**Chapter 27** 

A/N Thanks for 35k reads! This is a long one, so hope you're up for it! Jonathon Lancaster The tribunal had always been an awe-inspiring sight: a testament to the willpower of our race. The architecture was imposing: modeled a er the columns and marble of the Ancient Greeks and the glasses and domes of Renaissance Italy. My favorite part was always the tall statue of Lady Justice, blindfolded with scales in her hand, and a large imposing wolf curled menacingly at her feet. Then there was the library. It was a large collection of both human and wolf art, artifacts and literature. The tribunal was built by the second Lancaster King to make sure that order could be maintained among packs without royal interference. Wolves had begun to question the purpose of Lancaster rule without the threat of the Lycans. To assure them that there would be no tyranny, the King appointed four judges: one from the north, south, east and west to serve as protectors of our law. As I walked up the stone steps, I realized that for the first time, I was dreading a visit to this place. Suddenly, I saw someone walk down towards me. I recognized him immediately, it was Daniel Hugo: a tribunal lawman and a good old friend. "If it isn't Prince Jonathon himself! Good to have you back!" Daniel exclaimed, clapping me on the back. "Dan! It's been ages, how have you been?" I chuckled. "Oh you know, same old! But you, I heard you got yourself a mate. How's that?" Daniel asked as he walked me inside the building. "Can't complain." I murmured. We walked in and immediately I saw scholars and sta members milling about. They greeted me with quick bows before rushing o . Life in the tribunal was always hurried —packs never stopped bringing in problems. Dan saw my reserved state and smiled at me comfortingly. "Your trial's next. Alpha Blackmore and Beta Jasper are already inside the waiting room." Daniel said. "When I heard you were coming, I had to see you. It's been a long time, my friend." "Yes." I agreed. "I only wish I could have visited under better circumstances. You know I want you to meet my mate." "I'd love to meet the woman who stole the heart of our prince." Daniel chuckled. "Bring her here sometime, then. I'm sure she'd love to hear all about our adventures. Remember? You, me. Clayton and that hunting trip we took when we were sixteen?!" "Goddess, Dan! We all swore to forget that. Don't you dare!" I laughed, memories flooding back. Daniel had grown up with me in the palace; he was the son of one of my father's o icers. Much to his father's dismay, he had chosen books over fighting. He le for the tribunal a er he received his Bronze bracelet to avoid further conflict with his father. "Tell me, Dan, how much trouble am I in?" I asked as we sat down on a bench in one of the courtyards. "Jason Blackmore has always been looking for a reason to depose Theodore. You've given him an out, but he's going to milk this for as much as he can. I looked over the terms you sent me, he'll agree to them. Negotiate lower so that you can convince him that he's getting more than you're willing to give. He's feeling greedy, Jon, so play into that." Daniel said. I nodded. a "And the judges? Who is overseeing the trial?" I asked. "Dembe Malachi." Dan said. I shuddered. He was a formidable one, and he had a distaste for royals because of a falling out between him and my grandfather long ago. a "He's tough, but fair. Your best bet would be to remind him what you're an upstanding prince and that this transgression was an isolated event." Dan said. a I stayed silent. "It'll be alright, Jon. You're far too important to actually punish and I'm not saying this because you're a prince. These are dangerous times, and every single wolf in within our borders believes that only youcan see us through." Dan encouragingly said. "Way to put the pressure on me." "Ha! Good luck in there, and see me before you leave." Dan said. "Why don't you just visit Lightwing?" I asked. Dan sighed. "Jon, you know I can't do that." He said. "It's been years, Dan. He's not...even there anymore." I said, sighing as I put my hand on his back. "I know..." He said. Suddenly, he smiled at me. "Tell you what. I'll be there during the next coronation." "I'll take it." A sta member came running towards us. "They're ready for you, your highness." He stuttered. I nodded. "Remember, use his greed to your advantage." Dan whispered at me before turning to leave. I followed the sta member into the courtroom. Judge Malachi was seated high up. He was a tall, intimidating man with very dark skin and a bald head. His broad lips were pressed together tightly. a I saw Beta Jasper standing on one side of the room, and on the other side of the aisle, a tall lanky man with dark blonde hair—Alpha Jason Blackmore. The judge had not allowed anyone else to watch the proceedings, so the rest of the room was empty. I stood beside Beta Jasper, shaking his hand. I looked at the Judge Malachi, he was emotionless. I schooled my face into its usual stoic mask. You may be seated." Judge Malachi called out loud. The three of us followed his instructions. "This trial was called by Alpha Jason Blackmore of the Desert Fang pack to seek justice for the death of his cousin, Alpha Theodore Blackmore. Alpha Jason, please recount for the court the events leading up to your former Alpha's death." Judge Malachi said Alpha Jason walked over to stand in front of the judge. "This year's claiming ceremony was held at the Eastern Claw pack, ruled by Alpha Santino Basco and home to Gold Ranked female, Serena Basco." Alpha Jason started. I clenched my fists when I heard him say Serena's name. "The Alpha's daughter was called first and a total of five claimants stepped up to fight for her hand. One of whom was my cousin, the late Alpha Theodore. Prince Jonathon Lancaster did not stake a claim." Alpha Jason said, looking right at me. "My cousin won the fight fairly, leaving all the other wolves beaten but still able. He was about to claim Serena Basco when Prince Jonathon issued the challenge. The prince shi ed and entered the fighting pit." Alpha Jason continued. ď I hated the fact that this most defining moment of my relationship with Serena was being narrated by this piece of greedy scum. But there were no lies in his story, and even though Serena and I were happy it still did not change the fact that from the points of view of others, our mating would always be seen as controversial. a I felt disgusted with myself. "My cousin said that this was against the rules. Beta Jasper of Eastern Claw, the arbiter, allowed the fight, and Prince Jonathon won. The Prince then killed Alpha Theodore." He said it so simply, and yet those words, and the actions they referred to, were the cause of so much strife. "Thank you, Alpha Jason." Dembe Malachi said. Alpha Jason went back to his seat. "The law set forth by King Jarius Lancaster in the year 1887 explicitly prohibited killing during the Claiming Ceremony. Now, it is up to the tribunal to issue punishment, but not before hearing what the prince has to say for himself." Judge Malachi said. "Prince Jonathon." I stood up and made my way towards him. "Judge Malachi, Alpha Jason, Beta Jasper, I came here to ask for forgiveness for my actions during the Claiming Ceremony. There was no excuse for them, and I am prepared to make reparations to the Desert Fang pack and accept the tribunal's just punishment." I said. "Because of your actions, dear Prince, your mating might be considered null and void." Dembe Malachi, said, glaring at me. "No, Judge Malachi. I marked the princess twice, and her mark is on my neck." I said, pulling my collar down to show Serena's mark. "Our mating has been sealed and we are truly bonded." "Your name was not on the roster. There are procedures you have broken." He pressed. "Just because you are a royal does not mean you are above our laws." "I do realize my mistake. Judge Malachi. I did not come to Eastern Claw to claim a mate. But I did claim Serena, and nothing can change "Was the claiming consensual?" He asked. I did not expect that question, so I sti ened. ď "She did not protest, if that's what you're asking." I said. "Judge Malachi, my mating is valid and there is nothing I will let anyone do to tear it asunder. I'd rather we focus on the issue of Alpha Theodore. You are asking questions only my mate can answer, and as you have not summoned her, these questions only digress from the issue at hand." There was silence. Judge Malachi narrowed his eyes, but relented. "Very well. Did you harbor any conflict with Alpha Theodore Blackmore before the Claiming?" He asked. "No. In fact, the royal family has always enjoyed good relations with the Desert Fang pack." I said. "Until now." Jason Blackmore muttered. a "You will be civil, Alpha Jason." Dembe Malachi snapped. a "I apologize." He said. "Judge Malachi, this act of aggression was an isolated incident. It will not happen again, I promise you that. I can only hope to assure you that I will continue to serve as a dedicated prince as I have all my life, until I can rule as a king." I said. a Judge Malachi looked over some papers, checking o some things with a pen. The silence was thick and tense. Finally, Judge Malachi nodded at me. "Thank you. Take a seat, Prince Jonathon. Beta Jasper, please come to the stand." He said. Beta Jasper did so, and I sat down. "Beta Jasper, to your knowledge, did the prince show any inclination before the fight with the late Alpha Theodore, that he intended to claim your niece?" He asked. "No. The Prince was not there to claim a mate, he was there to discuss Eastern Claw's part in the coming war." Beta Jasper said. "Did you niece show any inclination of wanting to be mated to Prince Jonathon?" "Serena? No. Serena did not ingratiate herself with the pack as much as her father, the Alpha Santino, wanted. This caused strife between the two and led Serena to seek a life outside of the pack." Beta Jasper chuckled. "Did she show any resistance?" "The Princess showed maturity, and handled herself well. From all reports I hear she is doing well in the palace." Beta Jasper said. "A Gold Rank female mated to a prince...that is an incredibly powerful match, Beta Jasper, wouldn't you agree?" Judge Malachi asked. "I would say so, yes." Beta Jasper said. "And Eastern Claw is a prominent pack with terrain that will be useful in the war." The judge continued, looking over some papers. "That is why the prince went to your pack, yes?" "Yes, Judge Malachi." Beta Jasper said. "Strange that the prince's visit just happened to coincide with the claiming ceremony, the firstin almost a century with a gold rank female in the roster." The judge said. "It wascoincidental." I blurted out defensively. "I was talking to Beta Jasper." He snapped at me. "As I was saying, a Gold Rank female from a pack whose terrain the prince needed. Why, I'd say an alliance like this called for an arranged mating!" I was about to snap, but thankfully Beta Jasper immediately made eye contact, silently saying I'll handle this I yielded. "Eastern Claw's territory has always been at the disposal of the crown, no arranged mating was needed." Beta Jasper said with conviction. Judge Malachi nodded and looked over the papers again. "Thank you, Beta Jasper. Please take a seat." Again, Judge Malachi looked over the papers. It seemed to stretch on to eternity. Finally, he stood up and we followed suit. "While this tribunal can forgive the prince for claiming a mate...unconventionally, it cannot abide a heinous crime. The Prince is the future ruler of our race, and therefore needs to set an example. While none can deny his admirable qualities, we also cannot look past this egregious slight." Dembe Malachi started. "I don't need to stress how serious the murderof an alpha is. That kind of aggression doesn't just stem out of nowhere and will not just disappear. Therefore, this tribunal is ordering an inquiry into Prince Jonathon Lancaster's work. We will be sending two representatives to Lightwing to observe and report on the prince's capacity. They will evaluate whether what happened during the Claiming was just an isolated incident, or Goddess forbid, the seeds of something heinous. This investigation will be conducted for a month, a er which the representatives will report back and I will make a final ruling on punishment." Dembe Malachi finished. a Fuck. Now that we were in a precarious phase of our war planning, we did not need the tribunal sticking their noses in our business. The intelligence they could acquire just by being presentcould jeopardize everything. a And Serena, I did not want her being watched. She had just gotten comfortable in the palace and now there would be people monitoring her every move. If I protested, they'd think I was hiding something. They could issue all sorts of red tape to block me from my responsibilities and we couldn't have that, not with those she-wolves and their children su ering beyond the border. The familiar darkness crept up inside me again, causing my wolf to growl. I knew who he wanted. He wanted his mate, his light: Serena. I pushed him down and reminded him that we were here fighting for "I am amenable to that, Judge Malachi." I said, shaking myself from my thoughts. He merely nodded. "Now, the issue of reparations to the Desert Fang pack. Although nothing can replace an Alpha, I insist that the Prince give the pack a helping hand so that they can recover from this tragedy. Prince Jonathon?" Judge Malachi asked. I remembered what Daniel said. Already, I could see the greedy glint in Jason Blackmore's eyes as he looked at me. I stood up and read o the paper in my hand. "Before his death, Alpha Theodore expressed interest in building a new pack house a few acres beyond his territory because of the pack's growing numbers. I am prepared to buy the land and give it to Desert Fang. The funds will be deducted from my personal accounts separate from the royal treasury." I said. "What do you say, Alpha Jason?" He stood up and smiled. "We gladly accept this, Prince Jonathon." a I expected him to ask for the pack house, but he did not. I began to get suspicious—was he planning on asking for something else? "The late Alpha Theodore was not always law abiding. His pack has a history of dealing with smugglers from the human world—the tribunal knows this. If Alpha Jason agrees to stop Desert Fang's illegal business, then I am prepared to compensate for the loss of income for a year until an alternative can be found." I said. "I look forward to this opportunity so that the pack can turn over a new leaf." Alpha Jason said. "Is there anything else?" Dembe Malachi asked. "Just one last thing." Alpha Jason said. "Desert Fang's territory covers a huge portion of River Lycan. The river has been the cause of many scu les between packs and humans at ourexpense. I would like to propose that the crown turn over to our pack full authority over the tari s and tolls of River Lycan in the West—therefore we can install our own security." ď Wait a minute. For so long, the crown had been sending its own o icers to guard the river. If we delegated that task to Desert Fang, it would save us a lot of money and manpower. Sure, other packs might protest over this favoritism, but it would be seen as an alliance since Desert Fang was a very large, prominent pack. But... A vital part of our plan for Patrick's mission relied on the river being under our thumb. If Alpha Blackmore placed his people to guard the river, how would Patrick... Fuck. Where did this come from? å Did Alpha Jason notice that I've been sending more agents to check up on the river? This was so Patrick could prepare properly. I glanced at Alpha Jason, and he had a challenging, almost scheming look on his face. a I'd recognize a calculated move anywhere. If I didn't agree, it would arouse suspicions, and I didn't want him nosing around because I didn't trust him. The decision made itself. "That seems to be an economical proposal. It would relieve the crown of costs and give us back manpower." I finally ground out. I saw Alpha Jason rub his hands gleefully. a "However, the turning over of responsibilities will be gradual, since we want to do it properly a er all." I added. That seemed to wipe the smirk o his face a little bit. I smiled inwardly, relishing my little triumph. a I'll make sure it's VERY gradual. "Then that settles it. Are there any more requests? Anyone wish to say anything else?" Judge Malachi asked. "No." I said. I glanced at Alpha Jason. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he hesitated and said no instead. a "Prince Jonathon, you will work with Desert Fang to file and transfer all necessary paperwork. The representatives will be leaving with you tonight so that you can all be in Lightwing by morning." He said. "Prince Jonathon, I hope this debacle has inspired you to be more responsible with your actions. I pray that this does not happen again because we are all eager to see you succeed as our ruler. With that, I hereby declare this trial closed." Judge Malachi added. I bowed to

him in thanks. đ He exited the room and I let out a sigh of relief. I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned. It was Alpha Jason a "Prince Jonathon. I am glad this trial went smoothly. My beta will be in touch within the week and I will make sure everything is handled e iciently. Good day." Alpha Jason said. Even though his words were wholesome, something still felt o. ď "Thank you, Alpha Jason. I pray to the Goddess that your pack can heal and rebuild from this tragic loss." I said. He nodded, giving a slight bow before leaving. I turned to Beta Jasper and smiled wearily. "Let's get some co ee." He said. I eagerly nodded and followed him outside and into the cafeteria. We both got steaming cups of co ee before sitting down on a table. "How is my niece?" Beta Jasper asked, his voice betraying fatherly "She's well...happy and well..." I murmured, sipping my co ee. The hot liquid stung my throat but I relished the feel of it as it warmed my body. "I always knew Serena would do more than cause mischief in Eastern

Claw." Beta Jasper chuckled. "She's a good girl, but she needs reassurance and the sound of laughter around her—that's why she

"She's not who I expected." I admitted. "But she's special...that's

"That she is. She reminded Sonny, I mean, Alpha Santino, too much of the late Luna. A er Serena received her Gold Rank, Sonny was scared the pack might rally around her as a future Alpha, and he knew that role was not for her." He wistfully said, stirring his co ee. "But what he did to Serena's relationship with Evan...no parent

"What happened to the Luna?" I asked. Serena never told me this. Sure, I read her file but I never got the courage to talk to her about it for fear that I might induce painful memories. But now, my curiosity

"Serena's mother? Nell...she was pregnant with a little girl. Something went wrong during her labour—the child was stillborn and none of our healers could do anything." Beta Jasper said.

"Serena must have been devastated." I muttered, wishing to hold

"I know what you mean..." I said. Serena waslight. She was just

I didn't want to imagine what would become of me if anything happened to Serena. In the few months of our mating, she's become such an integral part of my life that I've come to depend on her. Every

My whole life was filled with war and orders and duty, and suddenly,

My wolf howled happily at the thought of her, and his joy was

Subconsciously, a smile flittered onto my face. Beta Jasper's

"She's wormed her way into your heart. Serena is so easy to love,

Love seemed like such a plain and simple word to describe the intensity of my feelings. Love I loved her. I loved her so much because she was her. Because she was terribly easy to love.

I realized how lucky I was to have the chance to love her. She

"She doesn't know, does she?" Beta Jasper asked, chuckling.

Beta Jasper exited and I was le to my own thoughts.

That night we got drunk, she said she was a duty to me.

Suddenly, war was no longer my destiny.

"Tell her soon. Or else it'll drive you mad." Beta Jasper chuckled. "If you'll excuse me, your highness, I have get back to Eastern Claw. Give

Of course it was that simple and complicated at the same time. I laughed out loud abruptly, causing people to give me odd looks. I

She was a duty, but not because I claimed her, but because I loved her. For the first time in my life, I had a duty that I had taken on

I'm taking bets to see who'll fess up first: Jon or Serena? Who do you

Continue to next part

Don't be stingy with comments and votes! See you on Friday!

deserved so much more than me, but I was selfish—Serena was mine and I would do anything to keep her. She was mine to cherish, protect, and love Suddenly, the word did not seem so plain and

eyebrows shot up in surprise. He chuckled, giving me a knowing look.

"We all were. The love for a Luna is second only to the love for a mate. She was our light." Beta Jasper said. "A er she died, all eyes fell on Serena. Oh, the whole pack loved her, she just didn't notice it. In her own way, she gave light through her antics and playfulness..."

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kept such...interesting company back home."

what I thought when I first saw her."

should pull siblings apart."

was getting the better of me.

Serena in my arms to comfort her.

oblivious to the e ect she had on everyone.

day, I sought her smile, her warmth, and her joy.

Serena. My Serena. My mate. My light.

"That much, huh?" He asked.

she happened.

"What?"

I frowned.

That was it? Love?

simple a er all.

didn't care.

She was right.

willingly. Love.

think, and why?

I'm in love, damn it!

Helplessly, I sighed.

my best to your Princess."

Love