

## Chapter 46: Velvet, Venom, and Victory



The sky was slate gray again, swollen with a dampness that teased but refused to commit to rain. Late afternoon light filtered into Murkmire Manor. The greenhouse entrance loomed behind a rusted ironwork gate shaped with vines encircling human figures, their faces stretched in anguish.

The moment Rea cracked it open, the place exhaled like a compost heap that had been keeping secrets. Sweet rot, crushed leaves, and a little something that whispered, *You're delicious, darling, come and sit down.* The scent of venom was barely disguised.

She was headed to see Pota and Toma. They spent endless days in their private greenhouse, splicing genes in plants, generating new and deadly toxins. The Poison Twins focused largely on the deadly nightshade family, as both potatoes and tomatoes belonged to it. But no poisonous herb or flower was beyond their reach. Pota Toes even carried a small metal case, her *Mortis* tin, that she kept her deadly powders and vials in.

Rea stepped inside. The space was vast, cathedral-like, but wild. Jungle had replaced ordered rows. The stone paths had been overtaken by creeping groundcover, some of it pulsing faintly with color. Massive fan-leaved palms dripped condensation like sweat. Pitcher plants hung from the ceiling in rows, *Nepenthes hamata*, all serrated rims with death waiting inside. A pair twitched when she passed, catching her scent.

In the corner, a cluster of *Amorphophallus titanum* were beginning to bloom. The corpse flowers loomed like obscene totems, reeking of rot and defiance. Her nostrils flared. Something behind a fern hissed.

The deeper she went, the more the garden vibrated with intelligence. A stand of *Brugmansia* dripped its trumpet-like blooms beside a tangle of *Claviceps*-streaked

ryegrass, the mold spores faintly golden under the filtered glass. Further in, a plot of belladonna berries gleamed like lacquered obsidians, so perfect it hurt to look at them.

And there, at the heart of it all, framed by the wicked petals of a flowering *Aristolochia gigantea*, sat the twins.

Toma and Pota lounged like mirror curses in twin chaises. One wore rust-red velvet, the other pale mint silk. Their hair was oiled and pinned into coiled crowns, their faces flawless and unreadable. They looked like figures from the paintings of Peter Paul Reubens, the originator of the Rubenesque body type; lush, curvy, zoffig female forms.

“Well, well,” declared Pota, flicking dirt from her lace glove. “The List girl approaches. I suppose that makes this a quarantine zone.”

“Be careful, sister,” murmured Toma. “She has that look, you know, the one rabbits get when they decide they’re apex predators.” Grinning and giggling, the Twins were in their element.

Rea didn’t flinch. “I want to talk.”

The Poison Twins exchanged a devious glance. Amused, anticipating blood.

“Talking,” Pota purred, “is usually foreplay-“

“-for pleading,” Toma finished.

“-Or betrayal,” Pota added, voice like cooled syrup. “Which one are we indulging in today?”

“Neither,” replied Rea. “I’m not here to beg. I’m not here to accuse. I want to know who hated Stilet enough to poison her.” The air shifted. Their response came fast, sharp as a serpent’s bite.

“You think we’d kill our own grandmother?” Pota asked, her lips barely parting.

“She called us visionaries,” Toma hissed, eyes narrowing. “We were her chosen. She said we could change the world.”

“She said we had venom,” Pota corrected.

“She wasn’t wrong,” they agreed in unison.

Rea’s gaze moved to the garden beds. There was Monkshood with its hoods tilted like listening ears. Henbane wilted artfully beside a patch of red-spotted foxglove, its toxic bells vibrating ever so slightly in the draft. Clusters of pale wolfsbane pushed up against the glass, hungry for sun they would never need. She felt the plants here were less dangerous than their growers.

“You cultivate killers,” she announced.

“We curate survival,” Toma corrected. “Ingested or inhaled, depending on the guest.”

“But if we’d killed Stilet,” Pota added with a sly smile, “she wouldn’t have died quietly.”

“No,” sighed Toma, sounding dreamy, “she would’ve bloomed.”

“We would have made her a martyr to molecular elegance.”

“She’d have gone out singing in her blood.” Pota’s face was ecstatic.

“She would have thanked us.”

The words landed like thorns, pointed and deliberate. The Poison Twins would never have settled for a simple death Rea realized. It would have been an epic scene, just as they described.

Rea stepped forward anyway. “You always looked down on the rest of us,” she accused. A hidden treefrog nearby peeped in agreement.

“No,” sighed Toma. “We looked through you.”

“Because there was so little to obstruct the view,” Pota chided gently, like a mother might say about a defect that was ‘unfortunate.’

Rea’s jaw clenched. “You thought I was stupid.”

“No,” Toma sneered, “We thought you were... ornamental.”

“Now you’re intrusive,” Pota added, rising to her feet. “Which is at least progress.” She giggled.

Rea took one step closer. “I’m not ornamental anymore. I’m not quiet and I’m not afraid.” One of the hanging *Nepenthes* snapped shut above them, startling a crow-sized butterfly. In the sudden silence, the twins studied her. Rea didn’t blink.

“She’s bolder than she used to be,” giggled Toma.

“That’s inconvenient,” tsked Pota.

“But interesting,” they both agreed, in singsong unison.

Rea turned and walked away, unbothered by the hearty laughter from the Twins. Behind her, the gate groaned shut with a sound like something trying not to scream.

She didn’t look back. The Thorn Garden receded behind her. She hadn’t been welcomed, but this time she hadn’t bled. That counted as a victory.