Chapter 23 A/N Well, look who just couldn't stay away? Here's an update earlier than scheduled. Hope you're ready, folks, this is a LONG chapter. Enjoy! Serena Basco In the two months that I've lived in the palace, I never really interacted with King Armand that much. It's not like he was never there. He was a strong compelling presence—untouchable and yet ever so present that you couldn't miss him. Like Jon, he was serious to a fault. I've never seen him laugh—I think I caught a smile once during last week. However, the lines in his aging face made it clear that once upon a time, he did enjoy the lighter side of things. I have never before been in his private study. It was much larger than Jon's, walled with books and portraits of ancestors. The Lancaster family had been our rulers for over five hundred years and their dynasty was preserved in these walls. Before they took over as monarchs, they were simply a ruthless pack that ruled the inlands. The first Lancaster king, Maurice, exterminated the remaining Lycans. Lycans were said to be hybrids born from the mating of wolf and Gods—much stronger, faster, and wielding unimaginable powers. They abused these powers by raiding packs but King Maurice banded all the Alphas together and had them declare him King. In return, the Lycan race was exterminated, but not before King Maurice took one as his mate to ensure a powerful bloodline. It was in their bloodline to be conquerors, and even though the Lancaster King in front of me looked weary and aging, I knew he was not to be underestimated. Especially now. "Sit." He said, motioning to the chairs in front of his desk. Instinctively, my wolf keeled and made me listen to his command without hesitation. Jon stilled before sitting down, and I had to wonder how he was resisting the Alpha command. "I called you both here because I want to...no, I need to understand what exactly is going on." The king said in a no-nonsense voice that reminded me too much of his son. Jon was silent, staring long and hard at his father. They both looked at each other challengingly, two alpha males unwilling to yield. I rolled my eyes. "What exactly do you mean, your majesty?" I asked in the gentlest voice I could. They broke their stare down and the king looked. I squirmed under his gaze. "Between the two of you, there is one dead alpha, and one general on bed rest in the infirmary. Serena, if you are going to inspire this kind of behavior in my son, then make sure you can rein him in before he causes irreparable damage." The King gravely said, but he didn't address it to me. He was looking at Jon the whole time. a⁶ I nodded, looking down in embarrassment. Jon, however, took it as a slight against me. He stood up and growled threateningly at his father. "Sit down, Jonathon! Idid not stop you from enforcing your own brand of justice on your general, so now youare going to listen to me!" The King snarled, slamming his fist on the table. a I decided to intervene. "Jon, come on..." I tugged on Jon's sleeve and implored him to sit down. He remained sti as a board so I squeezed myself in between him and the table and forced him down with all my strength. He acquiesced, but I knew it was not from the force of my hands but of his own volition. "You're going to have to get better at doing that." The King glared. I nodded at him, silently noting the Alpha order. å "I need you both to realize that everyone's eyes are on us right now especially with the war. If you both want crowns on your heads at the end of this, then display yourselves as appropriate rulers!" The King demanded. "We have done our duties well. We're gaining an advantage on war e orts. What more do you want, father?" Jon narrowed his eyes. Uh oh. "I'm not getting any younger, son. I need to make sure that you and Serena are ready to take the crown at any moment. I had thought that when you claimed a mate, you'd start being more of a king. But you're too much of a war general! The way you punished Cra, that was not appropriate behavior for a king!" The King said. ď Well, that was unfair. It was the King who raised him to be a war general. It was King Armand who molded his son into the war machine that he was right now. It was King Armand who handed the war e orts over to his son right the moment Jon experienced his first shi . a I opened my mouth to defend my mate but he beat me to it. Jon growled angrily. "And whose fault is that, father? Do you think I've had time to practice ruling? You started a conflict with the rogues that you didn't know how to finish and now I have to carry that burden!" Jon shouted. "So excuse me if I don't have time to sit and settle petty disputes between packs and courtiers." a "You know nothing about my trials with those damned rogues so I suggest you listen..." King Armand was about to go on a tirade, but Jon sco ed. "Trials? You couldn't find a way to deal with them so you just dumped them in a frozen wasteland! Your cowardice is the reason why the females beyond the border are being raped and used as breeders and their children eaten!" Jon exclaimed. å What?! I gasped. I could feel myself turning cold, my face paling. My wolf Oh Goddess. That's what was going on beyond the border? I trembled uncontrollably. I could just imagine those rogue shewolves rounded up in the snow, being beaten and sexually assaulted. I couldn't shake the image of their babies being torn from their arms and being eaten by that cannibal King Beyond the Border. Tears sprang up in my eyes as I felt my heart beating fast. ď They couldn't do that. That was a crime against the Moon Goddess. She-wolves were supposed to be marked and cared for by their mates, and in return they were entrusted to raise the young in a safe and nurturing environment. But for over two decades, these rogue wolves had been driven by desperation so much that they turned away from the love of the Goddess and in turn, they bastardized their own existence. "Is...is that true?" I asked, my voice broken as tears streamed down my face. Suddenly, I didn't know who had committed a more horrible crime: this King Beyond the Border who mongered utter destruction, or the Lancaster King in front of me who had combined all of these deplorable factors together in one place? đ And all of this was stacked on my mate's shoulders? How was Jon keeping himself together? My heart began to feel heavy and tears continued to stream down my face. Jon looked at me with so much sorrow, as if he was willing the Goddess herself to turn back time so I could never hear those words. "Yes." Jon said, glaring at his father. He stood up and gathered me in his arms. I trembled, bile rising to my throat as fear and disgust overcame my whole person. Jon helped me to sit down. He looked over to his father who was looking down at his desk. His fists were clenched and his eyes held so much misery and fury that I wondered if he would be able to sleep at night knowing his role in all that was happening. Jon growled. "I will be a good king, a better king than you, father. A er I win this war with the rogues, you will turn over that crown to me and if you don't, I will take it by force." Jon stated in a calm, deadly voice. ď "Leave." King Armand said. a I was still shaking with heaviness of heart that I didn't struggle when Jon li ed me up and carried me in his arms. He wordlessly walked out of the room. I snuggled into his hold, wrapping my arms around him and burying my face in his neck. I didn't even realize that we'd reached our private study until he gently placed me on the so, flu y couch. He wrapped a blanket around my form and sat down in front of me. "Jon...those poor females...we have to...we have to help them...we have to go...across the border..." I stuttered. There was no way I was sitting out of this war now. Something instinctive inside of me itched to take a hold of those poor she-wolves myself and carry them across the border to warmth and safety. I don't know how anyone in this palace, or the packs could sleep at night if they knew what was really happening. a "We need to tell everyone. Jon, they can't...they need..." I pleaded, sitting up and taking his hands in mine. "Serena, we can't tell everyone." He gently said. "Why not?" I demanded. "If we all joined forces now and everyone crossed the border we could rescue them and bring them here!" "It's not that simple, Serena. Believe me, no one wants to save them more than I do. But we can't just march north. There are strategies in place, we have a defector that needs to be smuggled in with the highest discretion, and we're not even sure what their numbers are." "So what? We can't just sit here comfortably talking inside the war council while those females...no, Jon. We have to go. You have to make the announcement to all the packs. Please, Jon!" I pleaded. He shook his head gently. "You know I can't do that, Serena. It would damage everything we've worked carefully for. Try and calm down." He murmured soothingly, handing me a glass of water. I eagerly gulped it down, feeling refreshed. I leaned back and mulled over his words. "We can't be impulsive this time, Serena." Jon said. I snorted. "Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black." I teased. Jon chuckled and stroked my hair gently. ď "I didn't want you to find out like that." Jon whispered. "My father...he...this is his doing and he knows it. But I'm the one who can end it." "I just don't understand why we're still talking about the tribunal or these strategies...can't we just get the females to safety and then we can fight this king beyond the border? Let's draw up a ceasefire or something to get them south." I suggested. Jon nodded at me. "I wish it were that uncomplicated. You're very intelligent, Serena. I'm sure you'd be an asset to the war council and if you want, I'll brief you properly so you can join in." Jon said. I knew that was the best I could get. "Alright." I said. Something had stirred inside of me, and I knew I wouldn't be able to rest easy until we actually did something concrete to rescue those females. I thought about King Armand—those rogues were his subjects to and they did not deserve the punishment he had carelessly given them. Rogues were wolves that were exiled from their packs because they were causing conflict. Not all of them were the evil, ruthless, raiders that they were being made out to be. The King's edict all those years ago scared all wolves into forcibly conforming to pack life, but what about those rogues beyond the border who just misfits in need of a better home or proper rehabilitation? "I want to take your mind away from all this sorrow, even just temporarily." Jon said. I looked at him curiously. "Let's talk about something else." "What?" I asked, wondering what could possibly remove the angst "You never answered my question last night." Jon said. I immediately blushed. "So, Miss Serena Basco, how did you get the bracelet?" a "You mean you doubt my superb strength?" I teased. Jon chuckled. "Come on, tell me. It'll keep our mind o this war and the issue with my father, at least for now." Jon said. "On of your Generals was a panelist. Why don't you just ask him?" I joked. "You know they're forbidden to say a thing, now stop stalling!" Jon chuckled. I took a deep breath. I knew that this relationship needed to be give and take. If I was going to need him to open up to me and share with me his trials, then I needed to do the same. The story of how I got my Gold Rank was intimate to me, something not even my friends could get me to tell them. It was a secret I had locked in my heart for two years. But if Jon was willing to let me be his partner, then I owed him at least the story of one of my life's most defining moments. "Fine. The truth is..." Jon waited with baited breath. "I'm Batman." å⁵ "Serena." Yikes, I knew that tone. "It's a long story, are you up for it?" I asked. He chuckled and li ed me up so I sat comfortably in his lap. "Mhmm." He said, giving me a kiss on the forehead. I nodded. "Once upon a time, there was an Alpha's daughter who really didn't fit in..." I began. Jon growled playfully. đ "Serena..." He warned. "Fine, fine." I chuckled. "Well, it started as any evaluation did physical first. I was tested on my fighting, agility, strength, and flexibility. I was doing pretty well so far—all signs pointed to a Silver bracelet at most so nothing out of the ordinary." a "When my interview portion came in, that's when things took a di erent turn. As an Alpha's daughter, I was questioned about wolf history, and my pack. I answered adequately. However, they saw on my file that my interaction with humans was above the average wolf's—unprecedented for someone with Alpha blood." a Jon was silent, his eyes coaxing me to continue. "They began to question how my father ran his pack, how he had let me get away with that. Now, you know I haven't always been close to my father. But, I knew he was a good Alpha; I just wasn't...the best daughter. I got riled up, so much that I started giving them a lecture on how a wolf's value doesn't hinge on physical strength or isolation from humans." a "A sixteen year old girl scolding the evaluation panel? You really are something else, Serena." Jon chuckled. "Thanks...I think. Anyway, there was one panelist...thi woman with dark skin and bright red hair...around forty years old? One of your captains?" I asked, trying to remember her name. a "Diana Desay?" Jon guessed. I nodded my assent. a "Yes. Her. She stopped my speech and for like five minutes spoke to the panel in hushed tones. Then she just walked around me in circles muttering to herself, staring me down. I was beginning to get nervous —I didn't know if I was in trouble. To be honest I thought they were going to punish me or...something. Anyway, the panel let her do as she wanted. She had someone called in, a boy that looked exactly like her." "Byron...he's around five years old, correct?" Jon asked. I smiled up at him. This was why he would make a great king. He seemed like he never paid any attention, but he was always taking in every detail and remembering them. "Yes. She told Byron to stand in the middle of the room, right next to me. Then she asked one of the other panelists, your General Xerxes, to stand up. In my head, I was like what the hell is going on here? It wasn't until Captain Desay ordered General Xerxes to attack her son that I was shaken into reality." a "WHAT?!" Jon exclaimed, hardly daring to believe it. "I kid you not, Jonathon Lancaster. General Xerxes was confused of course, but Captain Desay said to trust her. I began to get scared so I backed away from the room. I was about to run outside and scream that the panel was batshit crazy when General Xerxes actually lunged for the boy." ď "He did what?!" Jon cried out. I nodded eagerly and placed my hand on his arm. a "Let me finish. Anyway, the General actually attacked Byron. I don't even remember what exactly happened next. Next thing I know, I had General Xerxes pinned down on the floor and Byron was unharmed. I had him rendered immobile for like a minute because I hit his vital pressure points, but he managed to recover and sit back down on his seat like nothing happened." a "Then? They just gave you a gold rank?" Jon asked. a "Nope. Captain Desay reported that I didn't display any sort of aggression, strange for a wolf with the alpha gene, butmy protective instincts were...unusually high. Never before had a General been disarmed like that so quickly. She nominated to give me a Gold Rank." a "Did they all concur?" Jon asked. "Not in the slightest. There was uproar and they argued for what seemed like eternity. I don't know why Captain Desay was so adamant that I get a Gold Rank, but she fought tooth and nail for me in the debates while I just stood their so awkwardly. It was...di icult to have all my weaknesses bared for everyone to discuss so casually. But she brought a lot of my good qualities up too; qualities I didn't even know I had. Finally, she had everyone convinced except for one." "Who?" "Alpha Adam's father, Apollo, the retired Alpha of the North." I said. "How did she get his vote?" "For a lack of better word, bribery. She dangled a piece of information in front of him. If he agreed to let me have a Gold Rank, she would give it to him." a "She can't do that..." "Apparently the panel does it all the time." "But that's...corruption!" Jon exclaimed "And you wonder why I wanted out of pack life?" "What did she o er him?" "I couldn't make it out properly, but I read her lips as she whispered to him. Solterra". ď Jon sti ened. "Serena, you're not serious..." Jon whispered, his eyes searching mine for any hint of jest. "I'm dead serious, Jon. Solterra." I said. There was silence.

Solterra was a name that inspired reverence in the werewolf world. For centuries, the Moon Goddess blessed the wolves in the Solterra family with healing powers. These powers were to be used to help the werewolf race in times of need, but powerful wolves long ago corrupted and exploited them and their gi s. Solterra wolves were o en hunted, imprisoned in packs to have their gi sused by force. a Finally, over a hundred years ago, the Solterras took what was le of their family and hid themselves away, never to be seen again. Some say the Solterra bloodline had died out, but there were others who believed that they were still in hiding. a "Then that means..." Jon started. "Captain Desay had information on the Solterra wolves. She sold it to Alpha Apollo so that I could receive a Gold Rank." I whispered. "I don't understand. If the Solterras are still alive, why would Captain Desay keep it to herself? How did she get this information? What is Alpha Apollo going to..." Jon spoke quickly, rambling. a "I don't know, Jon." I said. "And you know you can't question Captain Desay or Alpha Apollo about it. The Evaluation is held in strictest confidence. If you suddenly roused a search for the Solterras, Captain Desay would know and we could be in even bigger trouble with the tribunal." a "Serena, don't you understand? The Solterra wolves could be critical to this war!" Jon frustratedly said. a "I know that Jon, but there's not much we can do. We have no leads to them whatsoever, and every move we make towards them could easily be traced back to me!" I said. a "So we just do nothing, knowing that possibly there are wolves out there with powers that can help us win?" Jon asked. đ "I hate to say this but yes. The only suggestion I can give to you is to have Captain Desay and Alpha Apollo tailed. It's been two years since my evaluation. If they're planning something, it hasn't taken e ect yet." I said. a Jon was silent, mulling my words over. "You're right." Jon bitterly said. "I'll have them watched discreetly and if there's suspicious behavior..." "Bring them in." I finished. There was silence. "Sometimes I wonder why it was so important to Captain Desay that I receive a Gold Rank. Did she really see something so special in me?" I murmured. "The rest is history. I went out of that Evaluation with a golden bracelet and suddenly, I was special." ď "Serena, you arespecial. You're not like other wolves and the panel saw that. A golden bracelet was the least you deserved." Jon said. "Jon..." I started. "You deserve so much more, Serena. I'm fighting this war so you can live in a world that deserves you." Jon said. ď I was stunned. Did he really see me that way? I felt unworthy of such kind words. What did he see in me? I wasn't special. What would happen if one day he saw me for what I truly was? Someone unremarkable. How could someone bearing the weight of the world on his shoulders find something good in someone like me? He didn't deserve any of this madness. a What I wouldn't do to take it all away. "Jon, I'm so sorry that you have to fight this war." I whispered. "I see it now...more clearly than ever. You're trapped, Jon. I want to set you free but I can't because you've worked so hard..." I sni led, tears streaming down my cheeks. Jon gently wiped my tears away. "The night I claimed you, I told your father than no harm would come to you. I'm not going to ask you to fight my war." Jon gently said. "I can't drag you into my darkness, Serena. You're my light! ď There it was. Three little words and I was sworn to him body and soul. Jon was my rock, the only consistent and unwavering presence in my life as of the moment. He was mine. "And you're my future, Jonathon Lancaster." I murmured, closing the distance between us as I pressed my lips against his.

Somewhere in the swells of my cheeks, my tears of sorrow became tears of joy. They blinded me, letting me melt into Jon's arms as he gently picked me up and carried me. That was some information overload there. Sorry if you guys got bored with it for a bit. Don't worry, all this info will be useful as the Next two chapters will have strong Serena/Jon relationship building. How do you like the story so far? Do you think Serena deserved a Gold Rank a er all that? Drop me a vote and comment! Continue to next part

A/N

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