Chapter 28

A/N
Whew 40k reads? Many thanks, loves!

Serena Lancaster

Jon filled me in on the tribunal's decision the night before. I made him promise to call me if he was almost home so I could meet him out front.

I was beginning to regret that decision the moment my phone rang at five in the morning.

"What?" I harshly growled, crankiness and sleepiness dripping from my voice.

"Well good morning to you too. I just wanted to tell you that your mate is almost home. I'm an hour away." Jon's deep, husky voice chuckled.

"Mm." I grunted, switching off the call. I was definitely not a morning person and Jon knew it. Why the hell did he choose to announce his presence at this ungodly hour? Yeah so what if I missed him and that my soul ached for us to be together again? I wanted to sleep.

Grrr...

I knew I wouldn't be able to go back to dreamland, so I decided to prepare for the day. To wake myself up, I took a cold shower that I instantly regretted the moment the stinging droplets hit my body. I bundled myself up in a warm blue wool sweater and jeans, yawning every now and then.

When I exited the room, I saw that the castle was still empty there were a few staff members getting ready to start their day. I made my way to the kitchen and prepared a thermos of hot steaming milk for Jon—if he had been driving all night then he needed to sleep. I decided to wait for him outside and maybe glimpse the sunrise while I did.

I sat down on the cold stone steps as I faced the driveway, waiting for the moment when the gates would swing open and Jon's familiar rover would drive in. I glanced east and turned to the sunrise. The sky was glowing beautifully, and I felt my heart warm along with it.

I wonder if Jon had been able to do some thinking during this time away from me. I hoped that he managed to figure out his feelings—it wouldn't be fair to both of us if we just buried everything under until the war was over. But I was surprised at myself that I didn't prioritize whether he loved me or not, so long as he was well, healthy, and back in my arms.

The sound of tires against the rough stony driveway shook me out of my thoughts. I stood up, smiling excitedly as I put the thermos down on the steps. It felt like everything was in slow motion as the Rover parked and the engine turned off. The door opened and my breath hitched as I glimpsed Jon's dark curly hair. He stepped out of the car, looking every bit attractive as the first time I saw him.

Soon, the longing was too much to bear.

I raced down the steps, not caring that I bumped the valet or that the two representatives from the tribunal were in the car with him. Our eyes locked and his lips widened into this ear-splitting grin. None too gracefully, I threw myself in his arms and held him tight, locking my legs around his waist as he held on to me with one arm.

There were people already looking at us, but I didn't care. My lips sought his and we kissed fervently as if we had been apart for more than an eternity. He broke the kiss and chuckled, nuzzling my neck.

"I see I was missed." He murmured, smiling against my skin. He was still carrying me, his right arm securely tight around my waist and the other carrying his bag. I reached for the thermos and handed it to Jon. He eagerly drank before coughing.

"Milk?' He asked, horrified.

"To help you sleep." I clarified. He rolled his eyes and gave me a kiss on the cheek, wiping his milk moustache on me.

Someone cleared his throat and I frowned at the interruption. I looked to the left and saw a tall, bespectacled middle-aged Asian man with a bronze bracelet on his arm. That was odd—werewolves didn't need glasses, unless they had been badly injured by silver.

Silver was our weakness, and it usually took out our eyesight first before paralyzing our whole body and eventually killing us. Whoever this man was, he was lucky to be alive and moving.

"Sorry." I murmured. I made to detach myself from Jon but he held on to me tighter.

"Serena, these are the representatives from the tribunal. Dr. Lin Nguyen and Captain Nandi Zulu." Jon said, still not putting me down. I narrowed my eyes at him. This wasn't an appropriate way to meet these people.

"It's nice to meet you, Princess." I glanced to the left and saw a tall, very attractive woman carrying a large gray suitcase. Her skin was a blissfully dark like the color of umber, her long hair kept in exquisite box braids and her eyes were obsidian. She was wearing a beautiful rust colored maxi dress that accentuated her perfectly thin body. She sported a silver bracelet. My jaw slackened.

She was the most gorgeous woman I've ever seen.

And she was in the car with my mate for more than five hours?

Unashamedly, I pressed myself even closer to Jon before nodding to acknowledge them.

"It's nice to meet you both. I apologize for my current state, my mate has decided to treat me like a five year old." I good-naturedly said. "I look forward to having both of you in the palace."

"Dylan here will show you to your rooms, and the King has granted you an audience at three in the afternoon so that leaves you time to get rested. If you'll excuse me, I have some business to discuss with my mate." Jon dismissively said, nodding at one of the male staff members, silently instructing him to do as he said.

Jon carried me inside the palace and straight to our rooms, ignoring the odd looks people threw at us. I buried my head in his neck, unabashedly sniffing him and trying to relish his scent. I pressed my lips to the mark I had given him, causing him to growl lowly.

"Can't you wait until we're in the room?" Jon grunted.

"Can you?" I shot back.

"Exactly. You have to be sensible one this time." Jon whispered. He pushed open the door to our room and threw his suitcase to the side. He threw me on the bed, making sure I landed gently as I bounced from the impact.

He shrugged off his jacket and took off his shirt, his hard toned torso making my mouth dry. I shook myself—he needed to sleep, not further exhaust himself!

"Hey, easy! You need rest, not sex!" I laughed as he removed his pants, leaving only his plain black boxers. He grabbed a pair or sweatpants from his closet and hung it over the headboard.

"I'll sleep after I've had my mate." He growled, grabbing me so that I was perched on top of him in bed. He wasted no time in roaming his warm hands all over my body, his fingers practically tearing the clothes off my body. I felt my blood heat up in arousal.

This was different from the other times he had lain with me. I felt his wolf creep up slowly to the surface. The man kissing me was animal, his fingers bruising and burning with need for my skin. He flipped us so he was on top, dominating me as his kisses leaked possession and frustration.

Jon was getting rough. This was so hot.

I decided to just let my mate have me. The she-wolf in me was yipping in delight, happy that our mate was hot with need for us even after spending all that time in an enclosed car with the gorgeous Captain Nandi Zulu.

She-wolves were naturally territorial and possessive, and I had alpha blood in me which meant that my wolf was just short on begging me to practically lick our mate head to toe.

Wouldn't Jon just love that?

As Jon claimed me, I felt joy singing in my heart. My mate *desired* me. Jonathon Lancaster, the man who always put duty before self, was letting his desires take center stage and it was *me* who was the object of that desire.

In his arms, I felt like the most beautiful woman in the world. And when he had succeeded in uniting us as one, I knew that this was what the word *complete* meant.

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Jon lay sleeping in bed, his loud snores evidence of his exhaustion. I was curled up next to him, my arms carelessly strewn over him. My fingers absentmindedly traced comforting patterns on his chest. Sighing, I planted a soft kiss on his cheek, his beard tickling my lips.

I gently detached myself from him. It took some effort to do it without waking him up because he was one strong wolf, but eventually I succeeded. Naked as day, I got out of the bed and washed myself up in the bathroom. I put on my clothes and braided my hair in a plait.

I padded through the room, grabbing Jon's suitcase with the intention of unpacking his things. I immediately tossed his dirty clothes into the laundry bin. The thick stack of papers I found I placed in the coffee table in our study—I'd go through them later. I put his phone on the bedside table, turning off all alarms.

Suddenly, I spotted something odd. I picked it up and turned it over, gasping slightly as I put my palm above my mouth.

It was a picture of me.

It was that picture he had taken during that first weekend we spent together, when we were at the breakfast table and I was telling him all about Instagram. I remembered it clearly and it seemed like such a lifetime ago. The girl in the picture knew nothing about Jon—she was shy around her mate and didn't really know a lot of things about the world.

Now? She was considering leading a small group to smuggle females out of the North.

I held the picture close to my heart—I couldn't believe Jon had this printed out and he brought it with him to the tribunal. My eyes brimmed with tears and I hastily wiped them away. I placed the picture back in his bag and put it away.

Shaking myself, I took the paperwork and sat by the chaise beside the window. It was the minutes of the trial. Most of it Jon had already told me about, so I sifted through the other paperwork. Finally, something caught my eye: the terms of Desert Fang's jurisdiction over River Lycan.

Wait, what?

Jon never told me that he had given Desert Fang rule over the river. That river was vital to Patrick's mission to safely bring the defector to Lightning. All the plans being made were essential to that river remaining relatively unguarded. I walked over to the study and grabbed a map of the territory.

I suppose there were smaller rivers and inlets connected to the big waterway, but it was too much of a gamble—what if there were humans or stray pack members roaming about? They'd immediately smell the rogue with Patrick, and how would the Prince possibly explain the presence of a rogue south of the border without arousing panic and havoc?

Why did Jon give him this?

I trailed my fingers southeast. Patrick could use the trails in Eastern Claw and bring the defector down to the beach port where they could take a boat to Lightning. That route would take them longer, and who knows what they'll encounter in a land-based journey? The whole river-based journey was rooted in the fact that the water would help mask their scent!

Frustrated, I leaned my head on the table and banged it repeatedly yet gently.

"What's all this?"

I turned, yelping in shock as Jon entered the study. He was still completely naked. I blushed to my roots and looked down.

"You're awake?" I murmured, still avoiding his eyes.

"Yes, and I'm upset because I wasn't holding my mate when I woke up."

I didn't look up, trying to push the map and the files further behind me.

"You seem to be avoiding looking at me, Serena. What is it?" Jon asked, putting a finger under my chin and lifting it so that we were looking at each other. "Are you hiding something?" He asked with an amused tone.

Yes, I was caught red handed with files you haven't yet explained to me and were probably waiting until the right time to do so. Also, you have no clothes on and I won't be able to keep my hands off you if that remains to be the case.

I stayed silent. Jon narrowed his eyes and gave me long kiss, pulling my flush against him. I didn't resist, but I did jump back when I felt his erection poking me in the abdomen.

"Can you put some clothes on? We have to talk." I murmured. He cocked an eyebrow at me before shrugging. He walked back to our room and I tried not to drool as I looked at his well-formed behind. He reappeared dressed in his usual shirt and jeans.

"What do you want to talk about?" He asked.

I handed him the River Lycan file. He leaned on the table, running his hand through his hair frustratedly.

"I still don't know what to about it." He sighed harshly. "I couldn't refuse. They'd get suspicious. Then I..."

"Jon, I understand." I said. "I might have a plan, but we'll need to run it through the generals."

I told him my suggestion, and he listened intently. He gave me some variations, but all in all it was worth looking into.

"Patrick's nervous about this whole thing as it is." He murmured, absentmindedly trailing his fingers over the map.

"How are we going to discuss this plan with those two watching?" I hissed, referring to the Dr. Nguyen and Captain Zulu.

"They're barred from the war council—I had to negotiate long and hard for that but everything else is fair game. Which means that as much as possible, this plan stays off the books." Jon said.

I frowned.

"But how will we prepare? Patrick is gonna need maps, and instructions—what is he going to do, memorize everything?" I asked incredulously.

"Seems to be that way." Jon harshly said.

There was silence. I read over the terms of the proposal and frowned.

"Something's fishy here, Jon. I can't put my finger on it, but there's a reason he asked for that river *specifically*. Maybe I'm just being paranoid but..."

"You're not. It *is* suspicious, but until I know more, I...can't bring him in for questioning, it'll look like I'm trying to avoid punishment."

"When's the turnover?"

"I...maybe I can stall until Patrick gets back safely? I don't...I'm sure Alpha Jason will try and thwart that, it's hard enough dealing with him without the tribunal being on his side. *Shit*." Jon let out a ragged breath.

I licked my lips. "Then I guess it's up to Patrick to do this well. Your hands are tied, Jon. I know you like being in control but you're gonna have to trust your brother completely on this one." I said.

"I'm moving up our timeline. Before the turnover's complete."

"Jon, are you serious? That's going to present more problems! Agent Ba'yon hasn't finished relaying the plans to this defector beyond the border and there are millions..." I rambled, but Jon cut me off.

"I know, Serena!" He snapped. I flinched at his tone, and he immediately gave an apologetic look. "I'm sorry...I just...this has been occupying my mind for the past twenty four hours. Can we talk about something else?"

Oh no.

I realized how much of a horrible mate I was being. He had just gotten back from a very grueling trip and already I was here grilling him about something that he was almost helpless to stop. He was barely rested—he didn't need this right now.

I stepped forward and pressed myself against him, wrapping my arms around his middle. He sighed and kissed the top of my head, putting his hands around me. My ear was pressed up right against his heart and I could hear it beating resolutely. It was strong, and consistent, much like Jon.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, Jon. I didn't mean to nag." I mumbled into his shirt.

"You meant well." Jon sighed.

I tugged on his hand and pulled him into the couch, climbing onto his lap so that I straddled him. I began to kiss the mark I gave him, trailing up to his cheeks, jaws, and finally, I claimed his lips gently.

"You should apologize more often." He mumbled, smiling against my skin.

I leaned back and smirked at him. Winking, I hopped off the couch before he could grab at me.

"Hey you're not done apologizing!" Jon growled.

"We need to eat." I said as he stood up and caught me by the waist. He slung me over his shoulders like a caveman. I laughed. I wasn't nervous or scared like I was when he first started carrying me back when we had just become mates. I knew Jon wouldn't let anything happen to me. I was comfortable. Well, relatively comfortable: I was upside down with a great view of his behind, my hair hanging and blood rushing to my head.

"Put me down, oaf!" I cried, pounding on his back. He didn't seem to feel it as he just laughed. He dropped me on the bed and grabbed his watch, checking the time.

"It seems you're right." He murmured. "Come, let's have lunch."

Jon pulled me from the bed, making sure to be gentle. Suddenly, he stiffened, frowning. His pupils began to dilate and he began sniffing me. I wondered what was wrong, but I let him continue his ministrations. He raised my sweater so that it was bunched up right under my breasts.

I looked at him, confused. From the way he was looking at me, I knew his intention was not to arouse me. He stopped and suddenly growled. I looked down and saw what he was staring at. I took a deep breath.

There were bruises from when we made love earlier. Because I was a werewolf, they were already a dark purple and would probably fade the next day. They were in the shape of his fingers. I had gotten bruises from our tumbles before, but he was significantly rougher on me earlier.

Not that I was complaining.

I tugged my shirt down and pulled Jon up.

"Jon, it's okay. It happens." I shrugged, taking his hands in mine and feathering kisses all over them. He immediately snatched them away.

"I hurt you." He growled, whimpering. That was his wolf talking. It was angry that harm had been caused to his mate.

"You didn't hurt me, Jon."

"I did, look at the bruises! No one can hurt you, not even me! I'm so sorry, Serena, I promise to be gentler next time! I won't do it again." He hoarsely said, pulling me closer to him.

"Really? I was hoping you would." I sighed, rolling my eyes. He looked at me curiously. I winked playfully at him.

"Jon, please don't worry about it. I promise, if I ever feel like I'm in pain, I'll tell you. Okay?" I asked.

He sighed dejectedly, pouting.

"Alright." He muttered, sorrow still staining his beautiful face. I gave him a peck on the lips and he instinctively lightened up.

"Now come, it's time to eat." I happily said.

A/N
Guys, I'm way behind schedule writing the last 8 chapters of this book, so y'all need to pump me up! I have a play opening tomorrow (yes, I'm a professional writer) so I'm gonna be pretty busy the next few days. I won't be able to respond to your comments as quickly but rest assured I read all of them and I will reply in time.

What do you think? Is our boy Patrick up to the challenge?

Continue to next part