

Chapter 7

Magnus's POV

The full file on Aysel Vale spread out before me.

The thick stack of reports lay across my desk, the scent of old parchment and wolf musk mixing faintly in the air. My claws drummed against the edge of the folder - a slow, rhythmic sound echoing through the dim-lit office of the Shadowbane Pack fortress.

I flipped through the documents, my sharp eyes catching every line, every photograph, every little piece of the puzzle that made up this strange she-wolf's life.

Her story fell into three clear phases.

Before she turned six, she was the Moonvale Pack's only daughter - the little princess everyone adored, raised under the constant warmth of Alpha Remus and Luna Evelyn's protection. Bright. Spirited. Playful. The kind of light that drew eyes wherever she went.

But everything changed after Celestine Ward arrived.

Moonvale adopted her - the daughter of Luna Evelyn's sister Yuna. From that moment, Aysel's light dimmed. She stopped appearing at gatherings, kept her head down, and became a quiet shadow. While the pack and the world sang praises of Moonvale's beloved daughter - Celestine - Aysel disappeared behind closed doors.

In every record, she was obedient to the point of self-erasure. A puppet with clipped strings.

Until she turned seventeen.

Something - no one knows what - must have snapped inside her. She rebelled. The quiet, pliant girl became fierce, even cruel by some accounts. Her conflicts with Celestine grew open and frequent. She defied her family, clawed at the gilded cage they'd locked her in. After college, she left Moonvale altogether, moving to the city and cutting all ties.

I leaned back, the chair creaking beneath me.

Jackson, my beta and ever-dutiful shadow, gave his report in a measured tone but couldn't resist adding, "The Moonvale sisters have... quite the reputation contrast, Alpha. Celestine Ward, gentle and brilliant - the pride of the pack. Aysel Vale, however... impulsive, reckless, and notoriously difficult."

My lips curved, the faintest trace of a smirk tugging at the corner.

"Foolish," I muttered.

Jackson wisely said nothing.

Everyone in this land knew what my word meant. As the heir to the Shadowbane Pack - the strongest force on the continent - my voice could shake mountains, bend loyalties, decide who lived or died. Entire packs shifted when I raised a brow.

So why, of all things, was I sitting here, reading about a wolf woman from a minor pack?

The thought would've amused me - if it didn't feel so dangerous.

Aysel Vale.

The name tasted strange on my tongue.

Jackson must have felt my mood turn because he kept silent, but I caught the flicker of unease in his eyes. He was likely thinking what everyone else would - that any she-wolf caught in my attention would be cursed, not blessed.

I ignored him and turned back to the page detailing her bloodline.

Celestine Ward's mother - Luna Evelyn's elder sister, Yuna - had once been promised to Alpha Remus. But something went wrong during their courtship. Instead, the younger sister, Evelyn, took her place as Luna of Moonvale.

Yuna married another man - a gambler, a brute who used fists more than reason. After years of violence, she fled with her newborn daughter, Celestine. Moonvale took them in.

Then, on Aysel's sixth birthday, tragedy struck. Yuna died in a carriage accident while searching for the little Aysel who'd run away during her own celebration.

That was the day everything changed.

Moonvale, heavy with guilt, adopted Celestine. Treated her not as an orphan, but as redemption. In every record, her life sparkled - gifts, praise, endless affection.

Even Aysel's brothers - Fenrir and Lykos - grew to dote on Celestine more than their own blood sister.

I stared at the two photographs laid side by side - one of a chubby-cheeked cub grinning with sunlight in her eyes, the other of a teenage wolf with guarded, hollow ones.

My gaze darkened.

I reached up and rubbed the faint mark still burning along my temple. The same spot where that little hellcat had slammed me with her head just last night.

She had fought like a wild thing cornered - all fangs and fury. The kind of defiance that drew blood and respect in equal measure.

I could still see her eyes then - blazing gold, feral, untamed. A little wolf daring to bare her teeth at a predator far above her rank.

A growl rumbled in my throat, low and involuntary.

Yes... this version of her, the one with fire in her blood and rebellion in her scent, was far more interesting than the puppet they once raised.

"Tell me," I said softly, the air chilling between us, "if I were to place her inside our pack, would she raise hell?"

Jackson froze.

The question was half a jest - or at least it would sound that way to anyone else. But my beta knew better. He knew that when I set my eyes on something - or someone - it was never idle curiosity.

And right now, I could already imagine it: the little she-wolf thrown into the heart of the Shadowbane Pack, surrounded by beasts twice her size, all trying to test her mettle.

Would she yield?

Or would she bite back - like she did last night, eyes glinting with defiance?

I almost smiled.

For the first time in years, something - someone - had managed to stir my blood.

And it wasn't just any someone. It was the discarded daughter of Moonvale.

A wolf who'd lost everything, yet still had enough spirit left to bare her fangs.

Perfect.