

## JOSH

I stood at one of the three large windows on the north side of my office gazing down at the green below.

Several men were working to construct the temporary arena for the ritual combat to take place later today.

Eventually, we would have to build a permanent one.



I hadn't seen it as a priority at first.

We held several combats in the early days of my administration—it was one of the first traditions we reinstated, in fact.

Nelson and Rhys resigned, so their spots had to be filled. Beatrice was out on maternity leave, and the Values Watch wanted her replaced permanently as well.

In the end we cleaned house, and every position but Beta and Gamma had to be fought over.

I didn't build a permanent arena because I had been too optimistic.

I thought the combats would make sure that only the best werewolves got the pack leadership roles.

I didn't expect to have to hold any more combats any time soon, after the last role was filled.



Then I found out Garcia was going behind my back to slander me with his secret Yapper account, and Farley showed himself to be incompetent...

*Maybe I should have had him arrested, like Garcia.*

*Well, no. Farley was an idiot but he wasn't actively trying to embarrass me.*

And yet there were a disturbing number of people deliberately working against me.

That became clear right away.

As a result, though we didn't build a permanent arena, we did build a new prison.

I felt a pang of regret.

*Is it wrong to cage people for disloyalty?*

*Is opening this prison a colossal mistake?*

*Is that what I'll be remembered for?*

That was *not* what I wanted.



All I wanted was to restore the glory and honor of the East Coast Pack.

It all became clear to me the first time I visited the Texas Pack, a few years ago.

I had been searching for some time.

I had known things were off. Something was missing.

I was upset about how bad things had gotten with Konstantin, and how we just didn't

seem to be the badass wolves I knew we could be.

I knew something had to change. But I didn't know what.

And then I met Doug MacConnell. And everything made sense.

Below my windows, men hammered posts into the ground as I let my mind wander back in time.

MacConnell showed me what was missing—or rather, what was being lost.

Our identity as werewolves.



In our efforts to become more “civilized,” we strayed from our true natures.

It was obvious to me now.

Aiden had always been weak.

And Raphael Fernandez was no better.

Look at their mates: Sienna with her Deity

powers and Eve, a half vampire!

Sienna hated tradition.

And she couldn't have children.

Instead, she and Aiden wanted *Rowan*—that freak of nature—to be the heir?!

MacConnell helped me see.

I had to save the East Coast Pack before it was too late.

A lot of people were ecstatic when I became Alpha, and I started to restore the old traditions.



They saw what I saw, what MacConnell had seen: we needed to be werewolves again!

But then there were others...

I shook my head, and the edges of my reflection in the window shook back at me.

*I can't let anyone ruin the work I'm doing.*

*Some of them may just be misled. But some of them are twisted and corrupt—too far gone.*

“They’re deranged,” MacConnell would say with his jolly tone and heavy Texan accent. “De-generates. Gotta put them down like rabid dogs, Josh.”

I sighed.

*I want to do what’s right, but I hate to just throw away good werewolves who’ve been led astray.*



*Maybe there’s some way to reeducate them.*

The thought inspired me, but I didn’t have a chance to pursue it because the door to my office opened.

Singh—and Vasquez, everyone’s favorite penny pincher.

I tensed, gritting my jaw.

Another man followed. I’d seen him before—a friend of Singh’s. Values Watch member. I didn’t recall his name

I didn't recall his name.

I raised my eyebrows at them.

"Excuse the interruption, my Alpha," Singh said.

I stayed where I was as he and the other men approached.

"I'm sure you remember Sullivan Dorsey, one of the co-founders of Values Watch?" Singh said.



Dorsey looked as well-groomed as Singh. Obviously rich.

I stuck out my hand and Dorsey shook it. He had a weak grip.

I hid my distaste.

"Did you need something?" I asked, glancing at Vasquez.

"My Alpha, as you know, we have been hemorrhaging money," Vasquez said.

Typical Vasquez as dramatic. "Our



Typical Vasquez, so dramatic. “Our lady Michelle’s parties, the cost of so many Hunter Squads, not to mention the construction of the Long Bay Prison...”

An angry retort built in my belly, but Singh held up a palm.

“We know how important these things are,” he said. “The Squads are performing essential duties. The prison is unavoidable. Even the parties play a key role in our public image.”



*Alright, then why are we having this conversation?*

“But even if these things are so very important, the reality is,” Vasquez said, grimacing like it pained him to say these things, “we have acquired a debt that is now a crisis that we cannot ignore.”

Gritting my teeth, I turned away from him and looked out the window.

Vasquez pushed on, “We may have to mortgage the Pack House, or consider selling land from the estate.”



I grunted as though he'd physically winded me and turned back to the three of them.

"We think we may have a better solution, my Alpha," Singh said, sleek as a cat.

"You must know how much the Values Watch appreciates all that you're doing, Alpha Daniels," Dorsey said.

I shifted my attention to him, still numb from Vasquez's bombshell.

"I, personally, am deeply moved to see the restoration of so many meaningful traditions," Dorsey went on. "I hate to see something as pedestrian as money interfere with your vision."



I blinked at him. Was he even speaking English?

"That's why," he said, "I propose to give you a loan."

*Ah.*

My confusion cleared.

Hope lifted my spirits.

“A loan?” I said.

“Yes, my Alpha. Enough to cover the expenses to date, and to cushion the future,” Dorsey assured me.

*A loan.*

I hated to get into debt, but on the other hand, it sure would save my bacon.

I grinned and stuck out my hand for a second shake.



“Well, Mr. Dorsey, I must say, I’m glad to accept.”

## MICHELLE

The press was already finding spots to set up: seats, but also places to stand, both in locations higher up on the terrace looking down as well as level with the arena.

I got changed in my office.

The fiasco of the sex tape had shaken my confidence, but I couldn't let them see that.

Truth be told, I didn't feel up to this today.

My tan, tile-printed Chanel suit was my armor.

I'd been saving it for a special occasion—okay, I'd only bought it last week, but still.

I looked hot.

Let them talk about my cellulite now.



As I exited the gallery, I made sure to stop, nonchalant, and look around, giving the cameras time for some good shots.

At the top of the terrace stairs I lingered, touching up my blood-red Armani lipstick.

There were plenty of flashes, but I didn't feel the electricity in the air like I once had.

*What is wrong with you people?*

*How can you turn on me like this?*

*The sacrifices I've made... to bring this new age into being!*

Didn't they realize? I didn't just decide to betray Sienna lightly.

It had to be done.

Aiden was useless as an Alpha.

I knew it after that battle in Lumen. It finally hit me then.

We would never be safe from the likes of Konstantin with Aiden in power.



Or with Raphael in power, for that matter.

They were so ready to tolerate people like Eve.

Like Sienna herself.

And who paid the price?

People like *me*.

Konstantin almost killed me, and why?

Because he wanted to get at Sienna.

And Aiden sat on his hands and let him.

When we fought Konstantin in Lumen, and the vampyre made all those replicas of himself, that was the moment that drove it home for me.

We would never be safe until we rid ourselves of all non-werewolves.

We would never be safe until Josh and I were in charge.



I sighed now, capping the lipstick and putting it away in my Fendi clutch.

Making my way down the stairs, I found my seat, raised above the rest on the newly constructed stands surrounding the arena.

Everyone from the Pack House was coming now, and Josh soon joined me up high.

He seemed happy about something; he was beaming at everyone.

I forced a smile and turned my attention to the arena.

It was divided into two sections. So, there must be four contenders for Farley's job.

As the crowd settled, the arts and culture guy, Havel, stepped out into a narrow middle area. He was holding a mic.

"Welcome, wolves! Thank you for coming to witness this combat! Today, four wolves fight for the honor of serving the pack as Zeta!"



The audience cheered. Some howled, as was becoming the trendy thing to do.

I clapped my hands, taking care to jingle my gold Oscar de la Renta bracelet.

"Four contenders will step into the arena," Havel announced. "Only one will come out the Zeta!"

More applause. My hands stung.

*I wish I'd worn gloves.*

Processions from the four corners beyond the ring appeared, approaching at angles to each other: the contenders, flanked by support staff.

They were all men.

Of course.

Any women who showed interest had no doubt been told they were not welcome to compete.

It rankled, but what could I do?



This was the price I had to pay for the new order.

One of many sacrifices.

*Ugh, I feel so dreary. I wish I could ditch all of this and just go to a club.*

*Drink myself under the table.*

*Laugh and dance for hours.*

But who would be there?

Not Sienna.

Not Mia or Erica.

I was alone.

Another sacrifice.

The contenders stepped into their respective sections of the arena and shifted.

In the western section, a gray wolf versus a fawn-colored.



In the eastern section, a black-tricolor and a sable.

Havel howled by way of signaling the start.

The fight was instantaneous and brutal.

I watched, hoping it would be resolved quickly. We still had another round to go, and it was awfully sunny.

*I will have to talk to Havel about setting up awnings or something in future, especially with summer on the way.*



The wolves snapped, growled, snarled, and lunged.

Yelps and blood soon followed.

Bones crunched. Flesh tore.

I wrinkled my nose, then caught myself and made an effort to smooth my features.

In the eastern section, the fawn pinned the gray, who submitted.



Shortly after that, with a startling move that sent a gasp through the crowd, the tricolor tossed the sable out of the arena.

As the wolves were escorted off to be tended to by their handlers, staff jogged on to quickly reconfigure the arena, removing the dividers that had made two sections.

Havel howled for a second time as the two remaining wolves took their positions.

The tricolor was aggressive, lunging and snapping, but the fawn was clever, darting out of the way and, more than once, using

the tricolor's momentum against him.

The fight between the tricolor and the fawn dragged on.

Finally, the fawn whimpered and collapsed. He was bleeding pretty heavily from a wound at his throat.

His opponent was victorious.

The tricolor wolf shifted and straightened up: a naked, middle-aged man with light brown, frizzy hair and unusually long arms.



He had injuries from the fight, and blood stained his body.

The crowd applauded, some taking to their feet.

I remained seated, clapping prettily.

## MONICA

“Curtis, make sure you stick to my left,” I said as I leaned forward in the back of the troop carrier, eyeing the convoy of prison

vans ahead of us.

“I don’t want another fiasco like Michelle’s Spring Equinox party.”

“You were too close to the ship’s railing,” Curtis argued as he fiddled with the camera before replacing it on his shoulder.

“That’s because the Beta of the Texas Pack kept hitting on me and I was trying to stay out of his line of sight,” I said.



Curtis shrugged his free shoulder. “Either way. Not my fault.”

It was just us two in the back of the troop carrier, so we had plenty of room to work and no concerns about being overheard.

“Get a shot of that,” I said, pointing ahead. The line of trucks was climbing a hill, and puffy gray clouds hung low in the sky beyond them.

The sight had an ominous quality I liked.

I could already imagine my voice over: “As thearrison were roll on with these dangerous

The sight had an ominous quality I liked.

I could already imagine my voice over: “As the prison vans roll on with these dangerous traitors, I wonder whether others still lurk in plain sight...”

I jotted the line down on my tablet.

We coasted over the hill ourselves a few moments later. I looked down into the valley on the other side, but I didn't understand what I saw, at first.



Then I gasped.

“Curtis! Curtis, are you getting this?” I cried, pointing.

Fumbling with my mic, I scrambled to position myself so Curtis would have me on one side as he filmed the catastrophe below.

The convoy had been attacked.