

Aiden

There's nothing quite like the sight of two grown-ass men arguing over who's the better father.

That was what we were watching unfold in the middle of Sienna's surprise luncheon. And I found myself getting more furious by the second.

"You have NO idea the sacrifices that I have made!" Rowan said, chest puffed up, his beard looking twice as big as usual.

"You really want to talk about sacrifice?"
Robert exclaimed. "How about raising a child her whole life and giving everything to her!"

"I would have done it myself if I could."

"Easy to say when you waltz in after twenty-one years!"

I looked at Sienna, eyes wide, paralyzed, watching the men go back and forth. If there was anything my mate didn't need right now, it was this.

"You don't even know what your own daughter is capable of!" Rowan shouted. "What she's really made of. And why she—"

NO. I was not going to let Rowan bring up the reasons for us losing the baby. Not here. Not like this.

"ENOUGH!" I bellowed, making the entire banquet hall go eerily silent.

No one dared speak when the Alpha raised his voice. Not even two patriarchs such as Rowan and Robert. I slowly stepped toward them, lowering my voice.

"Today is about Sienna. Not either of you."

They both bowed down their heads, slightly ashamed. Good, I thought. They should be.

But when I turned to look at Sienna, she had tears in her eyes. She turned and ran from the room. "Wait!" I yelled out. "Sienna!"

"It's okay," Michelle said, following her. "I got this, Aiden."

I wanted to comfort my mate myself. But I also recognized that maybe right now what she needed was a female presence. If anyone could help her right now, it'd be Michelle.

I spun on the two fathers. "You both know what a fragile place she's in, and you decide to make a scene anyway? What's wrong with you two!"

"I'm sorry, my Alpha," Robert said, lowering his head, subservient. "I was acting out of...the need to feel protective."

"And what about you?" I said, turning on Rowan.

"Your Beta wanted to discuss how we deal with a threat like Konstantin. I saw no harm in engaging—"

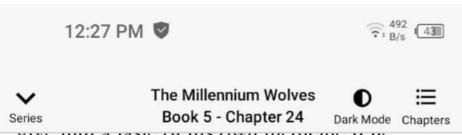
"I'm not hearing an apology," I growled. I was unaccustomed to men like Rowan, non-pack members who thought they were above our traditions.

A mad glint in Rowan's eyes shined with intensity, and I remembered what he'd told us—that he was not quite wolf, not quite deity.

Then what was he?

"You have no idea to whom you truly speak, Alpha," he said quietly. "I made a mistake, and I will own it. For Sienna. But I do not bow to any Alpha."

The man's call made my blood bail Ecreat



give min a taste of his own medicine if he wasn't careful.

"You dare disrespect me in my own pack house?" I said, stepping closer.

I was this close to teaching Rowan a lesson when Melissa stepped forward.

"It's not his fault, Aiden," she said. "I...I instigated everything. I didn't want anyone talking about work, and I may have overreacted."

"Is that true?" I asked, turning to Robert. He gave a small nod.

I shook my head. This was getting more and more complicated by the second. I thought Sienna would have returned to the banquet hall by now with Michelle.

But there was still no sign of them. And it was beginning to get dark outside.

"Listen to me," I said. "You three are her parents. Right now, what Sienna needs is your love and trust. That's all. No bickering. No fights. For her sake, please, get it together, all right?!"

This time, even Rowan nodded his head in agreement. At least, that was settled. This surprise luncheon had taken a turn for the worse.

I only hoped Sienna wasn't taking it too hard.

Sienna

Every time I felt like I was making progress, like I was more myself, like the world was becoming slightly more bearable, something like this would happen.

A middle finger straight from the universe. Reminding me that *nothing* was better and all the surprises, hugs, and kisses couldn't erase what had happened to me.

To Aiden.

To what was supposed to be our family.

I found tears streaming from my eyes as I hurried out the pack house, hardly noticing that I was being followed.

"Sienna! Wait up!"

I finally turned to see Michelle, chasing after me. I kept walking. I wasn't going to stop for anyone. Not even my best friend. It would just be more faking, more pretending.

More acting like everything was okay when it clearly wasn't.

"Sienna, please!" she shouted behind me. "I can't run in heels. This is ridiculous."

Finally, I turned. "I'm not asking you to follow me, Michelle. I'm perfectly fine on my own."

"Girl," she said, shaking her head, panting, "after what just happened in there, I know that can't be true."

Michelle was here to give me a pep talk. To get me to come back inside. To wipe away my tears and make me look nice and presentable.

No way.

Right now, I wasn't interested in a word she or anyone had to say. I kept walking, approaching the street now, noticing a bus stop.

"Are you serious, Si?!" she shouted out behind me. "Where are you going to go right now?"

"Anywhere but here."

Finally, I stopped and sat by the bus stop, crossing my arms. My mind made up. Michelle plopped into the seat next to me, sweaty.

She grabbed a tissue from her purse and dabbed the sweat from her brow. Then she offered me a fresh one.

"I'm fine," I said.

"I think you're the furthest from fine. And for good reason. That was so weird. On so many levels. How do you run that fast, by the way? Am I that out of shape?"

"It clears my mind. Moving. Running. Doing anything not to talk or think."

Michelle shrugged. "Fair enough. I'm not much of an expert in that field. I tend to talk through everything. But...if mindless activity is what you'd prefer right now, I've got a few ideas."

She took out her phone, and I shook my head. Sometimes my friend could be so clueless and contradictory.

"Michelle," I said, frustrated, "you can't have a few ideas and be mindless at the same time."

"Au contraire, my friend!" she exclaimed theatrically. "Check your phone."

I pulled it out. It was already buzzing so fast I could hardly keep up with the messages streaming in.

Michelle

girls

Michelle

this is an emergency

Michelle

what r u all doing

Erica

Binging Real Mates again.

Mia

Seriously, Erica???

Erica

What? There's some good stuff in there!

Erica

Plus.

Erica

I'm trying to find a good still for my Shifter prof pic.

Mia



Michelle

girls!

Michelle

focus!

Mia

Just got the baby to eat. What's up, Mich?

Michelle

we need to rally at Lupine

Michelle

biggest day-party of the year is RIGHT NOW

Michelle

lets DARTY!

Michelle









Erica

Clubbing??? In the middle of the day???

Erica

The line's gonna be insane!

Mia

I don't know if I can leave Harry with the baby...

Mia

He's kind of...incapable of changing a diaper.

Erica

Yeah and I have my first Shifter date, so...

Michelle

ERICA, RESCHEDULE IT

Michelle

MIA, SHUT UP ABOUT THE BABY

Michelle

WE ARE DOING THIS FOR SIENNA

Sienna

Sienna

Thx Mich, but that's really not necessary

Michelle looked up from her phone at me, incensed. "Are you serious?!"

"Michelle," I said with a sigh, "I don't want to go clubbing right now. That sounds like the last thing in the world I need."

"You said you wanted mindless. You said you wanted movement. Sienna. *This* is the perfect solution."

A bus turned a corner, pulling up to our stop, and I stood up. "No!" Michelle said, blocking my path. "You are not getting onto that bus."

Before I could stop her, she grabbed my phone out of my hand. "We are ordering a cab right now and going out. Just like we used to."

"Michelle," I said, trying to grab my phone. "Give it back."

"You can't run away without your phone, can you?" she asked with a smirk.

The door to the bus opened, and the driver gave us a curious look. "Well?" he asked. "You getting on or what?"

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I growled at Michelle, but she was clearly not going to give in. "That's all right," I said to the driver finally. He shook his head, exasperated, then continued on his way.

"Now, can I call a cab or what?" Michelle asked.

I rolled my eyes. "Give me the phone."

Erica

Are we doing this or not?

Erica

My date can't wait forever!

Mia

Harry's pretty nervous about me leaving, guys.

Mia

Is everyone on board?

Sienna Okay

Sienna

See you all there in 30

Michelle

wooooo!!!!!!

Michelle

lets dance, bitches!!!

Mia

Okay, okay. 😅

Erica

Changing now. 👯

Michelle

see you all there!

Even though I didn't feel like dancing, I had to admit Michelle was doubling down on being a good friend right now.

If anything could take my mind off of the weirdness of the day, it was an afternoon of drinking and shaking it.

"You can thank me later," Michelle said with a wink.

The cab pulled up a few minutes later, and as we were about to step in, I looked back at the pack house where everyone was still waiting. Even though I didn't feel like dancing, I had to admit Michelle was doubling down on being a good friend right now.

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"You can thank me later," Michelle said with a wink.

The cab pulled up a few minutes later, and as we were about to step in, I looked back at the pack house where everyone was still waiting.

"What about Aiden?" I asked. "And everybody?"

"Forget them," Michelle said. "Today was about you. And so is tonight!"

With a nod, I got into the cab.

It wasn't like the day could any get worse, right?

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