Chapter One

*Acrid smoke laden with the scent of scorched flesh and earth surrounded the frightened teen, filling her lungs with each shuddering breath. She pressed her back even further against the crumbling outer wall of the smoldering house, jamming her body into the partially concealed space between the storage shed and the side of the garage. Her trembling fist knotted around the handle of a rusted hand trowel she’d found discarded and forgotten near the bush behind which she’d taken cover. She clutched the makeshift weapon to her chest as she scanned the darkness of her family’s backyard, straining to hear any sign of movement beyond the tenuous safety of her hiding place.*

*Inhuman shrieks punctured the inky atmosphere throughout the small, sprawling neighborhood, each shrill scream like an ice pick plunged into the once peaceful setting. Shattering glass and pain-filled wails assaulted her from every direction as she crouched behind the foliage, desperate for someone—anyone—to find her, to rescue her, to drive the monsters away.*

*Suddenly, a flurry of heavy footsteps fell across the patio, thundering closer to where she hid. She gripped tighter to the rough handle, raising the small tool like a dagger and preparing to defend herself at all costs. Her cerulean eyes widened, leg muscles tensed, and pulse thrummed erratically in preparation for whatever was to come.*

*A pair of familiar, well-worn work boots sprinted into sight beneath the tangle of leaves and branches that obscured her from sight. “Dad!” The single word burst from her lips as she scrambled forward, the sight of her father pulling her through the foliage toward him.*

*He jerked in her direction, a panicked expression marring his handsome features. “Rayne, no!” He pressed his palm towards her as if willing her back into the shadowy crevice. She shrank backward, the branches tearing at her pajamas as she stumbled and fell. The guttural shriek shattered the night surrounding her as she thudded to the ground and stared in horror at the creature that leapt into sight, its emaciated hand clenching around her father’s throat. Blood spurted from where its talon-like fingers dug into his neck, transforming his painful scream into a strangled gurgle as flesh ripped and gore filled his ruined windpipe.*

*Rayne squeezed her eyes shut reflexively, her jaw clenching in revulsion as she heard the heavy thud she knew instinctively to be her father’s fading form spilling to the ground a few feet from where she had fallen. She pedaled her feet against the soft earth, propelling herself backward, away from the impending danger that hovered over her dying father, that crept forward like an emboldened predator closing in on its prey, that crooned in anticipation of its next kill.*

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Rayne Foster’s eyes snapped open, the visceral dream dying to the darkness of her bedroom. Her whitened knuckles fisted the folds of her soft, hand-knitted blanket and the sweat-soaked sheets that clung to her body, knotting around her limbs as a tangled testimony to the intensity of her overnight battle. Slowly she peeled her fingers away from her bedding, her breathing slowed and her eyes focused, settling on the digital display blazing from her alarm clock. 4:47 a.m. She groaned. It was too early to begin preparing for her morning training session, but too late to attempt to salvage any sleep without suffering from grogginess and brain fog. And considering that she had drawn Lena Greywolf, the pack’s Alpha, as her sparring partner for today, she couldn’t afford to build in any disadvantages; she would need every wit she had, every edge she could muster.

She groaned, disentangling herself from the damp bedding and swinging her legs over the side of her bed. *Hit the shower,* she ordered herself, shaking her head as if to cast off the last remnants of sleepiness.

Within moments, she shoved her face beneath the lukewarm spray from the shower nozzle, allowing the water to soothe away the haunting vestiges of the disturbing dream, her frayed nerves and muscle tension seeming to float away down the drain. She carefully soaped her bright red curls with peppermint and sage scented shampoo, relishing the invigorating tingle of the herbs against her scalp. She scrubbed and soaked, increasing the water temperature until steam clouded around her and her pale skin reddened beneath the steady stream. As she rinsed her body, she crossed her arms over her ample breasts, hugging herself as her father’s face floated back to her from her dream, his sightless blue eyes so like her own, but their light had been snuffed out, the mischievous sparkle she had always adored now long gone. Tears mingled with the shower water, now beginning to cool, signaling that her hot water supply was quickly waning.

She stepped out of the shower stall, wrapping a coarse body towel tightly around herself as she crossed the steamy room to the wall mirror. She wiped at the steam that distorted its cracked surface, appraising the reflection that stared back at her. Her teenager self in her dream had strongly resembled her mother; but the adult version of her face had lost its softness, and besides her high cheekbones and delicate jawline, she now looked more like her father. She had his full lips, his slightly upturned nose with a light sprinkling of freckles just across the bridge and, most notably, the deep cerulean blue flecked with silvery gray of his eyes. Yet, unlike how his eyes had seemed to dance with merriment just as hers once had, her stare now had a hardness cultivated from loss, haunted by fears and weighed heavy with the burdens of surviving the biochemical war that began her long journey to her new home within the Shasta County Packlands. She ran an errant hand through her sopping curls, attempting to smooth them away from her face and soothe away the ache in her chest.

“Damn dreams,” she muttered to herself. She set her jaw, turned on the faucet and continued to ready herself for her morning training sessions, using her routines to push away her past.

She dressed in loose clothing and a pair of tennis shoes that were about a half size too large for her feet. Like all her possessions, the clothing had been pilfered on a supply gathering trip into Redding, one of the many local ruined cities. Her best friend, Quinn Ashford, had been the one to actually find the pair of shoes in the skeletal structure of a half-destroyed home, but the shoes had been a better fit for Rayne. She tightened the frayed laces with a double knot, trying to be careful since the laces looked like they could snap in half at any moment. She frowned at them thoughtfully, making a mental note to keep an eye out for new laces—or at least some that were in better condition—during her next journey with Quinn.

While their excursions to the remnants of the cities helped both Rayne’s community of shifter wolves and Quinn’s small settlement of human survivors, the journeys were bittersweet reminders of the pre-wartime civilization that had been decimated by the powerful elite society in 2043. The three years since then had felt like several lifetimes with all the struggles to survive, the startling revelations regarding the existence of paranormal beings, and the constant worry that the threat of the war waged by the social elites wasn’t quite over yet.

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Rayne's muscles screamed with exertion as she ducked and pivoted, narrowly avoiding the simulated lethal blow that grazed her abdomen. Sweat trickled down her brow, stinging her cerulean eyes as she focused on Lena Greywolf’s lithe form to determine her sparring partner’s next move. Weaving around another volley of fists and feet, Rayne pirouetted and swung her knuckles toward Lena’s jawline. Without missing a beat, Lena sidestepped Rayne’s counterattack. The muffled sound of their footfalls on the packed earth of the forest floor was the only noise that punctuated the early morning stillness, a rhythmic testament to the intensity of their sparring.

"Come on, Rayne!" Lena's growl reverberated with both a taunt and a cheer. She pursed her lips to tamp down her mischievous grin. "Is that *really* the best you've got?" Lena’s amber eyes sparkled with merriment, relishing both the verbal jab and the physical combat with equal fervor. She flipped her outstretched fist over, opened her hand and flexed her fingers as if to say *bring it on.*

With a feral grin, Rayne lunged forward, using her momentum to roll beneath Lena's guard and spring up behind her, crouching in an aggressive three-point stance. It was a bold move, one that shifted the dynamics of the mock battle in Rayne’s favor.

Lena spun defensively, her cocky smile broadening in acknowledgement of the brazen tactic, even as she countered with a swift elbow jab that Rayne easily deflected. She chuckled as her spin brought her nose within an inch of Rayne’s next punch.

"Nice try," Rayne panted, her fiery red hair clinging to her face like the tendrils of an untamed flame, “but I'm just warming up."

Around them, the forest seemed reluctant to exhale, the usual cacophony of wildlife momentarily hushed in the presence of such a raw display of power. The other shifters watched intently from the shadows of the trees, their sentient forms motionless, but their expressions reflecting pride and familial affection.

Killion, a hawk-eyed scout with feathers threaded through his hair, nodded enthusiastically in approval. His sharp gaze considered Rayne's progress appreciatively. Beside him stood Lexi and Sol, their impish twinned features betraying their conspiratorial whispers as they bet on whether or not Rayne would land the next strike. Their mirror images of moonlit silver and sun-kissed gold shifted excitedly from foot to foot. Even stoic Bear, whose immense size and grizzled demeanor belied his gentle nature, barked out a laugh when Rayne executed a particularly daring follow-up maneuver.

The bond that united them was palpable, a tapestry woven from shared struggles, triumphs and the inherent trust that is cultivated in a close-knit community. They were more than a pack; they were a family that had embraced Rayne as one of their own, recognizing the strength of her spirit and her unwavering loyalty to her adopted family.

"Enough!" Lena called out, ending the session with a raised hand. Her dark hair, usually braided tightly for sparring matches, now had loose tendrils that spilled around her shoulders. She smoothed some of the errant locks back from her face as she appraised Rayne with a mixture of satisfaction and anticipation. "You've come far, Rayne. Your instincts are sharp, your reactions, quick. Soon there will be few threats you can't face head-on."

"Thanks, Lena," Rayne rasped between the heavy gusts of her breath. She wiped the sweat from her brow and met the gazes of her packmates, feeling their silent support wash over her. Her light skin seemed to tingle with heat even as a cool breeze kicked up, bringing the crisp scent of pine needles and pitch to replace the heavy musk and perspiration in the air. Her full lips curled into a satisfied smile; the warmth she had felt radiating from her skin a moment ago seemed to slowly sink, receding to the depths of her chest.

"Anytime, kiddo," Lena replied as she strode to Rayne’s side. She draped an arm over Rayne’s shoulders in a rare public display of softness. Leaning closer, her voice dropped to a conspiratorial pitch, "Now, let's go join the others for breakfast. I believe Sol owes Lexi a week's worth of hunting duties, thanks to your little acrobatic stunt."

Laughter rippled through the pack as they emerged from the trees, teasing banter filling the air. Rayne walked shoulder to shoulder with Lena, while the twins playfully wove around the women’s strides. Killion and Bear followed closely behind, shaking their heads at the children’s effort to mimic the training session and chuckling softly when Liza and Sol tripped over each other, tumbling into a giggling heap. The group followed a winding, well-worn trail of packed dirt, fallen pine boughs, oak leaves and acorns to a broad clearing filled with small cabins.

At the sight of the eclectic group of cabins surrounding a lush community garden, Rayne’s physical exhaustion seemed to melt away. Even as their group emerged from the dense woods surrounding the pack’s encampment, she could see other packmates bustling around the outdoor kitchen, chatting merrily at the picnic tables, or bringing trays laden with fresh breakfast offerings from the prep areas within the large wooden gazebo. The smell of bacon and freshly prepared omelets wafted across the commons. Rayne’s stomach gurgled in response. She turned and caught Lena’s eye; a wordless challenge passed between mentor and pupil in that moment and in the next, both women sprinted forward toward the delicious meal waiting for them.

She was greeted warmly by the rest of the pack as she slid into a seat at one of the picnic tables, flanked by the twins. Rayne inhaled appreciatively, thanking the shifters assigned to kitchen duty before bowing her head in prayer. *Thank you, Lord, for providing me such a wonderful, supportive home when mine was destroyed. Please watch over my beloved pack and bless them beyond measure for their kindness to an orphan. Amen.*

Rayne chewed thoughtfully, reflecting on that single word that had come to mean everything to her: *home.* After the war had unceremoniously claimed her parents and little brother, she had spent what seemed like an eternity moving constantly, lost to any normalcy and having to hide from Shades, a group of humans that survived the war, but became mindlessly corrupted specters of themselves.

As if invoked by the mere memory of the Shades, an inhumanly shrill screech sliced through the peace of the morning, reverberating through the hills surrounding the pack’s encampment. Rayne froze, her muscles tensed automatically, ready to defend and fight if necessary to protect her pack.

Her fork hovered above her plate, the temporarily forgotten piece of her omelet quivering atop the tines. She could tell that the frightful sounds came from a distance, but she was shaken to her core, nonetheless. *It’s just an echo. They’re far away. I’m safe; I’m home.*

A small, gentle hand covered Rayne’s wrist, guiding her fork down to the safety of her plate. Rayne glanced to her right, locking eyes with the silver haired child. Lexi’s lower lip quivered; her storm gray eyes flung wider than usual. Rayne dropped her fork on her plate and curled her arm around the frightened girl shifter, rubbing the child’s bicep reassuringly. Her grip on Lexi was firm but gentle, her touch radiating a calming warmth as she traced soothing patterns along the child’s arm. She repeated her mantra aloud in a slow, steady voice, “It’s just an echo, they’re far away, Lexi. We’re safe.”

Lexi nodded her wordless response, burying her face in Rayne’s shoulder. “We’re safe, Lexi. We’re home.” Rayne glanced around the surrounding picnic tables, noting the concern and quiet alertness of the pack. Many of the shifters sniffed at the air or squinted into the distance, scanning for any sign of impending danger. Another volley of high-pitched screams resounded, only this time the cacophony came from even farther away.

“It’s alright everyone,” Lena’s commanding voice intoned. “We aren’t having any uninvited guests this morning.”

The pack remained in an uneasy silence, but most resumed their breakfast at their Alpha’s reassurance. Lena’s gaze swept over her brooding pack, then settled on Rayne, still clutching Lexi to her side. Her mouth quirked into a wry smile. “Besides, if any Shades are dumb enough to breach our pack lands, Rayne will etch a lasting mark on their memories, and probably their backsides.” She winked.

Rayne’s head jerked up in response just as Killion, Bear and several others barked out laughs. “No joke,” Killion heartily agreed. “I’ve never seen a human with such mad fighting skills.”

Bear nodded along, “Yeah, I’d almost feel sorry for any intruders. *Almost*.” He drew out the last word dramatically, adding a snicker at the end.

Murmurs of approval and agreement floated around the picnic tables and everyone visually relaxed. Rayne’s cheeks flushed with pride as she returned Lena’s amber stare. Whether it was a stirring speech to motivate her pack, soothing words to calm and comfort those in need, publicly recognizing the accomplishments of pack members, a much-needed tension breaker or, as in this case, a mixture of all of these tactics, Lena expertly guided her community with wisdom tempered by strength and love. Rayne couldn’t help but admire her Alpha and adopted pack mother.

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Rayne's breaths came in short, controlled bursts as she sprinted to catch up with Lena on the pathway that wound through the heart of their encampment and toward the hiking trail. “Hey, Lena. Wait up,” she called out.

Lena paused and turned, gesturing for Rayne to join her. They strode in companionable silence for several yards before Lena spoke up. “You know, Rayne, what I said over breakfast wasn’t mere flattery or shallow praise; I really meant what I said. I’m truly impressed by your combat skills. You’ve really grown.”

“That means a lot coming from you,” Rayne responded. “You’re a *really* tough opponent,” she added.

“Progression can only occur when a challenger accepts the call to aim higher,” Lena mused.

As they got farther away from camp, the scents of pine and damp earth mingled with the smoky traces of the outdoor kitchen’s fire; blue jays rustled in shrubs and low tree branches that peppered the margins of the worn trail. With the sound of the Shades still echoing around her mind, and even older memories that she had fought to suppress for so long bubbling to the surface, Rayne stayed silent, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. She’d hardly noticed that they were fast approaching the edge of the encampment before they came upon the reinforced walls that marked the boundary of their inner sanctum.  
  
“Rayne, is something on your mind?” Lena asked.

Rayne had been so lost in thought that she hadn’t noticed Lena’s measured scrutiny. She sighed, knowing she had so many questions, but also that most of them probably didn’t have a concrete answer. She puffed out her cheeks and swallowed hard. "Tell me," Rayne began, her cool blue gaze following the perimeter where sentries patrolled both sides of the sturdy walls, moving like silent shadows, "how do you manage to keep us all safe in this mess of a world?"

Lena surveyed their surroundings, eyes sharp as obsidian daggers. "Well, it comes from understanding the role of a true leader. It's not about controlling everything that comes our way. The world out there," she gestured to the forest that stretched beyond their borders, "is full of horrors that would tear us apart if given half a chance. It seems like this war brought out the worst in some groups, and those are driven by a desire to control. To dominate. That’s not true strength or leadership.”

Lena paused as the terrain began to become more rugged at the base of the hill they were quickly approaching. The familiar scent of fresh grass and blooming flowers drifted on the crisp breeze from the peak of the incline; it was invigorating, like a promise of a peaceful view of an unbroken midmorning skyline. She inhaled sharply, her pace quickening; Rayne picked up her stride as well, both women magnetically drawn to the source of the soothing scents.

After taking a moment to adjust to the new level of exertion, Lena continued. “It’s my belief that leaders that want to effectively protect their people will do all they can to empower them and foster a strong sense of community. By cultivating each person’s inherent talents and encouraging growth, our support structure gets stronger overall.”

“But the times we live in are so extreme, Lena. There’s danger lurking everywhere,” Rayne blurted, her voice intoning the swell of anxiety she had been choking back ever since breakfast. “The whole world upended three years ago and…”

“And it’s been a lot to take in, I’m sure,” Lena interjected. “Particularly for you and most of your kind. After all, every shifter pack, vampire coven and all the other paranormal sects disappeared from human history just after the First Sundering, taking all of our lore and the world’s history along with us into hiding. We only existed in books based on a few accounts written by those who had an encounter with any of the paranormals. And even those were mostly brushed off as works of fiction.”

Rayne snorted in spite of herself. “Yeah, three years ago, I’d have laughed off any claims about shifters, vampires, angels and demons being real,” she chuckled, shaking her head and causing her bright curls to dance around her delicate features. “There are times that it still feels unreal, like I’m going to wake up any moment, or someone will suddenly appear saying, ‘Surprise, Rayne, you’ve been pranked on a global scale.’”

Both women laughed heartily as they crested the hill and came to a stop beside a battered wrought iron bench surrounded by wildflowers; Lena dabbed at her eyes, still giggling while Rayne sobered, a smile still tugging the corners of her lips upward. The levity seemed to loosen the ball of anxiety she had been harboring in her chest, easing the tensions she had felt since waking that morning. She stretched a long, muscular leg out, resting her foot on the bench and leaning forward to rub the lactic acid out of her aching quadriceps.

“Yeah, you’re taking everything well,” Lena quipped. “Kinda makes me wonder how you’re going to handle the latest rumors that have reached my ears.”

Rayne’s smile dimmed. She straightened; her eyes trained on Lena. “Only one way to find out," she offered, her tone laced with wariness.

“Killion mentioned running into a few shifters from another pack last night while on patrol,” Lena began. “They told him that some of the human survivors they had encountered claimed to have developed some sort of powers since the bio-war.”

“Wh-what?” Rayne’s jaw gaped open. She inhaled sharply, the air hissing between her teeth. “You’re kidding, right?”

Lena appraised Rayne for a moment, her voice softening. “Look, I don’t know how much of this rumor is accurate, nor do I pretend to understand what possible side effects those chemicals could have had. So little is known for sure; we know that there was a highly coordinated global attack using bombs with a biochemical agent unlike anything seen before. We know that the only group that could afford to develop and manufacture bombs were the most affluential humans. Anyone within the blast radius was killed instantly; and while paranormals weren’t affected by the chemical fallout, the majority of the human survivors started getting very sick with an unknown and incurable illness.”

“I heard a lot of them died within the first week,” Rayne said quietly. “The lady that lived next door to my family worked at the hospital; she had started getting symptoms, but still had to work since every hospital was swamped with patients. I remember she was talking to my mom one night, worried that she would suffer like her patients. From what she said, it was like they had ingested a slow acting acid that rotted them from the inside, out. Gave me nightmares just thinking about it.” Rayne shuddered.

“And the ones that didn’t succumb were transformed into Shades,” Lena added. “Biochemically altered, both physically and mentally. There’s no way to know if that was the intended effect.”

Rayne sucked in a deep breath. “I saw some of the news reports before the internet and cell lines went down about the most powerful and influential people disappearing.” She pursed her lips, a stony expression clouding her gentle features. “It’s still so hard to believe that my own kind could do something like this to anyone they thought were beneath their station. We never saw it coming.”

The air coagulated around them both, the heavy fragrance of the wildflowers and pine pitch were no longer the soothing ambiance they had been just moments before. Overhead, the sun’s rays intensified as the last of the morning’s cloud cover burned away, leaving behind only humid reminders of the intermittent shade. Lena had taken a seat on the worn bench as Rayne spoke. “I don’t put much stock in these latest rumors, kiddo. I only mention it because you almost bested me in training today and I guess my ego wanted to believe that maybe you had some of these superpowers.”  
  
Rayne sat down next to Lena, shaking her head. “Nah, more like super-training, Lena. You and all my packmates have helped me so much.” She smiled at her adopted mom for a minute before adding, “I will be sure to let you know if I learn to levitate or shoot laser beams though.”

“As long as you don’t start telling me that it’s just me getting too old to take on young pups like yourself, we’re good,” she laughed. They both sat giggling together, enjoying what was left of the morning.

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Quinn’s shaggy, wheat-colored hair stuck up at odd angles, looking more disheveled than usual. “Let me get this straight,” he said as he poked his walking stick into a heaped pile of scorched clothing he’d been examining. “Lena said we may have latent powers that we’ve never heard of, and these powers are some sort of side effect of the chemicals used in the bio-war?” His green eyes sparkled mischievously.

Rayne snickered. “No, she never said *that*. Sheesh! She mentioned a rumor and we got a good giggle out of it, so of course I shared it with you. So don’t go around bragging that Lena or I said you’re going to morph into some sort of Superman at any moment.” She pressed her hands against the door of the only structurally intact room of the shambled house they had begun exploring. She grunted; the door wouldn’t budge. “Ugh. Can you come help me with this door? I think there’s gotta be some debris on the other side that’s keeping it from opening.”

“Ah, see? You’re already calling on my super-strength.” Quinn laughed as he abandoned the pile of ruined clothing and sidled up beside her with an overly dramatic wink.

Rayne shook her head, giggling. “You know you’re impossible sometimes, right?”

“Of course I do, it’s part of my charm.”

“So *you* say,” she retorted. “Okay, Clark Kent, push.”

The stubborn door inched inward, but only enough to allow a sliver of light to invade the darkened room beyond. They both stepped back, peering into the crack. Rayne pointed to the heavy piece of furniture that was lodged on the other side of the door. “Barricade.” They exchanged glances, both understanding the significance; someone had pushed it into position. Someone who had never emerged from that room.

“Should we skip it?” Quinn asked, his gray eyes clouding with concern. He knew about Rayne’s family, how she had lost her parents and a younger brother on the night she escaped from the Shades.

“I’ll be alright,” Rayne assured him. An untouched room was a rare find, and she knew that even with his thoughtful gesture, Quinn was itching to know what it contained. “Wanna do the honors?” She swept both arms toward the door, bowing slightly at the waist as if to usher him forward.

Without hesitation, Quinn issued a lightning-quick snap kick into the door. The scorched wood cracked at the hinges and the breach widened. Another kick and the barricade fully gave way. Musty air laced with dust greeted them as they scanned the dimly lit interior.

Hastily nailed boards crossed over the windows, allowing thin streams of sunlight to pierce the silent space. A dilapidated crib stood in the farthest corner, a tiny bundle swaddled in a pink blanket visible between the slats; the skeletal remains of two adults and a small child huddled together next to the crib. The largest skeleton still clutched a shotgun that lay across its lap. Shells littered the floor, and a hastily opened box still containing more ammunition was close by.

Rayne shuddered at the sight, quickly averting her eyes from the baby furniture, the once merry mobile dangling from the ceiling, and the family’s remains. She made her way to the opposite side of the room, noting the items that were probably brought inside from elsewhere in the home. Canned goods from a raided pantry. Empty bottles of water. Rumpled linens and pillows, undoubtedly torn hastily from their beds. “They must have thought they could wait out the Shades,” she said reverently.

“Do you think they died from injuries?” Quinn asked. He gently removed the shotgun from the skeleton before him and began gathering up the scattered shells as he spoke.

“No,” Rayne replied, her voice just above a somber whisper. “Dehydration. All of the water they brought in was used up.” Gooseflesh rippled across her arms at the revelation. *They suffered. Good Lord in Heaven.* She grimaced at the plastic water bottles piled in the corner of the room. “Hey, Quinn,” she said, her voice trembling. “I was wrong when I said I could handle this. I’m gonna head outside for some fresh air, if that’s alright with you?”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” he stammered, his voice thick. “I’ll join you in just a minute.”

Once outside, Rayne took a deep, shuddering breath; it was a poor attempt to quiet her nerves and banish the images emblazoned on her mind. She sat down on a pile of rubble, crossed her arms over her chest and rubbed her biceps briskly.

Quinn’s thick-soled boots crunched over the scattered debris behind her, his burdened steps drawing near where she perched. “Are you okay?”

“I will be,” Rayne replied. “I probably should have waited for you out here. Stood guard or something,” she muttered bitterly.

He crouched down next to her, his lean form folding over to brush her shoulder reassuringly. “You don’t have to be tough all the time, Rayne. Nobody’s going to think less of you for being human, you know.” He paused for a moment. When she didn’t respond, he continued, “Well, nobody except for me when I *do* become the next Superman,” he said, waggling his eyebrows as he set down the pilfered shotgun and a dusty bag laden with the ammunition beside her.

Rayne snickered despite herself and playfully slapped Quinn’s shoulder. “Leave it to you to make jokes.” She rolled her eyes.

“Always the critic,” he sighed, feigning disappointment. “All I have to say is that if these latent powers are real, they better come with the ability to fly. If not, then it’s no deal.”

Their laughter chased away any lingering thoughts of the room behind them and the hardships of survival in such uncertain times. Rayne shook her head, still smirking. “So, that would be your choice of new powers?”

“Sure,” Quinn quipped, “and maybe the ability to materialize anything I want. Like tacos. Or better yet, cheesecake. What would you choose?”

Rayne’s brow furrowed and she toyed with a lock of her hair, curling it around her forefinger. “Honestly? Time travel. I’d want to go back three years and put a stop to the whole war so I could save everyone I’ve ever loved.”