

Chapter 21

Haven Kramer POV:

"This is a transaction, Demetri." I held the small porcelain bottle out to him, my hand steady despite the frantic beating of my heart.

His ice-blue eyes stared at me, trying to peel back the layers of my soul. He took the bottle, his fingers brushing against mine. The contact was brief, but a jolt, like static electricity, shot up my arm. He didn't drink. He just rubbed his thumb over the cool ceramic.

He leaned back against the headboard, his weakness a physical shroud, but the authority in his gaze was undiminished. "A transaction?" he repeated, his voice a low, rasping sound thick with mockery. "What does a wolfless outcast, thrown away by her own family, have to trade with me?"

His words were meant to sting, to remind me of my place. I met his gaze without flinching.

"The fact that I am the only person who can keep you alive."

A humorless laugh escaped his lips, a dry, rattling sound. His eyes dropped to the palm of my hand, where a faint smear of the dark liquid remained. "And you're not afraid I'll drag you to the grave with me?"

I took a step closer, leaning toward his sickbed, my voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "If you wanted to die, you wouldn't have held on this long. The hatred in your eyes burns hotter than any fire I've ever seen. An Alpha with a score to settle doesn't give up his life so easily."

That hit its mark. The mockery in his eyes froze, replaced by a flicker of stunned surprise.

I pressed my advantage. "I don't care who your enemies are. I just want to live. I heal you, I get your protection, and then I leave. Our goals don't conflict."

He fell silent. The only sound in the room was his heavy, strained breathing. Seconds stretched into an eternity. A cold sweat trickled down my back. I had laid all my cards on the table.

Just as I thought he would refuse, his hand moved. He lifted the bottle

and pulled the stopper out with his teeth.

Without another moment of hesitation, he tipped his head back and drank the entire contents. The dark, bitter-smelling liquid was gone in a single, desperate swallow. His throat worked, a ripple of muscle in his pale neck. It was the action of a man with nothing left to lose.

The boulder of anxiety in my chest dissolved, but I didn't let my relief show. I just watched him, my expression unreadable.

He finished the potion and let the empty bottle drop from his fingers. It clattered onto the bedside table. He closed his eyes, his face tight as he processed the medicine's immediate, foul taste. When he opened them again, his gaze was sharper than before.

"You said you learned medicine to care for your sick mother?" he asked suddenly. His tone was flat, the question of a judge not a patient.

My heart gave a lurch, but my face remained a calm mask. "Yes. My mother, Elara Beaumont, was a herbalist. I carry on her work and study her books." I repeated the story I had prepared, the one that was true enough to be believable.

A strange, unreadable curve touched his lips. "Is that so?"

He reached under his pillow and pulled something out. It was a smooth, black stone, about the size of my palm, with silver veins flowing like liquid light across its surface.

My pupils contracted. A Mind-Link Stone. An impossibly rare and expensive tool for long-distance communication in the werewolf world.

He pressed the stone to his temple and closed his eyes. The silver lines pulsed with a soft, ethereal glow.

My stomach plummeted. This man, who I thought was trapped and isolated in this bed, had his own network. He had eyes and ears outside this room. He was verifying my story. Right now.

I forced myself to stand still, to breathe evenly, waiting for the verdict. Each second felt like a century.

After a few minutes that felt like a lifetime, he lowered the stone. The light within it faded. He opened his eyes. The storm in their icy depths had calmed, but they were still as deep and unreadable as a frozen lake.

He had heard the report from his loyal Beta, a man code-named 'Slate'. Alpha, verification complete. The target's history matches her claims. Her mother, Elara Beaumont, is indeed a documented herbalist with a history of practicing in several territories.



He looked at me, his expression complex. "Your story is... convincing"

I had won the first round. My cover story was seamless because it was the truth of the body I now inhabited.

He held out his hand. It wasn't an attack, or a dismissal. It was an invitation.

"From this day on," he said, his voice still rough but stripped of its earlier mockery, "my life is in your hands." The words were a cold, hard declaration.

I didn't take his hand. I simply nodded. "A wise choice."

I turned away to gather my things, already planning the next phase of treatment. My real plan could finally begin.

"I will need certain things," I said, my back to him, testing the waters again. "The housekeeper may not be cooperative."

His voice came from behind me, calm and certain. "Make a list. Everything you need will be at your door by morning."