

Chapter 6

Aysel's POV

Silence fell heavy. Every gaze turned toward the two of them-perfect pair, radiant in the morning light.

I smiled without warmth. "Don't worry. The only dirty thing here is how clean you all pretend to be."

Lykos snapped, "You're just jealous. He's helping her because she's weak!"

"Right, right," I said, my tone sharp as a blade. "In a room full of people, she's the only delicate one-and somehow, she just happens to fall into my mate's arms. And Damon? Oh, he's just too kind, right? So kind he couldn't help but hold her. One day if they end up in the same bed, it'll probably be because everyone else around was blind."

My chest rose and fell as I forced a bitter laugh. "Honestly, I look at them both and can't tell who's filthier-two perfectly matched garbage bins overflowing with lies."

"Aysel, you've misunderstood," Damon said, his voice tight. He'd already pulled away from Celestine the moment I turned. But hearing him defend her-again-scraped something raw inside me.

"Misunderstood?" I tilted my head, meeting his eyes. "Damon, do you even know how many times you've said that to me over the years?"

He froze. "I can explain. There's a reason-"

"I don't want to hear it."

Intentions didn't matter in the wolf realm. A bond was measured by what you did, not what you claimed to feel. And Damon had stood against me too many times to count.

"About the coronation ceremony-" Luna Evelyn began.

"Coronation?" I cut her off, my lips curling. "The vows didn't even happen. What's there to coronate?"

"What do you mean?" Evelyn blinked, startled.

Everyone stared at me-Damon, Alpha Remus, Lykos, Fenrir. Only Celestine's eyes gleamed faintly in the candlelight, as if she'd been waiting for this moment.

"Do you really not understand?" I turned back to Damon. "Yesterday, when you walked away from me, I told you-if you leave, we're done. So let me make it clearer: Damon Blackwood, we're over. I don't want you anymore."

"No!" His voice cracked like thunder. "I don't agree to that."

He looked like he'd been struck across the skull. I could see the muscles in his jaw trembling.

He'd been in my life since I was three years old-two decades of shared breath, shared hunts, shared promises. He was my destined mate... or so I'd believed.

"You don't mean that," he said, trying to steady his voice. "You're angry. Take it back, Aysel."

I didn't answer him. My gaze slid to Luna Evelyn instead. "The breakup's been made official. If you don't want an coronation ceremony without a bride, now's your chance to cancel it."

"Enough!" Alpha Remus's roar shook the hall. "The bond between Moonvale and Blackwood was agreed upon long ago! You think mating alliances are some childish game? You begged to marry him when you were a pup. Now you throw it away like it's nothing? You think the world revolves around your temper?"

I met his glare coldly. "Then you can marry him yourself. Or better yet..." My eyes flicked toward Celestine. "Don't you already have another daughter?"

"Aysel!" Damon's voice broke. "You know I only love you."

I laughed once, hollow. "I used to believe that too."

Before anyone could respond, the heavy oak door creaked open. A new enforcer stepped in, still smelling faintly of rain and iron.

"Vale?" he said, brows lifting. "Well, well-wasn't she here last night too?"

The words froze the room.

He was one of the enforcers who'd handled last night's rogue incident. Apparently, fate wanted to make a spectacle of me.

"You know Aysel?" Damon turned sharply.

"What trouble did she cause last time?" Alpha Remus growled, his patience snapping.

Fenrir scoffed. "The Enforcer Hall might as well give her a permanent cell. Does she think she's still in her rebellious phase?"

They condemned me easily, their words sharp and practiced.

Only Celestine lowered her lashes, her voice soft and careful. "Please, Father. Don't jump to conclusions. Aysel's still young. She just acts on emotion sometimes."

"Still young? She's twenty-three." Remus slammed his hand on the table. "If only she had half your discipline, Celestine, I wouldn't have to worry so much."

"Whoa, hold up," the enforcer interrupted, clearly offended. "Who said she was arrested? The girl was attacked by rogues last night. Nearly mauled. She's lucky to be alive. If it weren't for a passerby helping her-and his lawyer stepping in-those bastards might've turned the story against her."

He shook his head, muttering, "Her arm's still bandaged. Poor thing was covered in blood when we found her. Didn't even flinch during questioning. Just sat there quietly, too damn calm. I thought she was an orphan-turns out she's got family. Huh. Some family you are."

His last words landed like claws across every smug face in the room.

For the first time, silence fell.

They suddenly remembered how pale I'd been when I walked in. No one had even asked.

"She was hurt?" Luna Evelyn's voice faltered.

"It's nothing," I said softly. "Just a few scratches."

In truth, the rogues had fared far worse.

The enforcer continued, oblivious to the growing tension. "She was terrified. Said someone was following her, but none of her family answered the calls. Guess all your comms were off. The man who helped her had to bail her out himself. Damn shame."

Every word struck like a blow.

Damon's face drained of color. I could see the moment the realization hit him-that call. The one he'd brushed off, thinking I was just being dramatic.

He'd told me not to "make a scene." And I'd hung up, shaking, surrounded by rogues.

We'd once promised-no matter what, we'd never ignore each other's call.

He'd broken that vow.

Alpha Remus cleared his throat, the edge gone from his voice. "Come home for supper tonight, Aysel. We'll make your favorites."

Lykos shifted uncomfortably. "Those rogues got caught, right?"

The enforcer nodded.

Fenrir's tone turned hard. "Then I demand they face full punishment. And the male who saved my sister-his name? We owe him our gratitude."

I laughed under my breath, shaking my head. "Save it. I won't be coming home. You all play family well enough without me. Goodbye."

I turned, waving once, a sharp flick of defiance.

"Aysel!" Damon started after me, but Celestine caught his wrist.

"This is my fault," she whispered, her voice trembling just enough to sound sincere. "If I hadn't been injured last night, you wouldn't have had to leave her alone. She's angry now, but she'll calm down. She loves you too much to stay mad. Just give her time."

"Yes," Luna Evelyn agreed, patting her daughter's hand. "Let her be. She'll come around, she always does. You did the right thing, Damon. A sick Luna-to-be's sister takes priority over a tantrum."

Celestine lowered her gaze humbly, though I could feel the satisfaction rolling off her scent even from the doorway.

Three years ago, she'd fallen into the sea during a voyage-along with her former mate. He'd died saving Damon. Celestine had survived, but woke up calling Damon by her dead lover's name.

Her mind fractured. Her heart, perhaps not.

Last night, she'd relapsed again after her accident, calling out for that ghost of a man. Evelyn had summoned Damon to calm her down-right in the middle of our coronation ceremony

They all thought it was reasonable. Logical. Justified.

If given the choice again, they'd still choose her.

Because Celestine Ward, the Moonvale darling, was always the fragile one worth saving.

And I, Aysel Vale-the unwanted heiress-was always the one they could afford to lose.