

Chapter 18

WARNING: DARK THEMES, MENTIONS OF RAPE AND ABUSE.

Jonathon Lancaster

I opened the door to the war room, seeing all four of my generals plus the agent from the north and my adviser already there. Maps were tacked onto the walls, with red lines signifying our defenses. There was a big map in the middle—all the lands touched by my family's rule. Strewn all over it were little figurines that represented our army.

It was General Clayton Cra who greeted me first. He was one of my closest friends and strongest fighters—he was brutal and hot tempered, not someone to be taken lightly. He and I had spent many years on this war campaign against the King Beyond the Border.

"Jonathon, what took you so long?" He asked, clapping me at the back. The others looked up and bowed slightly at me, but immediately went back to work.

Clayton looked at me expectantly, usually I would be friendlier with him but I wasn't too pleased with him right now, judging from what I've heard from the she-wolves.

I was actually furious. Snarling at him, I wrenched his hand o my shoulder.

"Doing your job for you. I had to get the she-wolves a new trainer." I growled under my breath. He frowned at that.

"Oh so your mate agreed to it, huh?" He chuckled. "We'll see how long that lasts."

I felt my hackles rise and I bared my teeth at him threateningly.

"What is that supposed to mean, General?" I snarled. He backed o , raising his hands up in surrender.

"I meant no disrespect, Jon, it's just, from what I've heard she didn't really do much training back in Eastern Claw." Clayton shrugged. I clenched my fists.

"Who gave you the right to order my mate's background check?" I hissed, pulling him aside so as not to cause a scene. Thankfully, the others were busy discussing something.

"I just wanted to know who my best friend's new mate was, Jon." He said, narrowing his eyes. I cocked an eyebrow at him and crossed my arms.

"I doubt she'll do worse than you, General. I didn't like what they said about your training style, Clayton. We'll have to have a discussion about that soon." I growled out.

"Oh? And what did they say? The lot of them—such whiny brats! I wish your mate luck, she's got her work cut out for her." He sco ed.

"Careful how you speak about my mate, General. She is your superior both in rank and royal hierarchy. I don't want you interfering with her training, is that understood?" I asked, keeping my voice calm and collected. It didn't sit well with my wolf how Clayton spoke about Serena—there was an air of disrespect.

"Wouldn't dream of it." He gave a cocky smile. I nodded at him and made my way over to the center table.

"Let's begin, shall we? General Hassan, welcome back from Eastern Claw. I'd like a status report on all intelligence gathered." I said. The men in the room immediately surrounded the table. Clayton stood next to my le , and my adviser General Hassan stood to my right.

"The rugged terrain on the east can be an advantage—we can situate camps here and here." General Hassan said, scattering some figurines towards the eastern border.

"The waterways here..." General Hassan took a wooden boat and placed it on River Lycan "Can be used to distribute supplies all the way throughout the west. If we place a few troops here, we can secure the river so that no one from the across the border can infiltrate it." He said.

I looked at River Lycan thoughtfully. It was a long waterway that stretched mightily across the border.

"We have an advantage if we can take the river, it's the main water supply of the rogues." General Hassan said.

"Environmental warfare, I like it." Clayton said, clapping his hands together in glee. "We cut o their water supply, we gain the upper hand."

"They're surrounded by a frozen wasteland." I observed. "Cutting the waterway is an advantage, but it's not enough."

"Taking the river might be di icult." General Hassan hesitantly said.

"Why? Most of it is within our territory and the Lancaster's jurisdiction." General Ivon, our chief strategist, said. He was older than most of us, and we valued his input and wisdom especially since he's lived through a lot of battles.

"A vital part of the river cuts through the west. We'll need the West fully on board with this." General Hassan said, looking at me pointedly.

I swallowed thickly and clutched the edge of the table, my knuckles almost turning white. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I knew what General Hassan was implying.

"The Western Packs have always been loyal subjects! Rogues have terrorized their territory more than the rest of ours!" General Cra indignantly said, slamming his fist on the table.

"That is correct, but this is the part of the riverbanks we need to set up camp." General Hassan pointed at a fertile piece of land beside the river. "It belongs to the Desert Fang pack."

Just as I suspected.

"Desert Fang?" General Xerxes, our intelligence oicer, asked. I took a deep breath and stared them all down one by one.

"Alpha Theodore's pack." I growled out. They all stopped, looking at me with bated breath.

"Not anymore." Clayton hesitantly said. "Who is their new alpha?"

"Alpha Theodore's cousin, Jason Blackmore. Gold Rank. And I have to tell you, Jon, he is furious." General Hassan said, exhaling with a shaky breath. I closed my eyes in frustration.

"I apologize. I know how hard you all worked to put these strategies in place, and now I may have damaged it." I grumbled. Hassan took a step towards me and put his hand on my shoulder.

"What's done is done. We lost an Alpha, but we gained a Gold Ranked Princess. Aye?" His voice sounded throughout the room. The others chorused with their own 'ayes'.

"If you need me to go to Desert Fang and remind them who they answer to, I'd be more than happy, Jon." Clayton proudly said. I gave my friend a nod, but I knew that if he did that, he would make things much worse.

"No. It was my mistake that led to Alpha Theodore's death. We need their support, and they need justice for their fallen Alpha. If they want me to answer to the tribunal so that we can have their support, then I will do it." I said. They all nodded in agreement.

"How long will it take for the tribunal to summon the prince?" General Ivon asked. I looked to Hassan expectantly.

"Within a month or two, if we pressure them enough." General Hassan said. Clayton grumbled.

"There's a war coming, that should be enough pressure." He growled out.

"We can't ord to wait longer, especially with the news I've brought." Agent Ba'yon said. He was the agent that had just come from the northern border with whispers of a defector. I turned to him, motioning for him to speak.

"The defector?" General Xerxes said. Agent Ba'yon nodded.

"Alpha Adam has been receiving messages from a rogue close to the Rogue King and he called on us to authenticate. The messages seem genuine, sent by a black raven. I've only gotten a few words in. This person intends to defect in two full moons. We have to arrange for his escape across the border." Agent Ba'yon said.

"We can have Alpha Adam recall all his patrols for that night, that way we can sneak the defector in and get him here to safety using the waterways. Travelling by land would be too dangerous—wolves would smell rogue immediately." General Ivon said.

"I agree. If this is going to be done, it will be done in secret. But we can't have Alpha Adam recall all his patrols—that would cause too much suspicion and alarm. He runs his warriors like well-oiled machines with strict schedules." General Hassan said.

"Then it will have to be more covert. Only Alpha Adam and us will know of this defector. We will send one person in to retrieve him—this person will have to sneak past Alpha Adam's guards." I said, placing a figurine in the Northern Pack's territory just below the border.

"I will do it." General Cra volunteered. I sighed, any other time I would have been glad to send my trusted friend to do this, but not this time.

"Thank you, Clayton, but a high profile general like yourself would be the talk of the North—they'll recognize your potent scent immediately. We need someone with skill, specializing at covert operations. Not a General—the moment one of us crosses north, people will talk war and raise their shields up, and we don't want that." I said. I thought long and hard—who would be perfect for this job?

"I have an idea. It's a bit unconventional, but I think it could work." General Hassan hesitantly said. I looked at him and nodded.

"Prince Patrick." General Hassan said.

There was a chorus of no's as his statement was met negatively. I kept quiet, mulling the idea over in my head.

"The Prince has only just received his Silver Rank! He's not ready." General Cra exclaimed.

"They'd assign guards to him—he's a prince a er all!" General Ivon agreed.

"We'll disguise it as something else, tell everyone that the King and Queen are sending him to tour the territories because they're putting more responsibility on him—something like that. They'll all be distracted by an arriving prince that the northerner's might loosen up." General Hassan shrugged.

"Or they'll increase security to make sure nothing happens to a royal. This idea is preposterous, Hassani!" General Xerxes said.

"The prince received good marks on tracking and stealth, and this way the information about the defector stays inside our circle." General Hassan said.

They all countered this with a chorus of arguments. Finally, I put my hand up and they immediately stopped and kept quiet.

"It's a risky move, but it has it's merits...we'll have to plan it very well." I began. I was nervous about Patrick, but this would be a good opportunity for him to take responsibility. I knew he'd been itching to show o ever since he received his silver rank; it was time to put some faith in my brother.

"No one will be expecting a prince to harbor a rogue—he'll be able to talk himself out of it if they get caught. And they won't, because my brother is sly." I said. They all looked at each other hesitantly.

"I do agree that Prince Patrick has the skill to pull this o." General Ivon relented. "But he will have to be thoroughly prepared."

"It...makes sense." General Xerxes hastily nodded. "The Prince's scent is clean of kill and blood, he'll be able to cover their tracks easily."

I looked at General Cra expectantly, waiting for his two cents on the matter.

"This whole idea is nuts, if you ask me. But it's our best option now." He relented. I nodded, smiling at him to thank him for his support.

"General Hassan and General Xerxes, you will train Patrick for this. If he is to tour other territories before going North, an announcement will have to be made, General Ivon, you can get the word out." I said. They all nodded.

"Agent Ba'yon, I'm going to need you to go back North and continue correspondence, find out more about this defector. Be careful not to reveal any of our plans until we are sure this is genuine." I said. Agent Ba'yon nodded eagerly.

"Wait a minute. How sure are we about this defector? Have we considered that this is all just a trap? We might be setting our prince up for ambush!" General Cra exclaimed.

Agent Ba'yon took a deep breath and stepped forward, as if there was something heavy in his heart that he needed to say.

"If what this defector is saying is true, then I'm sure this o er to defect is genuine. We can send agents beyond the border to confirm." Agent Ba'yon began.

"What has he revealed?" I asked.

Agent Ba'yon paused, and swallowed thickly. He put his hands on his lips and raised a palm upwards to the sky—a gesture of prayer to the Moon Goddess.

"It's chaos...dystopian chaos beyond the border. I think we all knew that was going to happen, sticking all those bloodthirsty rogues in a frozen wasteland was never going to rehabilitate them." Agent Ba'yon said.

"I know." I said. They looked at me curiously. It was true, I didn't agree with what my father did. No prisoners, rogue or not, deserved to be exiled in such a harsh environment.

"There are rumors that they are eating each other, but that's not the worst part. We all know that the male rogues outnumbered the females by a great deal. Well, the defector claims that this King has captured all the females and is using them as breeders for his army. The females are being raped and abused—their children taken away from them; or worse, sacrificed as food." Agent Ba'yon said, his voice thick and tense.

Silence followed. I closed my eyes and thought of those rogues beyond the border. Paranoia set a bitter stone in my stomach as I imagined what would happen if my own mate were taken—no, I did not want to think of that. It would only make me angrier, and reckless.

The Generals all looked to the ground, they all looked to be deep in their thoughts. I saw Agent Ivon touch his lips and raise his palm to the sky, uttering the name of the Goddess under his breath. I wondered if the Goddess was angry that this was being done to her precious females—females that should be cherished and loved as she had destined them to be.

"This." General Cra broke the silence. "Means war, gentlemen."

I nodded in agreement.

"This King of the Rogues will die for this crime against the Goddess." I said, swallowing thickly. "You are all dismissed."

I brushed past Clayton, who looked like he wanted to say something. All I knew was I needed to find Serena. Agent Ba'yon's revelations stirred something in me, something dark and heinous and I needed my mate and her sunshine to help dissipate it. I needed her comfort.

I followed her citrusy scent across the palace, stumbling and pushing everyone out of my way. I felt my heartbeat quicken as I thought of those poor female rogues, of the chaos my father's orders have caused. Dark thoughts began to cloud me and I hurried.

Finally, her scent stopped inside my o ice. I punched in her birthday in the code and the door unlocked. I hastily opened it and saw Serena twiddling with a pen and biting her lip reading a piece of paper.

I exhaled. She looked up and smiled, her red hair falling gently across her face.

The darkness inside of me slowly crept away.

A/N

5K reads already? Gaaah! I'm so touched!

First of all, thank you to all the people who voted on this book or added it to their reading list. I'm currently trying to thank you all personally. I appreciate those gestures very much.

My heart felt a little bit heavier a er writing this chapter. The situation beyond the border is frightening, like many happenings in the world today. Jon and Serena have their work cut out for them.

To all those silent readers out there, I'd like to hear from you! What do you think of the story so far? Do you like Serena? Jon? General Cra? Who's your're favorite character?

Drop me a comment and a vote!

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