

The Pack's Daughter

Chapter 1

Aysel's POV

The Moonlight Hall shimmered.

Wolves from every bloodline bowed in reverence, their breaths trembling as the drums of the Luna Ceremony thundered through the night.

And I stood at the center of it all-barefoot, veiled in white moon-silk, the sacred mark glowing faintly on my wrist.

In a few more breaths, I would speak the words that would bind my soul to Alpha Damon, heir of the Blackwood Pack-the strongest Alpha the eastern realm had seen in a century.

My voice would seal our bond.

My vow would crown me Luna.

And the entire pack would kneel to me.

But fate-no, my adopted sister Celestine Ward-always found a way to make me bleed.

"Aysel Vale," the High Priest intoned, his voice echoing through the marble arches. "Step forward, and swear before the Moon Goddess your vow to the Alpha."

I did.

The silk of my gown whispered against the floor as I faced Damon. His silver eyes caught mine, softer than I remembered, yet distant-as if I was something he'd already owned and forgotten.

"I, Aysel Vale-"

Bang!

The heavy oak doors of the Moonlight Hall burst open.

Knox Draven, heir of the Ironhowl Pack, stumbled in, breathless. "Celestine is hurt!" he shouted.

The words struck the room like lightning.

The chanting stopped.

The moonfire dimmed.

Even the goddess herself seemed to hold her breath.

At the altar's center, Damon froze. The ceremonial crown in his hands clattered to the floor, rolling to my feet.

"What did you say?" His voice was hoarse.

"Lady Vale just called," Knox gasped. "Celestine's been attacked by rogues. She's in the healers' ward. It's bad."

The hall erupted into gasps and whispers. The elders rose, the warriors stirred-but all I saw was Damon, already stepping down from the altar, already forgetting that his Luna stood before him.

Because Celestine Ward-the darling of my pack, the fragile, flawless adopted daughter-was hurt.

"Damon," I said softly, the single word catching in my throat.

He didn't even look at me.

I reached for him, fingers trembling beneath the veil. "You don't want to finish the ritual?"

He turned slightly, his eyes filled with something I used to mistake for tenderness. "Aysel... Celestine needs me. I'll be right back."

Right back.

Like all the other nights he said that and never came.

I smiled faintly. "And what if I don't let you go? You know I despise her."

His gaze hardened. "Aysel, this isn't the time for jealousy."

Jealousy.

That was always the word he used to silence me.

When Celestine fainted in his arms and I waited alone in our quarters.

When she cried about her dreams and he held her until dawn.

When he said, "You're my future, Aysel," even as his eyes followed her across the hall.

Now he stood before the entire pack and said the same thing-again.

"My vow," I whispered, my voice shaking, "only comes once."

Damon's expression flickered with guilt-but not enough to stop him. "Don't be dramatic," he said softly, almost like a scolding. "You've waited twenty years for this Luna mark. You can wait another night."

The murmurs started immediately:

"She's not even Luna yet, and he already runs to another she-wolf."

"Perhaps the Moon Goddess changed her mind."

"How pitiful-to be abandoned mid-ceremony."

The sound of them carved into me deeper than any blade.

Skylar stepped forward, fury blazing in her eyes. "Damon, are you her healer or her mate? Every time Celestine faints, it's you she calls for! You think she times her 'attacks' for nothing?"

Gasps filled the hall.

Damon's eyes darkened. "Skylar, enough. Mind your tongue."

"No," she snapped. "You mind yours, Alpha. Look at your Luna-she's breaking, and all you see is Celestine."

He turned to me, jaw tight. "Aysel, control your friend. Don't make this worse."

Control.

Another word he loved to use-control your anger, control your tone, control your jealousy.

All while he lost control every time Celestine so much as whispered his name.

The High Priest's trembling voice broke through the silence. "Alpha, if the moon sets before her vow, the bond cannot-"

"I don't care!" Damon roared. "I won't let Celestine die!"

And just like that, he left.

He left me standing in the ruins of my own coronation, surrounded by whispers and broken vows.

One by one, they all followed him-priests, elders, even the wolves who had sworn loyalty to me. The moonfire dimmed, the sacred music died, and the scent of crushed petals turned sour in the air.

Skylar's fists trembled at her sides. "Say the word, Aysel. I'll make him regret this."

But I couldn't speak. I couldn't move.

Because for years, I'd watched him walk away.

Every time she cried, he went to her. Every time I bled, he told me to endure.

And every time, I forgave him.

But not this time.

This time, I watched him go-and something inside me broke clean in half.

The altar's communication stone flickered. A message shimmered across its surface, carved in mocking silver light:

"You lost."

Celestine Ward.

I wiped my tears and looked up at the Moon Altar-the place where I was meant to be crowned, now littered with broken petals and his discarded vows.

Maybe I lost my Luna crown tonight.

But the game isn't over yet.