

**TWENTY-TWO**

## ESMERAY

My hands were curled into fists as I made my way to the dining table with Smythe leading the way, and it had nothing to do with how uncomfortable I felt with what I was wearing, or the many eyes that were fixed on me. Everyone looked on as we passed, whispering amongst themselves and some even pointing at me without making any efforts to hide it. Many looked on with admiration and envy and some with scorn. Others, it was hard to place their expressions. But my thoughts were in no way connected to my present surroundings. My thoughts were with Prince Draven.

He was still with Heather. It wasn't any of my business but I couldn't help but wonder what they were up to. Heather was pretty, a royal from a noble background, and there was no denying the bond the both of them shared. I was a nobody, definitely not a match for a man of his status. But why did I feel uncomfortable that they'd been together for the last hour? He wants me to put up a good show but is Smythe supposed to be the one showing me to the table?

I bet he is having a good time with Heather. I may be pretending to be his mate, but I wasn't his true mate, and he could be with any woman of his choice if he wanted. Not like he gave me a choice but I probably should never have agreed to this in the first place. Was I even good at acting? Even clad in this expensive attire, it still felt like anybody will take one look at me and realise I was a traitor, a dirty omega. No matter how many times I was cleaned or the amount of expensive fragrance I was adorned with, I'd always be filthy. The glances and side talks said it all. I couldn't even walk properly in heels. My feet were already hurting after a few steps. How long could I really act this out?

We finally got to the dining hall and my eyes did a quick sweep of the room. Expensive furniture carved to perfection and an air of royalty surrounding it. There were twelve chairs in total surrounding the table. One at the head, another at the end, and five chairs each on both sides facing each other. This isn't the king's royal table. The Royal table was only used on special occasions, but the former king had his private meals there. Since he died, no one ever dined there.

Prince Duron was already seated along with Vadirr and a third guy I didn't know. To Vadirr's right is a brunette who had her eyes on me and her face set in a smug smile. Three guards stationed at three different corners of the dining room, and the chef not too far behind. The table was already set and it's obvious they'd been waiting for the first Prince.

"You look amazing," Duron spoke first, and just as I was going to respond, I felt a chill run down my spine and the atmosphere grow tense. Everyone turned at once, and I swallowed hard as my eyes met the Prince Draven's. He'd changed his clothing and his hair was combed neatly to the back, making his cheekbones even more prominent.

He snuck his hands around my waist as soon as he was close enough and pulled me closely to him till there was no space between us. I shivered visibly, resisting the urge to cower as I was aware of all the other eyes staring at us.

"Dra-ven," I tried not to stutter, but I couldn't help it. The slight crease of his eyebrows told me I was doing a bad job. I tried to force a smile, but he leaned back and unexpectedly took my lips in his for a quick kiss.

My fists tightened, and I felt my toes curl as a wave of shock and excitement passed through me. It was just a slight graze of the lips but I didn't need to look into a mirror to know I was as red as a tomato. I pressed my thighs together to keep me from falling, and if he wasn't

holding me, maybe I would have.

"Mine," it was a simple word, but his possessiveness unnerved me. While his eyes still remained passive, his voice was domineering, declaring to everyone present that I was his. My wolf perked up as she started to pant in my head. I felt a wave of emotions all at once and for that second, I longed to know how it felt to be really his, to have a mate as powerful as Prince Draven, to have him kiss me like that and declare to the whole world that I was his everyday of my life.

He looked away then and pulled out a chair for me while I avoided the eyes of the others present and pretend like I didn't know that I looked like a marshmallow.

"Congratulations, Draven," the female next to Vadirr smiled as Draven took his seat at the head of the table. She used his first name and Draven didn't seem uncomfortable with it so that had to mean that they were close. Was she one of the women Abigail mentioned? She was pretty, but unlike Heather, she didn't stare at me with hatred.

"Thank you, Scarlett," he nodded in her direction, picking up his cutlery and the others followed suite. The chef was still standing a few feet behind Prince Draven, and she looked scared. I'd not noticed that look on her face before Prince Draven entered, and when Draven took his first spoon and furrowed his brow, I understood why she had the look on her face. Draven didn't have to say the words, but from the look on his face, he wasn't a fan of her cooking.

"I should fire you," he says without bringing his head to look at her.

"I ma - de it just how - you like," she stuttered, her eyes watering.

"Come on, Draven, it's not that bad," Scarlett chipped in, wiping the sides of her mouth. Draven glared at Scarlett who just shrugged and

continued to eat. I ate in silence, glancing occasionally at Scarlett and imitating her poise and the way she ate, but making sure no one noticed. Luckily for the chef, Draven didn't say anything more about the meal.

"So are you going to introduce us to your mate?" the third guy finally spoke, picking his words carefully. Draven rested his left hands on my knee, and my fork dropped to the plate in a clatter at the action. I picked it up awkwardly as all eyes turned on me again.

"Ramsey, this is my mate like you already know. Her name is Esmeray," he glanced from me to Ramsey and then back again "Esme, Ramsey is one of the royal Lycans here. As time goes on, You'll get to know each other better," he says coldly. Why was I getting a feeling that he hated making these introductions?

"The moon goddess rewarded you with a really pretty mate, Draven," Ramsey smiled at me. A low growl erupted from Draven's chest and Ramsey chuckled, leaning back in his seat "I'm just complementing a beautiful lady Draven! I'm not trying to take her away from you," he said, stifling a chuckle.

"Thank you Ramsey," I smiled awkwardly, but Draven's brows were furrowed in a deep frown, his eyes not smiling.

He's just acting. Of course he had to make it look believable and here I was, all flustered at his act.

"She already met Duron and Vadirr," he continued, "Scarlett is Vadirr's mate,"

I felt a kind of relief when he informed me, I'm not certain why. But I'm sure the relief was evident on my face because all three men apart from Draven smiled and Scarlett chuckled lightly.

"You have nothing to be afraid of," she leaned over to plant a kiss on Vadirr's cheeks "There'll be plenty females fighting you for your mate, but I'm not one of them. I'm too smitten by mine," she looked up dreamily at Vadirr who brushed a hand over her hair playfully, and both chuckled. He winked and kissed her slightly on the lips.

A small smile played on my lips as I watched them. This is how mates were supposed to be. This is how Zayden was supposed to love me. I pursed my lips and moved my eyes back to the food in front of me and all of a sudden, my appetite was gone.

"When are you introducing her to the other members of the royal household? Everyone is dying to meet your mate," Prince Duron asked. Duron knew I wasn't his brother's mate, but he was acting along too. He wanted his brother to be king just as much as Prince Draven wanted it, so he'd put up a good act, just like the first Lycan Prince was doing now.

"Soon. I have waited for her for too long. It's only fair that I have some time with her first before pushing her to the public. Or don't you think so, little mate?" he turned to me and quirked one brow.

I nodded my head a little too fast, not expecting the question. He smirked and turned back to his meal.