



AIDEN

Taking a deep breath, I launched into my explanation.

The one I'd been practicing to myself for last several months.



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I had been dreading this conversation ever since I had the realization.

"I don't want to be Alpha anymore," I said to Sienna.

To her credit, she didn't freak out or immediately contradict me.

"I know, it's been really hard," she said, her eyes full of love and concern.

"I can't imagine what it's been like—you were raised to be the Alpha.

“You’ve been the Alpha your whole adult life. You’ve given everything you have to the job—”

“That’s not entirely true,” I said.

“What? No, Aiden, you *have* given it your all—”

“That’s not what I was referring to. I mean the part about being raised to it.”

Sienna frowned, her eyes crystal blue in the gentle April sun reflecting off the lake’s water.

“Aaron was supposed to be the Alpha,” I said.

“Your brother?” Sienna shook her head slowly. “That’s not what you told me.”

I gave her a nod. “Actually, what I told you was true. Aaron always knew I would surpass him as Alpha.

“But that was just Aaron. My parents never got that memo.”



Sienna listened; her blue eyes wide.

“They raised Aaron to be the Alpha,” I said.

“I learned a lot too, but it was like... by osmosis.

“Aaron was five years older than me. When he turned eighteen, Dad wasn’t ready to retire, so he didn’t ascend to Alpha then, like some do when they inherit the role.”

“How old was he when he died?” Sienna asked softly, turning her aqua eyes on me.



“Twenty.”

“You were fifteen?”

“That’s right.”

A sigh escaped her, and she squeezed my hand.

“There was never any doubt. Never any question, that I’d take his place.

“And it helped, all those years of him building me up, telling me I’d make a better

Alpha than him.”

I thought back to those days, when Aaron would wrestle with me or toss a ball. He was more of a father to me than Dad ever was.

“I wanted to do it—I never considered *not* doing it. And my parents—well, no way were they going to consider letting the role pass outside of the family.”



A Norwood has been Alpha for generations, my dear boy, I could hear my father say in his cottony Virginia accent.

No wonder they went off on their world travels again. I bet Dad can barely sleep, with Josh in power now.

“I never stopped to ask myself if I even *wanted* to do it.”

Sienna gazed at me. She looked calm, but I could see the twitch of her pulse in her throat.

“These last few months...” I said. “It’s a simple life. A life I never even considered that I could have.”



I looked back out over the lake—it was beautiful, surrounded by pines and oaks, even the occasional chestnut.

“It’s peaceful here. Away from the insanity that goes with being Alpha—you know what I’m talking about, Sienna.

“The press. The demands. The politics. Some people live their whole lives without any of that. I think they have it better.”



“But Aiden,” she said, and her voice had a desperate note in it. “We need you.”

She reached for my face and placed a soft palm on my cheek, staring into my eyes. Her eyes were like blue crystals, ringed with fiery lashes.

“We need you to be Alpha, Aiden. Because you would be ethical. Decent.”

Her mouth looked soft, and I felt a rush of love and desire for her—the kind born of deep feeling rather than the haze, of intimacy and shared years.

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“Sienna,” I breathed, imbuing the word with all my passion for her.

Her eyelids lowered and her lips parted.

I leaned in and kissed her; her body yielded to me.

I wanted to just appreciate the kiss for a moment. Though I held her by the waist, I kept my hands from traveling, focusing all my attention on her mouth.



Her lips were velvet. She tasted like a glass of water after a long thirst.

She arched her back, inviting me to kiss her throat.

I guided us down from the log to the soft forest floor on the other side, hidden from view of the lake.

Above, birds called, oblivious to our rising passion.

The scent of leaves and earth mingled with pine.

I never want to leave this place.

*I want to live out my days in this forest,
making love to Sienna by this lake.*

Far from everything.

Free.



SIENNA

My mind was a tangle as Aiden's mouth kissed my throat and we laid down in the leaves of the forest floor.

I wish I could say I wanted to support my mate and his sudden desire to retreat from the world.

But he couldn't have chosen a worse time.

Yet even as I worried about what Aiden had told me, the feeling of his hands running up my sides, easing over my ribs and under my breasts, then over them, fondling and stroking...

The kisses thrilling the flesh of my throat—

the burning heat building in my sex...

After a few moments, it chased away all other thought.

I undid the button of my jeans and then fumbled with his.

His mouth was on my breasts now, kissing and sucking one and then the other.



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My nipples hardened.

He bit one lightly and I gasped.

I felt a rush of love for this man, and a hot yearning.

After everything we had lost—we hadn't lost so very much at all.

We had each other.

A tinge of guilt marred the warmth of Aiden's touch.

But I pushed aside intrusive thoughts of Selene and my dad and everything else

that threatened to overwhelm this precious moment.

Aiden pulled my jeans down around my knees and toyed with the edge of my panties.

I struggled a little, feeling caught by the jeans, but Aiden chuckled and slipped his hand in my panties, pleased with the arrangement.



I whimpered as he touched me, slipping into my wet folds.

“You want me,” he whispered in my ear.

“Yes,” I admitted, delighting in the confession.

“I’m going to make love to you, Sienna,” he promised.

My head swam with desire. “Please...” I breathed.

The hand left my panties and I moaned with frustration, but the next thing he did was yank the jeans off the rest of the way, as well as his own

as his own.

I pulled off both our sweaters.

His hands ran over my back as he began kissing me again, and his fingers unclasped my bra.

His mouth was on my shoulder and collarbone. His hands stroked my breasts, my belly, moving downward to part my thighs.



Feeling the heat of his body as he positioned himself above me, I cried out as he entered me.

I felt him thrust once, twice, and then I braced my foot and flipped us both over, straddling him.

Pressing my hands on his chest, I pushed myself down, sending him deeper.

Aiden grunted, his eyes black with arousal as they met mine.

I rotated my hips, giving a sharp little jerk from time to time.

Joined like this, we were complete—a perfect whole.

I want to stay like this forever.

I never want to be anywhere but with Aiden.

He is my home. He is where I'm meant to be.

The pleasure built and my breathing accelerated. I let out cries with each thrust, each movement.



Aiden gripped my hips, driving up into me.

His face contorted as he bared his teeth, groaning.

I watched him cum and my orgasm broke over me.

I rolled my head back, my hips still rotating, letting the ecstasy wash through me.

We moved together for a little while longer after the crescendo.

Collapsing by his side, I scooted closer, tucking my head into the crook of his arm.



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We slept.

MELISSA

I'm dying.

The thought was intrusive.



Trying to breathe deep, I lay on my bed. It was one of two single beds in this room. The other was Rowan's.

I'm dying.

No. Stop saying that.

He's dead, and I'm dying.

I couldn't breathe. I was smothered.

Choking.

I broke out in a cold sweat.

My heartbeat accelerated, harder and harder, until it was hammering.

My chest hurt.

Oh God, I'm dying!

Numbness spread from the tips of my fingers, all through my hands.

Someone help me!

My vision narrowed, like looking through a dark tunnel.

I blinked rapidly, but a hum built in my ears and the darkness crowded in.

“Grandma?”

I turned—Rowan stood in the bedroom doorway.

I made a choked noise and an unpleasant heat washed through me.

I couldn't form words.

Rowan shuffled his feet, his eyebrows drawn together with concern.



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“Grandma,” he said.

He made to step closer, then stopped himself.

I’m dying!

Help me!

HELP ME!



Whatever hesitation held Rowan back, he let it go and ran to me, grabbing my hand in his smaller ones.

“Oh Grandma, it’s okay. You’re going to be okay. She says so.”

“She?”

Dear God, what is he seeing now?

A spasm wracked me; I began making choking noises, my body jerking with each, like a dry cough.

But they were sobs.

Rowan kept ahold of my hands, patient.

The sobs rocked me. I squeezed my eyes shut, letting them come.

Some muscles in my back loosened, and I rolled onto my side, curling into a ball.

Something touched my hair.



I opened my eyes. Rowan was stroking my head.

Shuddering breaths became possible.

Some of the terror I felt bled away.

After another few minutes, I could sit up, swinging my legs off the side of the bed.

“There,” Rowan said. “See? You’re better.”

Tears rolled from my eyes and I wiped them away.

“You’re right, duckie. I’m better,” I managed.

What the hell is happening to me?

Am I dying or not?

Oh Robert. Are you still alive?

Rowan's clear, green-eyed gaze met mine.

Maybe he could help me.



The thought curled itself through me,
twisting around my heart.

I have to know.

I can't stand this uncertainty.

He can help me find the truth.

We can do it right here.

*He'll be okay. It almost never upsets him
when he does it spontaneously.*

I schooled my face into a serious expression.

"Rowan," I said. "Would you like to help
Grandma with something very important?"

Grandma with something very important?"

SIENNA

I woke up.

Leaves were stuck to my face.

I plucked them off, rubbing my skin, and gave Aiden a few small kisses.



He sighed and his eyes fluttered open.

"Hey, Freckles," he murmured with a grin.

"Hey," I said, smiling back.

With a deep breath I retrieved my clothes and put myself back into some kind of order.

Laughing quietly to myself about Aiden and me acting like teenagers, I made my way through the trees. As they opened up, I saw Vanessa and River tear by.

"Where's Rowan?" I called after them, but wherever they were going, they were too focused on it to stop and answer me.

I hope they aren't leaving Rowan out.

A tinge of concern propelled me to try to find my son. Maybe he was just fine, playing on his own somewhere. But I just wanted to check.

That was how I came to enter Rowan's cabin, only to find him sitting on the rattan couch with Mom, their hands locked together.



Rowan was staring out into space, blind to everything.

"Rowan," I said, but he did not respond.

Mom was staring at him, her gaze so intense it shocked me.

"What is going on here?" I demanded, stepping inside and closing the door behind me.

Mom's eyes darted to me, but then returned to Rowan's face. She bit her lower lip.

"Come on, duckie," she muttered after a pause. "Do you see him?"

pause. “Do you see him?”

“See who?” I said, my alarm mounting.

“Shh!” Mom hissed at me, then turned back to Rowan.

Throughout this, it was as though Rowan could neither see nor hear us.

Then, abruptly, in a voice that made my skin crawl, he said:



“No, he isn’t here. No, we don’t have him. No, no, no, no, no, no, no...”

“What the actual fuck,” I breathed, and yanked Rowan’s hands free of Mom’s.

“Sienna!” she cried.

“Mom, are you insane? What the hell are you doing?” I snapped, gathering Rowan into my arms.

I felt rather than saw him return to normal, as he squirmed free.

“It’s okay Mammal Grandma just needed



“It’s okay, Mommy! Grandma just needed help,” Rowan said.

I glared at my mother. “She should never have asked you to help like that!”

Mom’s face contorted with grief and frustration. “It’s not like *you* will do anything about your father!”

I flinched as though slapped.

Just then, a knock sounded behind me.



Shaking my head, I turned and opened the door.

It was Nina.

“You have to come to the lodge. Yuki has some news.”

Yuki stood on a bench, still covered in dust from sculpting, and held up a white piece of paper with writing too small to read from where I had entered the lodge.

“...a new prison camp,” Yuki was saying.

“But it’s not our problem,” Ivan said, his arms crossed over his barrel chest.

Yuki glared at him. “I’ll be damned if I stand by and let this happen! My grandparents met in Tule Lake in 1944!

“They would be spinning in their graves if they knew about this!”

Mutters traveled through the crowd of over a dozen people who had gathered.

“This is a prisoner manifest for the planned transfer,

“There are fifty-seven names here.” Yuki pushed on. “We think this is one of two manifests, and that they plan to move two groups.”

I glanced down at Rowan, who was holding my hand. Should he be listening to this?

Yuki continued, “Our sources tell us the camp is ultimately meant to hold at least one thousand people—all political prisoners,

newly arrested by this administration.”

Gasps. People exchanged horrified looks.

“We have to do something!” someone I didn’t know exclaimed.

Part of me agreed, but I wasn’t sure.

“Do something? What should *we* do, put our own lives at risk?!” Ivan protested. “We all chose to remove ourselves from the pack because this kind of thing is typical!”

“Typical? Hardly!” someone else said.



“There is always politics,” Gloria scoffed.

Nina eased up to stand next to me, giving me a grim look. Just behind her, Mom’s eyes were darting, lit with a feverish energy.

I didn’t know what to do.

My instinct was to declare that we should attack that convoy and free those prisoners.

But Aiden’s misgivings echoed in my mind.

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“Grandma,” Rowan piped. “Grandma, Grandpa’s name is on that paper!”

The shock of his words cleared my doubts.

I knew what I had to do.

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