

Prologue

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I was 16 when my life split into two eras.

As a child growing into adolescence, I was always an average she-wolf. At least, average in a way that no one really paid extra attention to me. I was nothing extraordinary, after all. I shined at the appropriate age, around 10, and I had a good enough relationship with my pack mates. My father was the alpha of our pack, Eastern Claw, and he somehow held on to his power and sanity even after my mother died when I was 13.

I know in my heart that he thought I was a disappointment. I may have looked like my mother, but in my father's eyes, I was nothing like the perfect Luna she was.

I did not enjoy hunting, training, and bloodshed—all the things he thought an alpha wolf should hold dear. I was always more interested in the human side of things. My friends and I, we considered ourselves a small group of outcasts in an otherwise bloodthirsty pack. We liked hanging out with the human community in the town nearby—we joined their activities, participated in their community theater productions, and mingled with them.

My father was not pleased, but he eventually let me do my own thing after he realized I was not going to take a more active role in leading the pack. That destiny was always meant for my twin brother Evan. He and I were close—he defended me when my father got too hard on me, vouched for me whenever I ditched training, and basically acted like a brother should.

I know my father wished I were more like my cousin Erica. She was the perfect she-wolf: never missed training, was always sweet and simple—if only he knew how much of a snooty bitch she was. Evan and I always made fun of her. That was my world. It was perfect, simple, and serene.

But, when I turned 16, my world turned upside down.

Every month, the alpha of the pack takes all the wolves turning 16 that month to The Evaluation, one of the two most defining events of a werewolf's life.

In our world, fighting strength is everything. A wolf's worth was judged by how good a fighter he/she was. How did we determine that? Through The Evaluation. An event where a panel of our most senior warriors judged us on fighting ability, and in the end, gave us a bracelet. That bracelet signified a wolf's rank.

Brass bracelets were reserved for omegas and weaklings, the lowest of the low. Bronze bracelets meant you had adequate, average fighting skills, and that's the rank given to most of the wolf population. Silver bracelets were for excellent fighters—reserved for warriors, betas, and alphas. A Silver bracelet meant you were given respect. Gold bracelets, however, were reserved for the best of the best. Only about 3% of the wolf population belonged to the Gold Rank.

Gold Ranking wolves were revered.

If you asked me, I thought it was all bullshit. I mean, 16 year olds hardly even knew their own bodies for Goddess' sake! So on top of all the hormonal shit going on; they had to take a test that determines how they're treated for the rest of their lives?

Bullshit, I tell you.

And because I believe that the werewolf community is inherently sexist, only a handful of female wolves have ever managed to be a part of the Gold Rank. 4 females in the past century, to be exact.

My Evaluation? I expected to just get a Bronze bracelet—just because I skipped training a lot, it didn't mean I was completely helpless. If I was lucky, I could get a Silver bracelet too.

After his Evaluation, Evan came out sporting a Silver bracelet as befitting his rank as a future Alpha. His Evaluation only took less than 10 minutes.

Mine? A whole hour. After which I emerged a Gold Ranked female.

When I emerged with that golden bracelet, a hint of pride danced over my father's eyes, only to be quickly replaced with fury. He tried storming the Evaluation Arena but was threatened by guards, so unbelieving that I, his wayward daughter could receive the highest honor a wolf could have. The decisions of the panel were final and could never be contested.

Friendly sibling rivalry turned sour as my father took Evan away, poisoning him with the threat that I would someday challenge him for the Alpha title. An absurd thought, seeing as I had never taken an interest in pack life. But Evan believed him.

When we went home, I knew I had lost a brother.

But I had gained the respect of my pack. No longer was I ignored—suddenly everyone wanted to be my friend. I tried to get on with my life as usual, but I was forced to be more careful since I was now under scrutiny. The royals, and other packs had gotten wind of the fact that there was a Gold Ranked female in Eastern Claw. It paved the way for alliances, and visiting wolves that always wanted to meet me.

My father saw this and tried to present me as a strong Luna. But he could not. I did not want to pretend to be something I wasn't. Visiting wolves wanted to see an intimidating Amazon warrior woman, instead they got me—a girl who looked like she couldn't even hurt a fly.

They'd ask me questions about the pack, how many members, how strong we were, and my father's plans for expansions—these were all questions that should have been addressed to Evan, much to his fury and disappointment. I could not answer them.

My father snidely told me that Erica could answer them all easily, she involved herself in the pack and worked more than a beta's daughter is expected. I told him to just adopt her and get it over with, that way he'd get a Bronze daughter instead. I got a slap in the face.

All these visiting wolves made me dread the second most defining event of a werewolf's life: The Claiming.

Every year, all unmated wolves 18 and above participated in The Claiming. Male wolves chose their mates. Again, the sexism of my world rears its ugly head. Females were paraded around like pageant queens and the males would just have their pick, then the girl would have no choice but to just up and leave her home to join the male's pack.

Thankfully, there was a loophole.

If the family of the female disapproved of the male who chose her, her father, brother or any male relative could challenge the wolf. They would fight, and whoever won, kept the girl.

I know, still so sexist.

I remember Evan used to promise me that if I didn't like a male who chose me, he'd fight the guy to the death.

I doubt he'd do that now. The way my father's poisoning his mind, he'd be glad to see me go.

But, thankfully, there's another loophole.

In rare occasions, the female could challenge and fight the wolf for her freedom. It was rarely done, since the male wolves were physically stronger than the females, but it was accepted.

I figured as a Gold Ranked female, I'd have a good shot if I really hated the guy.

This year, I'm going to be joining The Claiming.

Goddess help me.

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