

Chapter 2

Aysel's POV

Three nights ago, Celestine came to find me.

"You know Damon's planning your Luna Coronation, right?" she said sweetly, though venom laced every syllable.

Her eyes-those wide, shimmering amber eyes everyone called gentle-hid something darker that only I ever saw: envy, sharp and starving.

"I heard the Elders wanted to skip the ceremony entirely and announce the bond straightaway," she continued, brushing an invisible speck from her silk sleeve. "But Damon insisted on doing it properly-he wanted to hear your 'yes' himself. Isn't that romantic?"

I looked up from the documents on my desk, keeping my tone even. "So?"

Her lips curved, too slow, too deliberate. "So, Aysel, you-of all wolves-don't deserve happiness."

She tilted her head, the candlelight glinting off her pale hair. "Let's make a bet, cousin. Three nights from now, your pretty coronation won't happen at all."

And in that moment, I understood. She'd already set something in motion.

Celestine Ward, my aunt's daughter-taken in by my parents after her mother's death-my cousin by blood and foster sister by name, the Moonvale darling, my rival by fate, was never content unless she was standing on the ruins of my joy.

The Luna coronation ended in chaos.

One cry, one name-Celestine-and Damon had run.

As if the moon itself had called him.

The guests scattered. The chants died. The pack banners hung heavy, dripping with wax and silence.

Skylar tried to insist on driving me home-she'd seen my face, pale as bone-but a message came from the Frostfang elders. Something urgent. She had to go.

So I told her to leave. I lied and smiled like always, because that's what I'd been trained to do.

The hall emptied. I stayed behind, staring at the crushed moon-roses littering the marble floor. For a long while, I said nothing. Then, quietly, I laughed.

Because it was almost funny, wasn't it?

The ceremony, the vows, the illusion of choice.

I left the Moonvale Hall past midnight, walking along the river under the faint scent of blooming nightshade. The moonlight on the water looked like a wound trying to heal.

I didn't want to go home. Not yet. The house would smell like disappointment and old grief.

That's when I noticed them-footsteps behind me. Too close. Too steady.

Rogues, or drunk wolves from another pack.

Didn't matter.

I lifted my phone, pretending to take a selfie, and caught their reflections in the screen-three of them, closing in.

My pulse slowed instead of quickening. Funny. Fear had long ago stopped visiting me.

I pressed the emergency rune on my phone. Damon's name flashed across the screen-he'd insisted on setting it up last year after a fight broke out during a council banquet.

"If you're ever in danger," he'd said, holding my wrist to program the mark. "Call me. Don't be reckless again. Promise me."

I had promised.

And tonight, for the first time, I actually kept it.

The call connected.

"Aysel?" Damon's voice was low, tired-familiar enough to ache.

He sounded distracted. I could hear soft beeping in the background. A healer's ward.

"Someone's following me," I said.

There was a pause. Too long. Then:

"Aysel, I really can't do this tonight. Please, don't make a scene."

He thought I was lying. Again.

A woman's voice drifted faintly through the receiver-my mother...oh now is Celestine's mother, Luna Evelyn.

"Damon, give me that."

Then her voice, sharp and cold: "Aysel Vale! Your sister just barely survived an attack, and you're still out prowling like some wild stray? Stop making excuses for attention! No one's leaving this ward, do you hear me?"

Click. Disconnected.

For a heartbeat, I just stood there, listening to the silence.

Once, that would've hurt. But now?

Now it was only... hollow.

The river wind bit at my skin. It was spring, yet the air felt sharp as knives.

The men behind me laughed-low, mocking. One of them whistled.

"Easy prey."

They thought I was prey.

And for once, I didn't need to pretend otherwise.

Inside me, my wolf-Mia-stirred, stretching beneath my ribs.

Finally, she whispered. Let's stop playing human.

A warmth began to bloom in my chest, spreading like wildfire through my veins. My vision sharpened. The world slowed. I could hear their heartbeats, smell the sour tang of fear beneath their arrogance.

I turned slowly, letting them see my face. My lips curved in a soft, practiced smile.

"I've been pretending to be good for so long," I said quietly, rolling up my sleeves. "You have no idea how much I've missed this."

Then I let go.

Mia's power flooded through me-silver and violent. The air itself seemed to bow. Alpha dominance cracked like thunder, smashing into them before I even moved. Their knees buckled, eyes wide with instinctive terror.

"W-What are you-" one managed to gasp. "You are not an Omega..."

I was already in front of him. My fist connected with his jaw-bone snapped like dry wood. Another swung a blade; I ducked, twisted, and slammed him into the pavement hard enough to crack it.

Mia laughed inside me, wild and hungry. Yes. That's it. Breathe.

Minutes blurred into motion-grunts, snarls, the metallic tang of blood and fear.

When it ended, they were scattered around me, limbs broken, groaning weakly.

I stood over them, breathing hard, the moonlight staining my skin silver. My knuckles dripped red.

For a long while, I said nothing. Then I lay back on the cold ground, staring up at the sky, and pressed my trembling hand to my chest.

"Only yourself," I murmured. "Only ever yourself."

Fifteen minutes later, I called the patrol to collect the rogues, gave my report in a calm voice, and ended the call.

A faint rustle.

One of them, half-conscious, tried to crawl toward me, knife glinting weakly in the dark.

Before I could move, a boot struck the rogue's ribs with bone-cracking force, sending him sprawling into the dirt.

A shadow stepped between us-tall, broad-shouldered, moving with the slow, lethal grace of something that ruled the dark. The air itself seemed to tense around him, as if the night recognized its master.

Moonlight slid across his frame like liquid silver over forged steel. His coat flared with the wind, revealing the carved lines of a body built for dominance, not mercy. The scent that followed was a heady mix of smoke, cold iron, and the faintest trace of blood and pine-danger disguised as allure.

He turned his head slightly, and the world felt smaller. Eyes like stormfire found mine, and my pulse betrayed me-steady one moment, wrecked the next.

This wasn't just a man.

This was a predator who could end me... or ruin me in other ways entirely.

My wolf stirred uneasily. I couldn't sense his rank.

Which meant only two things.

Either he had no wolf.

Or his power was so far above mine that my instincts dared not measure it.

I swallowed hard, gaze lifting to meet his.

Amber eyes met mine-ancient, unreadable, gleaming with something between curiosity and danger.

He tilted his head slightly, the corner of his mouth curving in a slow, knowing smirk.

"Interesting," he drawled, his voice low and rough as gravel yet smooth enough to tempt sin. "Didn't expect to find a little wolf this fierce out here."

He took one unhurried step closer, his presence wrapping around me like heat and shadow.

"Tell me, darling," he murmured, his tone a velvet threat. "Who taught you to fight like that?"