

Chained By The Alpha By Jessica Hall Chapter 81

"Support is one thing," Stanley interjects, his brow furrowed. "But what about our businesses? If we're cut off from trade with other packs, we'll suffer."

I bite my lip, watching Zayn handle each worry with the grace of a true Alpha, yet still managing to dominate the room, too. I feel like an unwanted bystander listening to the mess I've made

Needing to escape, I slip away, grabbing the keys to Zayn's car, which he told me last night I could use. Needing to get my clothes and books, I head to campus, leaving Zayn to handle his pack. The college campus is quieter than usual, a contrast to the turmoil back home. But as I

insert my key into the dorm door, it refuses to turn. A cold knot forms in my gut—I try again before huffing, knowing I will need to check with the administration. Wandering down to the front of campus, I pass a few classes, yet I am thankful most are in class. I don't think I could handle their glares today. Entering the front office, I close the door gently

"Miss Carter?" The administrator at the desk looks up, pity etched into her features. "Hey, Samantha, my key isn't working," I tell her, holding it up. I watch as she bites her lip nervously, glancing down at her computer she pushes her glasses up her nose and slides one of her fiery red locks behind her ear as she types my name into the system

I watch as her brows furrow before she glances up at me where I stand, looking suddenly nervous. "I'm sorry, but your tuition has been

canceled. Your enrollment... you're no longer a student here."

"By who?" My voice comes out sharper than intended

"Your father," she replies, her gaze dropping. He cut my tuition. I knew he would, but I wasn't expecting it to be done by the next day. What if I had nowhere to go? What would I have done? Does he truly hate me that much?

Tears sting my eyes, but I refuse to let them fall

I storm out, slamming the car door behind me as I slump into the driver's seat. How could he? My entire future is gone with a single decision; I stare at the campus office, trying to figure out what to do

That's when I notice my own car is missing from the parking lot. Panic flares up inside me like a

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wildfire. Everything is spiraling out of control, he's even taken my car. I can't even retrieve my belongings from my room

"Hey." Zayn's sudden appearance beside the car startles me, concern etched across his handsome face as he opens my door, scaring the living daylights out of me. I clutch my chest in fright, wondering when he got here. Glancing at the clock on the dash, I realize I have been lost in my thoughts in the car for over an hour. "What's

wrong?" he asks

"Everything," I choke out, the walls I've built to contain my emotions crumbling down

"Zayn, I have nothing left, he's taken everything now and completely cut me off." I confess, the weight of my world is heavy on my shoulders

"No school, no car... my own father..." I feel humiliated knowing I will have to ask for his

help further now, because I don't even have a place to go if Zayn gets bored with me or wants me gone

"Shh," he soothes, pulling me out of the car into his chest. His heartbeat is steady against my ear, a grounding rhythm in the chaos. "You have me," he tells me

"Is that supposed to fix everything?" I retort,

even as I cling to him, desperate for his soothing scent

"Maybe not," he admits. "But we'll figure it out

Now get in," he tells me, and I sigh. I slip into the passenger seat when I notice Vance's car next to Zayn's. Vance waves. I nod back as he leans across the seat when Zayn leans down, speaking to Vance for a moment

"Head back to the club." I hear him tell Vance

Vance gives us a curt nod and disappears, leaving us alone. As Zayn takes the driver's seat, I can't help but stare out the window, feeling adrift in a life that's suddenly unrecognizable. "I have nothing left," I admit, the weight of my new reality pressing down on me. "No money, nowhere to live... I feel like such a burden to you

Zayn's hand finds mine, his grip reassuring

"You're not a burden, Cleo," he says firmly. "If you want, you can come work for me or just stay at home until you figure out what you want to do. You have options."

His words are meant to comfort, but they remind me how completely my world has tipped on its axis. We drive in silence, the hum of the engine a soothing background sound to the chaos of my thoughts. Once back on pack territory Zayn

drives past the packhouse and pulls up at a massive oval field, dotted with figures moving in synchronized patterns his pack training

"I'll be back," he says, stepping out. "Just need to drop off this patrol roster for Andrea to give out

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I nod and watch him climb out of the car and head over to his pack. My gaze flits across the field where his pack spar and sprint, their forms a blur of power and grace.

When Zayn returns, I can't contain my curiosity

"Why aren't they training in the city?" I ask

"Because I won't risk exposing my pack to other packs right now," he explains. "Not until things settle down."

"Shouldn't you be training with them?"

"You're still getting comfortable with all of this, so we'll train back home until you're comfortable training with the rest of the pack."

As we drive back to the packhouse, I'm acutely aware of the man beside me his presence has been constant lately. His scent envelopes me, a mix of pine and something that is uniquely Zayn, grounding me in the here and now

"Thank you," I murmur, unsure of how else to express the gratitude and tumultuous emotions churning within me

"Don't thank me yet," he replies with a wry smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes. "We've got a lot of training to do, and I won't go easy on you."

"Wouldn't expect anything less," I respond, the corners of my mouth lifting in spite of the situation

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The engine purrs to a stop and the world outside Zayn's car fades as we pull into the packhouse grounds. The familiar sight of towering trees and a sprawling house greets me, but this time, it feels different. It's not just a place I'm visiting: it's my new home

My heart thrums in my chest as Zayn leads me inside. The door shuts with a soft click behind me

"Go get changed; Andrea dropped clothes over before I left to find you. They are in the walk-in closet." Zayn tells me, his voice a calm command that somehow makes the chaos inside me still for a moment. I nod my head once and he wanders into the living room

In the privacy of Zayn's bedroom, I rifle through the clothes, my heart in my throat. The closet is filled with leggings, t-shirts, jeans, hoodies, and dresses. I change into the first thing I see, black leggings and a loose sweatshirt. A quick look in the mirror reveals I look like a mess, but I have much more significant problems right now

Leaving the room, I find Zayn has moved all the furniture aside in the living room and has already changed out of his jeans and button-up and is in all his shirtless glory, abs rippling with muscles as he stretches like he just woke up looking sexy as hell for good measure

My gaze trails over the ridges and valleys of his abs, and I'm caught snared in the sight of him

"Enjoying the view?" His voice rumbles, teasing and warm

[roll my eyes, feigning indifference. "Seen better."

"Sure you have," he chuckles, stepping closer, pulling me into the cleared space. "Let's get started."

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"I'm shocked you are seriously going to make me train with you. After everything?" I ask, even though the heat of his body draws me in like a moth to flame. "Haven't I been embarrassed enough? And now you want to hand my ass to

me

“You can hold your own. And it’s about being prepared.” He grasps my wrists gently, his silver wolf eyes glinting. “And I need you prepared with everything going on.”

“Fine,” I concede, my pulse dancing as he keeps hold of me, guiding me through defensive

stances. Each touch ignites sparks along my skin, and each brush of his fingers against mine sends shivers up my spine

“Good, now try to pin me,” he instructs, a playful edge in his tone

“Like I could,” I scoff, but the challenge lights a fire within me. I’ve seen him fight three alphas, yet he’s pretending that I could actually cause him harm

We move around each other, part combat, part me evading his reach. His body is a force of nature, and every move is precise and potent

Yet, he allows me close and lets me think I might have a chance. Our bodies collide, and I find it invigorating. He may have skill, but I’m a lot smaller and faster as I escape his grip and duck under his arm with a laugh. I kick the back of his knee, and he drops to one knee, and I pounce on him

“Got you,” I pant as I manage to jump on his back. He laughs

“Got me how?” he laughs, but he only has to lean forward, and my feet no longer touch the ground. Reaching back, he grips my arm; a shriek leaves my lips as he rips me over his shoulder. The air leaves my lungs in a rush as I hit the foam mats

“T got you,” he laughs. My breath hitches as I look up into his eyes, molten gray

“Seems you do,” I murmur. “Helps you have a lot more reach than me!”

“And heaps taller, I could wear you as a backpack,” he snickers. I glare up at him, and he pushes off the ground to stand when I turn,

kicking his legs out from under him. He hits the ground hard, and I scramble to pin him while he stares at the ceiling, having the air knocked out of him

“Fine, you aren’t short, you’re compact— You ‘re fun-size,” In one swift motion, he rolls, reversing our positions with an ease that leaves me breathless. Now pinned beneath him, I can’t help but marvel at his agility, so at odds with his size. His eyes, gleaming with a playful glint, meet mine. “Seems the tiny predator has become the prey,” he muses

I try to throw him off as he pins my hands above my head, his lips tugging in the corners as he watches me struggle against him before I give up with a huff

“See? Size does have its advantages. Height for reach and weight,” he shifts slightly, emphasizing his point without putting his full weight on me

“Well, I thought you were supposed to be showing me how to defend myself, not show me how utterly defenseless I am against someone your size?” I laugh and squirm beneath his weight

His eyes, dark and intense, lock onto mine with a gaze that could command the moon. “You might think being smaller puts you at a disadvantage,” he murmurs, his voice low and husky, sending a thrill through me. “But remember, you have the big bad wolf always ready to defend you.”

His smirk is a shadow, playing at the edges of his mouth, but his eyes—oh, they burn with a lethal promise. “Let them come for you,” he says, his voice low and cold. “They’ll quickly

learn I’m the last shadow they ever cross.”

My hands roam across the expanse of his chest, tracing the lines down his abs. Zayn’s breathing

grows ragged, matching the erratic beat of my heart

“You’re really not helping my training here,” I say, my voice shaky, as I try to focus on the task at hand and not the sinful thoughts creeping into my mind

“No?” he asks, his eyes twinkling with mischief

“I could always...” His lips brush against my ear, sending shivers down my spine. His

lips press below my ear gently, his lips grazing his mark on my neck; my back arches at the sensation it causes, like I could suddenly feel him everywhere at once, his lips travel along my jaw before meeting mine

Our lips meet in a clash of passion, tongues fighting for dominance. He tastes like wildness and promises, I drink him in greedily. The room spins, and everything narrows down to the feel of his body pressed against mine, the sound of our mingled breaths

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My hands tremble with anticipation as they reach for the waistband of Zayn’s pants, my fingertips gently tugging at the fabric. But in an instant, his body freezes, and he pulls

my hands away, his lips trailing down my neck. Confusion furrows my brow at his sudden rejection

“What’s wrong?” I manage to pant out, my voice heavy with desire

Zayn groans, his head resting on my shoulder as he tries to catch his breath. “You’re barely a week away from your birthday, Cleo,” he breathes out, his voice filled with longing and restraint. “I’d rather wait until you have got your wolf.”

His words hang in the air, leaving me bewildered and hurt. He marked me and claimed me as his own, yet now he denies me? The conflicting emotions swirl within me, leaving me feeling like a mere pawn in some game I’m not privy to

“What does that have to do with anything?” I ask, my voice trembling with frustration

Zayn sits up, guilt etched across his face. He runs a hand through his tousled hair before meeting my gaze. “I told you this before, Cleo, not until you get your wolf,” he states, his voice filled with sincerity

My heart sinks as the words leave his lips, and I try to hide how much they truly sting. The vulnerability in my voice betrays me as I stutter out my confusion. “I don’t understand,” I whisper, my voice catching in my throat. “You

marked me...but won’t have me? What am I to you then? Just a plaything when it suits you? A Weapon against my father? None of this makes any sense. What has waiting for my wolf got to do with it when your mark is on my fucking neck!”

The room descends into a heavy silence, the weight of my words hanging in the air. Zayn watches me; his expression is unreadable, but he remains silent, unable to find the right words, or maybe he doesn’t have any more excuses

Frustration and anger surge within me, and with a swift motion, I push him away and rise to my feet

“Cleo!” Zayn pleads. But I refuse to listen

Instead, I head for the stairs before remembering I can’t escape him in his room either. So, instead, I make my way towards one of the spare rooms, hoping to escape the embarrassment that

As I shut the door behind me, the hollowness of my heart echoes in the stillness. Tears well up in my eyes, blurring my vision as I desperately try to make sense of it all

But even at this moment, I can hear Zayn’s footsteps approaching, growing louder with each passing second. Panic grips me, pushing me to lock the door. The walls seem to close in around me as I struggle to catch my breath

"Cleo," he pleads again, his voice soft as he tries to turn the handle, finding the door locked. But T remain silent, unwilling to expose myself to further disappointment

His fist bangs lightly on the door, rattling the frame as he speaks through gritted teeth. "Cleo, I can explain."

I don't respond and close my eyes, trying to block out the world around me. Finally, after minutes pass, I hear his footsteps retreat, and I can breathe again. I collapse on the bed, curling into a ball as I tug the blankets up wanting nothing more than to go to bed to get this day over with

The next morning, sleep evades me, flashes of last night's humiliation replaying in my mind. I need to get out of this room; I need distraction. I quickly dress in jeans and a long-sleeved shirt before leaving the room. My bare feet pad quietly down the hallway as I make my way downstairs. In the kitchen, I find Zayn sipping a steaming cup of coffee, his eyes finding mine from down the hall where he sits at the island bench

His silver orbs are filled with remorse, but it's too late for apologies now. I don't want to hear any excuses or half-hearted justifications. I just need space from him in this situation. His jaw clenches as he sees me fully dressed. "Cleo," he says my name warningly, but I ignore him and head straight for the front door, only to hear his chair scrape across the floor

"Cleo, where do you think you're going?" he demands, his voice authoritative as he catches up to me in the foyer

"I'm going to look for work since I can't go to school," I say coldly, placing my bag over my shoulder with a resolute thud. "I can't stay cooped up here all day."

"Not until we talk," he growls out, his hand wrapping around my wrist, stopping me dead in my tracks

I whirl around to face him and meet his gaze head-on. "There's nothing to talk about, Zayn! You made your feelings crystal clear yesterday!" Anger laces my words, my green eyes blazing with unshed tears

"You're not going alone," he growls out, his jaw flexing as he stares me down, challenging me to defy him further. And while a part of me wants to push him, the other part of me knows I'm no match for him until I get my wolf. So, I know I have no choice as he tightens his grip on my wrist. He leads me back to the kitchen and motions for me to sit. "I am at war with nearly every damn pack in this city because of you right now. You can't just wander off and leave the damn pack!"

"I'm sorry about yesterday, I wasn't trying to hurt your feelings, but I have made it clear, Cleo, that

I won't mate you until you get your wolf," he starts, but I cut him off before he can continue

"It's fine, Zayn, I don't want to hear any more excuses; it's fine, I get it." I lie through gritted teeth, forcing a fake smile on my face. I don't get this man at all!

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He narrows his silver eyes in disbelief but doesn't press further as he finishes his coffee in one gulp and places the mug in the sink. "Put on a jacket, it's cold outside, and we're leaving."

"We?" I ask hesitantly, looking at him suspiciously

"We are going together; you want to work, you can work with me, but until this shit is settled with your father and the other alphas, I don't want you wandering off without me," he growls out impatiently, gesturing at the door. "You want a distraction, fine. I'm giving you one; take it or leave it." I swallow but grab my jacket before meeting him back at the front door where he stands in his suit trying to fix his cufflinks,

yet he appears to be in a terrible mood, which isn't helping when he looks on the verge of shifting. Moving closer, I take them from him, flipping his hand over, I do his cufflinks

"Why are you so cranky?" I ask him, and at first, he says nothing until I glance at him when moving to do the other one. "My wolf is furious with me; he is fighting me," Zayn admits, and I stare at him

"Why?" I ask quickly, fixing the other cufflink

"For upsetting you, he didn't like you weren't sleeping in our bed," Zayn states his words, coming out in a growl at the end as his wolf tries shoving forward

"Your wolf is angry I wasn't in the bed?" I ask him

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"You forget I have marked you, Cleo; our wolves are possessive, animalistic sides of us; he kept me up all damn night wanting me to drag you back to the room like some barbaric caveman. He thought you were rejecting him." he rubs his temples. I bite my bottom lip at his words, not knowing what to say

Zayn reaches for his keys, but I snatched them from the hallstand. "I'm driving. I'm not getting in a car with you if you're on the verge of shifting." I tell him. He clenches his teeth but says nothing. Instead, he turns to open the door

We walk out to the car when it occurs to me that I have no idea what he does for work; all I know is that he has an office in the city. "What are you doing for work anyway?" I ask him, hitting the key fob

"Real Estate, property development, I have all the city pack businesses, and I own a few clubs and bars. The proceeds go back into the pack."

"So how much do you own exactly." Zayn seems thoughtful for a second. "My pack or me in general?"

"Both?"

"Half the city, between my father's assets that were passed down and what my pack owns," he tells me as I open the driver's door and climb in,

and so does Zayn, slamming the door behind him

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"That was not me!" Zayn growls when his claws suddenly slash his seatbelt when he goes to pull it on. "Zarek, you stupid mutt!" he snarls angrily. My eyes widened at him, and he was talking to himself. Well, his wolf

"She is right fucking there!" he snarls as fur sprouts across his hands. I raise an eyebrow at him, worried this will be a very embarrassing all-day thing in his office.

"Sorry, he's being a..." His words cut off as Zarek presses beneath his skin

"Zarek, knock it off, or I won't sleep in our room tonight either." I snap at him, knowing he is about to shred Zayn's suit, and I want to get out of this house but can't without Zayn. Zarek instantly settles, and Zayn sucks in a breath of relief. While I stared at him, bewildered that his wolf so easily listened to me

"He never listens to me like that," Zayn mutters

"Maybe because you called him a mutt." I retort, starting the car

Zayn chuckles and shakes his head. "Ready?" I ask him. He nods, motioning for me to go; the tension in the car is thick the entire way to his office building. I park the car and climb out in front of a large building with his name at the top. Z.H. corporation. "I can honestly say I have never been to this side of the city," I tell him as I park his car

"It's only ten minutes from your university. How have you never been here before?" he asks. I shrug. "Dad always told me this side of the city was rougher, so I avoided it," I

admit, wondering why my father would say that when this would have to be the nicest part of the city and it was barely a few minutes away from the city center

“He lied,” Zayn states coldly as we walk into the lobby. The second we walk in, all eyes are on us, and instinctively, I stop, but Zayn drops his arm across my shoulders, tugging me closer

Zayn led me through the large lobby, my gaze darting everywhere as people greeted him left and right. I felt like an outsider, a trespasser in this world of glitz and glamor that I didn’t belong in. When we reach an elevator, Zayn uses a swipe card and then presses the level he wants to go

His office took my breath away panoramic windows looked over Nightshade City’s expansive skyline. On one wall was a mahogany desk with a sleek computer setup, while another showcased various awards and pictures of Zayn shaking hands with important-looking people

His scent permeated everything, claiming this space as his own. Despite the grandeur, it felt impersonal and cold-like him when he wasn’t around me

“So... what do you want me to do?” I asked tentatively as he settled behind his desk, shuffling through papers

“Make yourself comfortable,” he motions to the lounge. I sit heavily on it. For some reason, I was expecting it to be some cozy little building, not an actual skyscraper. However, I am now left twiddling my thumbs, watching him as he logs into his computer

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“Sitting on your lounge and watching you is not what I had in mind for work,” Zayn sighs heavily

“Considering I wasn’t planning on coming in here today for now, it will do; just give me a second, and I will give you something to do,” he tells me

I walk around the room looking at all the pictures, ones with his family and him as a child to him graduating from university to a picture of him and... me? My heart stopped

“What?” I find myself picking up a photo of me

“This was at the pack meeting when I met you.” he states, walking up behind me. “what are you

doing with it?” I demand

“I took it while I was sitting across from you.” He smirks before returning to his desk

“That’s creepy!” I huff as I put it back on his desk. “So, what do you want me to do, Alpha Zayn ?” I ask sarcastically as he glares at me for using his title like that.

“My files are right there. Sort them by date, will

you?” he points to a mountain of files at the end of the desk

“Are you serious?” I ask incredulously. He simply raises an eyebrow at me, waiting for an answer. With a huff, I grab the first pile and sit down on the lounge, dumping them on the small coffee table that was vacant in his office. The next few hours pass by boringly slowly as I look through papers after papers on mergers,

takeovers, shares, and deals. I didn’t understand it all, but I dated them. I did manage to do just fine until lunchtime came around

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“Hungry?” He asks, not looking up from his computer screen. I stood, my back stiff and sore from sitting in one position for so long, before grabbing the next pile of files

“Starving,” I tell him

“Let me finish these emails, and we’ll go get something,” he tells me. I nod, taking the last few documents back to the coffee table. When I notice my mother’s name. “What’s this?” I ask him; he glances at me before standing up and, shutting down his computer, and coming over to me while I try to decipher what it is; it looks like land title transfers, but that isn’t my mother’s signature that much I do remember, I used to always be jealous of her handwriting

“Zayn?” I ask, holding up the documents before noticing the one behind it. I see the official title changeover for my father and Linda

“Show me,” Zayn tells me, and I hold out the paper to him, his eyes narrowing before he snatches it off me

“Were you going through my drawers?” he suddenly accuses, shocking me. I stare at him

“What? No, it was in the pile. What is that?” I ask, reaching for the paperwork, but he pulls it away. “And why do you have it?” I demand

Zayn grits his teeth when I reach for it again, and I snatch it from his grip

"I've been looking into the rogue attack, that is, the land transfer from when your mother handed the pack over to your father and Linda." Zayn finally says

"That's not my mother's signature," I tell him

"I know. Alpha Greyson had some documents of her, and we compared them," He admits

"Do you recognize the handwriting?" he asks, and I shake my head

"No, it's not Linda's or my father's," I tell them, yet the signature looks like it was done by someone else; the pen used seemingly different despite the color being the same, like it was filled out with a ballpoint pen and the signature was done in some sort of marker pen

"No, but that's not the same pen used up here," I tell him, pointing to the signature. Zayn also nods. "Why do you have this?" I ask him

"I started looking into your mother's death after I met you, but that was approved by the council

for transfer a couple of days before the rogue attack. I tried to get the footage from the council for that day, but we are having trouble locating it because I know that isn't your mother's signature, but she would have had to sign that at the council with a witness. Unfortunately, the witness is dead." Zayn tells me. My brows furrow when I see the witness's name, and I

gasp

"Your father...." Zayn nods, and I shake my head. "This doesn't make any sense," I tell him

"I know, but Alpha Greyson and I are looking into it," we'll figure it out; I wasn't expecting you to see that. I thought I put it away. Clearly, I forgot." he says, angry at himself

"Why were you even looking into her?"

"L was trying to find a way out for you. I was

hoping to find something to stop your father from marrying you off so it wouldn't turn into this mess it has now," he admits

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“Come on, I will show you around this side of the city and we’ll get something to eat,”

He says,

grabbing my hand and dragging me along with him

“But...”

“We need more information, we have no idea who signed that without the old footage

or without the witness to confirm if your mother truly did go into the council to sign that, but I know my father I know he wouldn’t have witnessed it, if it wasn’t her.” Zayn

tells me

“So, what now?” I ask him

“We carry on until we can prove otherwise and I

know the other packs are up to something, right now we just need to bide our time

and figure out what it is going on while we also try to figure out who signed this.” He tells me, tossing the file on his desk and grabbing my hand. We make our way to the elevator and soon we are driving through the city center

“Where are we going?” I ask him as he heads

down a road leading to the club where I last saw Deacon

“To get something to eat, then I am dropping you home.” he states

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I huff, annoyed, but don’t add anything, knowing there is no point in arguing with him. I peer out the window as we pull up at the club

“Do you really think Deacon went rogue?” I ask him

“Alpha Greyson believes so, and he is Deacon’s Alpha; I think he would know,” I nod my head, yet I can’t understand why... It makes me wonder if my father scared him off

“You still hung up about that loser?” Zayn asks, and I purse my lips but shake my head

“No, I just think none of this would be happening right now if he were here. Instead, he runs off, and I worry my father is behind it, but

at the same time, I wonder how Lydia got those photos,” I admit, my mind working overtime

“You didn’t recognize him...” Zayn coughs, and my brows pinch

“My lady parts on the big screen, yeah, I recognized those parts,” I tell him, yet I have no memory of that night at all.” Zayn leans over and squeezes my hand

“That is probably a good thing,” he tells me

“Ts it, though? Maybe if I remembered who it was, I might know where Deacon went.” I tell him. He sighs heavily and I glance at him

“You found me, right?”

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Zayn swallows, looking straight ahead. “Yes, you were out of it,”

“And you didn’t see who it was?” I ask skeptically?”

“No, they took off, and I was too worried about you to chase after them.”

“Then how do you know he didn’t...” I trail off, but surely I would have been sore, right?

“I got there in time. You had no scents on...” Zayn grits his teeth

“I would know if he had: he didn’t,” he tells me, and I chew my lip nervously

“Where?” I ask the questions I should have asked ages ago, the ones I didn’t really want answers to, but find myself now questioning everything about that night, about my life since then, and since the rogue attack that took my mother from me

“In the parking lot, I think you were trying to drive home when he grabbed you,” Zayns tells me, and I peer out at the parking lot when Zayn grips my chin, turning my face toward him. He leans in, his lips brushing mine gently before pulling back slightly

“Nothing happened, I got there in time, and I took you home; that is all you need to know,” he whispers, his thumb brushing along my jaw gently, and I nod,

“But how did Lydia get those photos?” I asked him, and he let me go

“That’s a question we’ll have to ask her,” he tells me, and I wonder if I can ask her, I wonder if my father has asked her? Surely he would be questioning her, too? Maybe once he does, he’ll see reason and actually believe me

I open my mouth to speak, about to ask more about how we’ll handle Alpha Samuel and this situation with Lydia, when Zayn cuts me off, leaning forward and claiming my lips with his once more. This time, it’s harder and more demanding. His hands are in my hair, holding my head firmly as he steals away my breath

I moan into the kiss, feeling him press closer to me. He pulls back slightly, his forehead resting against mine as we both catch our breaths. He looks at me with hooded silver eyes that seem to see into my soul, and it sends shivers down my spine. “Food first, then questions,” he murmurs against my skin

We enter the club and take our seats at a secluded table in the corner, away from the other patrons. The place is dimly lit with red and purple lights, giving it an atmospheric feel that goes well with the intimate vibe. Our booth

is big enough for six people, but we make it work for the two of us. The soft jazz music plays as our orders are taken. I can’t help but notice how everyone looks at Zayn; some lustfully, some nervously, some curiously – it’s all new to me. He seems used to it, though, not showing any signs of discomfort or awareness towards their gazes, yet I notice each one, which makes me want to hide under the table

Our food arrives soon enough: steaming plates of pasta and garlic bread, juicy steaks paired with crispy fries, and a side salad for me. The smell is heavenly as it wafts through the air towards me; my stomach grumbles in anticipation. My mouth waters at the sight of everything on our plates before us

“Smells amazing,” I murmur between bites of my salad as Zayn tears into his steak like it’s nothing

The rest of our meal passes by in a blur; we devour our food like we are starved, yet the longer we are here, the more everyone’s stares get to me, I know most are his pack members, but I find it odd how even with everything going on the other packs people still show up to his club even if nervous

Once the dishes are cleared, we both lean back against the booth, both of us full

“So what now?” I ask, playing with my napkin nervously

“We go home,” he says simply, finishing his glass of water

“I mean about tomorrow...and the whole Lydia thing,” I clarify, and he growls lowly

“What do you want me to say, Cleo? We’ll

figure it out, but for now, there isn't much we can do until we have more information,"

he tells me

Zayn takes my hand in his, lacing our fingers together and squeezing gently as he pulls me from the booth, and we head back out to the car

Yet when we reach the doors leading out, he suddenly stops, making me glance at him to see he is in the mindlink. His eyes are glazed over, and I wait for him to finish. Only when he does, he looks quite panicked as he urges me faster toward the car

"Who was that?" I ask him

"Aunt Andrea, the pack is being attacked by rogues; we need to get back home," he tells me, and we race out to the car and jump. I buckle up as he speeds off back home, my heart pounding in my chest with unease, knowing how dangerous rogues are

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Yet nothing could have prepared me for the sheer brutality that awaited us as we ventured back into pack territory. As we approached the pack gate, a thick haze of smoke from the decimated buildings engulfed us, causing my stomach to plummet to my toes in dread. Zayn's grip on the steering wheel was so tight, his knuckles turned bone white, his jaw clenched as we race around the corner towards his territory

With screeching tires, he brought the car to an abrupt halt in front of the ravaged pack house, and we both leaped out, our eyes scanning the destruction

The sight of twisted debris and charred wood sent shivers down my spine, a haunting reminder of the savagery that had taken place

here

"Zayn!" Andrea's voice, filled with both relief and anguish, pierced through the eerie silence as Zayn searched for where her voice came from

We run through piles of debris and charred wood, searching madly for any sign of life until we finally find her – coughing and wincing in pain. Andrea's weary eyes met Zayn's as he scooped her up gently in his arms, cradling her fragile form against his chest. Without wasting a moment, he carried her back to his car, her gasps filling the air. But before she could even utter a single word, Zayn's voice trembled with concern as he demanded answers, "Where's Vance?" he demands to know before she can even speak

"I don't know," Andrea managed to whisper

through ragged breaths. "He was helping guide everyone to the bunkers beneath the packhouse... We... we were ambushed, the doors wouldn't lock to the bunkers, the power was cut, I had to remain outside to manually lock it, he was covering me... he..." Her voice trailed off as she scans around her looking for him, the weight of her words hanging heavily in the air, as we absorbed the enormity of the situation and judging by the state of her she had to have been caught in the fray

Suddenly, a faint whimper resonated nearby, Zayn rushes towards the sound, and I race to catch up to him when we find his brother. It wasn't Vance who emitted that pitiful sound; it was a rogue, one whom Vance had apprehended and was now dragging back to the packhouse

"Vance," he growls, voice rough and full of distress. "You okay?" He runs his hands over

Vance's body, feeling for any injuries; he seems to be covered in blood but none of it being his

"I caught one, the rest fled, our men have driven them east," he tells us

"Well take him down to the basement," he says calmly, but there's an edge to his voice that makes it clear he doesn't want any arguments when the rogue man starts wailing

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"Please, I will tell you anything, you don't need to torture it out of me," Zayn pauses and looks at Vance. "How many?" he asks Vance. My brows furrow

Vance's response offers a glimmer of reassurance amidst the chaos. "None," he states firmly. "They mainly made a mess, set fire to a few houses, and injured a handful of men. No deaths."

The man looks at Zayn pleadingly, his face is cut from Vance's claws and his hair is that bloody and matted. Yet, despite the disfigurement, his blue eyes shimmer with fear, a reflection of the terror that has consumed him

Through sobs that echo with remorse, the man's words stumble forth. "No, not kill. Only scare you," he manages to choke out. "It was a warning. He said we only had to scare you all." His admission hangs in the air, making me confused on who ordered them to attack, it could be anyone with Zayn being at war with half the city

Zayn's piercing gaze fixates on the mysterious man for a fleeting moment, demanding answers

The air crackles with tension as he demands,

The man, his voice trembling with fear, pleads

for mercy. "I don't know! I was merely given orders. We were never told his name, only that he is from the small pack on the other side of the city—the one with the snotty blonde woman." His words hang in the air, each syllable resonating with a deep sense of unease

Small pack... My father's pack. The realization hits me like a thunderbolt, and I exchange a wary glance with Zayn. The gravity of the situation dawns upon us both simultaneously

"Your father!" Zayn's voice is laced with raw anger. While I only feel disbelief. I bite my lip, murroring his thoughts

"Please, that is all I know," the rogue begs, his voice quivering under the weight of his fear

Andrea steps forward, her touch gentle as she rests her hand on Zayn's arm

"Zayn, we are not monsters," she reminds him, her voice carrying a note of compassion as she looks at the rogue man, not with hatred but pity

Yet the look on Zayn's face betrays an internal struggle, torn between his instincts and the desire to maintain his humanity

"What reason does he have to lie?" Andrea adds firmly, her eyes searching Zayn's troubled furious expression

Zayn's response is swift and cutting. "Depends on what he was offered for doing this,"

he snaps back, his words laced with a bitter skepticism

The man interjects hurriedly, his voice tinged with desperation

"Food, he offered us food, the lands are bare this

time of the season, nothing left." My eyes drift over the rogue taking in his emaciated frame, it

also makes me think back to the rogue attacks in the city over the past year how they've gotten worse. Are things really getting that bad outside the city borders and desperation is sending them in

Yet, despite everything I have been taught about rogues-wild and uncontrollable creatures this man before us appears no different from any other. His appearance is marred by dirt and blood, but his eyes hold a flicker of humanity that defies the stereotypes I've been raised to believe

"Zayn, I think he's telling the truth," I whisper and his gaze cuts to me

"They attacked our pack," he reminds me

"We killed no one, no one!" The man wails and sobs and I swallow the lump in my throat threatening to choke me

"They're starving, you can't say you wouldn't have done the same if in his place, especially if you haven't been in his situation,"

"How can you say that? Your mother was killed by rogues," He tells me like I have forgotten her suddenly

"That was different Zayn and you know it, this would be different if they killed people

but they haven't, everyone got to the bunkers, and our men pushed them back. Like he said no deaths, I thought they were attacking but they could have easily killed me and didn't, I was outnumbered once I lost Vance," Andrea says looking at the man

Zayn averts his gaze, jaw clenching tightly as he considers her words. His eyes back to the

flick

pathetic man before him, who is now shaking in fear, awaiting his fate. I chew my bottom lip trying to think of something to say but nothing comes to mind

Zayn however chooses not to answer Andrea instead waving one of his men over as they start appearing out of the tree line having driven the rogues out

"Send out teams to scout the northern borders keep an eye out for any suspicious activity increase training sessions with our warriors and send word to Alpha Grayson of our newest addition please," he says as he still has a death grip on my hand. I look up at him in question, remaining silent

"I don't want any slip-ups if your father sends more our way," he says gruffly before

turning away rubbing a hand over his face. The pack

member rushes off when Vance asks

“What about him?” I glance at the rogue

“Take him inside, I want to be sure before we let him go,” Zayn states and my stomach sinks

“Zayn?” Vance and Andrea ask simultaneously

“I want to be sure.” Zayn states leaving no room for argument

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Cleo

Zayn’s fury at the attack is obvious when Vance and Andrea hesitate, neither of them look like they want to punish or torture this rogue for information, yet Zayn is blinded by his anger

When Vance hesitates a second too long, and Zayn moves toward the rogue man, who whimpers and starts begging

However, Zayn’s grip on the rogue’s arm is ironclad, his knuckles white with tension as he drags him inside the pack house. The air is thick with Zayn’s aura which is menacing and the scent of the rogue’s fear which emanates from his pores in a thick musk scent

“Zayn, stop,” I plead, my voice steady despite the hammering in my chest. “He’s scared, look at him. Please don’t hurt him, he’s too scared to lie to you!”

“And that is precisely why he would lie, Cleo! Especially knowing what he says decides if he lives or dies!” I shake my head, racing to catch up to him

The rogue’s eyes flicker to me, wide and brimming with a raw desperation that clenches my heart. He’s not much older than I am, his face gaunt, dirt smudging his skin like a second layer

“Please, Zayn,” I urge, stepping forward to place a gentle hand on Zayn’s tattooed forearm, feeling the thrum of power beneath the surface of his skin as his skin ripples. His aura blasts me and I gasp, my hand dropping, and I nearly do

too before he realizes what he did

“Cleo!” he blurts, letting the man go, he staggers and stumbles onto his knees at the abruptness of Zayn no longer dragging his weight. “I didn’t mean that,” he murmurs, reaching for me, but I slap his hands away, only for Zayn to lift his hand to the rogue. “Look what you made me do!” he snarls, about to backhand the poor man, but I move, stepping In front of him. Zayn only Just pulls back in time

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“No, you’re letting your anger rule you, stand down, Zayn, or I am leaving!” I growl at him, before covering my mouth with my hands at what I did. Zayn startles at the sound too

“Cleo, he...” Zayn starts, but I glare at him

“Leave him, hunger makes you do crazy things.” I snap at him, grabbing the rogue man’s arm, I

help him up. He looks at Zayn warily, yet doesn’t move a muscle, using me like a shield. Zayn growls at his hand clutching the back of my shirt. Turning, I push the man toward the kitchen instead of the basement

“Cleo!” Zayn snarls. “What are you doing?” “Feeding him!”

Zayn’s silver eyes lock onto mine, searching, probing, before he exhales sharply, the tension uncoiling from his frame

“Fine,” Zayn grunts. “But if he tries anything—”

“He won’t,” I interject quickly, giving the rogue an encouraging nod. “Will you?”

The rogue man looks between us, his Adam’s apple bobbing nervously. “No, Alpha... I’ll tell

you whatever you want to know. We just needed help, our pack is starving.”

“Pack?” Zayn raises a skeptical eyebrow, his alpha aura dominating the room

“Other rogues, like me. I guess we aren’t a pack, but by remaining together we haven’t lost our minds, or I hope we haven’t, maybe we have? We aren’t like the other rogues.” Zayn watches him carefully, cautiously

“Other rogues?” I repeat, my mind racing with possibilities

“Alpha Dean and Alpha Samuel, they got rogues doing their dirty work. They ordered the attack at that hotel alpha meeting a couple of months back, we don’t associate with them, they’re not safe, they have mostly lost their humanity.”

Zayn’s jaw clenches, the mention of Alpha Samuel and Alpha Dean sparking a dark fire behind his eyes

“Come on,” I tell the rogue man, leading him towards the kitchen, so I can make him something to eat

I motion for the man to sit on the stool at the island and open the fridge, looking for something to make him. I pull out ingredients to make him a sandwich. Zayn leans against the door watching me, but his aura isn't as angry and violent anymore, but I can tell he doesn't trust the rogue at all, refusing to take his eyes off the man. The rogue's eyes darted around the kitchen, his posture tense, like a cornered animal. His gaze settles on Zayn, and I can see the flicker of recognition in those haunted depths, a silent plea for some semblance of mercy

I add layers of turkey and cheese, tomato slices, cucumber, lettuce – everything I can think of not knowing what he likes, maybe I should have asked if he had allergies, I think to myself, but surely, he would have mentioned he was allergic to these things, since he is watching me

Glancing at the man, he doesn't seem comfortable around us, which I can't blame him for when Zayn was only threatening to kill him moments ago

When the sandwich is ready; I slide it across the counter to him, he hesitates for a second, so I grab him a bottle of water from the fridge, all while being very aware of Zayn's eyes watching me

His hands shake as he tries to open the bottle of water, taking huge gulps of it down like he hasn't had anything in days

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“Thank you,” he mumbles around a mouthful of food, staring at his sandwich

“Eat, we'll talk after,” I tell him before feeling Zayn's chest press to my back, the rogue's eyes dart to him behind me when he speaks

“Eat, I won't hurt you,” Zayn tells him before pressing his lips to my shoulder. The man takes a bite, he eats slowly like he is savoring every bite

“So, what's your name?” I ask

“Blake,” he mumbles around food. “Cleo, right?” He asks before taking another bite

“Correct,” I tell him

“How long since your last meal?” Zayn asks Blake

“Three days,” he admits, and I chew my lip

“So why did you agree? You had to know it was suicide?” Zayn coaxes out

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The rogue man swallows his food before answering, “Mitchel the Alpha’s Beta said our Alpha would take us back, that we could come home. I haven’t met him, but mom didn’t want us to go, she said she won’t ever bow to him.”

“Him? You mean Alpha Joseph?” Zayn asks when I point to the other half of the sandwich, telling him to eat. He shakes his head. “I’ll save it for my sister,” he murmurs

I look at Zayn, but he doesn’t comment about Blake’s sister. “You said you didn’t know who sent you?” Zayn states

“I don’t, it was the first time I have seen the Alpha, I only know the Beta’s name because of

Jamie,” he states

“And Jamie accepted the deal? Where is Jamie?” The man looks away

“Dead, your Beta killed him when we were trying to escape.” Zayn points to the sandwich

“Eat, you’ll have food to take home,” Zayn tells him

“Tell us about the other rogues, the ones you’re scared of,” Zayn demands, his voice a low rumble that resonates

“We call them the bandits,” the rogue murmurs, his voice hollow. “They come, killing our people, taking what little we have.” He shudders, the fear palpable in each word. “We’re not safe even from our kind.”

I can’t help but feel a surge of pity for these

outcasts, their eyes reflecting a mix of hope and

dread as they watch us from a distance. Families huddle together, their children peering out with

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wide, curious eyes. I couldn't imagine having to

live like that

"What else?" Zayn asks

The rogue swallows quickly. "They... they don't take prisoners," he rasps, the fear palpable in his tone. "They've killed some of us. It's a sort of warning to stay in line— or else."

"Or else what?" Zayn prods, moving closer so his entire chest lines my back

"Death isn't the worst thing they threaten us with, they've taken a few of the women when we've refused them," the rogue whispers, casting a wary glance at Cleo before returning his focus to Zayn. "We live like ghosts, most of

us are banished families clinging to the fringes of Nightshade City, the majority of us were from his pack or so mom says, I don't remember not being rogue. That Alpha... Joseph? He gave us an ultimatum: scare your pack, or remain exiled forever."

"Banished? Why?" I ask, stepping forward with a creased brow, only Zayn tugs me back against him and I sigh. "You said you're from my father's pack?" Task

The man's face drained of color, and he stumbled back a step, as if the very ground beneath him had shifted. "You're... you're the Alpha's daughter?"

"Your father..." The rogue hesitated, his eyes widening as if he'd just pieced together a puzzle

"When his mate your mother was killed, he banished my mother for not submitting to him

along with those that refused."

"Submission is not loyalty," Zayn growls, his silver eyes flashing with a dangerous light. "It's control, fear. That's not how you lead a pack."

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"Wait," I say, my voice quivering with a mix of anger and curiosity. "You knew my mother was killed. But why would my father banish you for not submitting?"

"Because we refused to be his pawns," the rogue states, his own anger surfacing. "Just like he's using Alpha Dean and Samuel to manipulate the packs now."

The rogue's revelation hit me like a physical blow, my breath catching in my chest as I struggle to reconcile this new piece of the puzzle. Zayn's grip on my shoulder tightens

"Tell us more," I demand, trying to keep my voice steady. "What do you know about my mother's death?"

The rogue man looks between Zayn and me, his eyes darting nervously, as if the truth he harbored was a dangerous secret itching to break free. "I only know what my mother told me, I had a head injury a few years ago, I lost all earlier memories," he tells

us

"What did your mother tell you then?" Zayn asks, his curiosity now piqued with all this information

"Her mother... she was a visionary," he began, his voice a husky whisper. "She saw the potential for peace, for unity between packs. She and Alpha Greyson had been discussing a merger, one that would have strengthened both packs against enemies; my mother believed

Greyson was her true mate."

"Did your mother tell you anything about my father?" The question spills from my lips before I can stop it

"Alpha Joseph..." He hesitates, swallowing hard

"He didn't take kindly to the idea. Said he was alpha, and that if your mother wanted to leave he expected her to give up her pack for him and his new Luna, something about her owing him for something?" the man asks, his brows creasing like he isn't sure on the last part

My heart raced, pounding against my rib cage like a caged animal desperate for

release. The implications are staggering. My mother's death, the banishment of these rogues how much of it was orchestrated by my own father? But it now has me questioning if he had something to do with her death

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"Did he kill her?" The words tasted bitter on my tongue, and I could feel Zayn's silent growl vibrating through his chest, the sound feral and protective

“No,” The rogue shakes his head, adamant yet somber. “But when she died, he seized the chance to tighten his grip, to make sure no such union could threaten his rule again. That’s why we refused to submit. My mother was one of her warriors. She also said those rogues killed her

The ones that attacked the city a couple of months back. If you need information, you can meet her.”

“But you said they answered to Alpha Samuel?” I ask. The man nods, and I look at Zayn, trying to make sense of this mess

“Well then, I guess you need to take us back to your mother,” Zayn states

“You won’t hurt them?” Blake asks. Zayn shakes his head

“I do one better; your rogues help me; I’ll help them.” Zayn offers, and the man looks at me nervously

“He’s telling the truth?” He asks, and I look at Zayn

“His word is good,” I tell the man, and he nods slowly before pushing out his stool to stand

“Okay, I will take you to them, but you can’t hurt them; we are mostly families there, women, children; the only men left were sent here, but your people killed most of us off,” he admits, his lips quivering

“I’m not about to hurt women and children, I may be an asshole, but I’m not a monster,” Zayn tells him

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Cleo

It took us forty-five minutes for the rogue to lead us to the place the rogues had turned into their own campground, deep into the forest, down an almost concealed hiking trail. The path was narrow and overgrown, with branches whipping at our faces and underbrush snagging at our clothes as we pushed through the dense foliage

I clutched Zayn's hand tightly, my heart hammering against my chest as we made our way deeper into the wilderness

Finally, the rogue stopped and gestured towards a fallen tree, indicating that we should climb over it. We followed his lead, stepping carefully over the thick trunk and emerging from the

treeline into a small clearing. The sight that greeted us was both shocking and heart-wrenching

A group of men, women, and children, all dressed in tattered clothing, were scattered around the clearing. Some were huddled around small fires. Others were sharpening their knives or tending to their meager possessions

Everywhere I looked, there were signs of struggle and desperation- their makeshift tents were falling apart, the firewood was scarce, and there was a distinct smell of unwashed bodies and rot

As we move closer to the group, I can't help but notice the hollow look in their eyes, the weariness that seemed to weigh down every movement. This is a wasteland of despair, hidden from the world's eyes. And yet, here they were, surviving against all odds, a ragtag

community of outcasts and rogues

I clutch Zayn's hand even tighter, feeling a surge of sympathy for these lost souls. How had they ended up here, and what had they endured to stay alive in this harsh environment? I can't imagine the struggles they have faced, it is unfathomable to me that people have been forced to live this way

The heavy scent of despair saturates the air, wrapping us in a suffocating embrace as Zayn and I cautiously enter the rogue commune. My heart constricts painfully at the sight of dilapidated tents and ramshackle shelters, hastily assembled with desperation etched into every cobbled-together area. My green eyes are wide with a mixture of horror and empathy sweep over the faces of those surrounding us- emaciated figures, their gaze hollow and haunted, mere shadows of wolves clinging to threadbare hope

Silenced by the overwhelming scene before us, words evade me as I take in the dire living conditions. The ground beneath our feet yields uneasily, almost akin to swampland, a stark contrast to the city just within reach. The abrupt realization that while we live luxuriously in warmth and comfort, this makeshift community operates with nothing and forced on the fringes of society shakes me to my core. The very earth seems to cry out in silent protest against such injustice

"Zayn," I murmur, my voice trembling with raw emotion. Zayn's bewildered gaze meets mine, joined by Vance and his men, all struck speechless by the stark variance laid bare

before them. Despite being in close proximity to the bustling city, here lies a forgotten families living off scraps of what our city discards. Our own

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kind turns a blind eye to their plight, condemning them to endure inhumane conditions exposed to the elements while trying to care for children

Amidst this desolation, children flit about with carefree abandon, their laughter piercing through the veil of suffering like fragile rays of sunlight through storm clouds. Their innocence is untouched by the harsh reality that envelopes them the legacy of neglect passed down through generations within my mother's old pack making me realize these kids don't know any different to how they live now, it saddens me

Blake waves us forward, urging us towards the center where a group of women are cleaning fish that have been caught. There are hardly any men in sight, but those who remain immediately stand as we approach. Zayn raises his hands in a

placating gesture, as if he wants to convey to the men that he means no one here any harm

Blake rushes ahead, eager to explain why we are there. The men who linger are cautious, aware that they cannot very well stop Zayn's men when the few men we have brought with us already outnumber what's left of the men here. "Zayn, they're not a threat," I whisper, and he nods slowly, understanding my concern

"I know," Zayn replies, motioning for his men to stand down and come over. Vance is the first to join him, but he has the same horrified expression that I do, as muddy children rush around. "They're barely surviving," I whisper, my heart aching at the sight of the desperate people

Zayn's jaw clenches, and the silver of his eyes darkens to a stormy hue as he surveys the place

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"This shouldn't exist," he growls, the Alpha power in his voice making the air vibrate around us. I'm sickened that my father would cast out so many, knowing the dangers of rogues actual rogues and if all these people hadn't stuck together when they did, they'd probably be just as crazed as the rest of the rogues. They've somehow formed a pack of the packless

We continue to observe the scene. The desperation they feel is palpable, and it's clear that they have banded together to survive in a world where many struggle to do so. The image of the women cleaning fish, the children rushing around, and the men standing guard is one I won't soon forget. It serves as a stark reminder of the harsh circumstances faced by those who have been abandoned by their own kind. At the same time, it hit me harder that my father declared me a rogue, and didn't care if this was the sort of life I lived. If it weren't for Zayn, I could very well be in their place

We can't turn our backs on them now, but the challenge of helping them reintegrate into society while ensuring they don't become a danger to others will be a difficult one while they adjust