

## Chapter 31

Demetri Contreras POV:

The sound of the carriage wheels crunching on the gravel faded.

It faded until the wind swallowed the last of it. The room was left with a silence that felt heavier than stone.

She was gone.

Gone to that town, Oak Creek.

It was my decision. I was the one who mind-linked Silas, ordering him to arrange it. A rational voice in my head told me this was necessary. She needed supplies.

But another, darker part of me didn't care about reason.

Time turned thick and slow. The ticking of the clock on the wall was a hammer striking my nerves with every second.

An hour passed. She should be in town by now.

Two hours. She was probably haggling with a shopkeeper. I'd seen how sharp she was.

Three hours. My breathing grew uneven. A familiar anxiety, a crawling sensation under my skin, began to return. This was the first time she had been gone this long since her treatments began.

I tried to close my eyes, to force myself to rest. But the darkness only showed me images of my own powerlessness. Me, trapped in this bed, while she, my only hope, was out of my sight.

No. She was different. She made a deal with me. She needed me as an ally. I repeated the words to myself like a weak mantra.

Lunch arrived. A maid I didn't recognize brought in a bowl of rich broth and bread. She placed it on the bedside table and left without a word. This was the new order Haven had established.

I had no appetite.

The food smelled good, but my stomach felt like it was filled with a block of ice.

The light outside began to fade. The setting sun painted the room in an ominous, bloody red.

She wasn't back.

Why wasn't she back? The thought was a poison seed, sprouting wildly in my mind. Was she delayed? Or had she decided I was no longer useful?

After all, who would want to be tied to a monster with rotting flesh and useless legs? She already had the power she wanted.

A wave of furious rage, at her and at my own pathetic state, seized me.

I swept my arm out, knocking the untouched bowl of broth from the table.

The ceramic shattered with a piercing crack.

Soup and shards sprayed across the floor. I gasped for air, but the suffocating tightness in my chest only grew worse.

A mad impulse took me. I wanted to struggle out of bed, to crawl, to drag my useless body to the door and wait for her. But my legs, my damned, dead legs, were just heavy weights attached to my hips.

Helplessness washed over me like a cold tide. I fell back against the pillows, staring blankly at the ceiling.

So be it. If she was truly gone, then so be it. I closed my eyes, letting myself sink into a cold, empty darkness.

I don't know how long I lay there. Just as the darkness was about to swallow me whole, I heard the door creak open.

My heart stopped.

I didn't dare open my eyes. I was afraid it was a hallucination.

Then a familiar scent drifted over me. Herbs and something like a forest after rain. It was her.

"Demetri?" Her voice was soft, laced with the weariness of travel.

I snapped my eyes open. She was standing by my bed, Phoebe just behind her. She had taken off her traveling cloak, and the candlelight cast a soft glow on her face.

She was back. She had actually come back.

Her eyes flickered to the mess on the floor. Her brow furrowed slightly, but she didn't say anything. Instead, she reached into a basket Phoebe was carrying and took out something wrapped in cloth.

She unwrapped it, and a warm, comforting aroma of spices and baked

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 +120 Points at most

bread filled the air. "I figured you didn't eat. There's a new bakery in town. I brought you some fresh herb bread."

She looked at me, her face tired, but a small, genuine curve touched her lips. A smile.

In that instant, the block of ice in my chest shattered. A warmth I hadn't felt in years flooded through me, chasing away all the cold and the darkness.

I opened my mouth to say something but my throat was too dry.

In the end, I just looked at her. And with all the strength I had, I smiled back. A real smile, one I thought I was no longer capable of.

She saw it and seemed to freeze, a flicker of surprise in her eyes.



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