

Chained By The Alpha By Jessica Hall Chapter 71

"It was worth a try," he chuckles

"You really would, wouldn't you?" I tell him, and he smirks

"IT can order them to fuck each other if you'd prefer?" he tells me, and I laugh, shaking my head

"Go before you get me in trouble."

"You ring me if something goes wrong," he tells me, and I nod. Not that I would; I can't run to Zayn every time, and lately, the amount of times I've needed rescuing is becoming embarrassing

"See you soon," he pecks my lips before jumping

to the ground

A part of me wants to run after him, to bury myself in his arms and forget everything going on. But obligation and pride anchor me in place

I steel myself for what's to come, knowing it won't be pleasant if Lydia is involved

Seconds tick by like hours as I race around and slip my training gear on. A knock shatters the silence. I grab a bottle of perfume and douse myself in the floral scent, masking the lingering traces of Zayn's musky scent that clings to my skin. When I open the door, my guard stands there, nostrils flaring as they take in the heavy notes of jasmine and rose

"Ready, Cleo?" one of them asks, his gaze probing

"Let's get this over with," I reply, stepping out

and locking the door behind me

The car ride is silent and suffocating. Outside the window, the scenery blurs, but my focus sharpens on the growing sense of unease. We arrive at the training grounds, and I see the packs gathered Bluesteel, Lakeview, Claymore-all here, all training, which isn't weird, but usually today isn't Claymore pack training day; they usually train with Lakeview just not on the same days as our pack, but Lakeview trains daily, so I'm not surprised to see them here

"Damn," I mutter under my breath, noting Alpha Samuel's presence. Today isn't ordinary at all if Lydia has gone running to Daddy

My father emerges from the crowded stadium grounds, his face contorted in anger. The sight of him, so furious, sends a chill down my spine-not of fear, but frustration

Climbing out of the car, I shut the door

"Father," I start, but he's already upon me

"Explain yourself, Cleo!" he demands. "Lydia's got a broken nose, and now Samuel is threatening to cut ties with us!"

I roll my eyes, unable to help myself. "She'll heal," I scoff. "Wolves heal faster than their egos."

"Enough!" He seizes my arm with a grip that has no room for argument, pulling me toward the heart of the training grounds and inside the stadium. "Fix this. Samuel won't stand for your bullying any longer."

Bullying? I want to laugh, to rage, to scream

Instead, I grind my teeth and follow because sometimes being future Alpha means swallowing your pride and facing the music-

even if that means forcing a fake apology from my lips for the troll I have to call my stepsister

"Fine," I say, letting my anger simmer beneath the surface. "I'll handle it."

But inside, my mind races when I realize Claymore Pack isn't training but sitting in the grandstands. As I step onto the training field, I realize that this meeting isn't just about Lydia or our petty squabbles. But something else is going on

And deep down, I know Zayn was right. This feels like a setup, and I've walked right into it

The moment I step onto the training field, the tension is palpable. Lydia stands there, decked out in gear that looks foreign on her like a lamb donning wolf's clothing for a masquerade

Her smirk is as out of place as her attire, and it

grates on my nerves

"Training for once, Lydia?" I can't help but quip, eyeing her suspiciously

"Preparing for the inevitable," she retorts with a smug lift of her chin. "Unlike some."

Beside her, her father, Alpha Samuel, appears as if a storm is about to break. His eyes are narrow slits, his jaw set in lines of disappointment and barely-contained anger. The air between him and my father crackles with hostility as we come to a stop next to

them

"Your daughter has crossed the line this time, Joseph," Alpha Samuel growls, his finger jabbing in my direction.

"Lydia provoked her," my father fires back, his voice rumbling from deep in his chest. "She

insulted Cleo's mother-my ex-wife."

"Is that true, Lydia?" Samuel turns his sharp gaze onto his daughter

"Of course not, Father," Lydia lies through her teeth

"Ask my new guards," I retort, refusing to let her deceit slide. "They were there." I

motion to them where they stand, leaning against the hip-high fencing that is

supposed to protect spectators

Samuel signals sharply with his hand, and my guards approach, their posture rigid and alert

"Is what Cleo claims true?" Samuel commands

Under Samuel's piercing scrutiny, they confirm my account without hesitation

"Damn it, Lydia!" Samuel explodes, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "I'm at my wits end with this petty crap between you two!"

From the edge of the gathering crowd, Alpha Dane, who always seems to be around lately eavesdropping, comes forward. "Why not settle it with a fight?" he suggests

casually

"Lydia has a wolf. Cleo does not," my father scoffs, dismissing the idea immediately

"Ah, but Cleo has been trained," Samuel counters, mulling over the suggestion with a gleam of malice in his eyes. "Could be an even match."

"Even?" I laugh bitterly. "Right, because going tooth and claw against fists is fair."

“You claim your daughter trained with wolves

in training before,” Dane chimes in, his question directed at my father

“Training is not the same as fighting for real,” I snap before my father can reply. My skin prickles with anticipation and dread. I’ve sparred with wolves before, but a real fight? That’s different altogether; in training, they aren’t allowed to bite or rip me apart; it’s all strategic, not combat. And I am not stupid enough to believe I would stand a chance against a wolf in a real fight; the rogue attack at the alpha meeting was proof of that

Dane just shrugs, his indifference stoking the fire inside me. “A fight is a fight.” He states

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My father’s face is drawn tight, the weight of his position and the expectations of our pack etched into the furrows of his brow. He’s caught, trapped by his own pride and the pressures around us. I know he’s considering it, the possibility of letting me prove myself or perhaps letting me be sacrificed to maintain peace, and that infuriates me

“Joseph, think carefully,” Samuel goads him

“This might be the solution we need.”

A solution that smells like a trap, one laid out by Lydia. But now, standing here amid the circling alphas and their calculating stares, I know the truth

This isn’t settling a tiff between me and Lydia, but Samuel is trying to prove my father’s pack is better off in his daughter’s hands and not mine

The tension in the air crackles like a live wire, every wolf’s gaze locked on the unfolding drama. Alpha Samuel’s voice slices through the thick atmosphere, Alpha Dane’s suggestion hanging heavily between us all

“Let’s have a duel,” he declares, the words resonating. “A fair fight to submission, not harm. We all stand as witnesses no death blows, no permanent damage. Let the young Alphas demonstrate their skills through strength and control.”

His eyes bore into mine, challenging, daring me to back down. And then they slide to my father, who stands rigid, caught between fury and the unspoken rules of our society and his need to

protect his daughter

“Joseph,” Samuel taunts with a smirk that sets my teeth on edge, “if Cleo is truly destined to be your successor, let her show her skills. Let her prove her right to lead, not by birth, but by worth.”

My heart thunders in my chest, anger and fear mingling with a fierce desire to wipe that smug look off Samuel’s face. I can feel the weight of my father’s stare, the silent plea for me to agree

Yet something inside me refuses to cower or to show any hint of weakness when regarding Lydia. If it’s a spectacle they want, it’s a spectacle they’ll get. If my father is willing to toss me to them, he can deal with the aftermath and live with the guilt because I know Lydia won’t listen to any rules put out

“Fine,” I spit out, my voice ringing clear in the

sudden hush. “Let’s just get this over with,” I growl

Whispers ripple through the gathered packs, the scent of excitement and anticipation rising like a storm. While Alpha Greyson from the Lakeview pack seems to edge closer restlessly, his interest is piqued by the promise of a showdown

“Agreed,” my father finally says, his voice steely. “But we do this our way, monitored closely. It ends at submission, Samuel!”

Alpha Samuel nods, a predatory gleam in his eye as if already savoring victory

“Prepare the ring,” Samuel commands, and the space before us clears as wolves step back, forming a crude circle in the dirt

Lydia strides forward with an arrogance that

makes my blood boil, her confidence bolstered by Samuel’s conniving. She looks at me with distaste, as if I’m merely an obstacle on her path to power

“Ready to lose, Cleo?” she sneers, relishing the moment

I pay her no attention, trying to will myself to step into that ring, knowing she’ll shift and rip me to pieces

The alphas take their positions around the ring, their sharp eyes missing nothing when I hear my father open up the mindlink

“No shame in submitting Cleo; just submit the moment she shifts. Samuel knows this is an unfair fight and is just being a prick. I will deal with the fallout. I don’t want you hurt,” he tells me, and I scoff

“No, if you didn’t want that, you wouldn’t have allowed it to get this far. I’m not submitting to this bitch. She’ll have to kill me first,” I reply, and I notice my father gives me a panic-stricken look, and he hesitates at the edge of the makeshift ring created by

bodies

“Remember, non-lethal, first round is hand to hand, second round anything goes, just no lethal force.” Samuel reiterates, though his tone suggests he cares little for my well-

being

I step further into the circle, kicking my shoes off, the dirt cool beneath my feet as I face Lydia

She’s already shedding her jacket, her eyes locked onto mine with a sly smile on her

face

“Begin!” Samuel barks, and with that single word, Lydia lunges

Our challenge is one of violence and cunning, a

physical debate where each blow will land. Her moves are sharp and ruthless, but I counter with the precision of one who knows how to use my hands, and I can see Lydia fears catching one of them

“Submit, Lydia!” I pant, my knuckles connecting with her jaw with a satisfying crunch

“Never!” she spits, wiping blood from her lip

“T’ll die before I bow to you!”

“Then you’re a bigger fool than I thought,” I reply, dodging her next swing

“You submit!” she spits at me. I swing at her, and at the same time, she kicks me in the

flank

She falls to the side, and I cringe, feeling my ribs bruise instantly. She is quick to get back up while I stagger

My fists fly, connecting with Lydia’s guarded frame. She’s quick, a fact that I had not expected, and her blocks and counters are sharp but a little sloppy. However, it seems my stepsister has been preparing for this moment after all, making me wonder who she’s been training with

“Didn’t think I’d come unprepared, did you?” she sneers, her foot sweeping toward my legs in an attempt to knock me off balance

I jump back, dodging her attack, and feel the rush of adrenaline fueling my movements. My breath comes out in short bursts, my heart thundering in my chest

“Training with the enforcers, huh?” I grunt, wiping a bead of sweat from my brow as I circle her. “Guess you’re not as helpless as you pretend to be.”

Lydia’s only response is a vicious grin before launching herself at me again. Our bodies collide in a flurry of movement, each of us trying to gain the upper hand, but she heals quickly; I’m not healing at all, and I’m growing tired. I manage to land a solid punch to her midsection, and for a brief moment, I see something akin to pain flash in her eyes when I feel her ribs break

But then, everything changes. She starts to shift

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With no warning, Lydia’s form begins to shift, her body contorting as fur sprouts across her skin. The crowd gasps, murmurs rising like a storm around us. The rules were clear no shifting allowed until the second round and yet here she stood, a fully transformed wolf with gleaming teeth bared at me. I suck in a breath and take a step back, waiting for her father to call her out or for us to break for round two

Surely, they don’t expect me to just continue from the moment she shifts

“What the hell is going on?” Alpha Greyson’s voice booms over the commotion, and I can’t help but feel a sliver of relief at his intervention

“Joseph, you’re putting your daughter at risk!”

he bellows, stepping forward. His stature commands attention, and his concern for me is evident despite the chaos as he shoves through the crowd

“Stay out of this, Greyson,” one of the Alphas retorts, their loyalty to tradition over safety clear in their stern voices

“Rules are rules! She can’t fight a wolf in her human form,” Greyson argues, his hand slipping into his pocket, retrieving his phone with an air of authority

Dad pulls me aside, his grip firm on my shoulder. “Keep your distance, watch her movement; you know how to handle a wolf” he says hurriedly, his eyes flickering with a father’s worry

Before I can respond, the sound of another

commotion draws our attention. Alpha Zayn's brother, Beta Vance, strides toward us, his expression a mixture of confusion and anger

"What's happening here?" he demands, his voice cutting through the noise

"An unsanctioned shift during a title fight," Greyson replies, his eyes never leaving mine, silently communicating his disapproval

Alpha Dane and Alpha Samuel move toward Alpha Greyson and Beta Vance, who must be training with the Lakeview pack, while my father says nothing, allowing Samuel to deal with Greyson. Dad and Greyson have always had a strange relationship

"Damn it, what the hell is going on here?" Vance's voice booms over the commotion of Greyson and Samuel arguing; his brow

furrowed in confusion and irritation

"Back off, Vance," Alpha Dane snaps. "This doesn't concern you."

But Greyson intervenes once again, a sly grin

spreading across his face. "Oh, but it does," he says, almost too casually. "We've got ourselves an alpha fight. Cleo and Lydia are going at it."

Vance scoffs, disbelief etched into every line of his face. "You're kidding, right?" But there's no humor in Greyson's eyes as he shakes his head

"Don't worry, I already called Zayn," Greyson adds, just as my father's growl ripples through the air, thick with his disapproval

"Zayn has no place here," my father barks out, his glare searing. "He's nothing more than a mutt trying to interfere in matters that don't

concern him."

"Actually," Greyson corrects, his tone shifting to match the deadly lilt of my father's, "any alpha sworn in or not is subject to oversight by all the city's alphas. You know that, Joseph. And last I checked, Zayn's head of the council, so he has every right to oversee this bullshit."

As if summoned by the very mention of his name, Alpha Zayn enters the fray, his strides purposeful, his gray eyes stormy

"You wouldn't be breaking the law you helped write, would you, Joseph? The one you penned when you accused me of murdering my own father?" Zayn calls as everyone moves to get out of his way

My father's face contorts with anger, and he turns on Greyson, who stands his ground with a

smirk that makes my skin crawl. "You all need to stop sticking your noses where they don't belong!"

"I'm sure Clara wouldn't have agreed with you," Greyson sneers, "If she were here. But no, that harlot you call a mate made sure she'd never get a say about anything concerning her pack, didn't she?"

Confusion crashes over me like a tidal wave. My mother, she was spoken of so little, and now this? What did Linda have to do with

Before another thought can form, my father erupts, his fury unleashed, but Alpha Samuel steps in, a wall of calm in the chaos

"Linda had nothing to do with Clara's death," he asserts, though I'm not convinced anyone believes him

"Are we doing this or what?" Lydia interrupts, strutting forward in just a shirt she has stolen from somewhere with a smug tilt to her lips

"No, you aren't," Zayn declares, his gaze locking onto Lydia with enough intensity to set the grass ablaze. "Cleo hasn't shifted."

Lydia's hands fly up, her exasperation clear as day. "There's nothing in the rules that says an unshifted alpha can't challenge a shifted one," she retorts

"Did you challenge her, Cleo?" Zayn asks, turning his piercing silver eyes on me. I open my mouth, but no words come out-only silence

Yet as his gaze runs over me, I see the flicker of anger in it at my bleeding face

"Thought so. This isn't happening," Zayn concludes, about to turn away when my father's voice invades my mind, commanding me to speak

"Tell them you challenged her, Cleo; I will not be made to look like a fool by this prick."

I glare at my father when he speaks again. "Or you step down," he warns. Seriously, his ego is bigger than his care for his daughter. I grit my teeth

The weight of their stares squeezes the air from my lungs. I step forward,

my

resolve

faltering under the heavy expectations of everyone

"I... [challenged Lydia," I admit, my voice barely a whisper, and Zayn's entire body tenses and he stops, turning back to me

"See? All settled," Samuel says with a nod, and Lydia practically leaps towards the ring

"Wait," Zayn interjects, his eyes burning into

mine. "You challenged her?" he knows I'm lying

I stand mute, my heart pounding in my chest, betraying the truth without uttering a

single word. Zayn growls, storming toward me and grabbing my arm, my father moves to intervene, but Alpha Greyson becomes a wall between Zayn and him

Zayn's grip on my arm is firm, his eyes searching mine for any sign of surrender. "It's suicide, Cleo," he says through clenched teeth

"You don't have to lie for him."

"Admit it, and we can put an end to this madness," Alpha Greyson adds, coming over to us while Vance keeps my father back

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I yank my arm away, frustration boiling over

"Stop interfering! You're making things worse,

I snap at Zayn

"Cleo, your mother wouldn't want this," Greyson persists, but I cut him off

"Maybe that's exactly why I'm doing it!" My voice breaks as I speak; the weight of my mother's absence is like a stone in my chest, and everyone is hellbent on using her against me lately. "If I step into that ring, at least my father can't banish me. I've done what he wanted." The image of my pack-my home-slipping through my fingers if I refuse this fight makes me stubborn, I won't let that bitch get her hands on

my mother's pack

As I turn to leave for the ring, Zayn's hand finds my arm again, pulling me back. "Don't expect me to stand by and do nothing if you're losing," he warns, his gray eyes stormy

"That's exactly what you'll do," I retort, my heart pounding in a fierce rhythm of defiance. "I am not your problem." I remind him

His next words hit me like a physical blow. "I'll pull my men from your borders if you do this."

We had a deal his protection in exchange for..

something else, something I haven't actually delivered on yet. "Consider it broken if you step into a title fight," Zayn growls, the muscle in his jaw ticking

"You're all the same," I mutter, shaking my head, my insides twisting with anger and betrayal. "All of you just want to control me."

Zayn's gaze hardens, and his eyes flicker at my words

"Control this, Zayn. Go fuck yourself," I spit out, the words laced with venom. I storm off, leaving him standing there, his expression unreadable

"Last warning, Cleo," he calls after me, but I ignore him

"Pull them then!" I throw the challenge over my shoulder without stopping

"I'm not talking about my men this time, Cleo," Zayn replies, and I hesitate, confusion momentarily breaking through my resolve

"What are you talking about then?" I ask, suddenly worried

"Get in that ring, and you'll find out," he says, a

note of dark promise in his voice

My father's call slices through the tension, demanding my presence. I turn away from Zayn, ignoring the mix of disappointment and anger in his eyes. I march toward the makeshift ring a simple dirt circle of onlookers that feels more like an arena than ever

now

Lydia has already shifted, her wolf form sleek and menacing. The surrounding alphas and their packs form a tight circle, their attention fixed on the impending fight

"Let's get this over with," I mutter under my breath, stepping into the circle that's about to kick my ass

But before I can brace myself for her attack, Zayn is beside me, his presence a wall against the chaos. Our eyes lock, a tumultuous storm of

emotions swirling between us. He's close enough that I can feel the heat radiating from his body and smell the pine and earth scent that is uniquely his

Zayn leans down. "I warned you," Zayn whispers, his lips so close that they brush against mine with every word. "This is on you. I warned you not to get in this ring."

"Zayn, don't—what " I start, but he cuts me off with a searing kiss, pushing me out of the ring with a force that leaves me breathless. He steps in front of me, facing both Lydia and the other Alphas and my father, who is glaring daggers at him for kissing me, and so is Alpha Dane

Zayn strides into the circle, his presence commanding the immediate attention of all

"Under the Protector's Right, I, Zayn Holt, head

of the council and Alpha of the Black River Pack, invoke my right to stand in this challenge on behalf of Cleo," he declares, his voice echoing with a power that sends a shiver down my spine

I'm stunned, my mind racing. This isn't what I wanted, nor have I heard of it before. The murmurs around us grow louder as Alpha Samuel steps forward, his disbelief mirrored in his tone, "This is ridiculous. You aren't even in the same pack. You can't possibly mean to— Can he do that?" Samuel turns to look at Alpha Dane and my father

Before he can finish, Alpha Dane interjects, his own frustration clear. "This is unheard of,

Zayn

The challenge was meant to settle a dispute, not create a spectacle."

But Zayn, unflinching, meets their protests

calmly, "The law exists for this very reason to protect those who hold the future of our packs in their hands. I will not stand by while Cleo's safety and leadership are undermined."

As if on cue, Alpha Greyson steps up beside Zayn, solidifying the gravity of Zayn's claim. "I stand with Zayn. This isn't about spectacle; it's about upholding the very foundations of our society. He has every right to stand in on her behalf whether she is pack or not."

"You want to challenge my daughter?" Samuel scoffs

“But it’s okay for you to toss your daughter into a fight with an unshifted alpha; by all means, Samuel take her place.”

The silence that follows is heavy, charged with Zayn’s challenge

Panic sets in, and I try to intervene, realizing the spiraling consequences of Zayn’s actions. “Zayn, no, please. This isn’t what I-”

“Are you really willing to risk your council title for her?” Dane scoffs from across the makeshift arena

“Step into the ring and find out,” Zayn challenges, a dangerous glint in his eye

Dane, fueled by ego and the backing of my father, steps forward, ready to escalate the challenge into a full-blown conflict

“Dad!” I yell, seeing him step in next to Dane, but he glares at me

“I told you to end things with him.” my father snarls

The air is thick with the tension of impending violence

“Zayn, this is stupid,” I protest, reaching for him, but he brushes my hands away

“No, what’s stupid is you thought I would let you get in this ring,” he counters, his voice low, a storm brewing in his gaze

“Samuel backs out, too chicken to fight Zayn,” someone murmurs from the crowd, and I feel a surge of hope-maybe this madness will end without bloodshed

But it’s short-lived. Alpha Dane’s voice cuts through the murmurs like a knife

“You can’t be stupid enough to challenge two alphas,” Dane counters, removing his jacket and tossing it to his son. The audacity of his move

draws gasps from the onlookers, but Zayn chuckles a dangerous, thrilling sound that sends shivers down my spine

“Zayn, please, for me, don’t do this.”

Before I can argue further, he grabs me, and his lips crash onto mine, a searing kiss that

leaves me breathless and disoriented. It's raw and demanding, a claim, a promise

"You are exactly why I'm doing this," he whispers. And then I'm stumbling back, pushed out of the ring by his strong hands

"Stay out of this, Cleo," Zayn commands, his silver gaze locking onto mine one last

time before he glances at Alpha Greyson. "Grab her; she doesn't step a foot in this ring," he tells Greyson, and before I can even move, Vance and Greyson grab each of my arms. Zayn sends

me a wink, then turns to face the other alphas

"Last chance to walk away, boys," Zayn taunts them, rolling his shoulders in anticipation

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"Like hell," my father snarls, his eyes on me, filled with a mix of fury and disappointment when the mindlink opens up, and my father's voice is suddenly in my head

"You made your bed, chose whose side you're on. Now watch how real alphas handle their problems."

"Dad, please," I beg, feeling tears burn behind my eyes. My heart races, torn between fear for Zayn and the furious desire to jump back into the fray to stop my father

I look at Zayn, but he's focused on Dane and my father, who is circling him with predatory grace

"Let them sort it out," Vance leans down and

says when Samuel suddenly shrugs off his jacket, tossing it at Lydia, clearly sick of being called a chicken by the other packs, or maybe because he knows with three of them, they can overthrow Zayn

"They'll kill him," I whimper, looking at Greyson, who has a silly smile on his face

"There is a reason he is head of the council, Love," My brows furrow

"Birthright," I tell him, knowing Zayn took that title from his father

"Yes, but his father had to fight these very same men for that title," Greyson tells me before his eyes dart to mine. "You forget who took down the alpha of alphas in this city," he nods toward Zayn

"For decades, my father remained unchallenged, yet Zayn challenged him and won," Vance adds

I swallow

"Until now," I mutter when Zayn glances at me over his shoulder

"Keep your eyes open, love," Zayn says, his words meant only for me. "Watch and learn what happens to those who cross me."

"Zayn, no!" I call out. Alpha Greyson's and Vance's grip tightens on me, but it's too late.

I can only watch as the man I've fought so hard to resist defends my honor with fists and fury, proving his place among the alphas

"You want a challenge? You've found it," Zayn replies, his tone cool but his fists clenched in readiness

"Let's see what you're made of," Dane taunts, a cocky grin on his face

Zayn doesn't waste a second, launching himself at Samuel with lightning speed. The impact reverberates through the room, the sound of fists meeting flesh echoing off the walls

Samuel stumbles back, recovering quickly as he retaliates with a swift kick. Zayn dodges, his movements fluid and precise

As they clash, Vance whispers, "It's not just about strength; it's about strategy. Zayn knows they can't all attack at once without possibly hurting each other. He'll use that to his advantage."

Yet, despite his words, panic has my blood surging in my veins as I watch. The tension is palpable as blows are exchanged, each strike

resonating with power and brute force

Greyson watches with a knowing smile, his gaze unwavering. "Zayn knows what he's doing. He's been in tougher fights than this. He was trained by his father, have some faith. Your man knows what he's doing."

Suddenly, Samuel lands a solid punch on Zayn's jaw, the force of it causing Zayn to stagger back. Just as my father attacks him, but Zayn must have sensed it because he pivots at the last second, and my father crashes into Samuel

Samuel and my father collided and hit the ground, giving Zayn vital minutes to correct himself

Zayn regains his composure, his resolve shining through as he launches into a series of counterattacks. Each hit is precise and calculated, showcasing his skill and experience

and showing why he is the alpha of alphas of this city and why he holds the leading council seat

Dane and Samuel exchange glances, realizing they underestimated their opponent. But it's too late

Zayn unleashes a flurry of strikes, his movements a blur of speed and precision. Dane and Samuel are pushed back, struggling to keep up with his relentless assault, and Lydia shrieks when her father hits the ground, his head bouncing off the ground

"Is that all you've got?" Zayn taunts, his voice dripping with confidence

Samuel, in a fit of rage, shifts and tackles Zayn

I hold my breath and don't even realize I've tried to run in until Greyson rips me back. Zayn shifts

just as Samuel tackles him to the ground. His teeth and claws send blood spraying everywhere, and I can't tell whose it is as they rip into each other violently. Lydia screams, the sound chilling my blood, and my eyes dart to her before she rushes off

The next second, Samuel is tossed from the ring, and people jump back as his wolf skids across the ground and lands in a heap. Zayn's wolf, Zarek, is magnificent, towering over Alpha Dane, who doesn't bother shifting

Instead, he falls belly down on the ground, submitting like a coward

Zarek looks at him and huffs out a breath, kicking dust at him with his back paws. He turns to face my father. My heart nearly stops in my chest when I see my father's face contort, and he shifts

"No!" I scream, knowing my father won't submit to him

Greyson's grip on me tightens, but an overwhelming panic propels me to twist and sink my teeth into his arm. Startled by my unexpected retaliation, he momentarily loosens his hold, granting me the opportunity to break free

But Vance's grip is still strong until I punch him in the nuts, cringing with him, but desperate times call for desperate measures

Their wolves circle each other, predators about to fight to the death. The snarls that

leave them as they rush at each other make me panic. In a frenzy, I sprint towards the center of the ring, kicking up plumes of dust in my wake. Despite the haze obscuring my vision, I strain to see through it until it eventually settles, revealing a

chilling sight that sends shivers cascading down my spine

Suddenly, I am met with a new horror: two wolves on a collision course right where I stand

I suck in a breath, clenching my eyes shut, when I hear their snarls cut off. Opening my eyes to see my father's wolf skidding to a stop while Zarek is poised to lunge straight at my face, all teeth and claws, I see the recognition on his face just as I brace, flinching at the contact. His body collides with mine

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A bone-chilling scream escapes my lips as Zarek's claws tear through the flesh on my arms, leaving a searing trail of agony along my arms

As the world spins and shifts around me, I brace for the impact of the unforgiving ground beneath me. Yet to my astonishment, instead of landing on the hard ground, I find myself cushioned by Zarek's massive body, softening the blow and sparing me from further harm

A furious growl tears out of my father and I gasp to see him still coming after Zayn, Zarek though is quick and I slip off him landing on my stomach on the ground. I cover my head as they clash above me. Yet no harm comes to me with Zarek above me, almost like he is aware of where I am underneath him and is careful

enough not to move, just taking the brunt of my father's attack. Blood sprays all over me and I can tell it's a mix of Zayn's wolf and my father's

"No! Stop it!!!" I scream, loudly before screaming louder, my throat becomes raw and hurts as I scream myself hoarse trying to make them stop

But it's to no avail they keep fighting, growling, and snapping viciously at each other, tearing at one another's fur and skin and I am unable to move without being trodden on or caught in the middle, I can only cover my ears

Finally, Zarek throws my father's wolf down with a growl. I can feel his roar of dominance, his aura crushing as it rings out, I can feel every ounce of it in my bones as he bares his fangs and growls deep in his chest, stepping over me as he stalks my father

My father's wolf whimpers softly in submission, a whimper I've never heard from his powerful wolf before. Zarek doesn't ease up though instead he sinks his teeth into my

father's shoulder, not enough to kill him but enough for him to know who the Alpha 1s here

I scramble backward, staring in horror as blood pools around them both, Zarek shakes out his fur and my father is forced to shift back to heal when a loud screech from the stadium speakers has everyone clutching their ears. The sound is horrendous as someone sounds an alarm through them. We all look up to the speakers when the huge screen turns on. Confusion washes over everyone as I try to figure out what 1s going on

"Someone shut that off," I barely make out someone screams out when the blaring suddenly stops and so does my heart in my chest when I

see an image of myself. At first, it takes a second for my eyes to focus on what I am seeing when the image flickers to a more vulgar one

Murmurs break out and I feel the blood drain from my body at the next one, my breasts on display, my underwear gone and my legs wide open

My eyes dart to my father as he sits up and turns to see what everyone is looking at. Zarek shifts back, giving control to Zayn, who screams at someone to shut it off. Vance and Greyson are already running for the control room but it's too late. Everyone can see it, and there is no doubt who it is, my face 1s clear along with the rest of me

My father sputters and his eyes dart to me, the shame and confusion I feel makes me throw up

My stomach upturning as I try to figure out where these photos come from. Zayn rushes toward me, grabbing my hair as I throw up on the dirt. Suddenly, the screen cuts out just as I look up to see my father walking out of the stadium. "Dad!" I gasp, trying to get to my feet, but Zayn grabs me

"Cleo, leave it," Zayn growls, but I shrug him off, chasing after my father. Yet before I even near him, he spins around to face me and I almost run right into him

The moment he does, his hand connects with my face, and the sting burns right through every inch of me. I blink back tears as my head whips to the side, the next second all hell breaks loose when Zayn attacks my father. His fists rain down on my father with a fury that makes his wolf look like a calm puppy, my father can only try to block him while I stare stunned wondering how everything got so out of hand when my eyes fall on Lydia as Vance drags her

from the control room

Greyson rushes over grabbing Zayn and ripping him off my father. My father sits up, choking on his blood, before he heals swiftly. Zayn lands on top of Greyson as he is

ripped away. My mind is whirling, spinning uncontrollably just like my life is at this moment. The look of disgust on my father's face speaks louder than his next words

"This! Him! You'd pick him over your pack!" he shakes his head getting to his feet. I move to stop him, to try to explain what even I don't understand

"Cleo!" Zayn calls and I stop glancing at him to see him shake Greyson off and stand, my father also stops watching me. "Choose, Cleo! Choose, tell him you choose your pack over him," my father orders yet I am numb, coldly so as I glance between them

"I choose neither," I tell him, walking toward the exit when my father speaks. "Then you leave me no choice. As Alpha Shadowcrest pack I stand you down as future alpha," my father states

Clenching my teeth, I blink back tears but turn to face him, if he's going to banish me he can do it to my face. My father's lips tremble but by the hard set of his jaw, I know he's made up his mind. "I banish you from my pack and declare you a rogue." he

finishes

"Then so be it," I gasp as pain slices through me, I almost drop to my knees in front of him, but defiance and betrayal burn hotter than the agony I feel as my tether to the pack breaks. I glare at him before walking out of the stadium only to hear Zayn racing to catch up to me

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Cleo

The cool afternoon air hits my face like a slap as I step out of the stadium, my chest heaving with sobs that threaten to break free at any moment

My whole world had just been turned upside down-I am officially alone, abandoned by the man I called father for nineteen years

Somehow, my feet carry me away from the mess behind me, and away from the whispers and glares of everyone who saw those horrific images

I stumble around outside, the ground coming fast toward me, and I lean against the brick wall for support before my legs give out completely, dropping me onto the cold pavement

Humiliation, anger, grief they all rush through me in an uncontrollable torrent. Hot tears stream down my cheeks, creating streaks in the dirt and blood that coats my face a result of Zayn and my father's fight above me

“Cleo!” Zayn’s desperate voice cuts through the thickening fog in my mind, but I can’t bring myself to look at him, not now. His footsteps come closer, crunching on the gravel, relentless

“Cleo ”

“Go away!” I choke out, the words like shards of glass in my throat. My eyes are swollen, my vision blurred by the onslaught of tears. I can barely make out his form as it approaches, a shadowed silhouette against the waning light

“Look at me,” he demands, but there is a tremble in his voice that betrays his own turmoil

“Why?” I spit out bitterly, pressing my back

against the bricks as if I could disappear into them. “So you can gloat? So you can see the mess you’ve made?”

Zayn is suddenly kneeling before me, his muscular frame somehow making even this position seem powerful, commanding. “I didn’t do this. I didn’t want this for you.”

“Then what did you want, Zayn?” My voice rises, fueled by a rage I don’t fully understand

“Because right now, it feels like you wanted to destroy everything!”

“Everything I’ve done...” he starts, but I cut him off

“Everything you’ve done has led to this! I asked you not to get involved!” I gesture wildly to my tear-streaked face, to the empty space around us

where my life seems to have fallen apart. “You think because you’re some all-powerful Alpha that you can just ”

“Damn it, Cleo, I’m trying to protect you!” His shout echoes off the wall behind me, and for a moment, we’re both stunned into silence. Zayn’s gray eyes meet mine, and the intensity within them pins me in place. “This isn’t about power or me one upping your father. It’s about you

Can’t you see that?” I shake my head, and he reaches for me

“Stop,” I choke out, batting his hands away

Shame and confusion coil tightly within me as Zayn remains crouched in front of me, his eyes softening slightly. “I get you’re angry, upset, and want someone to blame, but I’m

not it," His fingers are cool and gentle on my hot skin, an unwelcome contrast to the heat of my embarrassment

His touch is hesitant, a reminder of the chaos I've just left behind. "I'm so sorry this happened." A tremor races through his words, betraying the iron strength I know he possesses

The raw honesty in his tone stirs something inside me, yet I can't allow myself the comfort of his apologies not now. I push him back, needing distance, needing air. My legs find their strength, and I rise, heart pounding against my ribcage like a trapped bird desperate for escape from its owner's cage

"Enough, please just stop Zayn, stop with the act, stop acting like you fucking care!" I manage to stand, trying to loom over him even though I'm only 5'4. It's futile; he's a tower of muscle and resolve, dark hair tousled from the fight, his presence overwhelming as he stands there chest bare and in just a pair of sweatpants

"Can't you see? This was never about what you wanted or didn't want!" Anger flares up again, burning away the tears, replacing them with a bitter taste in my mouth. "You couldn't just stay away, could you?"

"Stay away?" Hurt flickers across his face like a shadow

"Yes! Stay the fuck away!" I shove Zayn, my hands striking his chest like bricks, the

force of my betrayal driving each blow. "Don't make out this isn't what you wanted! I asked you to stay away, to not step in! This is exactly what you wanted!" My words are a whip, lashing out with venom and despair

He staggers back, a look of hurt flashing across his rugged features. "You think a sorry is enough?" I cry, my voice breaking under the strain of anger and tears that refuse to stop

They blur the world around me until there's only him, the source of my pain, and the target of my fury. He flinches, a visible wince, as if my accusations are physical blows beating against him and inflicting injury

The taste of salt from my tears and bitterness floods my mouth as I confront him with the truth he can't escape. "You just ruined my life! You fucking sired me and now I wonder if it was your plan all along when you healed me." He growls his own anger showing at my words

"Was it you who gave her those photos?!" I scream, my fingers curling into fists, wanting to strike, to hurt, to unleash the storm within him

He is the only one that would have had a chance to take them, how else would she have them? "Were you bored and wanted to humiliate me?!" The sob that follows cuts through the tension, a raw sound that bares my soul to the man who

stands before me, the man whose actions have unfurled my world

Zayn's face hardens, his jaw set in a defiant line as he grabs my wrists, halting my

assault. His grip is firm but careful, trying to contain the rage without causing more damage by unleashing his. "Cleo, listen to me," he begins, his voice low, a growl simmering beneath the surface, "Everything you're thinking—it's wrong

I could never-

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"Let go of me!" I wrench my arms away, stumbling back against the cold brick wall. It scrapes against my skin, a welcome distraction from the turmoil inside me. "How can I believe anything you say when everything since you came into my life has gone to shit?"

Tears blur my vision as I try to back away from Zayn, the sting of betrayal burning hotter than the humiliation on my cheeks

"No, that wasn't me, Cleo, I swear..." His voice cracks with desperation, his hands reaching out then retreating as if he's afraid to touch me afraid I'll shatter

"Then explain it! Explain everything!" My

demand is a scream, raw and ragged, slicing through the tension between us. "Where is Deacon? Where did those photos come from!?"

Zayn's jaw clenches, his gray eyes stormy with emotions I can't decipher. "Who the fuck cares where Deacon is, he isn't here is he!"

"Is that what this is, part of what? Is this some game to you?" My body trembles, anger and fear wrestling within me

"Why the fuck have you been stalking me? Everywhere I turn you are, getting up in my business knowing the conflict you're causing me" I press him, my voice cracking under the strain. "I may be sired to you, but you're a full-blooded alpha. You have your aura, you can reject the sire bond, order me away!" My words are a challenge, thrown into the space that divides us

"Was this your plan all along?" I'm shouting now, my vision narrowing until there's only Zayn who listens to my outburst calmly and the whirlwind of my thoughts. "You hate my

father! I feel so fucking stupid, naive! I should have known better than to trust you!" Grief morphs into fury, and I growl, claws slipping from my fingertips

He steps forward, his presence commanding even as his voice softens. "Cleo, I could never use you as a pawn against your father."

My breath comes in ragged gasps as I search for an answer, any form of relief that might explain the madness crashing down around me

"You're a liar!" I spit at him and something seems to snap in him because Zayn becomes a storm, his fury encapsulating him like a cloak, and when he reaches out, his fingers encase my

jaw with a grip that's both commanding and careful

"Where is Deacon?" The low growl emanating from Zayn carries a weight that drops my heart to my stomach. It rumbles with barely restrained anger, threatening to unleash and break me

further

His steely eyes lock onto mine, the gray hue swirling like the tumultuous clouds that forewarn of a violent storm. In our bubble of intensity, the world around us fades, the escaping crowds from the stadium become nothing more than a distant murmur, background noise

"Right where he belongs," Zayn continues, his thumb brushing against my cheek as if to soften

the harshness of his hold. Confusion knots inside me, trying to make sense of what feels

like a puzzle missing half its pieces

I blink away tears that threaten to fall, not just from fear or frustration, but from the raw emotion that Zayn invokes within me. My heart races, pounding against my ribcage, each beat crying out for something I can't quite understand something dangerous and all-consuming

His hands still hold my face. "The photos?" he breathes out, and his voice is a blend of hurt and disbelief. "You really think I had any part in that? Cleo, you know me better than that." His eyes sear into mine, twin infernos of sincerity. "I would never expose what's mine to the damn city."

My heart hammers against my ribs, threatening to burst from the sheer intensity of his

stare

Zayn has always been possessive, his protective instincts primal and sometimes overwhelming

But this? This accusation strikes a chord too deep, too raw even for him

His thumb caresses my jaw, and the gesture feels like both a plea and a promise. "And why haven't I pushed you away, broken the sire bond? Because I love you, Cleo. I love you with a ferocity that frightens even me."

His confession pierces through the fog of my doubts. My mind races, trying to reconcile the man before me with the chaos of betrayal that clouds my judgment, making me question everything and everyone

His grip tightens slightly, his voice lower, darker. "So be prepared for a life of being stalked because I will shadow you to the darkest corners of this world and beyond." His vow slices through the tension. "Should you fall, I will be there to catch you. Should pain find you,

I will obliterate its source." His jaw clenches, his eyes burning with some emotion that scares and thrills me simultaneously

"This isn't about titles, power, or territories," he continues, his voice a growling whisper

as he leans in closer. Our breaths mingle, almost like a shared breath that stokes the flames of desire within me. "If it's my title that makes you think I'd betray you like that, then I'll cast it aside without a second thought. If going rogue is what it takes to be with you."

My chest tightens, my pulse thrumming in my ears. I can almost taste the urgency of his need, the fervor of his words. The air between us crackles with electricity, charged

"Because I love you, Cleo, more deeply and fiercely than I ever thought possible." His lips are inches from mine, his heat enveloping me

"Tell me what you need, what you want. I'll lay it all at your fucking feet. Just say the

word, Cleo, because there is nothing I wouldn't do for you, no line I wouldn't cross, no sacrifice I wouldn't make." I swallow thickly around the lump that is forming in my

throat

"Is that what you want to hear?" He demands

“Zayn,” I gasp, overwhelmed by the torrent of emotions he unleashes within me. The barriers I’ve erected crumble beneath the force of his words, his presence an intoxicating drug that leaves me craving more yet I know that is the sire bond

“Show me,” I challenge, my voice a whisper that belies the angry doubt that still refuses to let go that this mess is because of him. He tilts his head to the side watching me for a second

“Prove it,” I challenge, my voice steady despite the storm of emotions raging inside me. My heart hammers against my ribs, a frantic drumbeat that echoes the turmoil in Zayn’s eyes

“Mark me,” I say, locking gazes with him, my resolve is unwavering as the steeliness in his gaze. “Do it knowing I’ll soon have the power to cast you aside, but you you’d be irreversibly bound to me.”

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His fingers brush against my skin, tracing the line of my jaw with a touch that sparks fire amidst the ice in my veins. It’s a paradoxical sensation comforting yet disarming and I’m lost in the dilemma of it all

His hands find my waist, grip firm, pulling me against the hard planes of his body. I can feel the heat radiating from him, despite the chill in the air that’s trying to slip between us. It’s not enough to cool the fire he stirs within me the fire that’s been smoldering since the day I met him

“Mark you?” He breathes out, stunned, then a slow, predatory smile spreads across his face

“Do you think that will scare me off?” his breath

hot against my ear, sending shivers down my spine as he pulls back. His smirk is gone, replaced by an intensity that holds me captive

Zayn’s gaze darkens, a shadow of something intense and indescribable flickering in his eyes

“You want my soul forever tied to yours, my heart in your hands?” His voice is low, a murmur that vibrates with power and menace

He chuckles, a sound that holds more weight than laughter should. “You break it, you break me... Can you live with that?”

His question sends a shiver down my spine, the reality of what I'm asking dawning on me in its full, daunting spectrum. I haven't got my wolf yet, and until I mark him, I hold the ultimate power to reject him, just like my father did to my mother. Alphas never relinquish such control, and here I was, demanding Zayn to surrender his

But before I can retract my demand, reconsider the gravity of my request, he continues, not giving me a chance to take it back, and suddenly, I'm desperate to do just that, understanding the enormity of what he's considering sacrificing for me a sacrifice I now realize wasn't fair of me to demand

"I'd give you the world, and you ask for my heart like you think it would scare me, make me buckle," he laughs again, but there's no humor in it, only a deep, resounding truth. "What you don't realize is you had it all along. From the moment I laid eyes on you."

His fingers trace the line of my neck, while his other hand tilts my face up to meet his. His eyes search mine, seeking answers to questions unspoken, fears unvoiced. And then, with a gentleness that belies the ferocity of his nature, he brushes his lips against mine

"It's always been yours, I don't fear being chained to you, you can have it, it belongs to no one else."

Without another word, he sinks his teeth into my neck, pulling me impossibly closer. A squeak escapes my lips, not from pain but from the overwhelming sensation of our hearts syncing, his soul binding to mine while mine remains free to wander. I can feel him entirely, and the moment he jolts as if pained, I realize the weight of what's happening his soul attaching to mine in a bond that's irreversible for him even if I reject him he will always have the lingering after effects of my soul once owning

his

He staggers slightly, pressing us both against the brick wall, and it's suddenly unclear who's supporting whom. When he finally withdraws, his lips are stained with my blood, marking me

in the most primal way known to our kind

Even now, marked, I hold the power to reject him, a power he's willingly given me. He will always be sired to me, in some way, echoing the tragedy of my mother and father. If only Alpha Greyson had marked her, perhaps she would still be here

Suddenly, the power I hold over Zayn feels too immense, too dangerous. It terrifies me, not because I have it, but because of the profound implications for him—how by giving it to me, he's exposed his heart, betting everything on us, on me. And in this moment, I realize I don't want this power. The realization hits me hard, the weight of his sacrifice

anchoring me to him with a bond that goes beyond blood, beyond marks. It's a bond forged in trust, love, trust I don't deserve from him

Not after everything I've done

"Zayn..." I falter, words sticking in my throat

"I'm sorry... I didn't understand—

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He silences me with a finger to my lips. "No more 'what ifs,' no more doubts, and no more apologies. We are what we are, and right now I'm yours." Guilt floods me as I stare up at him knowing what he gave me, some part of me screams what he did was reckless, yet another part of me screams how right it feels. Then there is the nagging thought of how selfish I was to demand he give me it

"Why are you sad?" he asks and my brows furrow at his words. "You can't feel me, but I can feel you, don't feel guilty Cleo. As you said IT am an alpha, I have my aura, you haven't forced me to do anything, you gave me a choice, so I chose you."

"Then why do I feel like you'll hate me later for Ta

"Hate you?" he laughs like it is the most idiotic thing I've said. "That's the last thing you could ever make me do. How could I hate you for being the one thing that's ever made me feel complete?"

His hand shifts to cradle my cheek gently, his thumb caressing my skin with a tenderness that belies the strength in his arms. "This mark," he continues, his voice softening, "I didn't give it lightly, and I don't give my heart lightly, either."

He leans in, his forehead resting against mine, our breaths mingling. "I chose you, Cleo, with every fiber of my being. This mark, it ties me to you, yes. But more than that, I knew what I was giving you by marking you."

The warmth in his gaze thaws the last of my doubts, filling the spaces between my heartbeats with something new, something exhilarating. "I could never hate you for making me feel alive, for making me love so deeply. You've awakened a part of me I didn't know existed. And for that, I could never hate you."

He smiles then, a genuine, heart-stopping smile that lights up his entire face. "I love you, Cleo

And I'll spend every day making sure you never doubt that. This mark, it's not a chain. It's the start of a bond, and one day, hopefully soon I will wear it proudly when you return it."

In that moment, any lingering guilt or fear dissolves under the weight of his words, his love. Zayn's mark isn't just a claim—it's a gift, one he is trusting I will return one day

"Come on, let's get you home." Zayn presses his lips against my forehead and wraps his arm around my shoulders, tugging me toward his car

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Cleo

Morning light filters through the sheer curtains, casting a warm glow over the room. Yesterday is now a haunting memory I wish wasn't mine

I'm uncomfortably aware of the pulsing sensation on my neck the mark that Zayn branded into my skin. It's both a declaration and a binding, like a ring etched with fangs instead of diamonds. My fingertips graze the tender spot, and a shiver runs through me, not from pain but from the depth of what it represents

Turning my head to the side, Zayn is not in bed, making me wonder where he is yet my mind is also stuck on yesterday. How my entire life was turned upside down and now I have no idea

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what I'm doing

Sitting up against the mountain of pillows. The thoughts in my head are a jumbled mix of anxiety and excitement, each one colliding with the others like atoms gone wild. For once I have no obligations or restrictions yet at the same time I have no idea what to do with this weird freedom, but is the pulsing of my neck truly freedom or just another cage? One I willingly climbed into

I swing my legs off the bed and pad across the floor, catching my reflection in the full-length mirror. Dark blonde hair tousled, light blue eyes staring back at me with an intensity I hardly recognize anymore

"Morning," Zayn's deep voice rumbles from the doorway, his eyes taking in the sight of me with an intensity that ignites my skin

"Morning," I echo, acutely aware of the power I hold over him now. If I reject him, he'll be weakened, vulnerable. The thought makes my stomach churn

I turn to find him leaning against the doorframe, his muscular build outlined by the soft light, dark chocolate locks framing a face that could make angels sin. His gray eyes hold a glint of silver as they meet mine

“Are you just going to stare at yourself all morning?” Zayn’s voice cuts through my reverie, low and laced with amusement

“Maybe,” I retort playfully, but my heart skips a beat. “There’s a lot to take in.”

“Come here,” he says, and there’s a command wrapped in his velvet tone that I can’t resist

I cross the room to where he stands. He reaches out, his fingers tracing the mark on my neck with a tenderness that belies his strength. A sigh escapes me, a sound of surrender that feels right at this moment

“Zayn...” My voice is a breathy whisper as the countless emotions swirling within hunt for an outlet

“Shh,” he hushes gently, pulling me close. “I know. It’s a lot. You’re safe here, Cleo. Just let things happen naturally.”

His lips find mine, and the world narrows down to the point of contact between us. The kiss deepens, sparking a fire that threatens to consume me, fueled by the raw energy of this one sided bond, yet I still can feel him, the sensation is odd, unnatural to me. I struggle to differentiate my emotions from his like they

bleed into each other, it’s just a trickle since I haven’t marked him but odd all the same

“Zayn,” I murmur against his mouth, “what if...”

“Whatever you’re worrying about, it can wait,” he assures me before capturing my lips once more

But the fears linger, shadows at the edge of the bright flame we’ve kindled. What have we done? What does the future hold?

“Let’s not think about that now,” Zayn whispers, sensing my inner turmoil, his hands roaming over my body in a way that makes it impossible to focus on anything else. Eventually, he pulls away, leaving me breathless. “Get dressed. I have pack members downstairs,” he tells me

“Is everything okay?” I ask him and he shrugs

“Nothing I can’t handle, just pack fears; word travels fast so I now have a house full of curious pack members, well the ones that help run the pack with me.” he tells me. I nod and get dressed before we both head downstairs together, but the atmosphere in the packhouse is charged with tension. The air thick with whispered conversations that die down as we enter

“Zayn,” Vance approaches with a heavy sigh, though his concern is etched into his features, “the pack... they’re nervous.”

I can feel their eyes on us as we enter the huge living room. Whispers slither through the room, coating my skin like frost as I take in the people here, there are about dozen, who must be Zayn’s community council, each pack has one so it isn’t something I am unfamiliar with. I am just shocked seeing them all here, my father never

allowed pack members to just freely come and go from the house. Which defeats the purpose of a PACK house, it’s supposed to be communal, a safe place for pack members so it’s good to see Zayn’s pack has held onto older traditions that aren’t used much in today’s society where we have technology

“Alpha Samuel has declared war,” one voice rises above the rest, laced with fear

“Joseph too,” another confirms, casting a wary glance my way

“Are we to be strengthened by this union or torn apart?” a female pack member questions, her eyes piercing into mine

“Why hasn’t she marked him back?” another member mutters, not quite under his breath. The question hangs heavy in the air, and I feel the

sting of judgment. Zayn sighs heavily, like this wasn’t how he planned his morning

“Settle, you’re panicking for no reason! So enough, it’s too early in the morning for this kind of headache.” Zayn’s command slices through the murmurs, and silence falls like a guillotine. “And Cleo’s choice to mark me, Stanley, is hers alone, and it will not be questioned.”

He turns to me, his gray eyes softening

However, with every conflicted gaze that meets mine, I understand the gravity of our precariousness of a balance tipped by him marking me and the war that situation seems to be brewing

Zayn stands watching them debate and argue in his living room like this is a normal thing, he is the calm in the eye of the storm. He addresses his pack, his voice resonant and firm. “Alpha Greyson has offered his support. We’re not alone in this.”

