Just then, the front door opened and Adrian appeared, a tentative expression on his handsome face. He surveyed the scene with his dark eyes, taking in the various expressions of shock, confusion and disbelief before him. “I see everyone is all caught up,” he said brightly, his words laced with a playful irony. He made his way back to his former seat, smirking knowingly at Jayce. “I take it you haven’t lost your touch at making an *impression*.”

Jayce shot him a sour look. “While most of what we were discussing should probably wait until we’re all relieved of a *very* amateur comedian, his insufferable presence might be a good thing right about now.”

“Sounds like my impeccable timing has once again proven useful, and I’m always good company,” Adrian countered with a wink. “What did you need from me, my friend?”

“Corroboration on something,” Jayce said, turning to Rayne. “There’s one thing that I don’t understand from what you just said. You mentioned that you saw me in the woods after feeling like you were being watched, right?”

“Yes,” Rayne answered. “You were still pretty far away, so I couldn’t have described you very well. But yeah, I saw you running from tree to tree in my direction.”

Adrian paled. “Wait. You actually *saw* Jayce? But you didn’t see me?”

Now Rayne looked confused. “No, the first time I saw you was,” she paused with a hard swallow, “um, right after the attack. You weren’t in the woods.”

“But I was,” Adrian mused. “We were both cloaked, but I was there with him, right up until you leveled that shotgun at him. He froze, and I told him I’d go on ahead to the settlement; Jayce stayed behind to make sure you’d be hidden from the demons.”

“I figured you heard a snapped branch or just got lucky when you aimed at me,” Jayce said.

Adrian shrugged, “As did I. Huh.” His brow creased.

“Back up a bit,” Rayne said, now looking very confused. “What do you mean by cloaked?”

“Cloaking shield,” said Jayce. “It’s the same tactic I used to hide both of us from the demons. Every angel has that gift so that we’re not detected. The shield radius around me is small and it can’t be projected. I saw you look at that tree line behind you and knew you’d never make it before those demons saw you. So, I took that opportunity to get close enough to shield us. I hadn’t dropped my shield until I had flanked your blind side; I was trying to not alarm you so the demons wouldn’t pinpoint us,” he added.

“Are you sure you didn’t drop your shield until then?” Adrian asked, seeming perplexed.

“I’m positive.”

“But I saw you the whole time, except when I was looking back to see how far away the denser tree line was,” Rayne said earnestly. She bit her lip, brow furrowed. “And if you thought I couldn’t see you, then why did you freeze when I aimed at you?”

He shrugged. “It’s better to be safe than sorry. Especially since Adrian was already gone and he’s not the healer that I am.”

Adrian feigned indignation, then smirked. “He never tires of reminding me of his incredible healing gifts, I assure you,” he said, addressing Rayne.

“Well, that still doesn’t explain how I could see him,” Rayne admitted thoughtfully.

Adrian and Jayce stared at each other, both seemingly puzzled. Jayce shook his head after a moment, his dark locks brushing his collar; then he shrugged, nodding. “Hey Rayne, we’re both going to cloak and then move. If you can see either of us, just track whoever you see by pointing, okay?” he asked suddenly.

“Sure.”

To most of the onlookers, both angels disappeared. But to Rayne, only Adrian was absent, the scent of cinnamon washing over her once again. She pointed to where Jayce was silently picking his way toward the room where Lena had grabbed her chair; she tracked him with her finger as he changed direction, heading toward the front door. When he turned to look in her direction, her index finger was aimed directly at his chest. Both men dropped their cloaking shields; Adrian was across the room from where Jayce stood, but he would have been in her line of sight all the same.

Jayce looked rattled. “Lena, Killion, were you able to track where I moved?” he asked, his voice straining to remain composed.

Both shifters shook their heads. Lena added, “Killion is our most gifted hunter. If anyone in this camp could have pinpointed you by sound alone, it would have been him. You were unnervingly silent, I assure you.”

Jayce exchanged a glance with Adrian, a silent conversation passing between them before turning back to the group. “This raises some concerning questions and I’m admittedly at a loss,” Jayce said, voice tinged with a mix of confusion and concern.

“This is definitely... unexpected.” Adrian agreed. He leaned forward, his warm brown eyes narrowing in thought. "It seems there might be some interference with our abilities or a force that can pierce through our cloaking shields," he suggested.

Rayne frowned, her thoughts racing as she tried to make sense of what had just unfolded. The air in the room felt charged with an unspoken tension, the weight of their shared uncertainty palpable.

“Could it have something to do with Rayne’s new ability?” Quinn interjected, his gaze flickering between the angels and Rayne. “Maybe her fire affinity has some connection to this... visibility issue?”

Lena rubbed her temples as she considered Quinn’s suggestion. “It’s possible,” she said slowly. “There are just too many things we don’t know yet. I mean, until tonight, I thought the whole humans-developing-supernatural-powers thing was a rumor. It’s pretty new territory for all of us.” She crossed her arms, her gaze fixed on Jayce.

“I think a connection between my powers and being able to see through Jayce’s cloaking ability is likely, if we think through things logically,” Rayne said slowly. “We know that Adrian discovered a magnetic connection between his angelic gifts and these human powers; he’s drawn to the energy. Jayce was able to help me control the fires my power started, and I’m betting that his instructions are based on how he controls his own powers.” The blue of her eyes sparked for a moment, dancing like soft firelight behind a grate. She looked meaningfully at Jayce. “Am I correct?”

Jayce's expression was inscrutable as he considered Rayne's words. After a moment of tense silence, he nodded slowly. "You are partially correct," he admitted, his voice taking on a somber quality. “I gave you instructions based on how we control ours; however, I wasn’t convinced it would work, if I’m being perfectly honest. I could see you were starting to get scared, and I figured our techniques would at least center you enough so that if it hadn’t worked, we had a better chance of figuring out what would. Panic never helps situations.”

“But you sounded so sure of yourself,” Rayne said, her eyebrows shooting upwards.

“That’s one of his more annoying traits,” Adrian said conspiratorially. “His self-confidence can be both a blessing and a curse.”

“And yours is using humor at inappropriate times,” Jayce sighed, rolling his eyes. "We need to figure out what connection these powers have to angelic gifts.”

Adrian leaned his head back slightly, a thoughtful expression crossing his strong features. “Agreed. Perhaps her unique abilities are acting as a conduit for angelic energy, allowing her to perceive things that would otherwise be hidden from view?”

“Maybe,” Lena mused. “But that wouldn’t explain why she couldn’t see through your shield. I think we’re still missing a lot of pieces to the puzzle.” She sighed, dragging her fingers through her hair, then wiping her hands down the length of her face, ending at her chin, her palms pressed together like a prayer against her lips. “But here’s my thoughts. As intriguing as all this information is, we have more questions than answers, more conjecture than we started with; the later it gets, the less sense anything is going to make. My suggestion is that we enjoy some hot food, decompress a bit from everything as best as we can, and try to get some rest. Maybe some of those puzzle pieces will become clear and fall into place with clarity that a good night’s sleep can provide.” She looked to Rayne. “I’m betting that you’ve got Quinn covered for the evening?”

“Of course,” Rayne responded. “But can we scrounge up some medical supplies and a change of clothes that will fit him? I’m sure he’d sleep better if he cleans up a bit and I dress his wounds.”

Killion chimed in, his deep voice carrying authority and confidence. He scanned all three men with a keen eye, sizing them up for their needs. “I probably have some things that would fit all three of our guests. And if Lena doesn’t have a place in mind for Jayce and Adrian, I have room,” he announced. His gaze rested on Lena, seeking his Alpha’ approval. She tipped her head to him, pride reflected in her eyes and unconsciously placing her hand over her heart.

Jayce looked thunderstruck, but the smile playing at his lips radiated gratitude. “Thank you, Killion. That means more to me than you’ll ever know.” He bowed his head in a display of respect and genuine trust.

Adrian clapped Jayce on the shoulder, a genuine, warm smile gracing his lips, his dark eyes sparkling with appreciation. “Yes, thank you for extending us your most gracious hospitality.”

With a proud smile still brightening her face, Lena cleared her throat and spoke up. "Before we wrap up the night's arrangements, I have one more suggestion. I think it would be best for Rayne and Jayce to train together in the morning, with just us and maybe Bear. And until we have a better understanding of the situation, let's keep this conversation between ourselves and not mention it to anyone else." She sobered, her smile melting back just enough to denote the seriousness of her last remark. Her amber eyes flashed a bright gold, as if emphasizing her point.

Murmurs and acquiescent nods greeted her as the wall clock chimed in, its numerous peals being a timely reinforcement of Lena’s words.

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As everyone else filed out of The Wolf Den, Lena called out, “Jayce, would you mind staying behind with me for a few more minutes, please?”

“Of course,” Jayce responded, turning back toward the center of the room where Lena now stood. “I did mention that some things shouldn’t have been said with everyone present. But I also didn’t want to keep you from a meal; it’s already late, after all.”

Lena smiled. “No, no, I’ll be fine. So what did you withhold?”

“A lot,” Jayce admitted. “But I’m sure that once I explain, you’ll understand why I thought it would have been insensitive to say anything in front of Quinn. Or Rayne.” He took a deep breath. “The first thing is about the nature of the demonic attacks on human settlements. Considering everything that Quinn just experienced and that his mother was killed, his father and sister are still missing, I’m certain this information would only prove painful to him in particular. Adrian and I have seen multiple demon raids over time. The most recent ones have been markedly different from anything we’ve seen before for a few reasons. First, we can tell from the amount of tracks that there are many more demons than ever before, attacking all at once in a blitz-style raid. Secondly, they attack infrastructure as well, burning buildings, smashing everything they can, basically doing as much damage as possible. Lastly, we have noted that there are very few dead humans after these most recent attacks.”

“What?” Lena sounded genuinely perplexed. “I would think that with more demons and structural damage, there would be more dead. Not less.”

“Exactly. We were as confused about that point as you were, and for the same reasons. However, after talking to the human prisoners we freed, we think we may understand that part of the phenomena. Both of the adult humans described the attack as being terrifying, and all three of them claimed that the demons were not attacking them directly, at least not using any lethal force. At first, Adrian and I thought that it was simply a more sadistic form of attack; demons have always enjoyed raiding human settlements for their own sick amusements since humankind has always been regarded as the weakest faction. But from what those prisoners explained, it was only in moments of extreme duress that their powers first manifested. The female prisoner said she had held up her hands defensively and a chasm appeared under her attacker. She was snatched up right after that display and carried off to the demon camp. The man had a similar story; we didn’t ask the child very much since he looked like he was already over-taxed from being imprisoned. It appears that the demons seek to torture or scare humans to see if any of these powers present themselves. They round up as many others as they can and take them to these encampments, the secondary, ‘powerless’ group is imprisoned all in one large pen away from the others that have already been identified, and then they torture the ones that didn’t present any powers. They torture them all to death, actually.”

Lena sucked in a sharp breath, grasping Jayce by the arm to steady herself. “Good God. I’ll have some of our hunters seek out any of the survivors that chose to decline our hospitality to try to reason with them. And to see if there’s another prisoner’s camp anywhere near our lands.” She looked queasy when she straightened. “Thank you, Jayce. Thank you so very, very much for not sharing that information with our human companions in company. I’ll be sure to keep this quiet. I don’t think either of them need to know any part of this, at least for now.”

“Agreed,” said Jayce. “Now maybe you understand why some of my kind, like Adrian, are willing to risk Judgement over this issue?”

“Completely. You’ll both have our complete support,” she nodded emphatically, her eyes shining with unshed tears. In a soft, overly-controlled voice that still wavered slightly, she asked,” Do you know why this is all happening, Jayce?”

His stormy eyes held a pained expression. “No. Not entirely. And I hate having all of these questions when there are so many lives at stake.” His head drooped.

Lena placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “We are all in this together, Jayce. As much as the situation seems dire, we will face it united and strong. Your insight and discretion have brought us this far, and I know your powers are formidable. I have no doubt that you will play a crucial part in navigating these troubled waters.”

A sense of relief washed over Jayce as he held Lena’s gaze. For the first time since arriving at the Wolf Den, he felt a glimmer of hope that they might uncover the truth behind the escalating demonic attacks and the mysterious emergence of powers among humans.

“I am determined to get to the bottom of it all,” Jayce said, his deep voice filled with renewed determination. “Unfortunately, the only thing I know for certain is that it all traces back to this demon lord; and that he has become interested in these new powers that humans have developed.”

“Rayne is in danger, isn’t she.”

“Not if we can help her understand her power, to be able to use it effectively. And to control it,” said Jayce. “You have my word that I will do all I can to protect her and to give her any help she needs to discover her full potential. I owe you that, and more.”

“You’re a good person, Jayce, and you always have been. As I said earlier, I never wanted to admit to myself that my husband and your friend, Gregory, made his choices too. That he was stubborn, willful and determined to help others at any cost, much like you. You both saw a situation for what it was, both chose to act together to right an injustice. It was easier to blame you than face those truths since you aren’t part of this pack. I wanted to hate someone, to be angry with someone, for someone to take the blame for my grief…someone who wasn’t my beloved husband. You really don’t owe me anything. I feel I owe you for wrongfully holding you responsible for Gregory’s death.”

“Thank you, Lena. Maybe someday I can stop holding myself responsible. I miss him too. He was one of my best friends.”

Lena smiled gently, “He would be proud of you. And I know he would have supported my decisions here tonight.”

Jayce nodded solemnly, acknowledging Lena's understanding and support. The weight of their shared knowledge settled heavily between them, a dark cloud hanging over the conversation. He had been burdened by this information for too long, haunted by the suffering of innocents and the manipulation of powers beyond mortal comprehension.

As they stood in the quiet of The Wolf Den, the crackling embers in the fireplace casting flickering shadows around them, Lena placed a hand on Jayce's shoulder. Her touch was both comforting and grounding, a silent reassurance that they were not alone in facing these dark truths.

“Tomorrow morning, we will begin training with Rayne. Together, we will ensure that she is equipped to face whatever challenges come her way.” Lena said, the firelight reflecting in her golden eyes. “For now, I’ll go check on the injured refugees upstairs. You should get some rest,” she smiled mischievously. “You’ll need it.”

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Rayne wiggled her toes in front of the gentle flames lapping at the masonry of the hearth, often thought of as the heart of the shifter’s common area. After a delicious meal of braised beef, steamed vegetables and freshly baked dinner rolls, she and Quinn had decided to unwind before retiring to her cabin, choosing the closest table to the slowly dying fire. Rayne had taken the opportunity to take off her shoes and let the radiating heat soothe her soles—and her soul. They sat in companionable silence, both transfixed by the firelight, both attempting to process everything.

After the last shifter left the commons, Quinn finally spoke up, breaking the silence between them. “

That was a bit overwhelming, don't you think?" he said, slowly shaking his head and widening his eyes to emphasize his point.

“Yep,” Rayne said slowly, letting the “P” make a popping sound on her lips. “And we were already in over our heads before that meeting. I think if there had been one more twist and turn, one more tidbit of new information, my head might have exploded back there.”

“Then I’ll offer my apologies in advance,” Adrian’s voice came from behind them. Quinn and Rayne turned to see the auburn-haired Archangel’s approach. While he wasn’t as tall as Jayce, his broad shoulders, lean, muscular arms and powerful stride exuded a sense of authority. “I’m afraid I’m about to ruin your night a little more, but this is probably the only chance I’ll get to talk to you away from Jayce.”

Quinn sighed, his shoulders slumped. “First, I lose my family. Then Rayne goes and gets the power to blow up demons, but I don’t get to be the next Superman. My head actually did explode in that meeting, I’m pretty sure…and now, one more piece of mental dynamite. Meh. How bad can it be?”

“Let’s not tempt fate by asking that,” Rayne said through a tired smile, shaking her head. “You really never can stop with the joking, huh?”

“I told you. It’s part of my charm,” Quinn said drily. He propped his elbow on his knee, his cheek on his fist, adopting the posture of quiet resignation. “Welcome to the firepit, Adrian. You’re free to start ruining our night at your leisure.”

Adrian chuckled. “So he’s always like this?” he asked Rayne.

She nodded solemnly. “Always.”

“Oh, I like him,” Adrian said, an impish smile spreading across his face. “Well, as promised, here’s yet another thought I had back in that meeting. I might know why it is that you can see through Jayce’s shield, but not mine. He’s not going to want to hear my theory and will definitely deny any possibility of this; however, I believe you are connected to him.”

Rayne’s expression dropped to a sardonic stare. “If this is the part where you inform me that he’s my fated mate or some angel prince with a happily ever after to offer me, then I hate to break it to you, but I’m human, not a shifter, and I stopped believing in fairy tales when the war wadded up my childhood along with everything else it destroyed. There. I saved you the trouble of ruining our night. You’re welcome.” She flashed a smile that was saccharin-sweet for a moment, then deadpanned.

Adrian’s laughed, holding his sides. “Well, that’s one way to put it,” he said, wiping a tear from his eye. “I must admit, I do love your sense of humor. But no, Rayne, it's not about fairy tales, fated mates or anything sappy. It’s something deeper and more complicated.”

Rayne raised an eyebrow, intrigued despite her skepticism. She shifted in her seat, pulling her legs up to sit cross-legged in her chair. “Alright, I’ll bite. What’s this big secret that’s going to ‘ruin’ my night?”

Adrian settled into the seat across from them, his expression turning serious. “Your kind has long held a notion of guardian angels, a belief that there’s one or more of us watching over a human’s every move. Yes, it’s very akin to fairy tales or romance cliches, which is why that notion isn’t true. However, it is a partial truth. Angels and Archangels are primarily responsible for maintaining mortal history, so to speak. We disrupt demonic influences and vanquish their forces. We protect and offer aid to any faction that isn’t aligned with darkness. And lastly, we record the events as they happen so that history has truth and congruency, not just the accounts of conquerors that wish to justify their actions. How the notion of guardian angels came about is that sometimes there are mortals that have qualities that resonate in such a way that we know they are going to have some sort of impact on history. We watch these mortals more closely, guarding and guiding them when necessary. Those that resonate the strongest can unknowingly create a connection with angels, which can make them a conduit for celestial energies. This makes it easier for us to track and assist those individuals.”

“Okay, but I’m guessing that this is pretty common knowledge among your kind, right?” Rayne asked.

“It is,” Adrian confirmed.

"Then Jayce already knows all this. And if I can see how this phenomenon is the most likely explanation for my ability to see through his shield, then I don’t get why he would deny the possibility,” she said, knitting her eyebrows together quizzically.

Adrian sighed. “Because it’s happened to him before. And it led to him facing Judgement, being Disgraced and becoming a fallen angel.”

Rayne’s eyes widened. “Oh. Yeah. I can see why he wouldn’t want to consider any connection.”

“And now the whole ‘one and a half angels’ insult makes a lot more sense. What a sucker punch that had to have been,” Quinn chimed in. “But I thought fallen angels became demons; Jayce clearly isn’t a demon.”

“Yet another misconception that has a grain of truth to it,” Adrian said. “Most fallen angels do become demons, but not all. It’s a choice to give into a sinful nature, a choice that every living being is faced with at one time or another. Jayce’s Judgement came about from one of these connections to a mortal, and it became a bond that led him to make certain decisions that exceeded his mandate; however, his motives were pure. So, while he endured Disgrace, he was never one to harm the innocent or align himself with evil thoughts and deeds. He retained most of his immense gifts and, as you can probably already tell, he still takes on his role as though nothing ever happened.”

Rayne pressed her lips together. “Humans are clearly very confused about angels.”

“Yes,” Adrian agreed. “But that’s because we don’t operate openly. And very rarely do we ever have to explain any of this to anyone since most mortals won’t require any interventions from our kind. We don’t mind the anecdotal misconceptions.”

“How did Jayce’s connection lead to his Disgrace, though?” Quinn asked.

“I think Adrian is the wrong angel to ask about that one,” Rayne said. “Seems kind of personal, honestly.”

“Knowing him the way I do, I would definitely agree with you,” said Adrian. “I’ve been both friend and mentor to Jayce for over a century. I only bring up the connection aspect because he will purposely overlook it, I’m almost certain. But you should be aware of that possibility, know that he has good reason to be reluctant to use or strengthen such a connection again, and allow him to come to terms with his own past. He carries so many regrets, sorrows and burdens, all of which he wishes to atone for to find his own source of redemption and peace. It’s my personal hope that a second chance of sorts can help him in some way.”

“Understandably,” Rayne said. She chewed her lower lip errantly, lost in thought for a moment. “Can I ask you a question, Adrian?”

“Sure.”

“You mentioned that you went on ahead to Quinn’s encampment while Jayce saved me from the demons that were about to attack. Were you drawn there by that magnetism type thing?”

“Yes, but unfortunately, I can’t pinpoint the source that I’m compelled to locate. At least, I can’t yet. I’m still trying to develop this new talent with the hope that it can prove useful.”

“Is it possible that your senses were picking up on someone that was in that village instead of me?” she asked.

Adrian frowned. “I wish I knew for sure. All I know is that I followed that pull, ended up distracted with fighting demons, and then saw you and your powers. I didn’t tune into that sense again since I figured I had found the person that I’d been drawn to find.” He shrugged. “But in theory, it’s possible that there was another in that village.” His face clouded then, looking troubled and lost in his own thoughts.

They all gazed into the dying embers, sharing a deep silence that was filled with individual contemplation about the problems they mutually shared.

*Demon lords, newfound powers, angelic connections, ongoing destruction and mysteries that desperately need to be solved. What have I gotten myself into now,* Rayne thought miserably.