



AIDEN

Solid ground raced toward us.

Sayyid yanked the headset off the pilot's head and thrust him from the seat.

He pointed at the collapsed co pilot. "Take over from him!" he said.

I wrestled the large man from his seat and plunked down in his place.

"Do you have a pilot's license?" I asked Sayyid.

"Just a sport pilot certificate," he said. "Not supposed to fly above ten thousand feet."

"Well, pretty soon you won't be."



"Fuck," Sayyid said under his breath.

I put on the second headset.

"Mayday, Mayday," he said into the headset. "This is private aircraft One-zero-one Echo Charlie Papa. Both pilots are unconscious. Civilians are flying the plane."

A tinny voice responded. "Uh... Say again?"



Sayyid repeated himself, and Air Traffic Control caught on this time.

After that, I couldn't follow the conversation due to all the technical jargon they used.

But when he pointed to something and told me to flick a switch or press a button, I did exactly as I was told.

The ground was coming so fast, I clenched my teeth, fingers digging into the control wheel.

Sienna, I love you. I hope I get to see you again.

And then...

BUMP!

The plane touched down hard, jerking us like passengers on a carnival ride.



Sayyid struggled with the control wheel.

We tore through snowy fields, demolishing fences.

And finally, we came to a halt.

Blinking, I looked over at him.



With a slow movement, he turned and met my eyes.

“Are—are we alive?” he breathed.

I threw my head back and laughed.

“Yes!” I exclaimed. “Thanks to you!”



The storm had knocked out the nearest cell tower.

We dug through the storage compartments of the jet until we found a map of the United States.

Unless I was very much mistaken, the nearest city was Lincoln, Nebraska.

By the way he was holding his head, Bertrand no longer seemed to be under Konstantin's control. And his co-pilot was already starting to rouse.

Their injuries didn't appear to be life-threatening, and should heal on their own.

Once I was sure that everyone would be okay for the immediate future, I shifted into wolf form, had Sayyid attach a small sack to my back, and ran into the storm.





the immediate future, I shifted into wolf form, had Sayyid attach a small sack to my back, and ran into the storm.

It was hard going, but the weather was already starting to lighten up.

When I reached the train station in Lincoln, I got dressed in a bathroom stall, then pulled my phone out of the sack.

**Aiden**

Hey hun

Aiden

have i got a story for you

ERROR

No signal. Message unent

ERROR

No signal. Message unent.

Goddamnit.

I tried placing a call, and after what seemed like a year and a half, I was able to connect with emergency services long enough to order a rescue party for the downed plane.

Then I hurried to a kiosk to buy a ticket for the first train back to Mahiganote.

Studying my itinerary, I chewed my lip.

I had to change trains in Lawrence, Kansas.

Jocelyn was at the Healer's Retreat in Lawrence.

I was tempted to stop and check in on her.

The drive to reach home, wrap my arms around
Sienna—

Find the vampyre ectoplasm—

It was strong.



But Jocelyn was my pack's healer...

... one of the most loyal people I had ever
known...

... injured when she risked everything to help
Michelle...

Aiden

if u ever get this, I am making a pit stop in
Lawrence

Aiden

but will hold u in my arms as soon as I can

Aiden

i love u Sienna.

Then I hopped on board the train going east.

NINA

Seeing Jocelyn earlier that morning had been such a shock, I still hadn't recovered.

I had tried to talk to her, but she ran off.

No way could I let it go, though.

I had to find her.

Had to talk to her.

To try to explain.

So I was outside her bedroom door, pausing between insistent knocks, when I heard the phone in her room ring.

Pressing my ear to the door, I listened.

"No," I heard her say. "No, I would prefer not to have any visitors today."



Would she tell them I was outside, trying to get her to let me in?

The healers here didn't know anything about me.

I had given them a fake name with forged papers that I'd had to call in a serious favor to get.

If Jocelyn wanted to, she could ruin all that.

"What?" she was saying. "Who did you say...?"

But I couldn't run away. Not again. I had to try to tell her.

I crushed my ear to the door.



She said, "Here? Are you sure?"

Who was she talking to?

I'd chosen this place because it was as close as I could get to the border of ECP territory without actually crossing into it.

The Alpha would kill me—or maybe his Beta would—if they found me still within the pack's boundaries.

But I also hadn't wanted to go too far.





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Dark Mode



Chapters

And now... she was here.

The door swung open. Jocelyn grabbed me, yanking me inside.

I was so stunned, no words came to mind.

Which almost never happened to me.

Jocelyn's eyes were bright with emotion. "Goddamnit it, Nina. I swear to God. The stupid, unbelievable timing of all of this. You have *got* to be fucking kidding me."

"Joce," I said, finding my voice at last. "Joce, please let me explain."



But she was shoving me into her closet.

"Joce, what're you doing—"

"Shut up, Nina," she snapped.

"Hey, I don't know if I can go back in the closet —"

"Just shut up and stay in there, and for the love of all that is holy, just *be quiet*."

The small space went dark as she shut the door.

A heartbeat later, there was a knocking on the door outside.

Holding my breath, I listened to the whine of hinges.

“Hi,” a man said. “It’s so nice to see you up and about, Jocelyn.”

I knew that voice. My heart began to hammer.

“Wow,” Jocelyn said, sounding nervous as she laughed. “I really didn’t believe them when they said it was you, *my Alpha*.”

The last two words sounded a little louder, as though she was aiming them at me.

My insides turned to water.

“Would you believe I was in the neighborhood? How are you?” Aiden Norwood asked.

Because of course, it was him. I recognized the voice now.

“I’m—okay,” Jocelyn said. “Still trying to come to terms with everything, I guess.”



Come to terms with what? Had she been hurt in some way?

Her voice choked off, and I struggled to hear the rest of the conversation.

I tried to get my rising anxiety under control.

Then, something Jocelyn was saying penetrated my panic.

“I know it’s important, Aiden, of course it is, but I’ll be alright. Sienna is depending on you. Don’t lose sight of that.”

“She’s depending on me to keep her safe, and that means taking out Konstantin,” Aiden said.

Konstantin. I remembered the wild, terrible night of the Yule Ball.

He had escaped.

But I had stayed. Helped. That was something, wasn’t it?

“Aiden,” Jocelyn said in that even voice of hers. “You’re missing a piece of the picture here. Yes, defending Sienna from physical harm is... essential. But that’s not all she needs.”





Not all she needs.

“Sienna experienced severe trauma,” Jocelyn continued. “We all did.”

Her voice was heavy with meaning—I knew she wasn’t just talking about Sienna.

“She must be more vulnerable than she has ever been, Aiden,” Jocelyn said. “She needs you now more than ever.”

She needs you now more than ever.

Jocelyn lowered her voice, and I heard the clink of metal.

I strained my ears to catch the end of her sentence.

“... tell her that she is strong enough to face anything.”

“Jocelyn...” Aiden sounded awed. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I heard her whispered response. “Sienna needs to know that the people she loves haven’t abandoned her.”

Abandoned her.



I closed my eyes, pressing my fingers to my mouth.

That was what I had done.

I'd abandoned Jocelyn, when she was reeling from Konstantin's attack.

When she needed me more than ever.

And now, she was trying to protect me again, despite everything.

Oh Jocelyn.

Will you ever forgive me?

SIENNA

Wednesday evening. Just a few days until the Festival of Flame.



I had no idea when Aiden would be home. I'd received a string of odd texts saying something about Kansas, but that had been hours ago.

Michelle had insisted we have dinner at the Pack House, on camera, to discuss how things were coming along.

She'd also "suggested" that I invite Charlotte.

Which sounded about as much fun as having dinner with a cobra, but I'd agreed. Michelle seemed so... volatile lately, it was easier to just give her what she wanted.

But of course, nothing was ever that simple.

"So I was thinking we practice the candle ritual after dessert," I suggested.

Michelle shrugged. "Sure, might as well get it over with."

"Cause I was thinking—"

"Michelle?" Monica called from the doorway. "Can I speak with you a minute?"

Michelle excused herself. She and the reporter began speaking rapidly in a hushed whisper.



I watched as Michelle seemed to nod in agreement with whatever Monica was saying before she strutted back over.

"So I was saying... if we move the candle ritual to after—"

"Oh my god!" Michelle interjected. "Who cares



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about that?"

I stared at her. "I thought the whole point of the festival was the lighting ceremony?" I said, confused by her sudden change in attitude.

Curtis moved behind Michelle, focusing the lens on my face.

She rolled her eyes. "How boring would that be?"

I gritted my teeth and tried not to look irritated.

"I don't understand," I said to Michelle. "Didn't we pick the Festival of Flame because... because you wanted some kind of... flashy event? Isn't the candle-lighting the flashiest part?"

Michelle tried to laugh it off, but I could see the hesitation in her eye. Before she had the chance to respond...

"Oh *really* Sienna," Charlotte said, rolling her eyes.

"What?" I dug my nails into my napkin.

"As if the Festival of Flame is somehow just about *candles*," Charlotte said.

"Exactly!" Michelle chimed in



UNLIMITED



“Exactly!” Michelle chimed in.



Seriously, what's her deal?

Remember why you're doing this.

“If it’s not about candles, what *is* it about?” I asked, exasperated.

Charlotte gave an exaggerated sigh and glared at me. “The Festival of Flame closes the haze, Sienna. It’s a celebration for blessing and protecting new pregnancies, for heaven’s sake.”

I gaped.

“Well that is... news to me,” I finally managed.

I felt rather than saw Curtis do a close-up on my face.

“But *quite honestly* I cannot *imagine* why you chose it,” Charlotte said. “Such short notice, and you aren’t pregnant yourself, are you?”

I blinked.

“Any healthy couple who tries during the haze is almost *guaranteed* to get pregnant,” she added.

The tension in the room was as thick as fog.



My whole body quivered with rage. And uncertainty.

Because Charlotte's words carried a kernel of truth.

Why aren't Aiden and I pregnant?

"Have you and Aiden been trying?" Michelle asked.

I couldn't believe she was saying this. On camera.

"Or has he not wanted to touch you since you let that vampyre bite you?"

My heart curled in on itself.

I heard Monica Birch fail to suppress a squeal of delight.

Charlotte gave a sniff, as if talking about her son's sex life was disgraceful.

"Okay, hang on," I said, trying to get a hold on the situation. "Michelle, can I talk to you for a second?"

She looked uncomfortable. Good.



“Only if the cameras come too!” Monica chirped.

I could sense the tension in the air. All eyes and cameras were on me, waiting for me to react.

My inner wolf was begging to be released—to lose control of my emotions and tell everyone in this room exactly what I thought of them all.

But I didn't.

Instead, I took a deep breath, fighting to maintain my composure.

“Michelle, you are my best friend, and I love you. But you're completely out of line. The bond between Aiden and me is stronger than anything you could ever imagine.”

I continued, “If insulting me is somehow going to make you feel better, go ahead. There is nothing you can say that will make me doubt my mate.”

My voice trembled a bit as I spoke, but my chin was high.

Everyone was silent. Michelle's cheeks were crimson red, but Monica looked like she'd just won the lottery.

Charlotte just looked down her nose doubtfully.



won the lottery.



Charlotte just looked down her nose doubtfully. Nothing I could say was ever going to please that woman.

But I didn't care anymore. I felt my confidence begin to grow again.

“Well that's quite a testimony,” a voice said from behind.

Everyone turned. Standing in the door to the drawing room was a tall figure with piercing green eyes.

“Aiden!” I cried. The watching cameras ceased to matter as I threw myself into his arms.

Before I had the chance to explain what had happened, his lips grazed my ear as he whispered...

“I want you...*now*.”

Next Chapter