They departed the ruined village under the cloak of nightfall, the emerging stars and slivered moon overhead obscured by the lingering smoke in the atmosphere. The deer path seemed even more ominous in the darkness and aftermath of the attack. Rayne led the small group forward with Quinn at her side; she could practically feel the grief pouring from him every time their shoulders brushed. She laced her fingers through his for comfort, not just his, but her own as well.

Jayce and Adrian brought up the rear, moving with such grace and stealth that Rayne occasionally glanced back to make sure she hadn’t lost them. Even in the miniscule light offered by the waning moon, she could see the grim expressions they wore, the alertness in their eyes as they scanned the dense brush for any threats.

Their progress had been undermined by the inky shadows that spilled across the winding path, but Rayne saw the first set of hidden markers that indicated they were nearing the Packlands. Her familiarity with this stretch of woodlands allowed her to traverse the distance with relative ease despite the obscurity of the narrow path itself; even at the brightest part of the day, the trail would be difficult to follow for all but the most experienced of trackers.

A barely audible rustle of leaves emanated from just up ahead; Rayne tensed, preparing to fight or flee. She squeezed Quinn’s hand, her eyes probing into the darkness stretching before them. Jayce and Adrian flanked Rayne and Quinn, taking defensive positions; they, too, had picked up on the disturbance.

“There,” Jayce’s lips brushed Rayne’s ear as he whispered, his breathy warning sending a tingle through her heightened senses. He pointed toward a large shrub between two old oak trees. A pair of animalistic amber eyes glowered at the group. A low, menacing growl alerted them that they had indeed been spotted by whatever crouched just beyond the dense thicket.

Rayne dropped Quinn’s hand and stepped forward, allowing what little light there was to expose her. “Lena, it’s me, Rayne,” she said calmly, addressing the feral animal skulking in the shrubs. “And a few friendlies are with me,” she added quickly, gesturing to the three men alongside her.

An oversized wolf with dark fur stepped purposefully forward from the foliage, teeth barred in a snarl and every stride exuding power and purpose. The she-wolf snarled again and shook her massive head. Her amber eyes bore into Jayce as she let out one last chuff; she began to transform into her human form then, bones audibly grinding, fur and fangs retracting. A moment later, Lena Greywolf stood before them, still glaring. “Jayce Leventis,” she growled, “I’d say it’s a pleasure to see you again, but I’d be lying. I offer my thanks for bringing my daughter and her friend to us unharmed; in return, you have safe passage out of the Packlands.” She spoke the latter part of her message through gritted teeth with particular emphasis on the word “out”.

Her formal language and terse tone seemed to catch everyone off-guard. “Lena?” Rayne said, genuinely puzzled. She stepped toward her pack mother just as another shifter emerged, carrying a long robe, presumably for Lena, who was still naked after her transformation. Rayne took the robe from her packmate and slipped it over Lena’s shoulders, even though she knew the gesture was unnecessary. Shifters are unfazed by nudity and their metabolisms regulate their body temperature for a short time after they transform; however, it’s still considered a kindness to cover their human form and, in this case, Rayne hoped to use the gesture as a way to ease the tension.

She rested her palm on Lena’s shoulder. “They have information that we need, Lena,” she said, an undertone of urgency to her measured words. “Especially now. Quinn’s settlement was attacked by demons and…” Rayne faltered for a moment, her eyes flickering to Quinn momentarily before deciding to delve no further into the tragedy for his sake unless she had no other choice. She steadied herself and continued,” …and there’s so much that happened so fast that I haven’t had time to ask them anything about what happened to me.”

Lena jerked her glare away from Jayce and looked Rayne over, her anger immediately melting into concern. “What happened? Are you hurt?” She sniffed the air around Rayne as Lena’s amber eyes seemed to probe every inch of her.

“No, no, nothing like that,” Rayne assured her quickly. “But I really think we all need to talk somewhere safe. I brought them here because I think you need to hear this discussion too.”

Lena visibly relaxed a bit but cast an unfriendly glance over her shoulder at Jayce. She snorted. In a loud, clear voice, she said, “Everyone, stand down.”

Killion dropped out of a tree gracefully, landing just behind Jayce with a spear still grasped in his hand; he rested the tip of the spear very pointedly on Jayce’s shoulder. Others emerged from behind tree trunks and shrubs, all armed with a variety of axes, knives, bows and mauls. Even Rayne looked surprised at the numbers of shifters that surrounded them, seemingly from out of nowhere.

Jayce raised both hands slowly, eyeing Killion’s spear as he spoke, “Lena, I…”

Lena whirled on her heel. “I’m going to strongly suggest you come with us, and without another word. Your welcomed presence on our lands is tenuous, to say the *very* least.”