

Chapter 37

Haven Kramer POV:

Mrs. Villarreal was unusually quiet for the next few days, which made me suspicious. A cornered, rabid dog doesn't give up that easily.

I told Phoebe to keep a close eye on the east wing.

This afternoon, I was in my lab observing my rabbits. One of them, injected with a micro-dose of the purified toxin, was already showing symptoms consistent with my diagnosis of Demetri: weakness in the hind legs, loss of appetite.

I was recording the data when the lab door was thrown open. Phoebe dragged a trembling maid inside.

It was Holly Hicks, one of Mrs. Villarreal's favorite sycophants.

"My lady! I caught her!" Phoebe's face was indignant. "I found her sneaking around outside the lab, trying to listen and peek through the crack in the door!"

The moment Holly saw me, she collapsed to the floor, babbling for mercy. "It wasn't me! It was the madam... Mrs. Villarreal forced me to come! She said if I didn't find out what you were doing, she wouldn't give me my 'antidote' for the day!"

I put down my pen and walked over to her, looking down at her from my full height.

"Oh? And what did she want you to find out?" I asked, my tone laced with amusement.

"She... she wanted to know if you were brewing some new poison... what you were doing with all these bottles and jars... and she wanted to know how the Alpha's condition really is..." Holly spilled everything like a bag of beans.

I see. Mrs. Villarreal still hadn't given up. She was still convinced I was using poison and was looking for proof.

A plan quickly formed in my mind.

"Phoebe, let her go," I said calmly.

Phoebe hesitated but released her grip.

I gave the pathetic woman on the floor a kind smile. "Go back and tell your mistress you saw nothing. The guards were too strict. Do you understand?"

Holly nodded frantically, almost banging her head on the floor. "I understand, I understand! I saw nothing"

"Good." I took a small vial and tipped a single white pill—a simple sugar pill—into my hand. I offered it to her. "This is your 'reward' for the day. Tell Mrs. Villarreal that as long as she behaves, I won't treat either of you poorly."

Holly snatched the sugar pill as if it were a priceless treasure and scrambled away.

Phoebe looked at me, confused. "My lady, why did you let her go? And give her the 'antidote'?"

I watched Holly's retreating back, the smile on my lips turning cold. "Because I need her to deliver the wrong message. I need her mistress to walk right into the trap I've set for her."

Phoebe still looked uncertain. She opened her mouth to ask more, then closed it.

I turned to her, reading the question on her face. "You're wondering why I don't just have her arrested and thrown out with the rest of them."

She nodded hesitantly. "Yes, my lady. We have the ledgers. We have proof of her theft. It would be so simple."

"Simple, yes. But not clean." I walked back to my bench, picking up a fresh sheet of parchment. "If I present those ledgers and have her dragged away, what do you think the servants will say?"

Phoebe thought for a moment. "That... that you're a harsh mistress who turned on the Alpha's own nursemaid the moment you got power?"

"Exactly." I looked at her. "And what do you think the Alpha himself would think somewhere deep down, when he hears that his wife disposed of his childhood nurse over some numbers on a page?"

Phoebe's eyes widened with understanding. "He would always wonder..."

"Whether I was telling the truth, or just clearing away someone I found inconvenient" I set the parchment down. "I don't want his trust to come with a shadow of doubt. I need him to see it for himself. To hear her accusations, watch her present her 'evidence,' and then watch it all

crumble in front of his own eyes. When he makes the judgment himself, there will be no room for second-guessing"

I paused, letting the weight of my next words settle. "And there's something else. In a few weeks, we leave for the Alpha King's summit. If Mrs. Villarreal is still here—even locked up, even powerless—she will find a way to cause trouble. A letter sent to the wrong person. A rumor whispered to a visiting dignitary. She has too many years of connections in this house to be truly harmless."

Phoebe's face went pale. "You think she would try to sabotage the Alpha at the summit?"

"I know she would. She has nothing left to lose." I picked up a mortar and began grinding a fresh batch of herbs. "So I need to destroy her completely. Not just remove her. Not just imprison her. I need her to stand before the Alpha, accuse me of murder, and be publicly proven a liar and a traitor. Once that happens, no one in this house will ever speak her name with sympathy again. No servant will dare pass messages for her. No visiting official will listen to her whispers. She becomes nothing."

Phoebe was silent for a long moment. Then she nodded slowly. "I understand now, my lady. You're not just punishing her. You're making sure she can never come back."

"Precisely." I returned to my lab bench. In addition to preparing Mrs. Villarreal's usual "inhibitor," I prepared another small paper packet. I filled it with harmless starch from the kitchen. The bait for my trap was ready.

Phoebe watched me work, her earlier confusion replaced by quiet resolve. "What do you need me to do?"

I handed her the starch packet. "First, I need you to spread a rumor. Tell the kitchen maids—casually, as if you're just complaining—that I've been spending so much time in the lab that I've been neglecting the Alpha's sickroom. That he's been left alone for hours at a time. That there are fewer guards on his door now than before."

Phoebe's brow furrowed. "But my lady, that makes you sound neglectful. And it's not even true—you check on him every hour."

"I know," I smiled. "That's exactly why it will get back to her. She'll think I've grown careless. That I'm so absorbed in my 'poison brewing' that I've left the Alpha vulnerable. She'll see an opportunity she can't resist."

Phoebe tucked the packet into her apron. "And the guards?"

"I'll reduce them to two at the main entrance tomorrow morning and

have them switched to the night shift so they're tired and slow. Just for one day. Long enough for her to get through." I met her eyes. "She needs to feel like she can reach him. If the way is too difficult, she might hesitate. I need her to charge in with confidence."

Phoebe nodded firmly. "I understand, my lady. I'll see to it."

She left to carry out her tasks. I turned back to the symptomatic rabbit.

From another vial, I drew up a dose of a clear liquid—a preliminary antagonist I had synthesized based on the toxin's components.

I slowly injected the medicine into the rabbit.

Now, all I had to do was wait. Wait to see if my antidote worked, and wait for the big fish, Mrs. Villarreal, to take the bait.

I needed her to cause a scene. The bigger, the better. Preferably right in front of Demetri.

She will come armed with her "proof," believing she's finally caught me. She will pour out every accusation she's been nursing for weeks. And when the doctor arrives and dismantles her claims one by one, Demetri will witness the truth with his own eyes.

He won't just be told that his nursemaid is a thief and a liar. He will see it. He will hear it from her own mouth. He will make the judgment himself.

And the entire household will watch. They will see what happens to those who try to harm the Alpha's mate. They will remember.

The next day, I delivered the "inhibitor" to Mrs. Villarreal as usual. But this time, I "accidentally" dropped the small paper packet on the floor.

After I left, I watched through the crack of the door as Mrs. Villarreal crawled on the floor like a dog and snatched up the packet. She opened it to find the white powder inside.

It was just harmless starch, but I knew that in her eyes, it was a deadly poison. It was the final straw, the signal for her to launch her grand attack.

Good. Take the bait. Come for me. The stage is set, and I've given you everything you need to hang yourself.

I turned away from the door and walked back toward the lab. Tomorrow would be a long day. But when it was over, this house would finally be clean.

