The last rays of the late afternoon sun bore down on Rayne as she and Quinn crested a large, almost barren hill where their paths would diverge; Rayne looked out upon the expanse of dense forest stretching from the bottom of the left side of the hill to her Packlands. Quinn’s family lived in a small, but thriving human settlement tucked into a clearing off to their right, just off the main trail they were currently travelling. She stopped for a moment, drinking in the magnificent sunset painting the sky in rich amber, molten gold, pale pink and a deepening purple signaling the oncoming night. “You know,” she began wistfully, “every time we reach this spot, I wonder what would have happened three years ago if I hadn’t found the deer path that leads to the Packlands from here.” She paused, inhaling deeply. “If I had stayed on the trail…”

“You would have found a home with all of us,” Quinn said warmly, adjusting his grip on the pilfered shotgun, its barrel now resting on the hollow between his neck and shoulder. “Everyone there loves you. My parents always ask why you don’t come live with us, you know.” He lightly tapped her with his elbow in a teasing gesture.

She sighed. “I know. And I’m sure my packmates would understand if I wanted to be with my own kind. But…” she trailed off, lost in the thought.

Quinn raked his fingers through his blond hair, making it even more unkept than usual. “But you found a different place where you belong and are loved,” he finished for her, his mischievous smile quirking his lips upward. “You know, I sometimes envy your place with them. It’s like having an even bigger family full of protective—and very strong—people to help you. And they are a lot more established than our settlement; being hidden from the human world had its advantages, I guess.” He squinted at the sky, studying the brilliant palette of colors emblazoned before him. “It’ll be dark soon,” he said thoughtfully, his brow furrowing.

“Yeah, we’d better get moving,” Rayne agreed. The thought of cutting through the forest at night by herself goaded her forward.

“Hang on a second,” Quinn said. He sidled up beside Rayne. “I already know you’re going to try to say no, but hear me out, okay? You still have a long hike left ahead of you. You’ll be lucky to make it back for dinner.”

Her stomach complained at the thought of food. “Yeah, we stayed out a lot longer than usual,” she agreed. “But what’s your point?”

“You could always come back with me,” he scrubbed the toe of his worn boot into the dirt. “It’s less than five minutes’ walk from here. And my parents would set you up for the night. You could bunk with Ariel; you know how much my little sister looks up to you. She’d love it. We all would,” he added.

“Yeah, I know,” she said, her tone already carrying the heaviness borne of having to turn down his invitation. “But Lena and the others would worry. The guilt would eat me alive the entire time,” she admitted.

Quinn cocked his head to one side. “I thought you’d say that. But they aren’t the only ones that worry about you,” he hinted. “So, I have a compromise. You take the shotgun and ammo so I can rest easy tonight.”

“Your find, your spoils,” Rayne quipped. “You know our rules.” She looked at him pointedly.

He gusted an exasperated sigh, pressing the gun into her hand. “Dear God in *heaven*, you’re so stubborn,” he blustered. “Just take it. *Please*?”

She rolled her eyes, tossing her blazing curls over her shoulder. “Fine. But just for tonight. I’ll be by to return it tomorrow after training.”

Quinn clapped his hands together, clearly pleased by her assent. “Bonus! Everyone will be so glad to see you. I can’t wait to tell them you’re coming by.”

“You make it sound like I never visit,” she quipped, mock hurt tinging her tone.

He laughed. “You do. But not often enough for my liking.”

She shook her head, a smile brightening her delicate features. “Hey, you won already. No need to keep digging at me.” She snorted, laugher welling up behind her pseudo-indignation. The golden tones began to melt out of the sky, replaced by a deep ruby hue as the sun dipped ever lower. “Let’s get a move on,” she said eyeing the skies above the forest warily. “As you said, I still have a hike ahead of me.”

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Rayne trudged down a barely noticeable deer path that led back to the shifter’s encampment, laden with the shotgun and bag of shells that Quinn had insisted she take with her. The dying sunlight filtered through the thick canopy of the surrounding trees, its soft rays mingling with the long shadows from gnarled branches reaching overhead. Her eyes darted back and forth along the winding dappled path, searching for signs of errant movements; her ears attuned for hidden dangers. While she knew she was less than a mile away from the edge of the shifter camp, she was hyperaware of how dangerous that stretch of forest could be for a lone traveler. It had been near this very path that Killion and a few of his scouts had found her three years earlier, attempting to fend off two Shades.

She had been a painfully thin 18-year-old girl back then, an emaciated scarecrow lacking any semblance of survival skills. The gauntness of her face and the hollows of her cheeks spoke to the weeks spent on the run, surviving on scarce scraps and raw nerves. Killion had come to her rescue twice that day; first, by killing the Shades, and then by taking pity on her and bringing her to Lena and the pack. They had tended her wounds with skilled hands, fed her nourishing foods and providing clean clothing for her frail form. As she recovered in their care, the pack had adopted the raggamuffin orphan as one of their own.

Much had changed since then. Rayne had trained hard to repay the love and kindness that had been bestowed upon her; she packed on lean muscle, honed by her strenuous workouts, regular hikes and daily sparring matches with various packmates. She had quickly learned basic survival skills, hunting and foraging, cultivation techniques and emergency medical response. But even now with how much she had grown and learned, she still felt like that barely 18-year-old version of herself anytime she used this deer path. She was hyperaware. Maybe it was the lingering memories this path held, or possibly her heightened senses that suddenly sent a chill up her spine; whatever caused the sensation, she had the intense feeling like she was being watched.

As silently as she could, Rayne dove behind a large shrub, praying she wouldn’t disturb any hidden wildlife or land on anything that would give away her position. She eyed the shotgun and bag of ammunition, cursing silently at not having loaded the weapon before now. Gripping the cold metal barrel to her chest, she forced her breathing into a steady, silent flow despite the fear squeezing her lungs.

The crack of a branch in the thick underbrush ahead jolted her nerves, confirming that she was not alone in this stretch of forest. Rayne slipped her right hand down the barrel of the shotgun to the trigger. *Better to bluff with a dangerous weapon than be ambushed and empty-handed,* she thought. She crouched, peering through the tangled branches in the direction of the sudden noise.

Furtive movement caught her eye; an obscured, tall figure loomed less than ten yards away. Sweat trickled down the back of Rayne’s neck as she levelled the shotgun at where a humanoid figure skulked from tree to tree, attempting to stay hidden while closing in on her position.

In a single graceful move, Rayne unfolded from behind the bush in a shooter’s stance, the butt of the shotgun resting against her shoulder, finger hovering above the trigger and the barrel pointed directly at the shadowed figure. “If you prefer your head in one piece, I suggest you don’t move any closer,” she barked, hoping her voice was steadier than her hands; she could feel the gun quiver in her unstable, sweat-slicked grip.

“Get down,” an unfamiliar male voice hissed. He spoke just loudly enough to carry across the distance stretching between them. “Quick, before they see you,” the stranger added.

Icy tendrils of fear shot through Rayne. *They.* A single word that held so many potentially monstrous meanings. She squatted low, shotgun still trained on the spot where the voice had emanated, her eyes darting between her quarry and the surrounding area.

A flurry of wings burst from a patch of trees in the distance, the disturbed birds squawking in annoyance as they fled; yet, neither she nor the strange man hunched behind a thick tree trunk had moved. Her eyes widened as her fist clenched even tighter to the useless weapon she trained in the direction where the birds had been.

Her breath caught in her windpipe as she began to hear the commotion that had set the birds to flight. Branches snapped. Voices droned across the distance, but they were still too far off to make out the conversation. Rayne cast a furtive glance behind her, hoping to find a better spot to take cover; she knew she was too exposed where she was. Thick oak trees formed a jagged line a few yards from where she hunched.

The stench of sulfur and rotten meat carried on the breeze, and she turned back in the direction of its source. *Demons. Terrific,* Rayne thought sardonically. She squinted, trying to judge just how far away the danger lurked.

*God, if you’re listening, please help,* she prayed silently. Her eyes began to water as the nauseating smell drew closer, cloistering the air. *It’s now or never,* she thought, clenching her teeth.

Before Rayne could move, a strong hand clasped over her mouth, squelching her reflexive yelp. Warm lips brushed her ear. “Shhh. Don’t move. I’ll keep you safe.” Her muscles tensed against the arm that snaked around her waist, holding her firmly in place. “They won’t see us, I promise.”

Her mind raced, shock and fear muddling her thoughts. *The stranger. But how…*

The question died as movement caught her attention. She could just make out several gnarled figures moving closer through the tree line ahead. Panic sunk into her belly like a heavy stone dropped into a watery chasm.

“Over there,” a gravelly voice exclaimed, “I think I see a path up ahead.”

Heavy footfalls resounded with a quickened pace, each one sending a shockwave of alarm through her nerves. Impending danger closed in from thirty yards away. Twenty. Now ten.

Reflexively, Rayne pushed backward into the broad chest pressing against her spine and squeezed her eyes shut. “It’s okay, we’re safe,” the stranger’s whispered reassurance was barely audible. The air seemed to warm and thicken around them, dampening the sound of the approaching band of demons. A new, spicy scent wove through the foul stench of brimstone, pushing the noxious odor away. Rayne inhaled, completely perplexed.

*Cinnamon? What the…*

“This way,” a muffled, but no less gritty voice commanded. “The encampment should be close by.” It was as though the words had reached her through water; muted, but still clear enough to send a renewed wave of panic through her body that overrode any logic or sense of self-preservation.

*Oh, God, they’re heading to my home.* Rayne’s eyes flew open, and she wrestled against the stranger’s hold on her. *I’ve got to warn them, to warn Lena.*

*“*Stop, *please*” the stranger murmured imploringly. “I can’t hold the shield if you struggle. They’re still too close.”

Tears borne of frustration, fear and anger welled up in her eyes; her vision distorted, the images of dense underbrush and the mud-caked boots shuffling beyond them swirling together, drowning in the shimmering pools that threatened to spill down her cheeks at any moment. *He’s right,* she realized bitterly. Resignation set in; if she broke away now, she’d only wind-up dead. Or worse, captured. She sagged against her captor, her emotions seeming to weigh upon her limbs.

“Thanks,” the stranger whispered. The hand that covered Rayne’s mouth slowly fell away, and his grip loosened on her midriff. The scent of cinnamon intensified, pouring over her as the air became even more dense. Her head bowed as the tears flowed.

She could barely hear the pounding, rapid pace of the demons retreating down the deer path, the footfalls dampened presumably by the shield her captor spoke of; could feel the ground reverberate with each demonic stride leading away from their hiding place. What must have been only a handful of seconds seemed to stretch for hours as she waited, her worry swelling each moment into an eternity.

The commotion dissolved; the forest stilled once again. “I think they’re far enough away,” the stranger spoke quietly. He straightened and took a few steps backward. “You should be safe now.” The atmospheric pressure that had hovered around them moments before now faded, the scent of cinnamon, all but gone.

Rayne turned, drawing herself up to her full height, levelling the business side of her shotgun at the stranger’s broad chest. “What in the…” she began but stopped midsentence. The man that stood before her looked like a thunderstorm personified; his steel gray gaze was heavy and intense, set in extraordinarily handsome, chiseled features and framed by dark, tousled hair that drifted on the whims of the breeze. His deeply bronzed face was clouded with a guarded expression, not unfriendly, but not exactly welcoming either. Something about him seemed otherworldly to Rayne, although she couldn’t put her finger on why. “It was *you* in the forest, wasn’t it?” she managed to splutter, her eyes narrowing with the accusation. “Did *you* lead those demons here?”

The man held up his hands in front of him, his expression softening. “No, of course not. I’ve been tracking that demon horde, yes. But leading them, not a chance.” His nose wrinkled almost imperceptibly.

She scrutinized him for a moment and found no signs of deceit or dishonesty. She let the gun drop to her side, barrel tipped toward the ground. “Fine,” she spat, brushing a tear from her cheek with the back of her free hand. “I believe you. I gotta go warn my pack.” Rayne bent down to grab the bag full of pilfered treasures.

“*Pack*?” The stranger seemed genuinely baffled. “But you’re a *human*,” he said incredulously.

She froze, her mind racing. “And you’re…not. Are you?” That otherworldly quality she had sensed came into focus. *He’s definitely not a shifter or a Shade. Too tan to be a vamp. Obviously has an issue with demons. That left only leaves…*

“I’m no threat to you,” his deep voice cut across her thoughts. “But it would be better if you just forget you ever saw me.”

“You’re an angel, aren’t you?” She phrased it as a question, but her tone belied the statement.

The stranger hesitated. “Of sorts. It’s… complicated.”

“Will you come with me to warn the pack? Maybe you could help…”

“Those demons aren’t headed toward the Packlands,” the stranger interjected. “They’ve been hunting humans.”

Rayne could almost feel the color drain from her, as though his words had been a glass of ice water poured over her head, sapping each nerve as it trickled ever downward. A face swam to the front of her mind, complete with his mischievous green eyes and echoing laughter from less than an hour earlier. *Quinn.*