

Chapter 8

Aysel's POV

I never wanted to return to the Moonvale Pack.

But when Alpha Remus himself summoned me, saying he wanted to "discuss the ownership of Grandmother's cottage," I knew resistance was useless.

That small house-tucked deep within the forest, smelling of herbs and sunlight-was the only place that had ever felt like mine.

When I was a cub, suffocating under Moonvale's heavy air of guilt and pity, my grandmother's home had been my refuge.

They all said I'd killed my aunt.

That I'd brought tragedy upon Celestine Ward and owed her my life.

But Grandmother never believed that.

She always told me I was just a child, that no wolf could control fate-that accidents were not crimes. Her voice used to cut through the endless scolding and cold silence of Moonvale's mansion like a ray of light breaking through a storm.

When my parents, out of guilt, started showering Celestine with every drop of affection, Grandmother loved me all the more fiercely. Perhaps she had known, even then, that one day I'd need a safe place when I finally tore myself away from this cursed pack. She'd even announced before everyone that the cottage would belong to me.

But she'd died too suddenly to leave a written will.

And now, legally, the deed was in Luna Evelyn's hands.

They claimed they'd always meant to gift it to me as part of my dowry-if I ever married.

I laughed when I heard that. Wolves like me weren't made for happy endings.

When I arrived at the Moonvale mansion that night, the old scent of the house hit me hard-cedar oil, polished oak, and faint traces of Celestine's rose perfume.

The servant who opened the door froze for a second. "Miss Aysel..." she murmured, eyes wide in surprise.

I didn't blame her. She'd joined the pack after I'd left, and for most wolves, Moonvale had only one daughter-the radiant Celestine Ward.

I stepped inside, ignoring the way her gaze lingered on me. Wolves always stared. They couldn't help it. I looked too much like the Alpha and Luna-same golden eyes, same dark hair streaked with amber under the light. I carried Moonvale's bloodline in every feature.

If not for my "vicious" reputation, my beauty would've been the pride of the pack.

Instead, I'd become their cautionary tale.

When I entered the dining hall, Luna Evelyn was the first to stand.

"Aysel," she greeted warmly, "come, we've prepared your favorite-sweet-glazed ribs."

I glanced at the table, cold amusement curling in my chest.

"You remembered wrong. Celestine's the one who likes sweet food."

I've always preferred spice-fire that bites back. When I was little, Father and my brothers would test pepper sauces with me, laughing as I coughed and demanded milk between tears.

That ended when Celestine came. She was born weak, fragile-a premature pup that needed care. From then on, every meal in Moonvale was bland for her sake.

Luna Evelyn's smile faltered for a heartbeat, then she smoothed it out again.

"Well, there are plenty of dishes tonight. If you don't like something, I'll have the kitchen fix another plate."

I sat down, my voice flat. "No need. Let's just talk about the cottage."

Father's brows drew together. "You've barely arrived and you're already demanding things? Can't we eat first?"

Before I could reply, Lykos came bounding down the stairs, reeking of wolf sweat and gaming fumes. "Hey, you're in the wrong seat. That's sister Celestine's spot."

Their dining arrangement had always been symbolic-parents on one side, three children on the other. Celestine in the middle. My old seat.

A neat little picture of a perfect pack.

"Did we start labeling chairs in this house?" I asked softly, leaning back. "What if I decide to sit here anyway?"

Celestine, as always, played the saint. "It's fine, Lykos. Let her sit. It's just a chair."

Lykos glared at me, jaw tight. But the reminder of my recent injuries-news travels fast in pack circles-made him hesitate. He snorted and dropped into his own seat.

Celestine's expression barely flickered, but I caught the flicker of annoyance in her eyes.

The mask never slips for long, though. She's too practiced.

Fenrir, ever the peacemaker, tried to step in. "Celestine, let's swap seats then."

"No need," Luna Evelyn said quickly, gesturing to a servant. "Bring Miss Celestine's chair beside me."

So Celestine was pulled closer to her side, surrounded by warmth and smiles.

And somehow, I was the one who looked like the intruder.

The hypocrisy was almost funny.

As Lykos gave me a smug glance, I shifted seats again, sliding down beside Fenrir.

"I prefer this spot," I said.

Lykos scowled. "What's your problem?"

"Just keeping my distance," I murmured, lips curling. "Wouldn't want to catch your stupidity."

He shot up, growling, "Aysel Vale!"

"Enough!" Luna Evelyn snapped, but her tone carried that same familiar mixture-half scolding, half indulgent amusement.

They always loved this image-siblings bickering, family laughing. Pretending things were normal.

For a moment, I almost let myself sink into it. Almost believed it.

Then Luna Evelyn looked at me, face softening. "Aysel, how's your injury? Should I call Dr. Lee to take a look after dinner?"

Father's voice followed, calm and coaxing. "You should just move back home. It's safer here, and we can take care of you."

The others nodded in quiet agreement, eyes full of concern.

It was a scene I'd seen a hundred times.

The same sweetness they'd always used to dull the sting of betrayal.

A slap followed by honey.

And when the next storm came-and it always came-they'd turn again, defending their precious Celestine and blaming me.

Celestine smiled then, her gaze cutting into me like glass. "Yes, Aysel. This is your home. We're family-no grudges between us."

She lingered on the word your, and I understood her meaning.

That I'd long lost the right to call Moonvale mine.

I met her eyes and smiled. "Funny you should mention grudges."

They all looked at me.

"Because I don't recall anyone apologizing for trying to brand me a murderer."

The air dropped ten degrees.

I kept smiling, soft and sweet. "If I hadn't gone to the Enforcers myself, I'd still be carrying that title-'the wolf who killed her aunt.' Seems worth at least one apology, doesn't it?"

No one spoke.

Even the fire crackling in the hearth seemed to quiet.

Let them squirm.

I'd played the scapegoat for too long.

And if they thought tonight's dinner would end in forgiveness, they'd soon learn-

I wasn't the obedient little cub they'd buried years ago.