The long walk to the center of the Packlands had been conducted in silence with Lena in the lead and the rest of the pack’s hunters in defensive positions surrounding the group. The tall walls of the Packland’s inner sanctum loomed ahead as the forest around them began to thin out, signaling that they didn’t have much farther to go. Evenly spaced solar lights provided a gentle visual beacon; welcoming smells of roasting meat and fresh baked bread provided a more visceral greeting as they approached the sentries patrolling the walls.

Rayne inhaled deeply; she had been hungry hours ago, and the physical exertion of battle, the emotional drain of the aftermath and the toll it all had taken on her had made her ravenous. Yet, she knew that they wouldn’t be stopping at the communal outdoor dining area, that the gently dancing flames of the firelight bathing the central hearth was just out of reach and that the cozy nighttime gatherings that were so central to life in the Packlands were going to have to wait. She plodded past the community hub, doing her best not to grumble.

Beyond the central common area, a flagstone footpath lined with small solar lights and planter boxes brimming with herbal mixes or well-tended flowers paved their way up a small hill toward the largest cabin in the Packlands, known to the community as The Wolf Den. Unlike the other smaller cabins, The Den featured a second story and a large, raised deck that wrapped around the building. Rayne had been told that prior to the War, The Wolf Den had been used as a multifunctional building for all Pack business, including private and formal meetings, commerce, recordkeeping and asset storage. As they approached the ornately carved front door, Lena dismissed the hunters with the exception of Killion, who still trailed closely behind Jayce. She ushered the small group into the already lit foyer and gestured for everyone to find a seat within the large, but cozy main room.

Adrian and Jayce sat together on a small sofa; Killion chose to stand behind the pair, leaning against a wall next to the staircase that led to the second floor. Quinn sank into an oversized recliner, his flaxen hair looking more disheveled than it ever had and still stained with dried blood along his hairline. Rayne sat in the sofa closest to him, eyeing her friend with concern and, for the first time, wondering if she looked as weary as she felt right at that moment. Lena grabbed an office chair from one of the smaller rooms and wheeled it to the middle of where everyone was gathered.

“Before we begin, since I’m sure everyone here has been through the wringer tonight and it looks like we’re all still on high alert, I wanted to mention that a few of our pack members are going to be coming in to bring us all our meals so there aren’t any surprises.” Lena’s announcement was met with enthusiastic murmurs of gratitude from everyone. She nodded in response, then continued.

“I’m already aware of some of what happened at the human encampment,” Lena began. She turned to face Quinn squarely, her posture softening and expression deeply pained. “I’m so sorry, Quinn. We got reports of an uncontained wildfire at the Packland’s border from our scouts and had everyone out fighting the fire when we saw the first humans fleeing the area. We sent our best hunters to your homelands, but they arrived after the attack was already over.”

“What happened to those that fled?” Quinn shifted forward in the recliner, a spark of hope lacing his words.

“We’ve taken in anyone that wanted our help,” Lena said carefully. “Many humans are still wary of shifters and regard us as just another monster. There aren’t many refugees here, but all were welcome.”

“Two of my family members are missing, my father and sister,” Quinn began. “Do you know if they’re with the refugees?”

“We haven’t gotten a chance to find out much about any of the refugees at this point. We’re still trying to settle everyone in; the injured are being tended to upstairs, others are out in the commons being served a hot meal and there are a few that have already been given temporary lodgings and retired for the night.”

“Oh, oh yeah. Of course,” Quinn stammered. “Thank you for everything you’ve done to help. And I’m sorry that there’s so many close-minded people,” he added.

"Thank you for the acknowledgment, but to be fair, it goes both ways, Quinn. There are shifters out there that don’t trust humans. Judgmental attitudes are learned, not inherited. I’m sorry that I don’t know more at this time, but you have my word that if any of the refugees that have been taken in are identified as your missing family members, I’ll make sure you’re reunited immediately.”

Quinn squeezed his eyes shut and nodded, a whispered “Thank you” barely audible even in the quiet of the large room. His breathing hitched as he fought to contain his emotions.

Rayne bit her lip, reaching over to rub his arm in a comforting gesture. “It’s okay to let it out, Quinn. You’re safe and among friends here.”

“Well, that ‘friends’ part, I’m not entirely sure of yet,” Lena said, swiveling her chair pointedly toward Jayce and Adrian. “There are one and a half angels here that I’m not too sure belong in the ‘friend’ category.”

Rayne and Quinn looked shocked and confused; Jayce sighed, shaking his head; Adrian tried to suppress an amused look. Lena continued, her gaze sharpening. “I’d like an explanation as to what you two are doing so close to the Packlands. Especially you, Jayce.”

Jayce opened his mouth to speak, but Rayne cut him off. “I don’t know what you mean by ‘one and a half angels’ but Jayce saved me from being ambushed by the horde of demons that ended up attacking Quinn’s home. He tried to get me to not follow the demons to keep me safe. And then he fought side by side with me when he could have chosen to let me go try to save Quinn on my own, which is exactly what I would have done had he not helped. And I’m not sure what the outcome would have been without his aid if I’m to be perfectly honest. If all of that isn’t an indicator of who should be considered a friendly ally, then I need a new definition for that term,” she said, a touch of exasperation tinting her words.

Lena sat back in her seat, a smirk toying at her lips. “Fair enough and noted,” she said evenly.

Jayce's eyes softened as he looked at Rayne, a mixture of gratitude and surprise evident in his expression. He had not expected her to defend him so fiercely, especially after their rocky introduction. He inclined his head slightly towards her in acknowledgment before turning his attention back to Lena. "I understand the skepticism, Alpha Greywolf," Jayce spoke, his voice calm yet firm. "I bear the weight of my past actions and the mistrust they have obviously sown. However, I assure you, my intentions are solely focused on aiding in the fight against a threat that looms over us all."

Lena regarded Jayce with a calculated gaze, her amber eyes piercing. After a moment of silence, she leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "We will need all the help we can get," she conceded, casting a meaningful glance at Rayne. "But know this, Jayce Leventis, I will be watching closely. I know firsthand that your best intentions don’t always bode well for those around you. I don’t question your character or your motives, only your methods.” She paused, her gaze shifting between Jayce and Rayne, assessing the dynamic between them. “I’m concerned because once again, someone I fiercely care for has now counted you a friend and ally.”

“Understood, Alpha,” Jayce said, his face clouding over at her words.

Quinn swallowed hard, his voice barely audible as he spoke. "Lena, I know you're trying to protect the pack, but... we can't fight this alone, you acknowledged as much just now" he said, his eyes pleading with her. "We need all the help we can get, especially against an enemy like this."

Rayne chimed in, “I agree with Quinn wholeheartedly. Our skills are formidable, especially since we work together as a pack. But after what I saw today, I have concerns about demons and how much of a threat they pose in larger groups. It would seem that gathering allies could be mutually beneficial; I’m pretty sure that any faction would be hard pressed to deal with a horde on their own.”

Lena pursed her lips together and nodded to Rayne, then looked at Quinn, her expression softening slightly. She sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I know, Quinn. And I’m sure it may look as though I’m only protecting my pack without considering anyone else, which I can assure you is not the case. However, I also know that Rayne wouldn’t have defended Jayce so vehemently if he hadn’t earned her trust, if his actions hadn’t outweighed any misgivings I have. But let’s not forget that his presence here raises questions that need answers, not just for my pack, but for everyone’s clarification of the scope of what we’re all facing.” Lena returned her gaze to Jayce. “Jayce, you were once an Archangel. Your kind has never been known to roam anywhere near shifters unless it was for reasons of great importance. So, what brings you here now?”

Jayce hesitated, his face haunted with untold sorrows and regret, a storm brewing behind his steely eyes. “I’ve sought redemption for a long time,” he finally spoke, his voice low but unwavering. “I’ve made mistakes in the past, grave ones that I can never undo. But I’m here to help protect everyone I can from the darkness that looms on the horizon. One that I’m certain poses a threat to everyone.”

Lena studied him for a moment, her expression unreadable. “And what is this darkness that you speak of?”

Adrian leaned forward, his expression grave. "As an Archangel, I may be better positioned to answer some of what you’re asking, Alpha Greywolf. My name is Adrian Blackwood, and you have my sincere apologies for not properly introducing myself sooner; there simply hasn’t been an opportunity before this moment. You’re very correct when you say that angels, and especially Archangels, do not reveal our nature to anyone we’re monitoring or protecting under casual circumstances. While all angels are permitted to use their powers to protect those they are assigned to watch over, we’re only allowed to do so using methods that are unlikely to be detected. Archangels are additionally mandated to only record the events we witness and never to directly interfere with mortal activities; however, some of us,” he paused, nodding in Jayce’s direction meaningfully, “have witnessed things that are forcing us to push the limits of our mandates, risking Judgement and worse.” He paused with a glance in Jayce’s direction. “We now believe that most, if not all of the evil activities we’ve been tracking all along are all connected to a powerful demon overlord who has been amassing an army in the shadows, biding his time to strike at our kind and any other faction that would stand up to him. We believe his goal is nothing short of creating chaos and the complete destruction of all paranormals that will not bow to demonic rule."

Jayce nodded in agreement. “I was one of the first to see the evidence of these demonic forces. It’s been my belief that this demon lord has been behind multiple catastrophic events, possibly spanning multiple centuries; and that more recently he masterminded the same darkness that led to the covert war that ravaged this world,” Jayce replied. “There are forces at play that endanger us all.”

“And due to the scale and gravity of this impending threat, we’ve been learning as much as we can about this demon lord’s activities and protecting anyone likely to be targeted by him and his minions,” Adrian added.

Lena's eyes narrowed as she processed this revelation. "And how exactly do you two fit into this impending battle?" she inquired, her gaze shifting between Jayce and Adrian.

Adrian answered first, his expression unreadable as he spoke. “At the moment, I’m seeking to help head off the newest possible threat, though only indirectly so that I can somewhat adhere to my mandate.”

“And since I’ve already gone against my mandate, I can be more hands-on,” Jayce chimed in. “Adrian and I have been loosely working together since I retained most of my powers even after my Judgement. He can access knowledge that I cannot; and I can act of my own freewill based upon his knowledge without my mandate tying my hands.”

“You never have been one for honoring any terms or upholding your oaths, have you Jayce?” Killion’s sudden accusation pierced the conversation unexpectedly. Even Lena seemed startled at his interjection. He chuckled roughly as all heads turned in his direction, the all-but-forgotten sentinel guard suddenly becoming a central speaker. “Your tendency to operate in the gray areas raises my hackles. I mean, we have no proof of any of what you’re saying, besides *your word*,” he spat mockingly. “So, when you have chosen to act dishonorably in the past and even now are admitting to continuing that same defiant pattern, how are we supposed to take you at *your word* that any of this is true? And moreover, if your patterns actually hold true, then how are we supposed to believe that you’ll keep your promises to Lena?”

“You don’t only have Jayce’s word on this matter,” Adrian reminded him solemnly. “You have mine as well.”

Killion scoffed, “And I don’t know you at all. But I certainly know him, even if he doesn’t seem to remember me.”

Lena growled, “Killion, that’s enough. The past is the past. You were still a pup the last time Jayce was here.”

“Yeah. A pup that was impacted by his actions. And you’ve said it yourself, Lena—youth allows a more direct appraisal of circumstances. You marvel at how pups can see simple truths that adult shifters can’t seem to grasp,” Killion retorted.

“While that’s true, I also know that part of why pups have that unique insight is their inability to see any mitigating factors involved. They see only what happens and can find the simplest of answers as to what caused it without weighing all of the other choices or circumstances involved. Life isn’t clear cut, it’s never just black or white. There’s a whole spectrum of choices and factors in there that lead to the whole truth, but it takes wisdom to be able to process it all. Let it go, Killion. Your past hurt is blinding you to what is happening in the present.”

“Killion,” Jayce spoke the young hunter’s name with a quiet reverence, “I do remember you.I’d been hoping to speak to both you and Lena privately, but that’s a luxury that’s not been afforded due to circumstances and time. While I realize that any apology I could offer will not make up for what you’ve lost, I would still offer it anyway. I’m truly sorry for the loss of your mother, Aurora.” Killion’s head jerked in response to his mother’s name, his petulant expression morphing to silent regret. Meanwhile, Jayce swiveled around to meet Lena’s eyes as he added, “And for the loss of Alpha Gregory Greywolf. I have mourned them both, felt the weight of my choices and borne the burden of my part in their deaths every day for well over a decade now.” His head drooped, shoulders slumped, and posture rounded downward in his seat. “I can only ask for your forgiveness, though I don’t expect anything.”

Adrian put a hand on Jayce’s shoulder. “He speaks the truth to you both. About everything. It’s no secret that I don’t always agree with Jayce’s methods. That I often find him reckless when he is committed on a course of action he believes in wholeheartedly; however, what I can say is his recklessness has always been with the correct intentions, that his motives have always been pure, that I even admire the amount of his conviction at times, and lastly that his actions have all too often ended with him suffering the consequences for doing the right thing. But only once has that suffering not been limited to him alone.”

Lena dabbed at her eyes as Jayce and Adrian spoke, but had said nothing, silently contemplating their words. She spoke then, her voice wavering slightly. “I can forgive you, Jayce. And I’m sorry for my unkind words tonight. I know there were other circumstances involved, but I chose to blame you for all this time. I guess it was easier than having to weigh the whole truth.” She nodded to Killion. “And thank you for helping me see the error of my ways by holding up a mirror, in a manner of speaking.” She sniffed, cleared her throat and closed her eyes, her brow furrowing under the weight of heavy thoughts. After a moment, she continued. “There’s one thing that’s troubling me about the current situation. You’ve both said you’re trying to thwart the plans of this demon lord you’ve been tracking. You’ve mentioned that he’s already been assembling a huge army with vast numbers; so why hasn’t he gone with an all-out offensive against any of the factions?”

“Oh, he has,” Jayce said earnestly. “But the attacks have been attributed to other things or have been spaced out over distance and time in such a way that only immortals with omniscience would pick up on it, and even then, you’d have to be in the right place at the right time for it to lead back to his sphere of influence. Those of us that have started piecing it together are beginning to think that almost every mortal atrocity can be traced back to him. He’s been at this game a long time and he’s only getting better at playing.”

Lena chewed her lower lip. “Okay, say I believe you. You still haven’t fully explained what this demon lord’s plans are and how they would affect us, besides the obvious possibility of increasing attacks with greater numbers. Or how you’ve been fighting back.”

Jayce and Adrian exchanged glances. “Adrian can’t say anything more than he already has or he will face Judgement, like I did. Would you be willing to allow him to step outside, or into a separate room for a moment?”

Lena looked puzzled but nodded her assent. Adrian stood. “Thank you, truly. I’ll be just beyond the front door.” He crossed the room swiftly and exited, closing the door behind him.

All eyes landed upon Jayce then, the air stilled with collective apprehensions. “The evidence we’ve gathered all points to the demon lord seeking a new weapon that has the potential to unbalance everything. Or more accurately, he is attempting to weaponize a new force that has recently come to light.”

His steely eyes found Rayne surreptitiously in the stillness that ensued around his weighty words. She sucked in a breath, noticing for the first time that her knuckles had whitened where she gripped the arm of the couch where she perched. She hadn’t realized that she had inched forward while the two angels were speaking until she was teetering precariously on the edge of the leathery cushion. That her jaw ached from clenching and unclenching her teeth as the revelations of impending danger crested and broke like jagged waves upon a shoreline. And now in the wake of Jayce’s unwavering stare, she somehow knew that every choice she had made, every step she had taken, and every seemingly random encounter had all prepared her for this moment.

**Chapter Six**

“Jayce, you weren’t in the woods this evening just to track that demon horde, were you? You had another reason to be there.”

The silence between them was heavy, the only sounds were the soft inhales and exhales of those in the room, and the ticking of a clock on the wall steadily counting off the seconds between her query and his response. Jayce's silvery gaze remained focused on her as he confirmed, "That's correct, Rayne. I was also there to find you."

Rayne's heart raced as the weight of Jayce's words settled around her, suffocating and undeniable. She felt the eyes of the room on her, but her focus remained locked with Jayce's unwavering stare like a moth drawn to a flame.

Gasps filled the room, and Lena leaned forward, her amber eyes narrowing. "Explain."

“I’ll explain what I know for certain, but there’s honestly a lot that we’re still trying to piece together.” Jayce took a deep breath, lacing his fingers together in his lap. “Adrian and I have been gathering information about the demon lord by tracking his minions and their movements. Over the last few months, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of human settlements that have been attacked, which didn’t make much sense to us at the time since we’ve been piecing together the theory that it’s the paranormal sects that are the demon lord’s targets. However, a couple of weeks ago, we found a small group of demons and Shades on the Northern side of Whiskeytown Lake that had three human captives in their camp. Long story short, we managed to free the prisoners and ask them some questions about what happened to their encampment and about their captivity, since that too, is a new development. Their account of the assault on their homes matched some of what Adrian and I had already noted regarding the severity of these attacks.” Jayce paused, turning his attention to Lena. “I can explain more about that in depth with you, but I think it would be insensitive to continue any further into some of what we uncovered with our present company. With your permission, I’ll skip to what’s most relevant about those prisoners we freed.”

Lena nodded emphatically. “Yes, please,” she said, eyeing Quinn and Rayne warily.

“All three prisoners had developed some sort of unexplainable powers,” Jayce refocused on Rayne intently. “Adrian and I believe they were to be taken to the demon lord to help him gain some sort of advantage over the paranormal groups.”

Rayne’s eyes blazed as she pursed her lips together tightly; her jaw muscle formed a visible knot in her cheek that twitched slightly, but she made no other move to respond.

Lena frowned, clearly troubled by the implications of this new development. "But what does this have to do with Rayne? And why were you looking for her?"

Jayce’s expression softened. “I should clarify a bit. I wasn’t looking for Rayne specifically. One of the things we discovered when we questioned those three humans was that Adrian can sense their type of powers. See, when they first mentioned these powers, we were skeptical; so, they gave us a small demonstration of what they could do. Adrian later told me that he had a reaction to the energy that was like magnetism. He had been the one leading us all day before we found them, and I remembered later that he had urged me to move faster for no reason. I’d actually said a few choice words since we seemed to be wandering aimlessly without any dangers around us,” Jayce chuckled at the memory. “But after finding those prisoners, it made sense that he must have been drawn to them without even understanding what was actually happening. He has since been more attuned with those magnetic-type reactions; I’ve been more patient with his sudden changes of direction.”

Lena's sharp gaze flickered between Jayce and Rayne, her alpha instincts on high alert. "What kind of powers are we talking about here?" Her tone was cautious, a reflection of the concern etched on her features.

Jayce exhaled slowly, his gaze never leaving Rayne. "The prisoners displayed abilities that aren’t unlike angelic gifts and seemed to be just as varied; however, the powers are definitely different from our own. It wasn't just enhanced strength or speed; it was something deeper, something more primal. Two of them had elemental gifts, but all three had some form of telepathic abilities. The female even said that the youngest of them, a boy of about 9 or 10 years of age, had healed some of her wounds just by touching them.”

Lena sat back in her seat, her arms crossed over her chest. “Killion, you mentioned a rumor about humans like he’s describing, right? Do you remember anything that you heard that might be helpful?”

Killion’s brow furrowed for a minute or two. “I don’t recall very much since I dismissed it as a joke. I included it in my report that day because I had to, and I thought Lena might get a laugh. The Ozborough Pack would be able to tell you more than we can about it. A couple of their shifters ran into us hunting the borderlands and told us about two humans, one that could control the wind and another that made a puddle freeze over.”

“Do you remember how long ago you heard about them?” Jayce asked.

“A few nights ago,” Killion shrugged. “They didn’t say when they met those humans though. And since I didn’t take it very seriously, I didn’t ask.”

“Thanks, Killion,” Jayce said. “I’ll try following up with the Ozboroughs if we have time.”

“Jayce, you still haven’t explained how any of this relates to Rayne,” Lena said impatiently.

“I think I’m beginning to understand fully,” Rayne said slowly. “I was on the deer path on my way back when I got the feeling I was being watched. I spotted Jayce between the trees, he warned me about the demons and when he told me they were headed to Quinn’s encampment, I did everything I could to get there to warn him. The battle had already started when we got there, Jayce and I ended up fighting off a few demons. And then Quinn was in trouble with a demon on his heels. I just remember screaming and the next thing I knew, the demon had blown up and my whole body was on fire, but I wasn’t being burned by it,” she blurted. Her speech pattern had matched the increasing intensity of the story so that towards the end of her diatribe, words were spilling out so rapidly that she was left breathless at the end of it all. Her cheeks blazed a shade that rivaled her ringlets as she glanced around the room, noting the varying degrees of everyone’s reactions, from slightly confused to downright gob smacked. She pressed her lips together and scooted back on the leather couch, her brow furrowed as though she was lost in thought.

Quinn sat up a little straighter. “So that wasn’t just in my head then? I wasn’t just hysterical or losing it?”

Rayne shook her head, her long red curls brushing her shoulders. “No,” she sighed steadily, “but I have a sinking feeling that I’m going to wish we were both hallucinating.”