Chapter 10

Mira's POV

My afternoon classes were in the south building — shifter-heavy, no vampires, no one who'd seen the cafeteria performance. For two hours I was just Mira again. I took notes on pack governance structures. I ate a granola bar from the bottom of my bag. I breathed.

I'd changed into a plain black long-sleeve and the same jeans from this morning, because my hoodie had somehow gotten hot chocolate on the cuff yesterday and I hadn't noticed until third period. Not that it mattered. Nobody in Advanced Shiter History cared what I was wearing. 5

By the time classes ended, I'd almost convinced myself the day was going to be normal from here on. 1

Then I remembered the lecture.

It was a public talk — open to the whole school, held in the big auditorium on the east side of campus. Professor Owen Blackwood, visiting from some university up north. The topic was cross-species biology and Medicine, which was the one subject I actually cared about. I'd had it marked in my calendar for two weeks. 2

I'd forgotten that "open to the whole school" meant open to vampires too. 1

I saw Damon the second I reached the auditorium doors.

He was leaning against the wall with his hands in his jacket pockets, Felix and Nikolai nowhere in sight. Just him. Alone. Like he'd been waiting. 2

So were a lot of other people who hadn't been in the cafeteria at lunch but had clearly heard. I felt them clock us — two students by the door going quiet, a girl lifting her phone, a group of freshmen whispering.

We were supposed to say hello. That was the deal. Act like a couple when anyone might be watching.

I walked up to him and said, "Hi," in a voice so wooden it could have been furniture.

Damon's eyes flicked upward. The smallest possible eye-roll.

Then he stepped forward, slid his arm around the back of my neck like he'd done it a thousand times, and steered me through the doors.

"Come on," he said, low, close to my ear. "And work on your acting. That was painful."

His arm was heavy across my shoulders. Cool. Certain. Like this was something he did — walked through rooms with a girl tucked against him, ignoring every head that turned.

The auditorium was full. Nearly every row packed, people standing against the back wall, a murmur of conversation that dropped three notches when we came down the center aisle. Heads turned. Whispers ran along the rows like a current. Damon wasn't trying to be subtle. He was the opposite of subtle.

There were reporters here too. I could tell by the lanyards, the cameras propped on knees, the way a few of them sat up straighter when they saw Damon. One of them murmured to another and nodded toward us. A camera lifted.

I realized, with a small jolt, that they were surprised Damon had a

girlfriend — but they didn't seem to know I wasn't a vampire. My skin was pale enough. My hair was dark. I didn't look like what most people pictured when they thought of a wolf girl. To them I was just someone on the Lord's son's arm.

For now. Until someone asked.

At the front, an older man in a tweed blazer was setting up a projector — Professor Blackwood, I assumed. He had white hair, round glasses, and the kind of energy that suggested he'd already made three jokes to the audiovisual technician. He was a vixen shifter, according to the flyer. A fox. One of the few shifters with a research position at a real university.

Cross-species biology. The exact field I wanted to study. The exact future I was building toward — the one where I got out of the pack and made something of myself that nobody could take away.

For a minute, I almost forgot about the performance. Almost forgot about Damon's arm across my shoulders and the cameras and the deal. I was just a student who cared about a subject and wanted a good seat.

Then the room filled up. And kept filling.

The room was packed. By the time we got to the front The room was packed. By the time we got to the front section, there were no two seats together anywhere. Every pair of empty chairs had a bag or jacket thrown across one of them.

"We can sit apart," I said, already turning. "It's fine. I'll find something in the back — there's probably standing room."

Damon's hand closed around my wrist before I could take a step.

"Look around," he said quietly. "Look at how everyone else is sitting."

I looked.

In the crowded rows near the front, where seats had run out, girls were perched on their boyfriends' laps. Squeezed two into one chair, legs draped over armrests, arms around necks. It was that kind of crowd — a school event on a weeknight, everyone crammed in together, couples making do.

My stomach dropped.

No. Absolutely not. There was a very clear difference between walking next to someone and sitting on their lap in front of two hundred people and an entire row of cameras.

I turned back around. Damon had already taken the seat — the last single empty chair in the second row, right where the reporters could see. He looked up at me, one brow raised, and patted his thigh once.

My face went up in flames.

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