

Aiden
Sienna, change of plans

Sienna
you're not going???

Aiden
Sorry, sweetie. I meant it's Chicago now, not Columbus

Sienna
why?

Aiden
long story. Traffic cam...guy i'm chasing...



Aiden
will explain everything when I get home

Aiden
which I hope to god will be soon

Aiden
I miss you

Sienna
I miss you too

Sienna
thanks for checking in

Sienna

Sienna

thanks for checking in

Sienna

safe flight 🙏🙏🙏



SIENNA

At ten I met Michelle, Monica, and Monica's cameraman, Curtis—I think his name was—outside the doors of the Regency Cove Mall.

We were going “Festival of Flame” shopping.

Not quite the kind of shopping I'd had in mind when I was talking with Aiden, but I supposed it would have to do.

As I approached them, I squared my shoulders.

My first priority was making sure that these entertainment people didn't take advantage of Michelle.

But improving my image as the Alpha's mate might not be such a bad idea either.

I decided to hope for the best.

“Hey,” I greeted Michelle. “You look great.”

She was wearing a brown Vera Wang maxi dress with a slit up one leg.

I, on the other hand, was in a sweater and jeans.

One of us was definitely more suited to the celeb life.

The look on Michelle's face as she did one of her once-overs on my outfit only confirmed that.

"Hey, at least this way, the camera will love you even more in comparison," I said with a chuckle.

Michelle rolled her eyes but smiled back at me.

"Well," I said, "shall we?"



"Oh, we have to wait one more minute," Monica said. "There's another member joining our little team."

I thought she meant a sound tech or something, but then a chic African American woman walked up.

It was Blair King.

Of course. She was another "mate" of the East Coast Pack—mated to Nelson King, Head of Social Welfare.

I liked Blair, but her elegant poise could be intimidating. Through no fault of her own, she always made me feel like a kid playing dress-up.

I saw Michelle eyeing Blair's Chanel dress enviously.

Bet she appreciates my lack of fashion sense now, I thought wryly.

"Sienna, Michelle, how lovely to see you," Blair

said with a warm smile.

She reached out her hands and we each took one to squeeze.

Everyone exchanged air kisses—this was all going on film.

So far so good.

Except I feel like I didn't get the memo about designer labels.



“So, the Festival of Flame?” Blair said, raising her eyebrows at me. “I’m surprised. I can’t remember the last time I heard of a pack celebrating it.”

“1998,” Michelle piped in. “Last one I found with a web search.”

“Wow,” Blair said, looking at me with eyes full of humor. “I didn’t peg you as one to revive old traditions.”

I shrugged. “It wasn’t really my idea—”

“Sienna,” Monica interrupted, “I had also hoped to get your sister, Selene, to attend. She’s the mate of the pack’s lawyer, isn’t that right?”

“Oh, uh...,” I fumbled.

“You’ll talk to her for me, I hope? Or your mother for that matter. She’s close enough,” Monica said. “For next time.”

I nodded in agreement, but personally, I doubted Selene had the energy or interest, what with



Series

The Millennium Wolves
Book 4 - Chapter 10

Dark Mode



Chapters

and my parents had their hands full helping out with baby Vanessa.

Monica ushered us into the mall, cameras in tow, and we made our way to Clair de Lune, an upscale interior decorating store.

The plan, as I understood it, was to buy a lot of candles.

Which wasn't exactly my idea of riveting television, but whatever.



Except when we got into the store, I saw that it had been rearranged to accommodate the large camera and lighting equipment, all of which was centered around three brightly lit podiums.

"Okay everyone, take your places!" Monica chirped as we entered. A dozen cameramen scuttled to do her bidding.

She turned to the three of us. "Ladies, if you'll follow me to your podiums, we've arranged a little game to kick things off!"

"What kind of game?" I asked, casting a suspicious glance at Michelle. But my friend was too busy triple-checking her makeup in a compact to notice.

"A fun one! With a fabulous prize for the winner!" Monica replied, not looking at me.

Was I the only one who noticed how rarely she made eye contact with anything that wasn't a camera lens?



On my other side, Blair King seemed as unflustered as always.



We took our places behind the plastic podiums, which were flashing stripes of yellow and red, like flames. Small red buzzers were mounted on the tops.

The cameras were aimed directly at us. The heat from the lamps was causing sweat to bead on my neck.

“Once we’re ready to begin, all you ladies have to do is answer a few questions about the Festival of Flame. After two rounds, the contestant with the most correct answers will receive an all-inclusive spa package at a five-star resort!”

“Ooooooh, I can’t wait!” Michelle said excitedly.

The cameras pointed their blank faces at me.

How was I supposed to answer questions when I could barely remember why I was even here?

I don't know anything about these dried-up old traditions.

My throat was bone dry.

“Alright everyone!” Monica said, “We’re live. Now let’s begin our game of *Festival Feud!*”

She beamed at the three of us, lined up like Jeopardy contestants.

“First question: Why are red candles considered sacred to the Festival of Flame?”

“First question: Why are red candles considered sacred to the Festival of Flame?”

I had no idea.

But my hands were sweating, and my fingers slipped onto the buzzer.



SQUAWK!

“Sienna!”

Uhhhhh, just make something up!

“Because it uh... symbolizes the blood of fertility?”

“Correct!” Monica cried.

Michelle glared at me, but Blair looked impressed.

I tried to hide my smile as a point appeared under my name on the scoreboard.

“Next question! What year was the first recorded Festival of Flame!”

SQUAWK!

This time, I hit the buzzer on purpose, even though I was only about twenty percent sure I was right.

“1547!”

“Correct!” Monica cried.

“I don’t think my buzzer is working very well,” Michelle said from her podium.

“Next question, here on *Festival Feud!*” Monica said as though Michelle hadn’t spoken.



I saw my friend’s jaw clench with tension.

Oh come on, it’s just a game, I thought, beginning to enjoy myself. And I’m winning.

But then I looked back at Michelle, who was staring with a fixed, too-bright smile into the cameras.

Festival Feud?

I thought this was supposed to heal wounds, not cause them.

JOSH

Michelle had kept me up half the night going on about her new reality show.

Part of me knew that I should be more attentive—my mate was struggling to put herself back together, and I needed to support her.

But at the same time, I didn’t understand how prancing about in front of a bunch of cameras was supposed to heal anything.

Not when Konstantin could be plotting his revenge.

I'd ended up taking a bottle of whiskey into my office, where I sat alone, drinking into the early hours of the morning.

So I was hungover and pissed off to begin with when I arrived at the Pack House on Monday morning.



My claws itched to dig into something, and I was hoping to continue the search for the vampyre.

Except I was being told that the Alpha wasn't in the office today.

"Well, when do you expect him in?" I demanded of Felix, Aiden's assistant.

Felix gave me his usual overly prim smile. "He e-mailed to let me know he'd landed in Chicago last night—"

"What are you talking about?"

Nelson came down the corridor. "Hey, Josh, is there a problem?"

I scowled. "I'm trying to make sense of what Felix is telling me. Aiden is in Chicago?"

Nelson steered me to his office. "Aiden went after Konstantin."

My blood began a low thumping in my ears. "Why—why am I only hearing about this now?" I asked. My headache was digging talons into my skull.

Nelson looked uncomfortable. "Aiden felt that

Nelson looked uncomfortable. “Aiden felt that with everything you have on your plate... he wanted to deal with this himself.”

My hands clenched into fists. “*I’m* his Beta.”

Nelson nodded. “Of course. But you have been under a lot of stress lately, Josh—”

“Save it,” I barked, and exited.

I couldn’t believe it.

The bastard left me behind.

AIDEN

The sun was just rising over Chicago when my flight pulled into the gate.

Between the jet lag and the anticipation over possibly catching Konstantin, I was unusually nervous.

But there was no time to waste. As soon as I was off the plane, I texted Sayyid.

Aiden

just landed at OHare

Aiden

what do you have so far?

Sayyid

We have footage of Turner

Sayyid
facial recognition flagged him



Sayyid
i also spoke with the local police commissioner

Aiden
and?

Sayyid
There have been a series of attacks in the city

Aiden
what kind of attacks?

Sayyid
Exsanguinations. Mostly homeless types

Aiden
when was the first attack?

Sayyid
about a week ago

Aiden
so we think Konstantin is in CHicago?

Sayyid
it looks that way



Aiden

Okay. This is good.

Aiden

means we've nearly got the bastard

Sayyid

yes my Alpha

Sayyid

how would you like to proceed?

Aiden

first, let's find Turner

Aiden

we need all the help we can get

Sayyid

Yes, my alpha.

SIENNA

SQUAWK!

“Sixteen!” I cried. “Werewolves usually experience the haze for the first time at sixteen years old.”

“Correct!” Monica crowed.

It was the final round of Festival Fand, and

It was the final round of Festival Feud, and Michelle and I were tied at four points each.



Blair, who seemed to find hitting the buzzer to be rather impolite, only had two points, and had resigned herself to third place.

“Okay, Sienna and Michelle, we have one final tiebreaker question. The woman who answers it correctly will receive the all-inclusive spa package!”

I grinned at Michelle, enjoying the light competition.

But her answering look was somewhere between a snarl and a grimace.

Monica narrowed her eyes. “Here we go: What flower is traditionally associated with the Festival of Flame?”

Tiger lilies! Holy shit I actually know this!

SQUAWK! My hand hit the buzzer, but then I paused before speaking.

Michelle really wants to win this.

So let her win. What the hell are you doing?

This whole thing is supposed to help Michelle.

“Ummm... petunias?” I said.

“Oh, I’m afraid that is incorrect,” Monica said. “Now, Michelle, if you answer this correctly, you win! But if you are wrong, the question goes back

win! But if you are wrong, the question goes back to Sienna for one more shot!”



Okay, Michelle. You got this.

But my friend was chewing on her bottom lip. “I think... umm... calla lilies?”

“Incorrect!” Monica said, looking delighted.

Her eyes swiveled back to me. “Okay Sienna, this is your chance to seize the victory. If you don’t answer, we’ll have to go another round.”

The fun of the game had fizzled out, and I definitely didn’t want to go another round.

“Tiger lilies,” I answered with a sigh.

“And we have a winner!” Monica crowed, a gleam in her eye. “Sienna Norwood, the mate of the Alpha!”

Michelle looked like she was struggling not to kick the podium over.

“It was a really hard question,” I said, trying to smooth things over.

But the pure venom in her eyes when she looked at me was enough to stop my tongue.

“I’ve never been very good at these sorts of games,” Blair agreed.

“So Sienna, when will you be taking advantage of your exclusive VIP spa package?” Monica asked from near a camera.



I looked over at Michelle and Blair and had an idea. “Actually, I think we should all go together. Sometime after filming wraps. It’ll be my treat.”



Michelle’s lips turned up at the corners, and Blair nodded graciously.

But out of the corner of my eye, I saw Monica’s look of disappointment.

I’d managed to avoid a blowup with Michelle, and had ensured that Monica wouldn’t get to film our spa day.

Take that, I thought victoriously.

But then Monica smiled at me, and I felt a shiver go down my spine.

AIDEN

I sent Sayyid to the coroner’s to ask questions about the killings.

I would check on the most recent crime scene.

It was located in one of the many abandoned freight tunnels where homeless people tended to congregate in Chicago.

Rain started to fall, darkening the sky just as I entered the even darker passages.

Water cascaded down from the street grates above. My shoes splashed loudly in the growing puddles.

These concrete tunnels got progressively dimmer and more hazardous—they were mostly forgotten

and more hazardous—they were mostly forgotten, except by those forced to seek them out for shelter in the cold Chicago winter.

Rusted rails cut through the ground at their base.

The smell of old piss permeated the walls.

I missed the clean air of Mahiganote, the quiet peace of the forest.

Most of all, I missed Sienna.



Get this done so you can go home to your mate.

I passed a shantytown, glancing at the cardboard boxes and tents as I went.

People hardly spared me a glance.

I considered stopping to ask questions, but I decided to do so on my way back, after looking at the area where law enforcement had found the most recent victim.

The walls near the shanties were colorful with graffiti, but as I left the inhabited area behind, they faded to gray.

My footsteps echoed.

I reached the crime scene tape, stark yellow against the dull, colorless scene.

Perhaps because of the odors, or because of the lack of noise, I didn't realize someone else was there with me.



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Until he attacked.

[Next Chapter](#)