



As I walked in the garden with Rowan, I kept an eye on his face, searching for signs that he saw things I didn't.

I watched his eyes.

I watched the way he held himself.

I watched his reactions to the sights and sounds I shared with him.

He seemed normal. Just typical Rowan, pointing out the trees that had turned bright colors—reds, oranges, yellows—for fall.

As we rounded the western wing of the Pack House, I saw a gray Mercedes oozing down the long drive.

I knew that car.

Heaven help me. It's Charlotte and Daniel.

I didn't know if I had it in me to face them right now.

The bone pain was exhausting.

Selene's death weighed on me like a yoke around my neck.

I can't imagine coping with Charlotte's passive-aggressive bullshit and Daniel's snobby thick-headedness today.



Returning inside the Pack House, in the drawing room I found Lexa and handed Rowan off to her.

As soon as she ushered Rowan out, I cast a look at the room's full bar.

I'm less of a drinker than I used to be, but desperate times...

The fatigue brought on by using my powers meant a drink might make me groggy, but the ache in my bones won out over my caution.

I poured myself a scotch—neat—and took a long sip, wincing a little. Not my favorite drink, but it suited my mood.

Then I headed to Aiden's office, cradling the scotch in its tulip-shaped glass.

If Aiden had anything to say about my drinking in the middle of the day, he kept it to himself.

He smiled at me as I came in. Blissfully unaware of what we were in for. I considered warning him, but he'd find out in a minute anyway.

I arrived only a moment before my in-laws —just enough time to settle myself against the wall near the window.

Leaning was my best option. I didn't want to sit, despite my pain. It didn't pay to allow Charlotte Norwood to look down on you.

But I also didn't relish standing, trying to hide how physically uncomfortable I was.

Plus, this way maybe I could ignore them and look out at the fall foliage.

Oh sure, Sienna. And a brindle wolf will change his coat to spots.



“Aiden, Sienna,” Charlotte sang. I gazed at her as she preceded her husband into the office.

She wore her black hair up in a high bun. A few tendrils fell around a thin bronze circlet, giving her the air of a Grecian goddess.

She had on a sky-blue Jackie-O style jacket, trimmed at the collar in ermine. Her skirt matched—a slim pencil.

Behind her, Daniel followed.

Daniel's taste was always more of a challenge when it came to my sensibilities.

A white suit coat topped his navy trousers, and today he was wearing a pale green ascot printed with what looked to be pineapples.

He towered over Charlotte, despite her heels.

“Mother,” Aiden said. Then a nod to Daniel.
“Dad.”

“Aiden, dearest,” Charlotte began, but to my surprise, Daniel overrode her.

“Son,” he said, his wealthy, southern accent cultured and lightly cottony, “what’s this I hear about burying that poor girl in the Alpha plot?”

I blinked.

Man. The grapevine was on *fire* today.

“Did Josh call you?” Aiden asked, frowning.

“That’s really not the issue,” Daniel said.

“Aiden, *darling*,” Charlotte put in, trying to regain her usual role of dominating every conversation.

Aiden held up a palm at her and addressed his father. “I’m sorry you came all this way, but Josh shouldn’t have called you.”



“Son, a good Beta wants what’s best for the Pack, and you have a good Beta. He knows that right now, your judgment is clouded by the emotions you are all experiencing,” Daniel said.

“You have to look at the big picture,” Charlotte asserted with a glance in my direction. “Take the long term, *grand* view. This tragic situation may feel like a personal crisis, but your actions have a larger impact.”



“Mother,” Aiden said, his tone a warning.

I considered whether to say something and couldn’t find the energy.

“Honestly,” Charlotte said with a *tsk*. “It’s been over six years, and you still let her flout tradition—this time it’s just unthinkable. She is *beyond* overstepping her bounds.”

“*She* is right here,” I said, finding my voice at last.

I guess being spoken of in third person still had the power to provoke me, despite how miserable I felt.

“Well, now, Sienna, you can’t possibly be serious about all of this,” Daniel said, turning to me.

He had his eyebrows raised in a way that seemed so astonished, I almost smiled.

Almost.

“Of course I’m serious. Selene was my sister.”



Daniel bowed his head and shook it, turning away from me and tucking his hands behind his back.

“Dad, I see no reason to exclude Selene from the Alpha plot—” Aiden said, but his mother cut him off with a huff.

“*Exclude!* How melodramatic. We simply *can't* bury every person we want in the Alpha plot, Aiden. It isn't *done*. The Pack has a hierarchy for a *reason*, dearest. You know it does!”

They don't give a shit about Selene.

Some monster murdered her, and all they're upset about is where she's going to be buried.

“My dear boy, I’m sure you know that Gregory Singh and those he represents will not stand for your catering to your mate’s whim,” Daniel replied.

“That she has such an inclination is understandable, under the circumstances,” he added. “but cooler heads must prevail.”

“I don’t answer to Gregory Singh!” Aiden snapped.



“You could do worse than to listen to Gregory.” Daniel admonished him, raising a finger and shaking it. “He was my Beta for years, you know. And a better Beta, there never was.”

“Well you think Josh is being a good Beta by calling you, so I’m starting to think you don’t have very high standards when it comes to Betas!” Aiden said.

“*Really*, Aiden,” Charlotte said. “There’s no need to be rude.”

For once, it was Aiden who was losing his temper with them, I noted in a detached way. I felt too... exhausted.

“Charlotte. Daniel,” I said, interceding.

“Thank you for making time to speak with us about your concerns. But as I’m sure you must realize, we really have our hands full right now.”

I gave them a little nod and a tight-lipped smile.

They stared at me like I was speaking Russian.

With a gesture at the door, I said, "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

JOCELYN



The mating bond.

It always seemed so wonderful.

Miraculous.

But it has two edges. And this one—the side draining Jeremy's life before my eyes—this edge is the sharpest.

The scratching sound of the blood-pressure cuff coming off cut through my ruminations. Hanh, my best nurse, wrapped the cuff up, glancing my way.

I could tell from his eyes the reading had been dangerously below normal.

Hanh never expressed any doubts—he wasn't the kind to question me. But I knew what he thought.

Trying to find a cure for the curse of losing a mate... it was impossible.

Hanh made a few notes on Jeremy's chart and left.

I watched him go from where I sat at Jeremy's side.

It wasn't the first time we'd seen this.



UNLIMITED

Werewolves died before their time in accidents and due to illnesses, and inevitably, we had to provide hospice care for their mates.

Placing my hands on Jeremy's chest, I closed my eyes. With a deep breath, I sent out feelers in an attempt to get a clearer idea of why he was dying.

Before Selene's death, Jeremy had been a healthy man in his late thirties.

Now, I could sense his vital systems shutting down.

He wasn't critical yet, but it was like pebbles rolling down a sheer mountainside. Soon, there would be an avalanche.

And when that occurred, we would lose Jeremy forever.

I can't just sit by and let that happen.

I didn't need Aiden's pleading to convince me to try to save Jeremy's life.

He was family.

"Joce?"



Releasing the probing tendrils I had sent into Jeremy's body, I returned fully to myself.

Opening my eyes, I saw Nina standing in the doorway of the room.

"Hey, sweetie," she said, giving me a tentative smile.

I felt a flicker of irritation. I was not in the mood to smile back.

I didn't want to talk to her at all right now.

Not that she'd done anything wrong. It just wasn't a good time.

I looked back at Jeremy's face. His eyes already had a sunken look to them.

I didn't know what I was going to do.

How am I going to save Jeremy?

What if I can't?

Nina was not a distraction I welcomed right now.

I heard her sigh and looked up again. She had her arms crossed over her apple green sweater. The color popped next to her dark skin.

“You’re working too hard again,” she said.

I gave her a confused look. “What do you mean? I’m just sitting here.”

Nina scoffed lightly. “Oh, sure. Just sitting. Just sitting and fretting, you mean. Probing, too, I’ll bet,” she added, squinting at me.

I had to laugh a little then. “You got me,” I admitted.

I rolled my neck and my shoulders and stood, ambling over to her.



“You aren’t a miracle-worker,” she said.

My movement hitched, and I raised my eyebrows at that.

Nina waved a hand at me. “You know what I mean,” she said. “Of course you’ve done amazing things in your career. You’ve helped so many people. But what Aiden asked of you this time...”

You just don't understand. This isn't about Aiden.

“Nina,” I said, breathing out. “I have to try.”

A muscle jumped in Nina's cheek as she looked away from me, down at her own arms.

“Nina,” I said again, laying a hand on one of her crossed forearms. “Please. I know it's—it might be impossible—”

She looked at me then, brown eyes steady but lacking in warmth.

“It *is* impossible, Joce, and if you push yourself too hard—”

“I won't.”



Cocking her head to the side, she gave me a piercing look.

She didn't have to say it. I knew she didn't believe me.

I pulled my hand away.

“Please, Nina,” I said. “Please, this is going to be so hard. I can't be fighting you at the same time I'm fighting this—this *curse*.”

“What do you want me to do, just stand by and—”

“No, I just need you to *help* me—”

“Help you *how*? I’m not a healer, Joce, and even if I was, I couldn’t save Jeremy. And neither can you.”

I gave a shuddering sigh. “I need your support, Nina. I just need you to—to *try* to believe in me.”

Biting her lip, Nina looked down again.

That got through to her, at least.



She peered up at me through dark lashes. “I always believe in you, Joce.”

Taking a deep breath, she went on, “And—I’ll try to support you as best I can. I’ll definitely help with the investigation.”

She reached for me then, taking my hand in hers.

“And if anyone can perform this miracle, sweetie, it’s you.”

SIENNA

I walked my in-laws out of the Pack House.
Neither of them mistook my gesture for politeness.

Charlotte cast one last glance at me as Daniel held the door of their Mercedes open for her. Her eyes traveled over the tee. The apricot sweats.

Her meaning was clear.

You're trash.

Your family is trash.

You soil my house.



Your family soils the plot of the Alpha.

I felt cold all over.

As soon as the car followed the curve of the driveway out of the grounds, I turned and marched into the woods.

No one needed me right now.

I could have a moment to indulge myself in a breakdown, right?

“Hey.”

I whipped around.

Aiden.

He stood there in his soft yellow sweater, leaning against the trunk of a large ash tree.

“I figured you might head this way, Freckles,” he said with a smile, his hazel eyes gentle.

Grimacing, I went to him, burying my face in his chest.

The sweater was slightly itchy.



Definitely mohair, my stupid brain supplied, and I thought of Selene, and a sob trapped itself in my throat.

Aiden's fingers slipped under my chin, lifting my face. I met his gaze.

“You okay?” he asked.

All I could manage was a shrug.

“My parents get under your skin?”

I squeezed my eyes shut in another grimace.
“A little,” I admitted.

His lips pressed on mine in a light kiss.
“Sienna, you know I chose you a long time ago,” he said, pulling just an inch away.

That brought a slight smile to my face. I looked in his eyes, taking in the bright flecks of green and gold.

“What would I ever do without you?” I asked.

His deep breath rocked us a little. “What would *I* do without *you*?”

“Let’s never find out,” I whispered.



I thought of Jeremy.

The mating bond between him and Selene would drag him with her into oblivion.

I shuddered.

Aiden’s arms tightened around me.

His mouth was on mine, then, and I thought I would want to pull away, but I didn’t.

Without warning, the haze burst over me. It washed away everything, just in that moment, and all there remained was desire.

Desire for my mate.