Chapter 11

Mira's POV

There was no way out of it.

Damon Voss had just invited me onto his lap in a packed auditorium, and if I said no — if I stood there and refused him in front of all these people — that would be the story. Not the lecture. Us. The wolf girl who turned down the Lord's son.

So I sat.

I perched on the edge of his knee, stiff as a board, every muscle in my body trying to take up as little space as possible. I could feel the eyes on us. More phones came up.

Across the aisle and a few rows back, Alyssa sat with Jason. I didn't have to look to know she was watching. I could feel the heat of it. I kept my eyes forward and tried to ignore all of it.

The lecture was about cross-species medicine.

It was the thing I cared about most in the world. The one subject that made me feel like I might have a future that belonged to me. I knew what I was in this pack. An outsider, a foundling, a girl whose only real link to belonging had been Jason — and that was gone now, kissed away on a frozen ceremony field two months ago.

But medicine didn't care whose daughter you were. If I could learn enough, get good enough, I could work anywhere. Support myself anywhere. Walk out of here someday and never depend on a single person who looked at me like I didn't belong.

So I listened. I really listened. I forgot the phones and the whispers and Alyssa's stare. I forgot, somewhere in there, that I was sitting on Damon Voss's lap at all.

When I finally glanced sideways, I caught something I didn't expect.

Damon was taking notes.

Actual notes, in small neat handwriting, his head tipped toward the stage. He was listening too. He looked genuinely interested. For a second he didn't look like the most feared boy in school. He just looked like someone who wanted to understand something.

I faced front again before he caught me looking.

The professor — Professor Owen Blackwood, an older man with a sharp grin, a vixen shifter — opened the floor for questions. A student near the front asked about the risks of cross-species mating. Aftereffects. Complications.

"Survival's rarely the issue these days," Blackwood said. "Two species can almost always have a healthy child. The mystery is what comes after." He spread his hands. "Hybrids. Their abilities, their growth, the way their bodies respond to things — much of it is still unknown. We're collecting cases as fast as we can, but every hybrid writes a new page."

Something about the word hybrid sat oddly in my chest. I didn't know why.

"Let's see who we've got tonight." Blackwood shaded his eyes against the lights, scanning the room, cheerful. "Cross-species couples — how many do we have? Wolf and lion?"

A couple of hands. A few laughs.

"Wolf and bear?"

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"And — " he chuckled at his own joke " — vampires and shifters? Anyone? No, of course not. That pairing's practically a myth. Doesn't happen." 2

The laughter died into a silence, and then, slowly, every head in the auditorium turned the same direction.

Toward us.

My stomach went cold. I turned too, looking up at Damon. We'd agreed this was for our reputations — but this was a room full of reporters and cameras. Did he really want this on the record? Did he really want to —

Damon's right hand was still writing, finishing a note. 2

His left hand was already in the air.

In the front rows, the reporters began to stand, lifting their cameras.

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