

## Chapter 33

Jonathon Lancaster

Weeks turned to months, and Serena and I eventually found the strength to move on from the tragedy of losing our first pup. The visit from her friends and family certainly helped, and soon the sparkle returned to her eyes.

But even good things had to come to an end. They're wishing us well, and Serena and I eventually had to go back to work—the war effort needed our attention.

Patrick's mission was going well so far. To deflect suspicion, he's currently visiting packs with the King and Queen as part of a "royal tour". He celebrated his 18th birthday while visiting the Rising Howl pack. He was already on his way North, and our parents were going to feign an emergency and return to Lightwing shortly so he would make the trip alone.

I was anxious. I was worried about Patrick, but Serena assured me constantly that he was up for the challenge. I'm ashamed to admit that she had more faith in Patrick than I did.

Because that's who Serena is. She has faith in people.

As the days progressed, I found myself falling more deeply in love with her—and I know it wasn't just me. She had easily earned everyone's love and respect through her warm heart, strength, and resilience. I was glad she had been given the chance to shine.

The representatives from the tribunal led with only good things to report. Most were careful to stay out of our way for the rest of their stay and as for her finding work in the war, well, Serena was adamant in sending her to the frontlines as soon as possible. The tribunal had deemed me fit to continue working, and I was thankful to put that whole business behind us.

The transition in turning over guardianship of River Lycan to the Desert Fang pack had been going very slowly. I had to keep making up excuses to stall, but so far Alpha Jason had not been complaining. I was running out of excuses, though, and soon I'd have to order the rest of my men to leave Desert Fang territory. I only hoped that Patrick would be able to get the defector safely across by then.

As the war seemed to draw closer, I found myself sinking more and more into darkness. My wolf was growing stronger, as if sensing the danger coming. Every night, I raged in my thoughts thinking of the carnage to come. I had no choice but to cling onto Serena for dear life.

She was my sun.

I knew I worried her, and sometimes I'd try to distance myself so as not to taint her with the murkiness going on inside me. But I never worked. I was like a moth, and she a flame I would always be drawn to.

Thankfully, a distraction came

I looked at my schedule and realized that in a week, we would be receiving the roster for the next season's Claiming ceremony. It was hard to believe that it had almost been a year since I claimed Serena. Our Claiming felt like a forever ago and I couldn't imagine what my life had been like before I had my mate.

Once looked at the ceremony as a far-o- thing, something I wouldn't be able to participate in for years. But things have changed so much that I didn't even recognize myself. I guess, in a way that was good, I was surprised to receive correspondence from the agent I assigned to keep watch over Captain Desay. The Captain was headed to Lightwing, and the former Alpha Apollo from the North was also headed this way too.

The two panelists from Serena's Evaluation.

"Jon...what is this about?" Serena asked as she looked over the email. We were at my office mulling over the impending visit. "They're the ones who..."

"Gave you your Gold Rank. I know." I sighed.

"A week before the roster comes out...do you think it's a coincidence?" She asked.

"I have no idea. Serena, my agents have been watching them carefully. There's been no mention of the Solteras. Are you sure you..." I trailed off

"Jon, I know what I heard. They said Solterra." Serena pointedly said. I blinked at her, shaking my head.

"Then I guess we'll have to wait until they get here." I said, leaning back on the chair.

I was nervous to say the least. What if Serena was right and Captain Desay knew something about the Solteras? What if the Solteras were still alive?

The Solterra bloodline was blessed by the Goddess herself and charged with a mission to help the werewolf race through the use of their healing powers. Was this the Goddess' doing? Did she save the Solteras to prepare them for this upcoming war with the rogues? Was now the time for them to come out of hiding?

They would have to be very protected, though. Werewolf stories of old were rife with tales of Solteras being abused for their powers and drained of their magical energy. Would I be strong enough to prevent that from happening?

Suddenly, the darkness crept up on my mind again and I held Serena closer, breathing in her warm, sunny scent. She grinned playfully before pushing me away, saying she needed to get something to eat. I let her go, relishing the sight of her red hair dancing as she walked out.

I suddenly realized there was a chance Serena and I would be apart during the war. I was going to be in the thick of danger, and there was no way I was letting my mate near a warzone. Even if I had to handcuff her and lock her up, I wasn't going to risk her life.

What was going to happen to me without her, though? Would I eventually be consumed by darkness? Would I return to her the same man?

Would she still love me?

Suddenly, I was interrupted from my thoughts by Serena barging in.

"Jon!" She cried, breathless with her chest heaving. "They're here." I immediately sat upright, and Serena stood beside me behind my desk. She held my hand comfortingly, giving an encouraging smile.

"Relax..." She soothed, rubbing my back.

Suddenly, there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," Serena called.

Darien came in, smiling nervously.

"Captain Diane Desay and Alpha Apollo Storm, your highness." Darien said before exiting. I motioned for them to come in and sit on the chairs in front of my desk.

Captain Diane Desay was a formidable figure, well muscled with dark skin and bright hot red hair. Alpha Apollo was tall and large, built like a Viking. He had dark blonde hair and a rugged beard, and all over his arms were fearsome tattoos. I stood up and nodded at them.

"Captain Desay, Alpha Apollo, what an unexpected surprise." I smoothly said, shaking their hands. "I believe you know my mate, Princess Serena."

Serena shook their hands as well, with Captain Desay giving her a knowing look that had Serena smiling anxiously.

"We apologize for the short notice, Prince Jonathon." Captain Desay said, primly sitting down. Alpha Apollo grunted and sat down next to her.

"It is no issue. You are always welcome in Lightwing. How is your son Byron, Captain Desay?" I good-naturedly asked.

"He is doing well...very excited for his first shi ." She grinned.

"And you, Alpha Apollo? How fares my friend Adam?" I asked, referring to the current Alpha in the North, Alpha Apollo's son.

"He is well. Tells me that everyday, more and more rogues seem to be hanging around his borders." Alpha Apollo grumbled said.

"I trust Adam to keep the borders safe by himself, at least until I join him north—which I fear might be soon." I said. Alpha Apollo and Captain Desay shared a look. I narrowed my eyes.

"Please tell me, what is your purpose here?" I asked.

"I want to get down to business, Prince Jonathon. I know you've been having agents tail us." Captain Desay pointedly said. My face betrayed no emotion. I only leaned back and stared at them. "I think I know why." She continued, looking at my mate. Serena blushed, and I held her hand protectively.

"My mate told me you gave her a Gold Rank. She told me about her evaluation, Captain." I said, my voice emotionless. Captain Desay smiled.

"And it seemed things are working according to plan." Alpha Apollo grumbled. My eyes snapped to him.

"What plan?" I demanded.

"Worry not, dear prince, this is not a conspiracy nor is it treason. It is actually for your...benefit." Captain Desay said.

"I'd rather we stop speaking in riddles now. I have business to attend to and I have no time for games. What is your purpose here?" I growled. Again, they shared a look.

"To be frank, Prince Jonathon, you or more specifically, your son the throne," Captain Desay said. Serena gasped.

I growled threateningly.

"Your words border on treason, Captain Desay. You want to depose my father?" I snarled.

"Oh heavens no. We only..." Captain Desay started but was interrupted.

"Your father isn't the same man he was, Prince Jonathon. The Armand I knew back in the day would never have agreed to exile the rogues. His mind and his rule have been spiraling out of control and the only reason assassinations haven't been popping out is because of you" Alpha Apollo said.

"Because of me?" I disbelievably asked. "I am fighting my father's war. Surely, you know that?"

"We do. The people are losing faith in him, Prince Jonathon, which is why we've been looking at you. You have the potential to be the best Lancaster King since King Maurice." Captain Desay.

"He managed to gather all the werewolves to exterminate the Lycans a er dozens of wars, and now you will ban us all together to defecate this king beyond the border." Alpha Apollo said.

There was silence. I mulled over their words, thinking about my father. It was true that he was not the bright-eyed king he had been when he had first started out. The rogue situation spiraled out of control during his rule and he saw only one way out. That decision led his mind to ruin and that's why he was like this now.

"I'm sorry..." Serena piped up. "What exactly do you want Jon to do?"

"We want to guide him," Captain Desay said. "Help him."

"You mean manipulate me like my father's council did to him?" I growled.

"No. Your rule is your own, dear Prince." Captain Desay said.

There was silence.

"I don't understand." Serena said.

"Would you like to know how you got that bracelet?" Captain Desay casually asked. I squeezed Serena's hand and growled threateningly at the Captain.

"What does my mate have to do with this?" I growled. She and Alpha Apollo shared another look.

"...her rank, it was a gamble—a gamble we weren't sure was going to pay o. We wanted to put an eligible candidate forward for your queen. Giving her the bracelet would ensure she caught your eye." Captain Desay murmured.

What?

"Wait...you gave me this bracelet...because you wanted me to be queen?" Serena asked, dumbfounded. "Why me?"

"I saw you during that evaluation, Princess. You are, destined for great things. You were fierce, and the moment you saw that my son was threatened you unleashed a hidden strength. Just like a true queen."

What?

"Ummm...that's cool...and all...but...umm...I still don't get..." Serena stammered, blushing. She looked to me for help and I nodded at her. I turned to Captain Desay and Alpha Apollo and sighed frustratedly.

"That doesn't make sense. A Gold rank couldn't have guaranteed that I'd claim her as a mate." I vehemently said. "Besides, I had no intention of claiming one until after the war."

"Like I said, it was a gamble." Captain Desay replied. "We made her the most eligible she-wolf...there was a big chance you'd claim her."

"And you knew about this?" I turned to Alpha Apollo.

"Yes, I had my misgivings at first. Her relationship with her pack had me suspicious but I see now...she will be a good queen." Alpha Apollo nodded.

Serena and I shared a nervous look.

"Oh? And what convinced you?" I boldly asked. Alpha Apollo grinned.

"Why don't you ask your mate?" He chuckled. Serena and I looked at each other, confused. "You told him, didn't you?"

"Told him what?" Serena challengingly asked. I got angry when Alpha Apollo started to laugh. I slammed my fist on the table and the room grew quiet.

"Let's stop beating around the bush. You tell me you've manipulated my mate's life and mind for years, and you say you want to help me. Tell me why I shouldn't arrest you both for treason right here right now!" I exclaimed, looking at both of them murderously. Rage clouded my mind.

I felt Serena's warm hand squeeze my arm, and I immediately relaxed. Captain Desay took a deep breath, looking at us apologetically before reaching into her bag and taking out a piece of paper.

"Perhaps it would be better if I showed you." She said, putting the paper face down on my desk.

"What is that?" I asked.

"The roster for this season's claiming ceremony—the names of the she-wolves participating." Captain Desay. "It will be released next week. Take a look."

I picked up the roster. It was just a list of names. I skimmed through it and slammed it down my desk.

"So?"

"Take a look Prince Jonathon." Alpha Apollo grunted. I glared at him before looking down on names on the paper.

1. Liesl Piper Solterra - No Rank

2. Priya Patel - Silver Rank

3. Carina Stinson-Chan - Silver Rank

Wait. What?

1. Liesl Piper Solterra - No Rank

"Godde...," Serena gasped. I narrowed my eyes.

"What is this, Captain Desay? A joke?" I warningly asked.

"It is not a joke. She turned 18 last month."

"And she is..." Serena trailed off.

"A Solterra." Alpha Apollo proudly said.

"How is this possible? The Solteras are gone." I said, my face devoid of emotions.

"If you really believed that, you wouldn't have had us tailed." Alpha Apollo mischievously said. I growled at him.

Thankfully, Captain Desay did use the situation.

"There are only two le in this world. Liesl and her brother Michael were raised in a small human village on a tiny tropical island. Their parents died a few years ago." Captain Desay said.

"And you believe their legitimacy?" I asked.

"Their mother married into the Solteras...she was my cousin, and we were very close. We thought she had just eloped with a human but before she died she called for me, and she swore me to secrecy about her family. I saw little Liesl when she was just two-year-old...she has the marking on her wrist." Captain Desay said, referring to the intricate birthmark that Solterra wolves were born with.

"And why now do they choose to return to us?" Serena asked.

"They know war is coming. They sense the coming bloodshed—it will be unlike anything we have ever seen. The Goddess created the Solterra bloodline during the first Great War with the Lycans because of the unimaginable conflict. Now more than ever they are needed again." Captain Desay said.

"They've been needed a lot more times during the past centuries!" I snarled.

"Liesl and Michael...they don't share their parents' views. They want to share their powers. Their ancestors hid away because they were scared and hunted but I've assured them that that will not happen them."

"Wait...you're saying...they wish to help in the war? They will go north?" I asked, suspicious.

"My son will claim the Solterra female and bind her to me and the northern border. That is the deal Captain Desay and I made when she chose to give you a Gold Rank." Alpha Apollo said, nodding in Serena's direction.

"What? And your son knows this?" Serena disbelievably asked.

Was this why Adam missed the past few claiming ceremonies? He had been preparing to claim a Solterra all along!

"Yes. He will bring home a Luna Solterra—the first in centuries." Alpha Apollo proudly said.

"I will not allow this young girl to be forcibly mated!" Serena snarled.

"She has already agreed to join the claiming ceremony. To be chosen as a Luna is the highest blessing!" Alpha Apollo shot back.

"And that Luna will be hunted down by the rogues when they see her markings!" Serena cried. "Their lineage might get exterminated. We can't send them north!"

"My son will not let anything happen to his mate." Alpha Apollo pointedly said. "The girl has agreed to go north at whatever the cost. Says it's her destiny to help the werewolf race."

"And her brother?" I asked. "Michael Solterra?"

"He already has a mate. They will join us in the borders when war comes." Captain Desay handedly said.

Silence followed.

"Why...why are you telling us this?" I asked, putting the roster away.

"You have a Gold Ranked female, you have a Luna Solterra, and you have all these soldiers and Generals who are going to war because you're leading the charge. You are our leader." Captain Desay said.

"My father is still our king and leader." I said through gritted teeth. Captain Desay and Alpha Apollo shared a glance.

My wolf shivered inside of me, growling slightly

I pondered my words. Was heFor the past few years I had been taking over his work. Was it part of my apprenticeship, or had my father lost his spirit to rule?

All my life, people had been telling me what to do. Be a good prince, fight this war, win against the rogues, and become a king. The first time I've made a choice for myself was when I claimed Serena, and now I've just learned that to a degree, she was chosen for me and put in front of me.

But I still chose her. I didn't have to, but I did. I chose her. I claimed her, and I loved her. They wrapped her in the shiniest bow to make sure she caught my eyes, but I could have just as easily turned away. I was supposed to focus on war. It was the destiny forced on me.

But as for the war, who was I? A king?

"I never wanted this war." I remarked.

Serena drew a sharp breath. I suddenly felt protective of her and my wolf felt that, which caused him get antsy.

"It was thrust into my hands even before I had my first shi . And now, I hear all these manipulations coming out of your mouths. What do you expect me to do, Captain Desay, Alpha Apollo?" I exclaimed.

"Prince Jonathon, it was never our intention to manipulate..." Captain Desay started.

"THEN WHAT WAS YOUR INTENTION?" I shouted.

Silence followed.

I saw Serena from the corner of my eye sitting down and muttering to herself.

She seemed lost in her own world.

"To remind you that no one has considered your father our leader for a very long time. Even if you're still a prince, everyone's looking to you. King Armand is no longer our king, he hasn't been for a long time." Alpha Apollo said.

"So you want me to overthrow him because it's what everyone wants? My own father?"

"No. We simply want you to wield the power you have. You think you're still a prince...but you're already a King." Captain Desay murmured.

I looked at Serena, who was still muttering to herself and fumbling with her hair. Her eyes looked glassy, and she looked like she was about to cry. My backdoor rose—this whole meeting had upset my mate and I sought to rectify the situation.

"Please leave." I said.

"Prince Jonathon?"

"The guards outside will show you to your rooms." I said with finality. Alpha Apollo and Captain Desay exchanged a look before exiting.

When the door closed, I let out a breath. I walked over to Serena and placed my arms around her. I carried her over to the couch and set her down on my lap.

"Jon...how are you feeling?" She asked, looking into my eyes.

"Like I don't know what my life is anymore." I murmured. "What's real? What isn't?"

"I'm real, Jon." She said, taking my hand and placing it above her beating heart. "I'm real and I'm here. I love you."

"Even if that they said is true? That they purposely gave you a gold rank just so you could become queen?" I asked. "That they took your own future away from you?"

She looked away, biting her lip

"I...can't deny that I feel used, Jon." She muttered, tears streaming down her eyes. "I wanted to join the human world but the moment they gave me this bracelet, I should have known that was never going to happen."

This was all unfair to her.

"Serena...if you..." I started. "If you still want to do that, join the human world. I mean, let's do it. We could leave tonight. Start over somewhere fresh where no one knows our names. We can hide our scents and leave this horrible place together."

I said it with such conviction that even I started to believe the fantasy. Serena chuckled.

"As tempting as that sounds, you know that we can't. We have a responsibility now—to the people we rule, and to those we bring beyond the border. This privilege comes with specific obligations." Serena said.

I sighed.

"When did you get so smart?" I teased, kissing her forehead. "I'm not ready to be a king, Serena. I'm still a war general. I don't know how to rule."

"According to them, neither does your father." She muttered. "They're right, you know, you're already a king and you don't even know it."

"What do you mean?"

"Jon, I know you love your father but...it's time to consider what other people think because you're supposed to be serving them. I know for a fact...Captain Desay and Alpha Apollo aren't the only ones who feel this way." Serena said.

"How?"

"When I was still recovering from...you know...my father and I talked. He told me how he never wanted me in Lightwing because well, people conspire and manipulate here—it's dangerous. He told me how your father was a good king once but he was badly advised. I told my father...that's not going to happen to us..." Serena said. The memory of the night I claimed Serena flashed in my head. This was all my fault.

Serena, the moment I feel that Lightwing...or this life is going to be too dangerous for you, I'm taking you away without a moment's hesitation." I swore.

"What?"

"Even if we have all these obligations, you come first, Serena. You, my mate, you are the most important thing in my whole life and you will always be a priority. I don't care what happens with the war—as long as you're safe." I declared.

"Jon...you can't put me first before your..."

"No, I can, and I am. I don't want the throne poisoning me. So I need you to make the same promise. If ever you feel that I'm losing it, you will make me leave." I said, looking her straight in the eye. She frowned.

"What if you don't listen to me?"

"I will always listen to you, Serena, no matter what happens." I said, as if it was the only truth that mattered. "After hearing everything from Captain Desay and Alpha Apollo, you're the only person I trust now. It's just you and me."

"And your father, what do you plan on doing about that?"

"I am not blind to my father's faults, seeing as I've been carrying his cross for years now. Captain Desay and Alpha Apollo haven't done anything treasonous, they simply expressed an opinion. I just...I had no idea people felt that way...about me."

"And now that you know they do?"

I turned and looked at Serena, suddenly feeling exhaustion creep up on me

"I plan on keeping my word. Remember when we had that meeting with my father? Once I win this war, he'll turn over the crown to me or I'll take it by force."

She took my hand and looked at me with such determination and trust.

"I'll be with you every step of the way, Jon, I'll support you."

"Even if it means high treason?"

A/N

No, Serena is not the Solterra female.

I felt that would make it too cheasy and it would defeat the entire purpose of Serena's journey to finding her strength. It has to come from inside her, not outside. So yes, Serena is just so ordinary wolf thrust into an extraordinary circumstance, much like so many great people from history who have gone on to achieve amazing things.

What do you think of this revelation? Any theories about the sequel? I'll be revealing the title soon!

Don't forget to comment and vote!

Continue to next part