

Aiden
hey Freckles

Sienna
hey

Aiden
I'm really sorry, I have to break our brunch date. I'm heading out to Ohio

Sienna
what



Sienna
OHIO???

Aiden
I have a lead on konstantin

Sienna
...

Aiden
wanna come to watch me pack?

Sienna
meet you at the hotel

AIDEN

Sienna was sitting in an armchair, gazing

AIDEN

Sienna was sitting in an armchair, gazing distractedly out the window, when I let myself into our hotel room.

She looked so tired and pale; my heart clenched in concern.

I stroked her cheek. "Hey," I said. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she said with a shrug. "Just worried. You're going after Konstantin."

I took her hands in mine. "You don't have to worry. I'll have my Hunter Squad for backup. I will take every precaution."

"He's so dangerous, Aiden. He killed my parents... Aaron's mate. He may try to kill you, too."

I turned her chin, catching her gaze. "I will not let that happen, Sienna."

"I don't want you to go," she whispered.

"I know," I said. I leaned in and kissed her forehead. "But you know as well as I do that he has to be eliminated."

Giving her hand a squeeze, I got up and started assembling an overnight bag.

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"I'm sorry, Sienna," I said with sincerity. "I wish I didn't have to go. I'm probably going to be gone for a while, too, unless we get lucky right off the bat."

Sienna sighed. "Well, at least Michelle will be keeping me busy."

"Oh?"

"Yep," Sienna said, once more gazing out the window. "She's gotten me involved in a reality show, of all things. *Real Mates of the East Coast Pack*. She's over the moon about it, of course."



UNLIMITED

Where did this come from?

"Doesn't sound like your kind of scene," I said with a wry grin.

"It's not. But she's hellbent on doing it, and I don't think she should be alone. She's so fragile right now."

She's not the only one.

"Are you sure this is a good idea? I can have the whole thing shut down, ya know?"

Sienna gave me a small smile. "And disappoint Michelle and her crowds of adoring fans? I think she'd start a coup."

Still unconvinced, I raised my eyebrows at her.

Sienna waved her hand. "I'm sure it will be nothing. Just that Monica woman following us around while we show. It might even be fun."



“If you say so,” I said. “Feel free to run up the ECP credit card if you like.”

Sienna gave me a look of mock outrage. “I would *never* misappropriate pack funds, Alpha Norwood!”

“Okay,” I conceded. “Run up our credit cards, then.”

Her face brightened. “Maybe I will.”



“You definitely should. Get yourself some kind of sexy outfit and when this whole ordeal in Columbus is done, I’ll take you out on the town, sound good?”

She got up and came to me, wrapping her arms around my neck. “That. Sounds. Amazing.”

My need to pack faded into the background as I kissed her, the soft sensation of her lips on mine waking my lingering haze.

I felt the tension slipping from her shoulders and back as she relaxed into the kiss.

My flight to Ohio suddenly seemed unimportant. Columbus could wait a few more minutes while I spent some time with my mate.

Gently, I guided her to the bed.

SIENNA

Aiden undressed me slowly, kissing the skin he revealed.

I ran my fingers through his silky hair, closing my eyes and willing all my worries away, just for now.

As he pulled off my jeans and panties, he planted a kiss on my mound, sending a thrill through my whole body.

With one smooth gesture, he slipped his hands along the insides of my bare legs, parting my thighs.

His tongue found its way to my center, hot and probing.

With a gasp I arched my back, fingers digging into his hair.

“Aiden,” I whispered, my breath becoming ragged.

He ran his fingers along my folds as his tongue teased and pleased me.

My mind emptied as sensation took over, enhanced by my burning haze. My body was begging for release.

His tongue slipped inside me, hitting the right spot over and over again, sending me over the edge.

I broke, crying out.

Aiden’s arms wrapped around my hips as I rocked with ecstasy.

A moment later, it was over, and I crawled into his embrace, savoring one more moment of love with my mate before he had to go.



Michelle

hey Si

Michelle

busy?

Sienna

not really what's up?



Michelle

i think we should meet to talk about the show

Michelle

had lunch yet?

Sienna

no i haven't

Sienna

where do you want to meet? Winston's?

Michelle

how about the country club

Sienna

...

Sienna

sure



Michelle

be there in fifteen

I looked at the phone a moment longer and sighed.

Part of me really wished Michelle would choose a different way to get over her trauma.

But she was my friend, and I would be there for her.



I headed for a quick shower, trying to give myself a mental pep talk.

It might not be that bad.

I can try to shove most of the attention onto Michelle.

She'll love that.

I smiled, hoping that my predictions would be right, and this wouldn't be a total nightmare.

AIDEN

My phone buzzed just as my driver pulled into the airport.

Sayyid was on the other line.

“You’re going to have to change your flight plans,” he said in his characteristically abrupt way.

“And why is that?” I asked.

“We’ve got footage of Turner running a red light in Chicago from forty-five minutes ago.”

“I see.”

I made arrangements to meet Sayyid and the rest of the Hunter Squad at O’Hare.

Getting out of the car, I waved to Bertrand, the pilot of the East Coast Pack’s private jet.



“Change of plans, Captain. Looks like we’re headed to the Windy City.”

I leaned back in my chair with a sigh.

This hunt was taking me farther and farther away from where I truly needed to be.

Which was back home, with Sienna, before she broke herself under the yoke of her own guilt.

MICHELLE

I sauntered into the Mahiganote Country Club knowing that soon I’d be doing it with a camera following my every move.

I couldn’t wait.

Monica Birch was already waiting for us at the best table in the house. She beamed as Sienna and I entered.

But I noticed that her gaze went straight to Sienna, and there was a hungry gleam in her eye.



I paused a moment, a frown coming to my face.

Sienna didn't even want to be here. I was the one who had suffered, who deserved a little attention.

Who woke up last night in a cold sweat only to find the bed next to her empty, and then found her mate slumped over on the sofa hugging a half-empty bottle of scotch.



Whatever. Just wait until the cameras are officially rolling. We'll see who the real star of the show is.

Smoothing my expression, I took a seat as Monica rushed over to meet my friend, sticking out her hands like she might try to hug her.

"Mrs. Mercer-Norwood!" Monica gushed in a bubbly, fake tone. "I can't tell you how excited I am to work with you!"

"Umm... yeah. Thanks," Sienna said, chewing on her lip.

I smothered a sigh of exasperation. You think she could at least *pretend* to be excited.

This means a lot to me. Why doesn't anyone see that?

"So, where do we start?" I asked after everyone gave their drink orders.

"This is your rodeo, Michelle. What did you have in mind?" Sienna responded.

"I was thinking we could make some calls and get the girls together for a night on the town!" I said.



Sienna frowned. "I mean, it would be great to see the girls, but Mia and Selene are kind of drowning in babies..."

"All the more reason for them to get out of the house and have a girls' night!"

"Ladies, if I may," Monica interjected, "I have an idea."

Pausing, I eyed her in surprise.



Monica had told me that *my* ideas would be given top priority. This was the first I was hearing about some other plan.

Monica smiled, revealing her too-white teeth. "This show will be an eight-episode series, with lots of social media events to go along with it."

"Social media events?" Sienna echoed.

"Yes, little one-offs that we can livestream," Monica explained.

You could see the suspicion coming off of Sienna in waves.

My heart dropped. If she didn't agree, my dream of being famous would be dead before it started.

It hurt badly enough that I would have to play second fiddle to my best friend, but if there was no show at all...

Being on camera was the only place where I felt healthy and whole.



I couldn't lose that.

Not so soon.

My stomach clenched with anxiety.

Monica raised her hands as though framing a banner in the air. "You and Michelle will plan and pull off a big event, with the event itself happening in the eighth episode."



"What kind of an event?"

"Oh, the specifics aren't really important. What's important is showcasing the mate of the Alpha."

I stiffened, and Monica must have noticed because she quickly added, "And of course, the mates of the Beta and the rest of the inner council."

Sienna frowned and looked at me. "Michelle, are you sure this is what you want?"

I paused. To be honest, "showcasing" my already famous best friend was the last thing I wanted.

I had thought the show would be focused on me, on my journey as I showed the world that I was stronger than ever.

But it was too late to turn back now.

"Absolutely," I said.

"Great," said Monica, her smile even wider. "This way, everyone in the world will get to know the *real* Sienna Norwood."

SIENNA

The “real” Sienna Norwood?

What does that even mean?

“And that’s... good?” I asked.

“Think of the optics!” Monica exclaimed.

“I’m not sure I know what that means.”

“She means people will form a perception of who we are,” Michelle said.

“What kind of perception?” I asked. I’d already witnessed the power of the media to twist and manipulate the truth.

“The planning and implementation of a big party is perfect,” Monica insisted, ignoring my question. “It’s fun. It’s exciting. We’ll leave them hanging at the end of episodes when things go wrong.”

“What makes you so sure things will go wrong?” I asked.

“Well, they always do,” Monica laughed. “Plus, I think a little time pressure would be good. What do you say to throwing a Festival of Flame?”

“A what?”

Michelle rolled her eyes. “You know, Si. That old celebration where they’d bless all the candles. It’s supposed to happen on January 15.”





Monica nodded. “The Festival of Flame used to be an important holiday. It’s fallen out of fashion—hasn’t been celebrated in recent decades in any pack that I know of.”

“Think of it this way,” she continued. “You’ve dealt with some... backlash over the way things went this fall with the Fertility Festival.”



That’s putting it mildly.

“Revitalizing an old custom would be a great way to smooth things over with the traditionalists,” Monica said, eyes glowing.

I sighed and looked at Michelle. “What do you think?”

She smiled broadly, but the expression didn’t quite reach her eyes.

This is such a bad idea.

But I was not about to stand in the way of my best friend’s dream.

I owed her too much.

“Throwing a great big party? I think we should go for it!” she said brightly.

I tried to smile in return, but it came off as more of a grimace.

“Alright then,” I said. “Let’s do it.”





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Next Chapter

