

# Chapter 1

Serena Basco

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It was one of those pink, perfect moon nights that seemed to come out of a postcard. My friends and I were planning on going to the carnival over at the human town. The whole pack was on edge because we were hosting The Claiming ceremony this year—it was like the whole compound had turned into one big ball of stress.

We didn't want in on that.

I could already smell them faintly walking over to the pack house, so I jumped out of bed and walked out of my room. As I went down the stairs, I noticed Erica walking out of my father's office with a smug smile on her face. I rolled my eyes.

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I tried to stay out of her line of sight but was unsuccessful. She looked at me as if she was triumphant, and I in turn scrunched my nose up at her. She was wearing a collared shirt and a pleated skirt, with her shiny brown hair held up in a high ponytail. I resisted the urge to roll my eyes at how preppy she looked.

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Seeing that she was making her way towards me, I turned and faced her with a big, bright smile.

"Hey, cuz." I said through gritted teeth.

"The alpha just gave me a special assignment." She said in a sickeningly sweet voice. I sighed.

"Congratulations." I sighed, turning to leave. She sidestepped to step in front of me.

"Hold it, Red. Don't you want to hear what it is?" She asked. I clenched my fist—I hated that nickname. My brother gave it to me

when we were kids—Evan and I had inherited our mother's red wavy hair, but while his was a rather burnt shade that was closer to my father's brown, the shade of my red hair was bright. Evan never used that nickname now, and it only served to remind me of our previous

closeness.

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"No, not really. I have a carnival to go to." I said, shrugging. Erica put her hand on my shoulder and I nudged it away. I flashed my eyes at her—I swear I would have looked more intimidating if I wasn't 5'3 and she wasn't an inch taller than me.

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"The prince is coming to The Claiming." Erica said.

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I stopped in my tracks.

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That didn't make sense. Everyone knew that Prince Jonathon Lancaster was not in the market for a mate. Besides, his name was not on the roster for this year. That didn't mean he couldn't choose if he wanted to—the guy was a 24-year-old eligible royal of for heaven's sake. But a Royal male choosing a mate was a big deal, and everyone would know about it if it were happening. The King would usually make an announcement.

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I sighed.

"Everyone knows Prince Jonathon isn't looking for a mate, Erica." I said. Erica shrugged.

"Oh, I know. He's just here to visit, probably discuss the issue with the rogues from across the northern border with your dad." Erica said.

I had heard about that, but I didn't know much. Like I said, pack life and all its goings-on did not appeal to me. I didn't care to update myself with too much news, only the basics. Apparently, the rogues exiled in the arctic were forming groups. There was even a rumor of a king north of the border. A Rogue King. King of the Rogues.

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The idea seemed preposterous to me. Rogues were rogues. They had shunned pack life. Why would they listen to a leader?

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I thought it was bogus—the northern border was protected by the most ruthless Alpha, we were perfectly safe but I guess anything can happen. I wasn't scared though—the threat didn't seem real enough yet.

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"And let me guess, Alpha wanted you to gather intel from across the border? Aww, I'm gonna miss you, cuz!" I cried out happily, gathering her into my embrace. "Don't let the rogues eat you!"

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Erica growled and pulled herself away.

"Ugh! You're just—ugh! Your dad wanted me to show Prince Jonathon around the pack." She smugly said.

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For a moment, hurt struck my heart, but I quickly masked my face back into nonchalance. Usually, it was the Luna or the Alpha's daughter who toured important guests. I didn't enjoy the task, and lately I've been hiding out from it, but a prince was a big deal.

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I figured my father would want to show off his Gold Ranked daughter.

"Jealous?" She sneered at me. I smirked.

"Actually, I feel bad for you. Prince Jonathon must've heard that there was a Gold Ranked Alpha's daughter here. He's gonna expect to see this..." I flashed my Gold bracelet at her, causing her to bare her teeth at me. "And all he'll get is you."

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Erica stomped her feet and gave a strangled cry.

"YOU ARE SUCH A BITCH!" Erica cried. She quickly bounded up the stairs, wiping tears that were leaking from her eyes.

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I felt bad.

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Well, not really.

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"What was that about?"

I turned to see my uncle Jasper coming out of the kitchen. He was my father's beta, and Erica's father. Uncle Jasper was the only family member to say that he was proud of me after I had gotten the Gold Rank. With my mother dead, my father ignoring me, Evan shutting me out of his life and Erica, well, being Erica, it was nice having some sort of family life. He and my Aunt Marianne always made me feel loved.

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"Your daughter thought she could make me jealous but I ended up making her cry." I shrugged unapologetically. Uncle Jasper sighed. I was glad that he wasn't oblivious to his daughter's faults.

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"You know, you both could stand to be nicer to each other. After all in two days you might both be mated. You might miss each other." Uncle Jasper said, raising his eyebrows at me.

"I doubt it." I sighed. "Erica might get picked, after all, guys love simple submissive women."

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"Hey now." Uncle Jasper warningly said. I sighed.

"Sorry. I'm just nervous about The Claiming." I said. He nodded understandingly and gave me a warm hug.

"I'm not going to lie to you, Serena, there are a lot of wolves who are attending because of you. There is going to be a spectacle." Uncle Jasper said.

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"I plan on being a big, clumsy mess during the dinner before the ceremony." I dryly said. Uncle Jasper chuckled.

"I'd offer to fight for you, dear niece, but your father was explicit that we stay out of this whole debacle." Uncle Jasper said.

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"So if some loser wanted to claim Erica, you wouldn't fight for her?" I asked.

"The debacle pertained to you and your golden rank, dearest." Uncle Jasper sighed. I shrugged.

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"It doesn't matter, anyway, uncle. If I don't like whoever wins or claims me, I can fight." I said, raising my wrist and shaking the Golden bracelet.

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"Well, that'll be a show. No one's ever seen you fight." Uncle Jasper chuckled.

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"I don't want to fight. I hate fighting." I said, looking down. Uncle Jasper sighed and raised my chin up to look at him.

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"You're going to be first up there, show us all what you've got." He said, patting me on the head. "Good luck."

I sighed as Uncle Jasper made his way back to his office.

"You ready to go?"

I turned to see my friends Paolo, Christopher, Melanie and Jane. I smiled at them, it was the first time we were all joining The Claiming and none of us were excited.

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My friends were the only reason I was still sane. It didn't matter that the pack considered us new age hippies because we believed in non-violent solutions and mingling with the humans.

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Paolo Cortez was a bookworm, and planned to become a scholar for the royal court someday. He was interested in studying humans so that wolves could learn more about them. He was tall and slightly pale with curly blonde hair. We called him an overgrown cherub.

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Christopher Ming, however, was a warrior, well muscled and fierce. He was in the Silver Rank, mostly due to his knowledge of human martial arts.

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Melanie Dorcas was the epitome of a rebel. We joked that she never got over her emo phase. She dressed in black, dyed her hair magenta, and had a nose ring. Most of the girls in the pack found her scary. I found her delightful.

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Jane Vasilev, however, looked more like a Gold Ranked female than I did. She was tall, and strikingly beautiful with platinum blonde hair and sharp cheekbones. I'm pretty sure there would be guys fighting over her during the ceremony. Too bad her heart belonged to Paolo.

Paolo was also besotted by her, and we were all nervous about how this Claiming Ceremony would turn out because Paolo wasn't much of a fighter. There was no way he could beat any stronger wolves who wanted Jane. Thankfully, Jane had a very understanding, very strong father who would kick the asses of any guy his little angel didn't like.

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"Come on, let's go! Paolo promised to win me huge teddy bear." Jane teased, causing Paolo to blush furiously as she linked her arm with his.

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"Do you think anyone's gonna notice that we're gone?" Christopher asked.

"I doubt it. They're all at the pack hall decorating. Mrs. Haggis might." I said, shuddering at the thought of the Pack Matron punishing us. The Pack Matron was the oldest woman in the pack, and she worked adjacent with the Luna to help mold the young wolves into eligible men and women to be ready for mating.

"Let's go before anyone sees us, then!" Melanie cried out, pushing us all out the back door.

We entered the woods behind the pack house and stumbled through the rough path to town. It was already late in the year, and there was already a chill in the air. I hugged my jacket closer and blew into my hands.

"So, I hear the prince is coming to town."

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