuse."

I explained that a private kitchen was the only way to ensure the food and medicinal broths for Demetri were completely safe.

As Phoebe listened, the fear in her eyes was replaced by a look of steely determination. She understood that I wasn't acting on impulse; I was carefully building a fortress for our survival.

"I understand, my lady! I'll go to Mr. Reynolds first thing in the morning," she said, nodding firmly.

With the plan in place, a wave of exhaustion washed over me. I went to the bed to check on Demetri. He was still "asleep," his breathing even. I tucked the blanket around him and turned to go to the sofa.

As I moved away, I felt a faint tug on the hem of my dress. I looked back, my heart skipping a beat.

Demetri's hand had slipped out from under the blanket. His fingers were curled, snagged on the fabric of my skirt.

Was it an unconscious movement in his sleep, or... was it another test?

I stood perfectly still for a long moment. He made no other move.

Carefully, I gently worked the fabric free from his grasp.

I lay down on the sofa and closed my eyes, but sleep wouldn't come.

This man was like a sleeping predator. I could never know when he would open his eyes and bare his fangs.