

Chapter 25

Haven Kramer POV:

Phoebe and I walked down the corridor toward the east wing of the main house. The carpets here were thicker, the tapestries on the walls more ornate. ☹

"My lady, Mrs. Villarreal lives in the finest suite in the manor, even more luxurious than the Alpha's," Phoebe whispered, her voice tight with indignation.

I nodded. It didn't surprise me. A parasite would naturally hoard the best for itself.

We arrived at a massive pair of oak doors. Two maids stood guard. I recognized one of them, Holly Hicks, the same girl who had been fanning Mrs. Villarreal in the dining hall.

Holly saw me and immediately lifted her chin, looking down her nose at us. "Stop! This is Mrs. Villarreal's private residence. Not just any cat or dog can enter."

From inside, we could hear Mrs. Villarreal's booming voice, berating someone.

Inside the room, Mrs. Villarreal was reclining on a velvet chaise lounge while a maid knelt, massaging her plump calves. She was feeling much better today. The spoiled food had given her a nasty bout of diarrhea for a few days, but she was convinced it was just an accident. Now, she was plotting her revenge against that insolent Haven Kramer. ☹

"That bitch dares to ask for Dragon's Blood Resin? Who does she think she is? The Moon Goddess?" Mrs. Villarreal spat at Holly. ☹

"You're right, madam. She's just a jinx cast out by her family, living here

on the Alpha's pity," Holly's voice, though muffled by the door, dripped with sycophantic praise. ②

Mrs. Villarreal grunted in satisfaction. "Go. Tell the kitchens that from now on, not even scraps are to be sent to the west wing. Let's see how many days she can last without food."

Just then, Holly's sharp voice cut through the air from outside the door. Mrs. Villarreal frowned, annoyed. "Who is making such a racket out there?" ③

The doors were pushed open. I walked in, Phoebe close behind me. Holly tried to block my path, but one cold look from me made her flinch and step back.

Mrs. Villarreal shot up from her chaise lounge as if she'd been stung. "You! Who let you in? Get out!"

Her suite was the pinnacle of gaudy luxury. Thick animal furs covered the floor, and the air was heavy with the scent of expensive incense, a stark contrast to Demetri's cold, sterile sickroom.

I surveyed the room, a cold smile touching my lips. "Mrs. Villarreal, I've come to collect what I need."

"What you need?" She laughed as if it were the funniest joke she'd ever heard. "There's nothing for you here! Let me tell you, Haven Kramer, don't think you can throw your weight around just because you've climbed into the Alpha's bed!"

Her words were venomous, designed to humiliate. Phoebe turned white with rage and started to step forward, but I stopped her with a raised hand.

Arguing with this fool was a waste of breath.

I pulled a folded piece of parchment from my pocket-my list of herbs. "The items on this list. I need them today."

Mrs. Villarreal snatched the list from my hand. Without even looking at it, she tore it into pieces and threw them into the air.

"I'll say it again, get out!" she shrieked, pointing a fat finger at the door, spittle flying from her lips. "Or I'll have the guards drag you out like a dead dog!"

She was certain the guards answered only to her. She was the queen of this manor.

The scraps of paper fluttered down like snow. One piece landed on my shoulder.

I reached up and gently plucked the fragment off, then I smiled.

It was a sweet, gentle smile that sent an inexplicable shiver down Mrs. Villarreal's spine.

"It seems, madam, that you are not willing to cooperate," I said softly, as if commenting on the weather.

"Cooperate? With you?" Mrs. Villarreal planted her hands on her wide hips, her face a mask of arrogant victory.

"Very well." I nodded. Then, from my sleeve, I produced a small, exquisitely carved silver box.

"Since you won't provide the medicine," I said, flipping open the lid, "I suppose I'll have to offer you a little gift of my own."



