

Chapter 18

Demetri Contreras POV:

I had "slept" through the night

In truth, I had barely slept at all. The woman's words kept replaying in my mind.

"We will rely on ourselves."

She was smarter than I had anticipated. And more alone. The Kramer family had truly cast her aside.

Her caution last night when she freed her dress from my hand was not lost on me. She didn't trust me.

Good. A woman who trusted too easily wouldn't have survived this long.

In the morning the maid Phoebe left the room. I knew she was off to execute Haven's "kitchen plan."

It was just the two of us in this room now. The silence was thick.

I decided it was time to end my "slumber." I let out a low groan and slowly opened my eyes.

Haven was at my bedside instantly. Her gaze was purely professional as she checked my pupils and color.

"You're awake," she said.

It was a statement, not a question.

"The... thing on my face..." I began, my voice a dry rasp, lifting a hand as if to touch the bandages.

"Don't touch it," she said, catching my hand. "The wound is delicate."

I looked at her, a flicker of mockery in my blue eyes. "What's wrong? After 0.0%

12:57 

staring at my disgusting face all yesterday, you haven't had enough?"

I was testing her again, trying to find a crack in her icy composure.

She sighed, a sound of pure exasperation, as if dealing with a petulant child. "Demetri, can we please skip this part? I don't care about your face. I care about your life. Is that so difficult to understand?"

She used my name, not my title. The intimacy of it was startling, yet her tone was all business.

My test had failed again. This woman was impenetrable.

She brought over a bowl of warm broth. "Time to eat."

I glanced at the bowl and wrinkled my nose in disgust. The long-term silver poisoning had destroyed my appetite and sense of taste. The thought of food was nauseating.

"Take it away," I said coldly.

"You have to eat," she insisted.

"I said, take it away!"

I swiped my hand, knocking the bowl from her grasp. The ceramic shattered on the floor. Hot broth splashed across the back of her hand, turning the skin an angry red.

She looked at her scalded hand, her expression unreadable. She said nothing simply kneeling to pick up the broken pieces.

An unfamiliar, sharp feeling—one I could only name as guilt—lanced through my chest.

After cleaning up the mess, she stood and faced me. "I know you have no appetite. It's a side effect of the silver poisoning. But if you don't get nutrition, your body will collapse long before the poison kills you."

She wasn't scolding me. She was stating a medical fact.

I stared at her, silent. A war raged inside me. The part of me that craved vengeance needed strength. The part of me tortured by this broken body just wanted to give up.

Haven seemed to see the conflict in my eyes. "When I have my own kitchen," she said suddenly, "I'll make you a black pepper steak. Medium-rare, with rosemary and butter, so juicy it melts in your mouth. How does that sound?"

My throat tightened. It had been so long... so long since I had even thought about the taste of real food. But the image she painted was vivid, tantalizing.

She saw the flicker of interest in my eyes. "All you have to do is cooperate. Eat your food, take your medicine. Once your digestive system has recovered a little, I'll make it for you."

She was like a devil, tempting me with a forbidden fruit.

I looked at her. This was our first real negotiation. My cooperation in exchange for a steak.

It was absurd. And... incredibly tempting.

