

AIDEN

My hands trembled as I texted my Hunter Squad captain.

Aiden

Did you check any evidence out of PH storage

Sayyid
nope

Aiden

evidence is missing

Sayyid
what evidence



Aiden

the sludge

Sayyid

was stored in resealable bin on top shelf,
fourth row

I found the bin, but it was empty.

Upstairs, my mate was facing down the cameras—
not to mention my mother.

And I was stuck down here on a wild goose chase.

Aiden
checked again, nada

Sayyid
That's concerning. Have you looked at the security cam footage?

Aiden
Guess that's what I'll do next.

Running the footage on my laptop, I didn't have to look at much tape before I saw a familiar spiky-blond-haired man enter the evidence room.

Josh.



But how did he even know the sludge was important?

Aiden
Looks like Beta Daniels took it.

Sayyid
Well, that's a relief.

Aiden
Did you talk to him about it?

Sayyid

yeah, yesterday

Sayyid

He asked for an update

I sighed. There was no reason for Sayyid to refuse to update the ECP Beta on an ongoing investigation.

In fact, it was general practice. Josh should have been the one running the investigation in the first place.

He was just—too close to it all.

A jog through the Pack House turned up no Jos'



I growled low in my throat.

This was exactly why I'd been concerned about sharing information with him.

He'd gone off after Konstantin.

By himself.

SIENNA

Monica had insisted on everyone getting ready for the Festival of Flame at the Pack House.



the Festival of Flame at the Pack House.

“Tell us how you feel about tonight,” Monica prompted as she dragged me into an interview booth before my makeup was done.

“Nervous,” I admitted, trying not to look directly into the camera. “I really want this whole thing to go off without a hitch.”

“Of course. We all do,” Monica said, her lips curling into a smirk.

ERICA



They'd set up booths to record at the touch of a button. Settling into one of them, a glass of traditional mead in my hand, I gave the recording camera a serious look.

“What people don't know,” I said, “is how much Sienna is sacrificing for this event. For this pack, really.”

I took a sip of my drink.

“She was offered a commission. Sienna's an amazing artist. They wanted her for a set of paintings in Miami! It would have been such a break for her.”

“But she turned it down because it would have

meant ditching this festival.”

The booth’s curtain opened, and Mia sat down next to me.

“Oh, that’s right! The commission,” she said, glancing at the camera. “Sienna would have been great for that!”

“Were you listening? These confession booths are supposed to be private!”

“Oh, you’re fine! You were saying?”



I mockingly scoffed. “Just that she turned the commission down because she didn’t want to let everyone down.”

“Man, that’s too bad,” Mia said.

“And it’s all because of Michelle,” I finally voiced the darkest thought I’d been keeping to myself.

Mia’s eyes widened. “What do you mean?”

“Sienna feels responsible for what happened to Michelle, and Michelle is milking that for all it’s worth,” I said.

I finished my glass.



“She doesn’t even care what all this is doing to Sienna, as long as she gets her spotlight.”

MICHELLE

I found an empty booth a few minutes before the start of the rituals and tucked myself in.

Before I hit the “record” button, I took a moment to straighten my Versace blouse and check my makeup in a pocket mirror.

My eyes looked bright and a little feverish. Well, that was to be expected.

I couldn’t remember the last time I’d slept through the night.

But there was no time for that now.



This was going to be my time to shine, even if I had to get my claws out to do it.

I was going to give them a little interview I knew they’d want to use.

“This is so exciting. It’s all about to start. We have three candle rituals planned.”

I pulled out my compact and lipstick.



“Of course, Sienna gets to lead all of them.”

My stomach roiled uncomfortably. I still wasn't quite sure why I had pointed out Sienna's lack of fertility in front of everyone.

I was just so... angry. Like there was this constant fury simmering just beneath my skin.

And when Monica told me that Sienna probably didn't even know the importance behind the Festival of Flame...

I didn't think. I just spoke. Horrible words about my friend.

And what's worse... I didn't entirely regret it.

I made a show of touching up my lipstick, then looked straight at the camera.



“It's a shame, really. Sienna just doesn't have the... high-end tastes of her position. I mean, this idea to cater the event with Mia's grandma.”

I rolled my eyes, snapping the compact shut.

“But I guess that's how it goes. I'll be there in case she messes up. I can always swoop in if she needs me.”

Giving the camera a wink, I turned it off and

Giving the camera a wink, I turned it off and headed to the dining room, straightening my shoulders as I went.

Never let them see you sweat.

SIENNA

I waited on the raised dais next to Blair.

Gathered in front of us were more than five hundred members of the East Coast Pack, most of them holding long tapered candles with paper shields guarding their hands.

The Festival of Flame was about to begin.



My formfitting dress was midnight blue, with dozens of tiny red and orange crystals sewn into the bodice and cascading down to the hem.

Selene had brought it for me that afternoon, and I couldn't believe how beautiful I looked—like I was made of candlelight.

Michelle came outside to join us on the dais, and I saw a faint frown cross her face when she saw her marked position off to the side of the stage.

But then she turned to pose for the camera, and I wondered if I had imagined it.



No matter, Michelle was in for a little surprise tonight.

Everyone was.

I caught Selene's eye from where she stood in the crowd.

"You look *amazing*," she mouthed quietly.

I smiled at my sister. It meant a lot to me that she was here, especially since it meant leaving little Vanessa at home with Mom.

From the corner of my eye I saw Monica and Charlotte, their heads bent together as they spoke quietly.



What were those two plotting?

I didn't trust either of them as far as I could throw them.

Then Monica got a signal from her cameraman. She gave me a nod, and I stepped forward.

"Thank you all for coming," I said, giving the crowd a big smile. "We're so glad to have you join us for this revival of the Festival of Flame."





Series

The Millennium Wolves
Book 4 - Chapter 15

Dark Mode



Chapters

Everyone clapped.

I took a deep breath and began reciting the traditional Flame Blessing.

“Divine flame, fertile and bright,” I said from memory.

As I spoke, those with candles formed a line, coming to the front to light their wicks from a little brazier that burned there.

Formal instrumental music began playing from hidden speakers.

I looked to Charlotte, who was watching me with a satisfied look on her face.

Fucking finally...



I continued the verse: “Give us each an inner glow to nurture seeds as they grow...”

Ugh. Who writes this shit? It sounds like cult propaganda.

But I didn't allow the serene expression to drop from my face.

I was almost done. Only one overly sappy verse to go



go.

“Though the haze has ended, so we shall love on.”

I turned and lit the two candles at the front of the dais, one red and one black.

Then, I looked to Michelle.

She blinked at me as I came toward her.

We had not practiced this.



MICHELLE

Sienna handed me the long-stemmed lighter. “You do the rest,” she whispered.

To the crowd, she turned and said, “Michelle Daniels will light our line of candles because I dedicate this year’s festival to her and our friendship.”

I winced. Was she being genuine, or was this just another play to make herself look better than me?

Sienna continued, “It is my hope that the blessings of the rites will let our own friendship grow stronger, just as the blessings strengthen the new lives we wish to bring into the world.”

A murmur spread through the crowd.

The women moved forward in the line, lighting their candles.

My head spun with joy as the cameras followed my every move.

I lit the back row of candles, reveling in the spotlight.



This evening was everything I'd ever hoped it would be.

Thanks to Sienna. Everything else fell away, and I felt nothing but love for my friend.

I met her eyes as she stood next to Aiden, smiling at me.

Giving her a little nod, I lit the next candle.

It was all perfect.

SIENNA

As soon as I could, I escaped outside.

The rites were finished, and now it was pretty much like a wedding reception.

People mingled, eating the delicious food that Mia's grandmother had provided, on the delicate, bone-china plates that Charlotte had chosen for the occasion.

My mother-in-law was pleased. Or at least as pleased as she could be, considering she had an icicle for a heart.

Michelle was over the moon.



So why was my chest so tight?

The whole thing had gone off without a hitch.

It had all played out perfectly.

I didn't screw up. Michelle got to have the spotlight, a gift I'd decided to surprise her with that morning.

Even Monica seemed happy.

But I couldn't breathe.

Go find Aiden. Tell him how you're feeling.

But my mate was so preoccupied. Something was troubling him about the investigation, though he wouldn't say what.



I could handle this.

I just needed to get a grip.

Standing on the terrace, I inhaled the cold January air, trying to calm down.

My hands were numb—but not from the cold.



All I wanted was to run, to shift into my wolf and tear through the snow-covered forest to a place where there were no cameras, no ridiculous expectations.

No lifelong dreams that I had turned down because I couldn't find the spark, the passion for art that had been a part of me since I could remember.

The city councilman in Miami had sounded genuinely disappointed when I'd turned him down.

My breath hitched in my throat.

Whatever. It isn't like I was ever destined to be a famous artist.

I have a great life. A privileged life. I should be grateful.



But I couldn't seem to get enough air into my lungs.

My vision began to blur.

Okay. It's okay.

But what if I'm never able to paint again?



What if Konstantin stole that from me, along with so much else?

Run.

Stop worrying about what everyone will think, and run.

I made my way into the garden and stripped off my cocktail dress.

Shivering in the cold, I focused on my wolf.

But after a minute of trying, I noticed something was wrong.

Nothing was happening.

I looked down at my hands... the same ten digits as before.



But after a minute of trying, I noticed something was wrong.

Nothing was happening.

I looked down at my hands... the same ten digits as before.

My feet, teeth, eyes... no different.



I tried transforming once again, but no matter how I tried, I remained the same.

What the hell is going on?

Panic exploded behind my eyes when the realization hit me.

I was stuck.

My wolf form was buried.

I couldn't shift.

Next Chapter

