Dread coiled in her gut; Rayne clenched her fists, momentarily torn between warning her pack and trying to save her best friend. The stranger's words echoed in her mind, chilling her to the core. Humans were being hunted, and Quinn was out there alone and unaware, heading back to the very settlement that would soon be under siege. Without a second thought, she slung the heavy bag over her shoulder and began to sprint in the direction the demons had gone.

To her surprise, the stranger followed close behind, his steps incrediblysilent despite the strenuous pace. “Hey, the Packlands are back *that* way.”

“I know,” she tossed over her shoulder without breaking her stride.

“Um, I’m pretty sure I just told you that the demons are heading to the human settlement. The one in *this* direction.” His fingers encircled her wrist with a gentle tug.

Rayne skidded to a halt and spun around. “And I’m pretty sure that my *best friend*, another human, was headed back there too since that settlement is his *home*,” she spat, eyes blazing with unmasked anger. Her voice was low but resolute as she met the stranger's silvery gaze. "I have to find Quinn."

Without waiting for a response, Rayne turned away from the stranger, effortlessly breaking his hold on her wrist and sprinted deeper into the forest, her heart thrumming with a mix of fear and determination. The dense undergrowth whipped against her legs as she pushed herself to move faster, the urgency of the situation lending strength to her limbs.

Behind her, the stranger’s fluid movements allowed him to keep pace with her effortlessly. As they rapidly approached the main trail, Rayne couldn't shake the feeling that there was more to this mysterious being and his presence here than met the eye. She stole a glance at him over her shoulder, taking in his tall, strapping frame and the unsettling quality of his stormy eyes. Despite her wariness, she couldn't deny the sense of reassurance his hulking presence brought. After all, it had been nerve-shattering to charge toward impending danger alone.

The sounds of chaos grew louder as they reached the main trail. The acrid scent of sulfur tainted the air, mingling with a pungent ribbon of dark smoke that was growing ever wider at an alarming rate. Flames licked at the tops of trees, the hungry orange and scarlet tongues lapping at the foliage. Rayne's heart clenched at the sight of the fire, her worst fears manifesting before her eyes. She pushed herself to run faster until her muscles burned, fueled by a heated surge of energy coursing through her veins and her desperation to save Quinn.

The stranger matched her pace with ease. His expression was unreadable, but his determination to aid her was evident in the way he kept stride with Rayne, his movements almost ethereal against the backdrop of destruction.

As they drew closer to the human settlement, the scene unfolded before them as one of devastation and horror. Buildings lay in ruins around the small community, their charred remains smoldering in the aftermath of the attack. The air was thick with the stench of burning wood and the metallic tang of blood.

Rayne scanned the chaos, searching desperately for any sign of Quinn. Panic skewered her insides as she realized the enormity of the situation. Humans were scattered and fleeing, trying to escape the onslaught of demons that ravaged their small makeshift homes. Without hesitation Rayne plunged forward, winding her way through debris-strewn pathways along a shortcut that would lead them directly to where Quinn’s family lived.

She rounded a blind corner and ran headfirst into a demon; its grotesque, twisted form loomed before her with rotten teeth and fiendish light glowing behind its eyes. Its putrid breath washed over Rayne as she stumbled back, found her footing and raised the butt of the shotgun, poised to strike.

Before she could attack, the demon lunged toward her with unnatural speed, its claws slashing the shotgun from her grip. It clattered to the ground just as the fiend swung its arm forward again, claws aimed directly at Rayne’s jugular vein. She ducked and rolled to the side, narrowly avoiding the deadly strike.

The stranger leaped forward with a grace that belied his otherworldly nature, his movements a blur of fluid agility. In a whirlwind of motion, he crossed the distance between them and intercepted the demon's attack, his hands moving in intricate patterns that seemed to weave threads of light and energy. The creature recoiled, hissing as it tripped over the fallen shotgun and slammed backward into the ground, a reeking pile of brittle wings and leathery, darkened flesh.

A shockwave of power emanated from the stranger's hands, and the demon erupted in a bright flare of light with a deafening roar of agony. Rayne watched in awe as the monster writhed on the ground, its twisted form contorting in pain under the onslaught of whatever unearthly force the stranger had unleashed upon it.

From beyond the curtain of smoke and ash, two more demons emerged, one dragging a badly injured and unconscious human female unceremoniously by her foot. Rayne gasped. Even with the deep gashes marring the woman’s face, she recognized Quinn’s mother instantly. Rage coursed through her, turning her veins to molten lava as a guttural roar escaped her lips. Her hand instinctively found the hilt of her knife; she drew it as she plunged toward the demon holding Quinn’s mom. Her ferocity seemed to startle the beast; it dropped its quarry and tried to scuttle backward just as Rayne closed in and plunged her dagger deep into the monstrosity’s throat. She landed an adrenaline-fueled snap-kick into the creature’s solar plexus and it flew back, clawing at its ruined throat. She spun to her left just in time to see the second demon looming above her, its claws poised.

A blur of movement to her side intercepted the other demonic fiend. The stranger had leaped into action, his movements a dance of lethal grace as he engaged the demon in combat. His hands flashed with blinding speed, striking with precision at the creature's exposed joints and weak points. Each blow landed with the force of thunder, causing the monster to recoil and screech in agony.

They fought as a team, the stranger's dark silhouette a whirlwind of ferocity that complemented Rayne's own agility and determination. Together, they managed to drive the beast back, forcing it to retreat with a guttural snarl of frustration.

A terror-filled shriek pierced the pandemonium around them, drawing Rayne’s attention back to the urgent task at hand. She spun around, scanning the remnants of the embattled village. A clamor swelled from within a small cottage that bordered the smoldering forest; it was a home Rayne knew well and had visited often. She gasped as the front door of the Ashford’s home was flung open and Quinn emerged, blood trickling down his face. A shadowy figure moved behind him, its wickedly hooked claws trained toward Quinn’s exposed back.

To Rayne, the world seemed to slow and melt away, leaving only the vision of her best friend fleeing from the hideous creature aiming to kill him. Her temple throbbed and her hands shot forward, reaching for Quinn; her veins flooded with intense heat as a furious scream erupted from her lips. “NO!”

Her hands glowed as fire ignited her fingertips, the flames as white-hot as her rage. The demon exploded in a burst of searing light, disintegrating into swirling embers that dissipated on the wind. Quinn was thrown forward from the force of the blast; he landed face first several feet away from the inferno that quickly engulfed the Ashford’s home.

Quinn pushed himself up to standing, faltered for a moment, then turned to face Rayne with wide eyes, shock etched across his blood-spattered face.

“Rayne? What…what was that?” Quinn's voice wavered, disbelief coloring his tone as he took in the sight of her, surrounded by flickering flames that danced along her outstretched arms. The air crackled with the remnants of her fiery outburst, the ground beneath her feet scorched by the intensity of her newfound power. His eyes grew wider with every passing second, his jaw melting downward toward his chest in an ever-widening expression of shock and awe. “Oh, holy *hells…”* he stammered, the remainder of his words devolving into unintelligible gibberish.

Rayne’s chest heaved with exertion, her breathing ragged as she fought to contain the seething energy within her. Her skin shimmered with an ethereal glow, the fire reflecting in her bright blue eyes as she locked gazes with Quinn.

“I-I don’t know…” Rayne’s voice trailed off, the remnants of fury still simmering beneath the surface as she struggled to comprehend what had just happened. She held her hands up to her face, examining the slowly receding flames. No blisters or burns. No scorched flesh. In fact, her skin hadn’t even reddened.

The stranger at her side watched with a stoic expression, his stormy eyes fixed on Rayne with an intensity that made her shift uncomfortably under his scrutiny. "You have an affinity for fire," he spoke softly, his tone filled with solemn understanding. "A rare gift, indeed. *Very* rare, in fact.”

Tendrils of flame still encircled Rayne’s arms and danced along her fingers. “Ohh-kaayy. But how do I shut it off?” *And what if I can’t?* Her unspoken worry churned her stomach, making her unsteady on her feet.

“Center yourself,” the stranger said knowingly, his voice calm and reassuring. “Focus on your breath, on creating stillness within you. Feel the power, acknowledge it, but do not let it control you.”

Rayne hesitated for a moment, uncertainty swirling within her. She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, letting the stranger’s words guide her thoughts. Her panic subsided; her mind stilled. She could feel the heat within radiating through her core, a gentle, inviting sensation that seemed to draw her into its depths.

*I’ve felt this before,* she thought, almost startled in the wake of the revelation. A sudden sense of familiarity washed over her, like a warm smile from an old friend. Unconsciously, her lips curled upward slightly in return. The heat swelled outward for a single moment, enveloping her in an ethereal embrace before receding back into her core. Rayne breathed in deeply, silently willing the flames to diminish, feeling the heat dissipate as the glow faded.

When she opened her eyes, her hands were back to normal, devoid of any supernatural fire. To her amazement, the fires that had ravaged the homes and surrounding woods had also died away, leaving only tendrils of smoke and blackened scars where flames had once blazed. She met the stranger’s gaze once more. “Thank you,” she murmured, still reeling from too many conflicting emotions and struggling to catch up mentally with all that had transpired.

The stranger nodded in acknowledgment, his expression an unreadable mask. "Are you alright?" he asked warily.

Something about his tone managed to pull Rayne from her whirlwind of reverie; her eyes snapped to where he stood. Rayne noted his apprehension; how he had shifted into what would look like a relaxed stance to an untrained eye, but was actually how fighters stand prior to sparring. His expression belied a readiness to defend or attack at any moment. Her indignant confusion faded in the realization that he was doing exactly what she would have if the roles were reversed. He was assessing a potential threat and attempting to minimize the damage to everyone around them.

"I'm fine now,” she said, deliberately controlling her tone and pitch. “Whatever power overcame me is gone.”

The stranger smiled slightly, shaking his head gently. “It’s not gone. You just managed to put it back to sleep. For now.”

Rayne was about to question what he meant until the collateral damage of the battle behind him came into focus. A heap of shredded, bloody clothing and long flaxen hair caught her attention. And then put her heart in a vise grip. “Quinn's mom..." Her words formed a lump in her throat as she gestured toward the form of Mrs. Ashford lying on the ground several feet away.

Quinn gasped, collapsing to his knees at the sight. With all that had just transpired, he hadn’t noticed what had become of her yet. He raked his fingers through his hair absently; his shoulders shook. Rayne crouched down next to him, a hand clasping his arm in silent support, her eyes still fixed on the unmoving woman’s form.

The stranger followed Rayne’s gaze and, without a word, moved to kneel beside the injured woman. His fingertips glowed with a soft light as he assessed her wounds with practiced precision.

Rayne watched, awestruck. She had heard tales of exceptionally gifted healers among the paranormal factions, but none of the stories had prepared her for what she was witnessing. She could feel the hum of soothing energy flowing through the air around them. *Incredible.*

The stranger’s brow furrowed deeply in concentration; the soft glow emanating from his palms intensified, casting a honey-gold light that sparkled around Quinn’s mother like fireflies dancing against the night. The unmistakable scent of cinnamon wafted into the air. He shook from exertion; perspiration erupted on his brow.

Rayne bit her lip, balling her hand into a fist holding the sleeve of Quinn’s shirt. His mother’s chest appeared to rise less with each breath despite the steadily intensifying light pouring over her. The stranger quaked with evident strain, a soft grunt escaping his lips as if battling an unseen foe. Beads of sweat rolled down his temple in thick rivulets, his hands trembling intensely from the effort.

Quinn looked up at Rayne, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Is... is he going to be able to save her?” Quinn's voice cracked with emotion, his fear palpable in the air.

Rayne squeezed Quinn's arm, unable to answer him. She turned her gaze back to the stranger whose face was a mask of concentration. The glow surrounding him pulsed rhythmically, like a heartbeat syncing with the injured woman's shallow breaths.

Seconds felt like an eternity as the stranger continued to channel his healing power, his hands enveloped in a radiant aura that seemed to weave threads of light into Mrs. Ashford's fading form. The air hummed with energy, a charged stillness settling over the trio as the stranger’s breaths became ragged, almost desperate.

Finally, with a soft exhale, the stranger's hands stilled, the golden light surrounding them diminishing until it dissipated completely. A heavy silence blanketed the clearing. The stranger’s head bowed over the pallid form of Mrs. Ashford; his fist knotted against the scorched earth soaked with a widening pool of blood spilling beneath the completely still woman’s body. “I’m so, so sorry,” the stranger’s deep voice was calm, yet filled with an underlying intensity that hinted at untold stories and hidden sorrows. “It wasn’t enough.”

Rayne's heart dropped into her boots, and she felt her chest contract as though an icy fist squeezed her ribs. She looked at Quinn, worry etched on her face as she spoke softly, trying desperately to hold onto hope she already knew to be futile. "What do you mean?"

The stranger's head rose slowly to meet Rayne's gaze, his shimmering silver eyes revealing a depth of pain that she had never seen before. "I mean," he said in a voice that shook slightly as though he was using whatever power he had left to control his tone, "that I couldn't save her. No matter how hard I tried, it wasn't enough."

Quinn let out a pained wail like the sound of the wind howling through a desolate wasteland. He scuttled forward, collapsing beside his mother's body, sobbing in anguish. Rayne embraced him tightly, her own tears falling silently as she felt the weight of the world press down on them all.

“Don’t be so hard on yourself, Jayce,” a new and unfamiliar voice rose through the grief and gloom, turning every head in the direction it came from. He was tall and lithe with long auburn hair drawn back into a neat ponytail fastened at the nape of his neck. His dark eyes were trained on the stranger as he spoke. “You did everything you could, you must understand that. Some wounds simply run too deep, even for your immense gifts.” His voice held a note of empathy, understanding the burden that the stranger, Jayce, carried with him.

Jayce’s gaze flickered to the new arrival, his expression a mix of gratitude and weariness. “Thank you, Adrian,” he murmured wearily, his voice laced with a raw emotion. “And yes, I do understand. But it doesn’t make it any easier.”

Adrian shook his head with a sigh. “You never change, my friend.” He moved forward, his steps measured and purposeful, until he stood beside Jayce and laid a hand on his shoulder in silent solidarity.

Quinn’s sobs began to subside, replaced by a hollow ache that echoed through the clearing like a mournful dirge. Rayne held him close, offering what little comfort she could. She remembered all too well how crushing the weight was in the face of such overwhelming loss. Looking back where the Ashford’s house had once stood, Rayne got a sinking feeling. “Quinn, I know this might be hard for you right now, but I’ve gotta ask. Where is your dad? And Ariel?”

“Taken,” he spat bitterly, his voice hitching slightly.

Raynes eyes flew wide. “What?” she said, incredulously.

Quinn’s jaw clenched, his fists tightening as he spoke through gritted teeth. “They got dad first. He told us all to hide when the demons came. I saw them drag him out the door just before the fire started.” He closed his eyes, inhaling deeply. “They found mom and Ariel next. Mom tried to fight back, but they ripped Ariel right out of her arms. I tried to help, I…I…” he stammered, his words failing as a new supply of tears shimmered in his emerald eyes.

Rayne's heart plummeted at the news. She clutched Quinn to her protectively, wishing she could ease his suffering somehow. She glanced up at the other two men, her narrowed eyes falling on Jayce. “You said you had been tracking that demon horde and knew that they were hunting humans. What else do you know about this?”

Jayce's gaze darkened as he glanced first at Adrian, who nodded almost imperceptibly, then back to Rayne, his shoulders stiffening with a grim resolve. "I know more than I've shared so far," he admitted, his voice low and steely. “And I promise I’ll explain all that I can once we’re away from here. The demons could return in greater numbers, especially if any of the ones that escaped saw your powers.”

Rayne jolted, her eyes scanning the ruined tree line and shattered village surrounding them reflexively. Her skin suddenly tingled; she felt utterly exposed. The deafening silence seemed to draw out in the wake of Jayce’s words.

“But I can’t leave her.” It was Quinn who had spoken, his despondent voice breaking the stillness surrounding them all. He slumped against Rayne’s forearm, eyes locked on his mother’s remains.

Adrian knelt beside them, his hand coming to rest on Quinn’s shoulder in a gesture of comfort. “She was a brave soul,” he said, his voice gentle yet firm. “She knew you tried to save her. And that she was loved with all your heart. That’s all any soul can ask for. I doubt she would want you to remain in such a place.”

Rayne sucked in a deep breath, attempting to quiet her mind. She ached for Quinn and fully empathized with his reluctance to leave. Yet, she knew that they were probably in danger if they lingered for much longer. She understood that she barely knew either of the other two men, that she hadn’t even had a proper introduction to them, yet they clearly had information that she needed now more than ever. But mostly, she was certain that this was neither the time nor the place for the answers she needed. “Quinn, I think they’re right. We can’t stay, especially if we want to have any chance of getting your dad and Ariel back.”