

Chapter 20

Haven Kramer POV:

Late at night, Demetri woke from a restless sleep. I noticed that his furrowed brow had eased slightly, and his breathing was steadier than before—as if the burning pain within him had lessened somewhat.

He opened his eyes, and his gaze fell upon me, sitting in the chair by the bedside. In the dim candlelight, I was busy sketching something on a piece of parchment. My profile was focused, my long eyelashes casting shadows across my cheeks. He made no sound, merely watching me. For the first time, his mind was not consumed by thoughts of revenge, but filled with curiosity about me.

I sensed his gaze and looked up.

"You're awake," I said, setting down my quill. "Good. There are things we need to discuss."

I walked to his bedside, holding a small porcelain bottle in my hand.

"This is a new medicine I've prepared for you," I told him. "The pack healers' remedies are too weak. They can keep you alive, but they cannot heal you. You need something stronger."

His eyes narrowed, instantly sharp and suspicious. "You prepared it?" His voice was laced with distrust. "How do I know this isn't poison?"

This was the critical moment. I had to earn his most basic trust. I looked directly into his eyes and decided to take a risk—to tell him part of the truth.

"Demetri, I am no weak, ignorant noble girl," I said slowly.

He raised an eyebrow, silently inviting me to continue.

"My mother, Elara Beaumont," I said, a lump forming in my throat at the mention of the name, "was ill for many years before she passed. To care for her, I spent most of my childhood reading medical texts and learning from many healers. My knowledge of herbalism may run even deeper than Healer Sullivan's."

It was a plausible lie—a story that could explain my skills without revealing the impossible truth.

Demetri studied my face, weighing my words. I didn't give him time to overthink I pulled out the stopper, poured some of the dark brown liquid into my palm, and, right before his eyes, licked it clean.

A bitter and pungent taste exploded on my tongue. I suppressed the urge to gag, forced myself to swallow, and kept my expression perfectly neutral. Demetri's pupils dilated in shock. He had never expected me to prove it this way.

Testing the medicine on oneself was the most direct, primal, and effective way to build trust.

"Now do you believe I'm not trying to poison you?" I asked, my mouth still twitching from the awful taste.

He stared at me, a storm churning in his icy blue eyes—shock, suspicion and something else... something I couldn't read.

"This medicine will purge the toxins from your body and repair your damaged intestines. Your appetite will gradually return," I explained. "This is the first and most crucial step of the treatment."

I held the bottle out to him. "The choice is yours. You can trust me, and we can work together to get you back on your feet. Or you can continue taking those useless potions and lie in this bed waiting to die."

My words were cruel, but they were true. I placed the decision entirely in his hands.

Demetri stared at the bottle as if it held his entire future within it. The room fell silent, save for the crackling of the candle flame.

After a long moment, in the thick tension, he extended a trembling hand and took the bottle from me. He didn't drink it immediately. He looked at me, his voice hoarse and dry. "Why?"

"Because I need a powerful ally who can protect me," I answered honestly, "and you need a healer who can keep you alive. This is a transaction, Demetri."

