Chapter 14

Okay. It was fine. It was acting. That's all it was.

Damon's POV

"All right," Felix said the second we went through the door to a small seminar room. "What in the world was that?"

"You're not actually doing this." Nikolai's voice was flat. Disbelieving. "Tell me you're not actually dating a wolf."

I kept walking. Hands in my pockets, pace unhurried. Let them scramble to keep up.

I didn't see the point in lying to them. They were the only people I didn't have to perform for — the inner circle, the ones who'd been at my side since primary school.

"It's not real," I said. "It's a deal. She needed cover, I needed good press." I let that land for a beat, then looked sideways at Felix. "Press I need because you can't stop shoving shifter kids into walls and getting filmed doing it."

Felix had the grace to look uncomfortable. His jaw tightened. "We didn't bully anyone. Those wolves cried to the media over nothing. You know how they exaggerate."

"Whatever it was," I said, "tone it down. The fake girlfriend only works if you stop generating headlines."

"Fine, fine." Tristan held up his hands, palms out. Surrender. Then, after a moment, his head tilted. "Why her, though? Out of every wolf in school — why that one? I heard she's a late shifter. Couldn't even shift at their...

What was that again? Mating ceremony?" He exchanged a look with Nikolai. "A weak one, even for wolves."

"She came to me," I said. "Walked right into it. Made it easy."

I didn't mention the kidnapping that happened when I was a kid. I promised to bring that wolf girl Mira out but failed. I went back the next day and asked servants to dig that whole place upside down but she was gone. I remember clearly how Mira once cheered me up in the pit until today and I'd known her face the first day I saw her again at school. And I couldn't help but kept watching her from a distance ever since I recognized her.

Those weren't good stories for a strong Vampire Lord's heir.

"Well," Felix said. He adjusted the collar of his jacket, casual, a smirk pulling at the corner of his mouth. "Good thing it's fake. Lucky little thing — gets to play at being yours for a year." He laughed, short and light. "She'd never actually deserve it."

Something twisted in my chest. Quick and sharp, like a wire pulled taut.

I didn't like the sound of it. Deserve. Like Mira was a commodity being priced. Like worth was something you measured by species and bloodline and pack rank, and she'd come up short on all three.

I didn't say anything.

The silence hung there for a second — just long enough that Felix glanced at me, checking. I kept my face neutral. He moved on.

"Just give us a heads-up next time," he said, oblivious to whatever had just flickered across my face. "Warn us before you go kissing wolves in front of cameras. We honestly thought you'd lost your mind."

"Noted," I said.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out. My father's name on the screen, the contact photo just the family crest — a black V bisected by a crown.

I held it up so they could see it, and I laughed.

"You two are ahead of the curve, at least," I said. "My own father doesn't even know yet."

I answered.

"Damon." His voice was low and furious, barely contained. "Explain to me. Right now. What in God's name I am looking at on every screen in this house."

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