12. Equals

Soa's POV

The sound of my alarm disrupts my sleep and I lay in bed contemplating faking an illness. I would be spending the entire day with Mateo and the thought put me on edge.

Two nights ago he had asked me about my marriage and I've ignored him since, unable to face him or my reality. In fact, I avoided him at all costs yesterday but today would be impossible.

Get up! Solana demands. I want to see him!

After a bit of bickering with my wolf, I force myself out of bed and change into my training gear. Much to my annoyance, I run into Mateo when I step out of my room.

"Morning," he says, scratching his head nervously. "I -uh- I don't know where the training grounds are," he smiles sheepishly.

Of course he doesn't, I groan.

We walk in silence into the jungle and I do my best to stay ahead a few paces but my short legs make it almost impossible and he quickly catches up. When I pick up the pace, I fail to see a log in my path. I feel my ankle twist and I brace myself for impact with the ground only to collide into a strong chest.

Mateo's arm is wrapped around my waist, my heart hammering against my rib cage at our close proximity.

"You okay?"

I come to my senses though and peel myself away from him.

"I'm fine, thanks," I mutter before storming on ahead once more.

A few minutes later we arrive at the training grounds, all the soldiers getting in formation as they wait for the General's arrival. Soldiers line up based on their Rank, with the 13 year old privates on the far right and the Lieutenants on the right. Three Captains stand before the soldiers, eyeing them closely.

"Who are those little girls up front?" Mateo whispers in my ear, his breath sending warm shivers down my spine as it caresses my skin. "They look like they don't even have wolves yet..."

He nods in the direction of the Lieutenants and I know exactly who he's talking about.

"That's Second Lieutenant Karina Cortez, General Cortez's eldest daughter and her little sister, Sergeant Penelope," I sigh. "They're 12 and 9."

"You have 9 year-olds training in your army?" He hisses. "Are you people insane? She's a child!"

Afraid he might draw attention from the soldiers, I grab his hand, ignoring the incredible tingling of his touch and dragging him back to the woods.

"First of all, keep your voice down Mateo. Someone might hear you."

"You have little girls training with a bunch of wolves and you want me to shut up?" He snaps, gripping his hair in frustration. “Do you realize how insane you sound? You people are-“

I grip his chin between my forefingers and thumb, pulling his face down to my own.

“Listen to me. I did not make this decision so do not, for a second, think that I agree with that arrangement. Trust me, I was not pleased when the General started bringing his daughters for training. They were only four.”

The blood from his face drains.

“Monsters…” he whispers, tearing his face from my grip.

“I have no right to tell the General how to raise his daughters,” I sigh, staring at my hands.

“They don’t even have wolves yet!” He says, throwing his arms in the air.

“Look, they don’t see combat, okay? They just train like any other wolf-“

“But they’re not wolves, they’re kids!”

“I know!” I snap, my hands bursting into flames.

His face hardens. “You don’t scare me, your Highness.”

I look down at my hands and will the fire to go down. “I’m sorry, that’s wasn’t my intention.”

He grunts a reply and stuffs his hands in his pockets. “What does the King say about this.”

“I was no older than Penelope when I started training,” I shrug. “It’s normal around here.”

“That’s not normal! What kind of father would put his children through that?!”

“One who wants to prepare his daughter to lead a kingdom!” I retort, my fist clenched at my side in indignation. “Do not insult my father for teaching me to be a soldier for my people. You forget, Mateo, some of us actually take our responsibilities seriously. Within three months time, I will be crowned Queen of Estrella del Monte and when I’m 21, I shall be Queen of Sol de Oro. That’s close to 10,000 lives that I will be in charge of protecting. I don’t have the luxury of being a careless teenager. I don’t have time to dream. I have real work to do and it is an honor to serve my wolves!”

He stares blankly at me, assessing my words before he speaks once more.

“Is that how you truly feel or is that what you’ve been trained to say your whole life?”

The look in his eyes is gentle, almost tender even and he takes a few steps closer to me, invading my space. I hold my breath, afraid his scent might make me do something I’ll regret.

“I’ve wanted to be Queen my entire life and I will be a great Queen.”

“And you have no other aspirations? No other dreams?” he murmurs.

Yes.. I want to say. I want to be with my mate…

I, however, press my lips firmly together and shake my head, stepping away from his intoxicating smell.

“We should get going,” I say, turning on my heel. “The General is here.”

He says nothing as we once again return to the soldier line up, where General Cortez is addressing the new recruits. He does not pay us mind as he gives out orders and the soldiers split into their training assignments.

“I don’t tolerate tardiness in my army, Mr. Altamirano,” General Cortez says as he turns to face us.

I freeze immediately and salute him, Mateo doing the same. The General bows in my presence, as do his other commanding officers.

“Mi General, it’s my fault. I was giving Mateo a tour of the territory,” I lie.

The General’s eyes shifts between Mateo and I and he accepts my response.

“Don’t be late again,” he says. “His Majesty tells me you have training m with the Altamirano clan. Tell me, what was your rank?”

“Yes sir, I was a Captain.”

“Captain, huh?” The General thinks for a minute before his eyes fog over. Moments later, a group of privates come racing to us, saluting the General and myself.

“At ease,” the General says and the soldiers wait patiently for instructions. “Captain Altamirano, these are the newest recruits under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Reyes. You were brought here to learn discipline and discipline you shall learn. You might be used to special treatment because of your name but not here. Here, you will show me your worth through your work. Lieutenant Colonel Reyes will assess your capabilities during the week and I will decide whether or not you are worthy of your Rank. Understood?”

Mateo salutes him. “Sir, yes sir.”

“Good. Lieutenant Colonel Reyes will keep you up to speed on the training regime we have here,” he smiles, turning to me. “I leave him in your hands Lieutenant Colonel.”

“Yes sir.”

Mateo turns to look at me as the General leaves, raising his eyebrows and smirking.

“Lieutenant Colonel?” He chuckles. “Wow, your Highness, impressive.”

“On the field, I am Lieutenant Colonel to you, Captain.”

His smirk deepens and his lowers he voice an octave when he speaks. “Yes ma’am.”

“As the General said,” I say, clearing my throat. “These are the new recruits. They’ve all recently completed their first shift and are starting the basics of hand to hand combat and building endurance.”

“I see,” he says. “Any silver wolves here?”

I shake my head. “We don’t train Silver wolves. They do better under the leadership of their own clan. We don’t have anyone equipped to train those who are gifted. You and I are the only ones on this field with gifts.”

“So shouldn’t I be the same rank as you then?” He smirks.

“I thought you said you didn’t like getting handed things you didn’t earn?” I shoot back. “Or were you just bluffing?”

He chuckles to himself. “No I earned my rank.”

“As did I.” I almost snarl.

“I’m sure you did,” he smiles condescendingly. “So,” he clasps his hands together. “Who do we have here?”

I turn to the wolves. “Attention!”

They immediately scramble into formation much to Mateo’s amusement. I look at the first girl to my right and she bows her head in respect.

“Introduce yourself to your new Captain, private.”

“Yes ma’am. Private Raquel Diaz. Sir. They call me Rocky, sir.”

Mateo smiles politely at the girl and reaches out to shake her hand. She blushes and I hold back a giggle at how smitten she is.

I turn to the next private.

He bows. “Private Daniel Macias, sir. I go by Danny Sir.”

“Nice to meet you Danny,” Mateo says, shaking his hand.

“Are you really a silver wolf?” Danny asks, admiration swimming in his eyes. “Sir,” he adds quickly.

The other wolves eye him eagerly, awaiting his response.

“I’m just a wolf, Private,” he replies.

“Yes sir,” Danny nods.

He meets the rest of the young wolves, all of them eager to learn from him.

“So Captain,” I say after he’s done meeting them. “What’s your first task with your new crew?”

He eyes then all and thinks for a second before answering. “Sparring. I want to see them inaction. Assess what they know. I’ll have a better idea of what I’m working with. But first, a few laps on the track to get the body warmed up.”

The recruits groan but one look from him silences them instantly.

“I’ll join.”

We take a nice jog around the track, picking up the speed on the second lap. I try to clear my mind and run ahead a little but he runs alongside me, making me nervous and sending Solana into a purring frenzy. Wanting to put some distance between us, I pick up the speed and sprint.

Much to my annoyance, he sprints too, quickly catching up to me. I glare at him but he just gives me a cheeky grin. I sprint a little faster and he matches my speed. We continue this pattern until we’re practically racing each other, overtaking the recruits twice.

When we finally finish running, we’re both fighting to catch our breaths, my lungs burning profusely.

“You continue to surprise me, Lieutenant Colonel,” he chuckles, inhaling and exhaling deeply. “You’re almost as fast as me.”

“Almost?” I pant. “I believe I beat you.”

“I went easy on you,” he laughs.

“Then why are you struggling to breathe?”

He stares at me, before bursting into laughter. “Okay, I give you that. You’re as fast as me.”

I don’t know why, but him admitting that warms my heart.

We wait for the recruits to arrive, all of them panting furiously.

“Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth,” he tells the red faced little soldiers.

We take the recruits over to the sparring circles for Mateo to complete his assessment. He pairs all the recruits and overseas all 10 recruits in their matches. In the circle besides us, a match between two wolves is well underway, several wolves gathering around the circle, including the General.

“Who’s sparring?” Mateo leans in to me.

Suddenly we hear the General bark in displeasure.

“Karina!”

The wolves that had gathered quickly disperse, not wanting to catch the wrath of the General.

Oh no…

With the wolves gone, we get a clear view of the sparring circle. Karina lays in the middle, her face covered in bruises and blood. Sixteen year old Angel, her sparring partner, stands equally bruised beside her but is clearly the victor of the match.

“You’ve lost the match,” the General growls in anger, the vein in his neck bulging.

“I’m sorry father,” she says, getting to her feet and dusting herself off. She tucks her arms behind her back and hangs her head in shame.

“What’s going on?” Mateo asks.

I push him back to our circle. “Don’t. I promise, you don’t want to get involved.”

We hear a slap and turn to see Karina caressing her cheek as her father continues to berate her for her failure.

Mateo growls and is about to storm over to them when I step in front of him, my arms in flames.

“Stand down, Captain. That’s an order.”

“But he just-“

“I said, Stand down,” I command.

He looks at me with anger I never wish to see again, clenching and unclenching his fists at his sides.

“I made the mistake of trying to intervene once,” I mumble. “I only made things worse for her and her sister.” I grimace, remembering the extreme training regime Karina and Penelope underwent the last time I spoke out.

“What do you mean?” He says, glancing over at Karina who was once again sparring Angel, moving cautiously and precisely.

“Just trust me. It’s best to leave Karina and the General alone.”

I can tell he’s unsatised with my answer and I knew he would ask later, but for now he drops the subject, stealing glances at Karina.

“Umm.. C-Captain, permission to speak?” Danny says, bouncing on his heels excitedly.

“Yes?”

Danny looks around at his fellow recruits, all of whom seem to cheer him on.

“Umm, w-we were wondering, sir, if we could watch you in action. You know, in a match? We’ve never seen a silver wolf fight before.”

Mateo scratches his head, deep in thought. “Well…”

“I can spar with you,” I say before I even process my thoughts.

Sofia, you i***t! I scold myself. Why would you volunteer?

You’re curious, Solana chuckles. You’re curious about our mate.

“You.. Fight you?” He laughs. “Really?”

“Why not? I could kick your ass if I wanted to,” I snap.

“Is that a challenge?” He grins at me, stepping towards me so that he towers over me.

I feel my heart start to race but I don’t back down.

“Fine,” he says. “But no shifting. Hand to hand and powers only.”

We walk to the circle while a few privates rush off to get a few buckets of water for Mateo to use against me while the others gather around eagerly to watch the match.

Mateo circles me before taking a defensive stance. I'm the first to move, delivering a high kick which he blocks with his forearm easily. He delivers his own and the match begins.

He works fast, punching quickly and moving back into a perfect stance. That being said, I'm no weakling either and I manage to sneak a few blows to his chest and his face. I surprise him when I swing my leg in an ankle sweep, making him jump just as I swing my leg back and donkey kick him in the gut.

He grunts and stumbles back a few paces before regaining his footing and charging at me. We continue to fight when I decide to activate my gift. He smirks at the challenge as my fists burst into flames. The young privates step back to avoid getting hit with my fire balls.

I aim several fire balls at him, Mateo dodging the flames. When I lunge forward to shoot a ray of flames at him, I feel an invisible force grab my arms and point them towards the sky, the fire rays missing their target. Mateo smirks as I fight to free myself from the force when one of the buckets of water floats in mid air, directly above me.

My eyes widen as I feel the cold water spill onto my body and he bursts into laughter. The privates gasp in shock as I stand there soaking wet with my arms held against my will in the air.

"Got you," he laughs.

Enraged, I wriggle my foot free of my shoe and lift my leg up at him, shooting a ray of fire from the sole of my foot. He barely manages to dodge the flame, the distraction making him release me from his telekinetic grip and drop me onto the ground. Scrambling to my feet, I charge at him, knocking him over and climbing onto top of him. We tussle and fight for control until I manage to sit on him, wrapping my hand on his throat.

"I win," I pant, a little triumphant smirk on my lips.

"You're pretty," he smiles.

I freeze, completely caught off guard by his words. I can hear my own heart start to race uncontrollably as Solana howls at the compliment. That's when his smile turns into a smirk, and before I can react, he hooks his leg around my thigh and rolls me on my back, pinning my arms above my head.

"I believe I win, your Highness," he whispers in my ear, his breath making goosebumps rise on my skin.

"Who the f**k is this?" I hear a voice snap, making my stomach churn in disgust.

Mateo and I both look up to see a seething Julian glaring daggers at us.

"Anyone care to explain why a mutt is straddling my future Queen?"