Chapter 32

Serena Lancaster

I never really thought about how much Jon loved me until I saw my brother enter my infirmary room.

Goddess.

My mate loves me so much. Aww!

Wait.

Evan was here.

Oh.

I took in Evan's scent, feeling oddly comforted by the sight of his familiar red curls. They reminded me so much of home—of the rolling hills and beaten paths of Eastern Claw.

The night of the claiming felt like an eternity ago.

The silence was heavy and tense. I saw a range of emotions dance across his eyes—frustration, sadness, fear...and worry?

I broke eye contact, yelping as I suddenly felt two arms gather me in an embrace. I groaned, feeling Evan's body crush against mine. He immediately let me go, afraid he was hurting me.

"Now that's a surprise..." I murmured, smiling weakly up at my brother. For a moment I didn't recognize him. His red hair was now cut shorter, he had dark bags under his eyes, and he seemed to be bigger and more muscular since the last time I saw him.

"I'm so sorry, Red..." He whispered. "When Prince Jonathon called...I thought of mum, and I saw you lying on the bed...Goddess! You looked like her when she..."

"Are you saying I look like I'm dying?" I teased. Evan growled lowly.

"I can't believe you could even joke in this condition." Evan sighed.

There was silence. I realized that this was probably the first time Evan and I had been in a room alone together for a long time. I suddenly got this warm feeling as I looked at him. He wasn't just my brother, he was my twinand I guess a part of me will always be intertwined with him.

"I missed you." He said, looking into my eyes that were so identical with his own. I nodded, gripping his hand tightly. "I'm so sorry."

I realized how much weight he put on those words. They weren't just apologies for my miscarriage—they were also an apology for the ri that had been driven between us. I didn't know how I managed to come to that conclusion—I just knew. Maybe twins do have that special radar.

"It's okay." I said, sighing. "Me too."

I guess I knew I was also at fault for not pushing more for our relationship. Even though it was dad's doing to drive us apart, we were already grown up by then—we should have made more of an effort. I should have made more of an effort.

"I know I should've at least called after the claiming. I just—we had a big mess to clean up..." Evan mumbled, sitting down on the bed beside me.

"No doubt caused by my mate." I sighed. "Evan, really, it's okay. I'm in a better place now. Jon and I...we love each other and we're going to get through this...all of this..."

Evan shook his head.

"I at least owe him a punch to the face for marking my sister like that." Evan growled playfully.

"Have at it." I rolled my eyes.

Evan and I continued talking. We caught up on each other's lives. I told him about my life at the palace and my relationship with Jon, and he in turn told me about his training as a future Alpha and all the interesting things going on back home in Eastern Claw. He hadn't claimed a mate during the ceremony, saying that he'd do that once the war was over.

By the end, I realized I was close to crying. I missed my brother so much. He had been my best friend for the first sixteen years of my life. How in the hell did I manage to survive two years without him?

"Everyone's here to see you. Dad, Uncle Jasper, Aunt Marianne, Erica, and all your friends." Evan said.

No way!

"You're kidding!" I exclaimed. "Jon called you all in?"

"More like he gave a royal order." He laughed.

"Typical." I snorted. "How long are you all planning to stay?"

"I think Dad and Uncle Jas need to get back tonight, but I...I want to stay for a while, to be with you...if that's okay..." Evan hesitantly said. I smiled.

"Of course it is!" I beamed. Evan stood up gently, giving my hand a kiss.

"Well, don't let me hog you. Want me to send the next group in?" Evan asked. I nodded eagerly. Evan beamed at me before exiting.

I sighed, feeling a heavy weight lifted from me. Evan and I were on good terms again. I was so happy. I closed my eyes and sent a quick prayer of thanks to the Moon Goddess.

Uncle Jasper and Aunt Marianne then came in, with Erica trailing in their wake. They fussed on me nonstop, which I already expected. Erica was surprisingly very nice—maybe her parents threatened her or maybe she'd already grown a heart. Either way, it was very pleasant seeing them again.

I was not in the very least surprised at the sudden onslaught of loud noises that accompanied my friends when they came in. I closed my eyes and relished the babble—it was the one thing this palace truly lacked. Melanie cried and yelled at me for Goddess-knows-what, Paolo vehemently recited all the food I should be including in my diet, Jane trilled about her recently-discovered love for yoga and how it could help me as well, and Christopher took his shirt off to brag about his new tattoos and six-pack.

Did I mention this all happened at once? It was a miracle I even understood any of it.

I made them all promise to stay for the next few days so we could all catch up. Melanie was beginning to get cranky, so I asked them to go back to their rooms and get rested.

Princess's orders.

I sighed and leaned back, feeling tiredness creep up on me. As soon as I was about to close my eyes and take a long nap, the door creaked open. I sat up and looked at the door.

My father.

I didn't say a word. We stared at each other for what seemed like an eternity. He looked much older than the last time I saw him. His broad shoulders were tired, slightly hunched. There were more wrinkles on his face. I leaned back, suddenly feeling intimidated. It was like I was back home in Eastern Claw again, subject to the ire of the Alpha.

He walked slowly towards me, stopping to stand beside the bed on my right. I leaned back against the bed and stared up at him. He raised his hand, and I instinctively flinched. He closed his eyes in frustration at my gesture.

I was surprised when I felt his hand gently brush the hair away from my face. He ran his fingers down my hair comfortingly. I just stared at him, my mouth agape. It seemed so long since I received a sliver of fatherly affection from him. His touch was unfamiliar and odd, but strangely enough, I welcomed it.

He sat down on the chair beside the bed and held my hand in his big, warm one. The last time I held his hand, my fingers had been smaller and pudgier.

There was a thick silence.

"Long before you and Evan were born, your mother had a miscarriage." He gruffly said, giving my hand a gently squeeze.

I blinked, surprised at this information. I did not know this.

"She was pregnant with my pup during the claiming ...that's why I fought so hard for her hand—she would have gotten punished and humiliated if I had not won." He said.

I was too stunned to reply. I blinked and pinched myself on the thigh. Was I dreaming?

"It happened the morning after. The stress of seeing me fight...she was so scared I'd lose. We couldn't do what you and the prince did...or else we'd get caught. He told us you buried your pup?" He asked, looking into my eyes.

What?

For the first time in a long time, I saw something real in my father's eyes. His words were genuine and his stare only spoke of concern. Suddenly, I felt so linked to my father that I could only nod in awe.

"It...he...we named him Hector..." I whispered, grasping my father's calloused hand. My father sighed.

"You're too young to have a pup, Serena...Goddess you're only 18." He started. "But I can't deny that it would be a good idea...with this war..."

"What do you mean?"

"Your mate...cares for you, a great deal. But he is going to war. I...he needs an heir in case...." My father slowly said.

Don't break.

I snatched my hand from his hold and glared at him. Tears welled up in my eyes.

"In case what? How...how can you even say that?" I exclaimed. He sighed frustratedly and ran his hand through his face.

"It's a reality, Serena. I'm saying this because I care about you." He said.

"Care about me? You haven't cared about me in a long time, and now you say I need to give birth to an heir while I'm recovering from a miscarriage? That's fucked up, dad!" I disbelievingly cried.

"Language, Serena!" My dad admonished. He sighed frustratedly. "If your mate dies..."

"Stop saying that!"

" If he dies, what will happen to you?" He snapped. I froze, looking at him. "You will be cast away!"

I was stunned into silence. All sorts of scenarios ran through my head. What if Jon died during the war? It was always a possibility—one I never thought to consider, but a possibility nonetheless. Jon can't die!

But war is war. Did Jon know all along that there was always this possibility of him dying? I wonder what he thought about it. Jon was brave, I knew that. I always thought that to be the best thing about him but now, I wasn't so sure. His bravery could get him killed.

"Jon can't...I mean...he's..." I murmured, shaking visibly. My father leaned in to pat my cheek. He held my hand comfortingly.

"I'm sorry if what I said distressed you. I did not mean to...I am just worried about you, Serena. He said.

"You have a funny way of showing it, starting this conversation with my mate's death! You don't know me, dad. You've basically ignored me ever since mum died. You even...you even took Evan away from me." I sobbed.

There was a thick silence.

"I...I didn't realize...I...there's no excuse for that...I am sorry." My father relented. I turned away. That was the first time he had ever apologized to me. "I thought it would make things easier...since you've always had this plan of joining the human world."

"And you never wanted to convince me otherwise? You never even asked me to stay!"

"I thought it was for the best! I wanted you to join the human world because I know how suffocating and restrictive this society is, especially for someone like you. You'd end up like your mother!"

"What do you...what happened to mum?"

He stopped abruptly, and took a deep breath.

"Dad, what happened to mum?" I repeated. My father looked at me helplessly before sighing.

"She wasn't supposed to conceive after you and Evan were born...it was too dangerous. But she was pressured—the King wanted more wolves with Alpha blood. He gave a financial incentive for alphas with big families—the pack was going through hard times then. I told her we shouldn't but...your mother was persuasive. She assured me...I..." My father's voice broke. I could tell he had been holding this in for a long time. "It caused her death..."

What?

"Then this is all the King's fault?!" At my exclamation, my father gave me a hard look before looking around the room nervously.

I clamped my mouth shut.

"I...Serena...you have to understand, I never wanted you in Lightwing. You have to forgive me, I failed you."

"You tell me my mate is going to die and you ask for my forgiveness?"

"I knew that if you joined the human world, you'd be all set because you could take care of yourself. I'd sleep easier. But now that you're in... Lightwing of all places...the mate of the prince...you're in a very dangerous position, Serena." He said.

"I know that!"

"Do you? Do you realize that your place here is only protected so long as your mate is alive? If he dies and you have no child, you're fair game to be exploited. Your child's Lancaster blood will protect you." My father explained.

"If what you're saying is true, then if anything happens to Jon I'll just leave and join the human world..."

"My daughter, are you that naïve? Do you really think they'd let you leave; much less join the human world? The secrets you must know by now as a mate of the prince—they're not going to take any chances." He snapped. "You'll be trapped here for the rest of your life...and I know you, Serena. You may think I don't, but I do. You're exactly like your mother, a free spirit."

There was silence. I gulped, fearing for the worst. Again, horrible scenarios flashed through my mind and I involuntarily trembled.

"I...you came all this way...to scare me...I've just gone through a lot and you...Goddess..." I sobbed. My father squeezed my hand. I made to snatch it away but he held on.

"I'm hoping this tragedy will open your eyes. Do you think no one's going to see this miscarriage as a point of weakness?"

"What? No...they couldn't...I mean...that's horrible..."

"You've been living in a fantasy world, Serena. Everyday, there are conspiracies against the crown. You never know, already there might be those who think that you are unable to conceive and use it against you. While your mate will always protect you, what happens when he's not here? I want you to be careful, especially since you and the prince might be apart during the war."

What?

Oh Goddess.

My wolf began to whine incessantly and it was starting to give me a headache.

My dad was right. In his own, twisted way, he was right. I hardly dared believe it but I knew there was truth in his words.

"But why...they wouldn't...that's cruel...I...I never thought of it that way..." I mumbled.

"Your mate has been very effective in keeping you away from danger but remember that Lightwing is a shit place, Serena! Just look what happened to the King." My dad said, keeping his voice down.

"There you go again with the King! What is it about him?" I demanded, my voice hushed.

The walls have ears in Lightwing.

"He...He was an idealistic prince once...but Lightwing...this place, or maybe the crown ruined him. His advisors were greedy...the rogue situation was costing their packs money...where do you think he got the shit idea to exile them?" My father hissed. I stilled.

"Where...how...how do you know these..."

"Like I said, I always thought you'd join the human world...so I never took it upon myself to educate you. That was my mistake."

"But me and Jon...that...that won't happen to us. We've talked about it and we're going to change things. Jon is going to be a better king."

"You're right." He nodded. "So you better protect him as well."

I sighed, bitterly thinking about my life in Eastern Claw. I suddenly yearned for those days, when I was so carefree and everything was less complicated. "I'm not ready for this..." I whispered.

"You are. You have to be, I know you have it in you. I just wish..." My father sighed. "I just wish I knew the prince was going to claim you...that way I could have taught you..."

"There's no way you could've known, and it doesn't matter now. Like you said, I'm trapped."

There was silence. I knew what my father was trying to say, and I understood. In no way did I forgive him for what he did to me all these years, but he was still my father and an experienced alpha. His words and counsel would always hold value to me.

In his own way, he loved me.

"Dad...you just said a lot of things...you're going to need to explain them to me again because this is...too much...I'm pretty sure I'm high on medicine right now so..." I trembled, my voice breaking.

"I'm sorry I've upset you. But it might be a long time before we can speak face to face again. This war will take us to different places. Promise me you'll survive, Serena."

I gulped.

"I will be okay, dad. I am my mother's daughter, after all."

"That's my girl." He smiled, ruffling my head. I chuckled and closed my eyes; relishing the fatherly affection he had just given me.

Just then, the door opened and in came Jon. I blew him a kiss and he smiled brightly at me. My father stood up and made his way over to him.

"Thank you for taking care of my daughter, Prince Jonathon. Please...don't ever let anything happen to her." He said, pulling Jon close and clapping him on the back. Jon returned the embrace, surprised.

"She'll be safe, Alpha Santino. I promise." Jon said, his voice serious. My father then walked over to me and kissed me on the forehead.

"I must be going, I leave for Eastern Claw tonight." My dad said, reverting back to his serious demeanor.

"Can't you stay a bit longer?" I asked. I had hoped to speak with him more, to ask him about the issue with the King, but he shook his head.

"I can't leave the Gamma for long. We will talk soon, Serena. Goodbye, and good luck to both of you." My dad said. With one last smile, he exited.

Jon breathed a sigh of relief and sat down on the bed, running his hand through my hair.

"So how did you like my surprise?" Jon asked.

"Jon, you're amazing. I love you so much." I beamed. I stopped abruptly, noticing a purple mark on the side of his face. My hackles rose and my wolf growled. "What is that on your face?"

I held his cheek gently, feathering my fingers over the bruise. He winced, and smiled ruefully.

"Your brother. Because I marked you in public." Jon huffed. I growled lowly under my breath.

"Did you guys get into a fight?" I bit my lip, wondering if I had to do some damage control.

"Nope." He shrugged, smiling at me proudly. "I took it like a man because I deserved it." I rolled my eyes. Men and this toxic masculinity. Sigh.

"You and your dad were talking for a long time. What happened? Did you two make up?" Jon asked.

"Yeah...I guess...in a way..." I shrugged, still thinking about my dad's words. Jon gave my hand a gently squeeze.

"There's something on your mind. What is it?" He asked, concerned.

"My dad just...said something...anyway, I'll tell you later. I'd like to take a nap now, if that's all right. I'm pretty drained from your surprise." I chuckled. He smiled and nodded.

"Alright. I'll come back in a few hours. I have to arrange for Patrick's departure anyway. He's leaving tomorrow."

"What? Already? Is he prepared? Where is he going first? How long will this take? If..." I rambled, but Jon silenced me with a kiss.

"Everything's taken care of, don't worry. He'll come and say goodbye to you tonight. I'll fill you in soon...I don't want you stressed."

Well, fat chance of that now.

"I'm just sad I didn't get to pull my own weight in helping prepare for his trip. I mean...this is Patrick...smuggling in a defector...wow..." I whispered.

"I know." He chuckled. "Seems only yesterday I caught his five year old ass in the middle of the night stealing sweets from the kitchen."

Silence followed.

"Thank you, Jon. For everything." I said, pouring all the sincerity in my voice. He leaned in and gave me a kiss. My talk with my father had made me realize one thing: Jon was the most important thing in my life right now. If shit was going down during this war, then I was determined to make the most out of whatever time I had left with Jon.

Be it days or Goddess willing, forever.

A/N
Thank you all for your continued support! We're almost done with Serena and Jon's journey (8 more chapters, plus an epilogue, an essay by me on some reflections, the summary of the sequel, and a teaser chapter for the sequel) and I'm happy to have shared this with all of you guys!

So what do you think of Serena's father?

Please drop comments and votes!

Continue to next part