Chapter 16

A/N
Hope you're all having a wonderful week. This chapter, we're gonna see Serena and Jon grappling with their own duties as prince and princess. It's time for our girl to meet a challenge.

Don't forget to leave comments and votes! They give me life and inspire me to update faster!

Serena Basco

I met Sunday with two feelings: joy and dread.

Joy because Jonathon was spending another day with me—another day uninterrupted with my mate. The rest of the family seemed to be aware that this weekend was our unofficial honeymoon and made sure to stay out of our way. I didn't know if Jon told them or if they just thought we needed time to bond, either way, I was thankful that they managed to get the other courtiers and staff in on it.

Dread because I knew our bliss would be over soon. Tomorrow, as soon as his alarm rang right before sunrise, he'd be going back to work.

He did promise that we'd be spending more time working together this week, but now that I had a taste of what *having* him all too myself felt like, I was suddenly greedy.

Thinking about it left a bad taste in my mouth, and as much as I tried not to let it show on my face, I couldn't help it.

Jon and I were sprawled on a picnic blanket in the meadow he showed me yesterday. There were a few pups playing around with their parents and guardians dutifully chasing them. Sometimes a few would hop or bump around us, but we didn't mind. The older wolves looked surprised to see their crown prince actually *relaxing* but thankfully no one commented or bothered us.

Earlier, we had gone flower picking, or rather, I went flower picking while he trailed behind me like a puppy dog. Occasionally, I'd try to reach for a flower from a thorny bush and he'd gently push me away like a hero and pick it himself.

Now, he was sitting cross-legged with his arms in front of him tied in twine that I was spooling out to make flower crowns. It was something I learned to do during an arts and crafts festival back in the human town near Eastern Claw. I planned on giving them to some of the younger female pups.

"Are you sure you don't feel like your man card's been taken away?" I joked as I threaded some flowers through the twine. He looked at me in confusion.

"What is a man card?" He asked. I pursed my lips at him and sighed, shaking my head.

"It's this thing guys say when their girlfriend makes them do something...I don't know...not manly?" I tried explaining to him as I tied the crown securely.

"But you are not my girlfriend, you are my mate." He stated, still clearly baffled.

"Just...never mind." I giggled. He shrugged and gave me a small smile. The sunset was giving him this ethereal glow that I wanted to ruin the moment and just take a picture.

Sunset.

Our time together was almost over.

I sighed, deflated over the thought. I put down the last crown and untied the unused twine from his hands. He playfully rubbed his wrists as if hurt from the pressure. When I did not react, he furrowed his brows.

"What is wrong?" He asked. I decided to be honest.

"We go back to work tomorrow." I sighed. He nodded and took my hands in his, not saying anything.

Silence followed. Some of the female pups had spotted the flower crowns and I all too eagerly gave it to them.

They all squealed in delight as I gave them the colorful items. It was a chorus of "Thank you princess." "These are so pretty princess Serena!" The older wolves just stared at me, confused yet amused by my actions.

Seeing that it was almost dinner time, the pups were soon ushered home by their guardians. Jon and I packed up the picnic blanket and walked hand in hand in silence towards the palace.

As he opened the door for us, he broke the silence.

"I have a favor to ask of you." He said. I looked at him and smiled.

"Of course, anything." I said.

"As crown prince, part of my work involves overseeing the training of the younger wolves in the castle and in town. I assign the work to my generals, but the war is taking so much of our time that we aren't able to give as much time to train the youngsters as we should." Jon began.

Uh-oh.

Where was this going?

I motioned for him to continue, my heart starting to beat a little quicker.

"It's vital for them to get the proper training, especially for the group of fifteen year olds who are going to undergo their Evaluation next year." Jon said.

"I understand." I managed to ground out.

"The male wolves are easy to deal with, their training is going well, but we just can't seem to get through to the female wolves—not much progress is being made." Jon said, sighing. I put my hand on his forearm to comfort him.

Did these wolves know how lucky they were that their prince worried about their strength and progress so much?

"Who is in charge of training these fifteen year olds?" I asked.

"General Cra , a good friend and one of my best warriors. The male wolves idolize him, but the females are too intimidated by him to learn anything." He said.

"I see."

"That's where I hope you'll come in. These girls have only seen male warriors flaunt in front of them, I think they're starting to feel inferior and I don't want that to be the case. I'm hoping you can take over training the she-wolves and get them ready for their Evaluation. I mean, who better than the only living female Gold Rank to inspire them, right?" Jon said.

He looked me so sincerely in the eyes that I almost melted.

I thought about those female wolves, and Jon was right. They needed a female role model. I mean, male wolves could just as easily teach them the right tips and tricks, but if progress wasn't being made, it only meant that they didn't have the heart.

My Aunt Marianne had been the one to train me. Looking up to her as a fighter made me want to be a better fighter. But she had always put her other duties first, so there was no one who really mentored me.

Jon was right. A rare Gold Rank female as their trainer would surely inspire them.

Only, I didn't know shit about training wolves.

"Well?" Jon asked. I realized I had been silent for too long so I shook my head.

"Jon, that sounds like a wonderful idea. I mean, you're right; girls need role models they can look up to. If you feel that this General Cra isn't doing a good job of training them, then I trust your instinct." I carefully said.

"But..." He pressed.

"How did you know there was a but?" I giggled.

"Instinct." He simply said. I sighed.

"I also agree that having a Gold Rank female would inspire them. But Jon, I have to be honest with you, I don't think I have what it takes." I said, looking at him helplessly. He shrugged.

"Serena, you were ready to get into a fighting pit with an Alpha Wolf just to keep your freedom—if that's not the kind of show of strength they need, then I don't know what is." He said.

"That's different. If we're talking about fighting, then yes, I could probably hold my own. But teaching is different. I can be the best warrior out there and still not know how to teach others properly." I explained.

"Oh, don't give me that. I'm sure your father had you train the younger wolves in Eastern Claw at some point." He chuckled.

I blinked.

How was I going to respond to that?

Yes, my father tried to get me to lead training. No, he was not successful.

"Jon, I have never led a training session. Not in Eastern Claw, not ever." I confessed.

He froze.

I knew it. I knew he had some sort of expectation about me bottled up somewhere. The moment he saw my bracelet, he had assumed. So far, I had done nothing or said nothing to neither affirm nor dissuade those assumptions, because Goddess knows I didn't even know what they were. But I had some idea.

When Jon continued to remain silent, I grabbed his wrist and pulled him into our room, closing the door behind us.

"Jon, who...what do you think I am?" I carefully asked.

Silence followed.

"I don't know how to answer that." He slowly said. I sighed.

"Jon...I meant it so much when I said I stayed out of pack life. Believe me, Jon, *everyone* was surprised that I ended up with a Gold Rank. I'm...I'm more human than wolf, Jon. I hate fighting, I hate bloodshed...I hate violence." I said.

He blinked at me, breathing heavily but remaining silent.

"You want me to train those she-wolves...but you have to understand, I skipped training *a lot* in Eastern Claw. My best friend had to hack into the pack database to edit my file because I often fell short of the monthly quota for required training time." I said, my breathing shaky and ragged.

Silence.

"Jon, say something." I murmured.

Why was I suddenly the one feeling guilty? *He* was the one who trapped me into a mating, *me*, a girl he barely knew. It wasn't my fault I didn't live up to his expectations. I didn't want to feel guilty for being who I was, but somehow, I did.

Why did I suddenly feel like a fraud?

I knew in my heart that he had no right to accuse me of that, and I knew that he knew that too. But I could see it in his eyes—I was not who he thought I was.

"You..." He began. "You have that bracelet on your wrist. You must have done something right."

I looked up at him.

Relationships are about compromise. Now, we had to learn how.

"I'm willing to learn, Jon. Will you teach me?" I said, looking him in the eye and holding his hand.

"What do you mean?" He asked, searching my face for answers.

"Seeing you care so much about these wolves...it's inspiring, Jon. You inspire me. I do realize that having this bracelet is a responsibility. When people see my Gold Rank, they think I'm an Amazon warrior woman, even though I'm not. I'm not. But...these girls, they don't know that." I began.

"And if they need to see me as a figurehead so that they can find their inner strength, then I'd be willing to do it." I said. Jon sighed.

"They don't just need a figurehead, Serena. They actually *need* someone to teach them to fight." Jon said.

"And that's where you come in. You can help me; train me to be a good trainer. I do have some skills, Jon, you just need to teach me how to convey them properly so that the kids can learn from me." I said, smiling up at him.

"Serena..." He started, but I cut him off.

"Back in Eastern Claw, I was nobody until this bracelet. Everyone thought I was just average that I started to believe it. But when I got the Gold Rank, I began to think that maybe I wasn't average after all."

I fumbled with the bracelet. "But I think the problem was, no one taught me how to channel all that energy to become better."

"Before I left, my best friends told me that I was given a Gold Rank for a reason. Maybe this is it. I just need to improve. Who better to help me than my mate?" I asked, placing the bracelet back in its rightful place.

"Will you help me?" I finally said. "Will you help me help these girls?"

He sighed.

It didn't work. He was going to send me back where I came from and —

"Of course I will. You're my mate." He said, reaching to embrace me.

With those words, I melted in his arms.

"So when do we start?" I mumbled into his shirt.

"Tomorrow. I want you to meet the girls first and talk to them, then we can discuss me training you." He said, kissing the top of my head.

"Aye-aye captain." I grinned.

"I won't go easy on you just because you're my mate." He teased. I slapped him gently on the chest.

"Oh, Prince Jonathon, how will I survive?" I moaned, falling into his arms playfully. He caught me, making sure to be gentle, and propped me upright.

Suddenly, his phone pinged with a message. I detached myself from him and failed to suppress a huff of annoyance. He looked at me apologetically before reading the message.

"Who is it?" I asked.

"General Cra ." He said.

That was what I liked about Jonathon. He was honest; he answered me straight every time because he saw it as his ethical duty to do so. Once I hoped for a partner who would be honest with me because he loved me. This is the next best thing.

"What does he want?" I pressed.

"We have a lead on a possible defector from beyond the border." He said, shutting off his phone. He furrowed his brows in a way that I knew he was annoyed.

"Oh wow, isn't that a good thing?" I asked, confused as to why he was frowning.

"I explicitly ordered my generals not to bother me with work all weekend." He huffed and turned to me. "I apologize."

Oh.

"It's no big deal, besides, a defector? That's big news." I reasoned.

So this war thing really is picking up some steam. Huh.

"What difference does it make if we can't do anything about it until tomorrow morning? That's when our agent from the north arrives." Jonathon growled out.

"He probably thought to get an early start on strategizing. Jonathon, calm down. It's okay." I soothingly said. Jon sighed and put his arms around me.

"He disobeyed orders." Jon said, still clearly miffed. "This weekend was supposed to be about you, and he knew that."

"Well, it's already nighttime. Besides, we did enough bonding during this weekend. It was probably time to wean ourselves into work mode anyway." I said as I traced soothing circles around his back.

"Not enough." He mumbled into my hair. I yelped as he suddenly picked me up and set me down gently on the bed.

He captured my lips in a searing kiss, one hand cradling my face and the other gripping my waist firmly. I ran my fingers through his hair and pulled him closer to me. He growled in approval, the vibrations making me shiver in pleasure.

He broke the kiss and gave me a peck on the cheek before collapsing down beside me. He pulled me close to him and started nuzzling and kissing my neck.

Holy shit.

"Jon..." I moaned, not being able to resist. He abruptly stopped and nudged my cheek with his nose.

"Sorry." He mumbled. I chuckled.

"No...it's okay. You're my mate, you're allowed to touch me and hold me and kiss me." I said. He shrugged, unsure of himself.

"Yes, but I don't want to do anything you're uncomfortable with." He said. I nodded at him.

"Thank you..." I whispered. "I know we haven't talked about mating but I want you to know...I do want to mate...not now, I mean, someday..." I gently said. He nodded understandingly

"I know. I don't want to pressure you; Goddess knows I've done enough of that already. But is it okay if I keep touching you...and holding you...and kissing you?" He echoed my earlier statement.

"Of course." I whispered.

I craved a physical connection with my mate, and I was pleased to find that he was just as attracted to me as I was to him. I loved that he wasn't afraid to show it to me in private—I wasn't into public displays of affection myself, and I gathered that neither was he.

For now, I was simply content to be held by my mate.

A/N
Next chapter: Serena meets the she-wolves. I think our girl S has been a trooper, don't you? How do you think she'll do on her first big princess job?

Coming soon: What's really going on beyond the border? Who is this defector?

Leave comments and votes, please!

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