Ash sifted through the air, swirling like out-of-season snowflakes as it drifted lazily to the packed earth of the shifter’s training grounds; a light coat of ash had gathered overnight before Rayne and her companions had gotten there, a sobering reminder of the burned homes, the wildfires that had ravaged the forest, and the demons that had set it all to burn. As dawn blazed across the horizon, the small gathering looked on, knowing from experience that the air pollution from yesterday’s fire would cause an unsettling phenomenon: a blood-red sun. Regardless of how prepared each of the small group was to witness it, the impact of the sun cloaked in colors that rival flowing lava could be felt; most turned their attention from the center of the clearing to watch the sun crest the ridge, sucking in a collective breath at the sight. Rayne glowered at the burning red ball of light in the sky. *Well, isn’t that kind of ironic,* she thought wryly, averting her eyes from the molten sunlight to her upturned, empty palm where she had been attempting to summon a single flame.

Her fingers trembled; her palm twitched slightly as she focused once again and attempted to push the energies inside her to manifest in the palm of her hand. She gritted her teeth and the shaking became slightly more pronounced, the muscles in her forearm bulging, her tendons tightening into taut ropes beneath her skin. To her dismay, the only thing that appeared in her outstretched hand was a tiny flake of the ash that continued to drift from the sky around them sporadically. She groaned, dropping her hand and shaking the ash away.

Jayce’s calm, soothing voice came to her from across the clearing, “It’s okay Rayne, just focus and…”

“What do you think I’m doing, pretending to be some ridiculous sculpture?” She snapped, cutting him off midsentence, her frustration having reached its apex. Her cheeks blazed, eyes narrowed. “I’ve focused and been pushing so hard, my arms are beginning to get sore and I haven’t actually moved at all. Nothing is happening. Maybe I can’t…I just…I can’t…” She choked back a sob, the fatigue and frustration welling up in her throat. Before she even realized it, her feet were pounding against the hardpacked earth, breaching the boundary of the training circle and carrying her into the forest.

Jayce started after her, but Adrian caught his arm, shaking his head silently; Quinn had already darted after her. “Let him go help her, Jayce. I have a feeling he will know exactly what to say to his best friend to help her calm down.”

Sighing, Jayce ran his hand through his thick, dark hair. “You’re right. As usual.”

“Could you repeat that?” Adrian said brightly, a teasing grin and impish twinkle in his eyes. Jayce rolled his eyes and nudged Adrian away with his shoulder.

Ahead in the sparsely wooded area surrounding the training grounds, Quinn barreled forward, hot on Rayne’s heels. “Hey, wait up,” he called. “I can’t run that fast.” He pushed his legs to move faster, the forest looming up around him and getting denser with every long, sprinted stride.

Rayne skidded to a stop just before the arc of oak and birch trees started to weave together like a unified front that seemed to denote a line of demarcation, a ‘go any further and you’re officially in the deep forest’ message. She had barely broken a sweat.

Quinn gasped, his chest heaving. “Thank you,” he managed to get out between gulps of air. “Very much.”

Rayne looked stunned, but amused. “I didn’t ask you to follow me, you know.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I know.” He bent over with his hands on his slightly bent knees. “Thought you…might need… to talk. My end might…have to wait.” He sank down to sitting, still breathing heavily. “Whew. Some Superman, huh?”

Rayne giggled. “You may need to brush up on your super skills. We could always ask Lena to throw you into the training rotation,” she suggested.

“Might be a good idea,” he mused, “considering everything going on. So,” Quinn drew out the word before continuing, “what’s up. Why are we out here?”

“I thought that was pretty obvious,” Rayne soured. “I have as much likelihood of producing a flame as you have to win a Decathalon.”

Quinn snorted, then burst into full laughter. “Me, a Decathalon? I don’t think I could win a One-Cathalon.”

Now Rayne was laughing wholeheartedly. “That’s not even a thing," she snickered, blotting her eyes.

“Good. Then maybe we can talk about your thing,” Quinn said, still smiling. “And before you verbally filet me from navel to neck, I’m not here to tell you to focus or attempt to direct you in any way. I’m here to listen.”

Rayne’s laughter died away. “I don’t know. I guess it’s that here I am, surrounded by ash, under that ruby red sun, all of it caused by violence I was just part of, but I’m trying to produce a flame, which is the cause of this fallout. And control a power I’ve managed somehow to tap into only once. And I didn’t even have control of it the first time; Jayce told me an unproven method that, yeah, ended up working. But…” her voice faltered.

“But…you’re worried about what might happen if it doesn’t work?” Quinn offered earnestly.

Rayne’s lips quirked to one side, her eyes cast downward as though she was considering the toes of her boots very hard. “Yeah,” she admitted in a small voice. “And maybe it would be better if I didn’t mess with forces of destruction. Maybe that’s why nothing is happening…maybe that power agrees with me.”

“Nah, that doesn’t track, Rayne. It wasn’t you that started those fires yesterday, so taking responsibility for the pollution in the air doesn’t seem fair, at least in my opinion. I think you’re being too hard on yourself. What you have is a gift in times like these. I admit, I’m a little jealous. I joke around about the whole Superman thing, but all jokes have a root of truth to them; otherwise, they aren’t funny or relatable. You saved me with that power, Rayne. In your hands, I think that power could be a great asset.”

“Thanks but…” Rayne’s head snapped up suddenly, her eyes unfocused for a moment. “Wait, wait. What did you just say?”

Quinn chuckled. “If you’re looking for an ego boost…”

“No, no…the other thing you said. About that power saving you. Maybe it came out because I was so desperate to save you, so angry at that demon for trying to kill you…”

Quinn’s forehead wrinkled in thought. “Hmm. Well, we could always stage a reenactment, I’m sure that Jayce wouldn’t mind lobbing some of his angel-woo-woo at my head to see what happens.”

Rayne smacked her forehead, wiping her hand slowly down her face in pseudo-exasperation. “Yeah. Not an option, unless you’re looking for a demonstration of a fileting that is more visceral than verbal. And did you just say ‘angel-woo-woo’? Seriously? What am I going to do with you?” She shook her head, eyes closed, biting back a grin.

“It’s more like what would you do without me,” Quinn sat back, rubbing his knuckles on his chest, then breathing on his fingernails, a faux-smug smile plastered on his face.

“I never want to find out,” Rayne said. “That’s why I know this is important. I know I need to figure this out. But putting you in danger just to reconnect with this, this power, that’s just too extreme.”

“Reconnect. Huh. Here’s a thought. What were you thinking about when you were trying to produce a flame?”

“I was thinking things like, ‘flame, appear’. I tried imagining the flame where I wanted it. I tried pushing whatever energy I had through my arm to my hand. I tried not thinking at all, I tried everything,” she said despondently.

“No, not everything. Re. Connect. Maybe you didn’t reach out to it to connect, just to order it to do what you wanted. And if this power is now a part of you, it might have some of your characteristics. Like not always listening to someone who’s being pushy but being receptive to the same advice from someone who is taking the time to reason with you. What both people tell you may be exactly the same, but you respond to how that message is delivered,” Quinn reasoned.

A small tingle of warmth circled in Rayne’s belly. She startled, instinctively cradling the spot where the heat radiated the most. She looked at Quinn, wide eyed. “I think you must be right. I feel something.”

“Really?” Quinn gasped, then immediately composed himself. “I-I mean, yeah, of course you do. Knew it all along.”

“Uh-huh. Ohhh-kayy Mr. Supergenius. I think it’s time we got back to the training grounds so I can test your theory,” Rayne said drily.

“Okay, but let’s walk back. I might have just saved the day, but I *still* can’t fly.”

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Grunts and growls greeted the duo as they reappeared in the clearing. Rayne moved to rush forward, her panic spiking. A tree trunk of an arm held her back as Bear intercepted her. “They’re only sparring,” he said quietly. “No worries.”

A flurry of fists and feet toppled across the training field, Killion launched into the air from a running start, his leg spinning in a perfect arc towards Jayce’s head. Jayce ducked just in time, rolling back on his shoulders before springing to his feet, a wide grin stretching across his face. The two combatants circled each other like sharks hunting their prey, sweat already visible on Jayce’s t-shirt and Killion’s bare chest. As if on cue both men lunged, their arms locked into close quarters combat—testing each other’s grappling skills. A series of fluid movements, counters and controlled strikes ensued, both Killion and Jayce demonstrating incredible speed and skill; it spoke volumes of their training.

Rayne watched in awe at their synchrony, the way each move seemed almost choreographed yet held an underlying intensity that made her heart race. She could feel the energy crackling in the air around them, a palpable reminder of the strength and skill of her fellow pack members and her newfound angelic companions.

Quinn nudged her gently, drawing her attention away from the sparring pair. “Back there in the woods when I said it might be a good idea to start training? Uh, scratch that.”

She chortled in response, eyes still glued to the sparring match. Raw power radiated from Killion and Jayce, lacing itself through each move. Just when it looked like Killion had managed to wrestle Jayce into a submission hold, Jayce shifted his weight, broke the hold Killion had on his arms and waist and torqued his body to the ground in a low, predatory crouch. His t-shirt tore down the front in the process, now fluttering behind his back in the slight breeze, looking like cloth wings for a moment.

Killion, although surprised by the obscure move, didn’t hesitate. He lunged forward, refreshing his attack. Jayce executed a dive roll, narrowly avoiding a tackle that would have pinned him to the ground; however, what was left of Jayce’s shirt caught on Killion’s arm and both men stumbled momentarily. Jayce spun around, snatching the ruined shirt from the ground, shoving his arms through the armholes, sliding the material across his back quickly.

But not quickly enough. Rayne’s eyes widened. Two identical, slightly curved scars marred the length of his back, starting beside his shoulder blades and ending at the bottom of his ribcage. The tattered fabric veiled the long, jagged welts and Jayce returned to a fighting stance, tracking Killion as quickly as he could.

Killion was picking himself off the ground, having missed his mark with his flying tackle. He held up a hand in front of him, a silent request to have a moment to compose himself.

Instead, Jayce relaxed his stance and called out, “Let’s go ahead and call that a draw, Killion. Extremely impressive, by the way. I can see why Lena has so much confidence in your abilities and thinks of you as her best hunter.”

Lena beamed with pride, “You should see him battle in wolf form. There’s few that could take him on in the ring.”

“Agreed,” said Rayne, stepping further into the clearing. Jayce whirled around, a look of trepidation on his face. Then embarrassment. She tried not to take in the sight of him, his sculpted upper body, the bronze skin shimmering with a thin sheen of sweat, his broad shoulders covered haphazardly by the ruined shirt and, most notably, how vulnerable he looked. He clutched the front halves of the ripped t-shirt together with both hands before he straightened, forcing his face to adopt a neutral expression.

Although she wasn’t fooled by his literal quick coverup, Rayne was also compelled to pretend she hadn’t seen anything noteworthy. “I’m sorry that I lashed out at you earlier. It’s not your fault that I was frustrated.”

Jayce softened his expression, his silvery eyes flooding with a silent relief mixed with gratitude. “I understand completely. I take it you’re ready to try again?”

She nodded. “Quinn came up with an idea that I think might work. But before I try anything, I need your word that you’ll take any necessary measures if things go wrong.”

“You can always back it off, put it back to sleep,” Jayce stammered.

“Your. Word.” Rayne’s blazing blue eyes bore into him. “Part of why it didn’t work is because I’m terrified. I don’t want anyone to end up like that demon. Okay? So please. Give me your word that, if things get out of control, you’ll do whatever it takes to stop…me…and that you’ll keep everyone else here safe.” She straightened to her full height, shoulders thrown back and jaw set in determination.

Jayce knit his brows together, the muscles of his jaw a thick knot working visibly behind his cheek. He closed his eyes, pressing his lips together and took a very deep inhale. Then slowly let it out, his shoulders rounding. Without opening his eyes, he said, “You have my word, Rayne.” His eyes slid open, the usual storms that swirled there, now stilled. He turned and strode from the ring, taking a place between Lena and Adrian.

On unsteady feet, Rayne move forward, each step seemingly heavier than the last. She slowed her breathing, pushing every thought she could out of her mind. When she reached the very center, she stopped, bowed her head and cupped the spot that she had felt the heat tingling in her belly. *I’m sorry if I’ve not been communicating appropriately up until now,* she thought. The tingle returned, spreading a warmth through her chest that soothed her. She relaxed, mentally folding part of herself into the feeling, welcoming it to envelop her. Unconsciously, she raised her arm, her hand floating upward, palm outstretched. *Will you help me?* The warmth became more intense, radiating outward, stretching down her arm and pooling into her palm. The air shimmered and coalesced over her hand. She didn’t need to open her eyes to know something had happened; nor did she need to rely on the gasps of all present. She *felt* the flame appear. Rayne poured her gratitude into the phantom flame, felt a surge of joy that she knew to be resonating from both her and the unnamed power behind the flame. The tingling sensation moved through her, from head to toe like a caress gliding across every nerve, every synapse, every cell of her body.

The elation she felt was not merely her own. Something or someone else was rejoicing alongside her. In the depths of her mind, a presence she couldn't quite grasp but could feel as a comforting presence, was guiding and strengthening her. It was as if a weight she hadn't known she carried had lifted, leaving behind a sense of freedom and power that surged through her veins like molten lava.

As the golden flame danced above her palm, casting a warm glow that pulsed through the clearing, Rayne couldn't tear her gaze away. It flickered and swirled in intricate patterns, meshing an everchanging color palette within its aureate tendrils, responding to the unspoken pattern of her thoughts. The intensity of the flames ebbed and flowed with her emotions, a tangible representation of the newfound connection she had forged with this elemental force.

Her heart swelled with wonder, mingled with a touch of trepidation at the vast potential that lay within her grasp. She could sense Jayce's eyes on her, a mixture of awe and concern reflected in his gaze. The rest of the onlookers watched in stunned silence, their expressions ranging from disbelief to reverence.

*I can feel that you’re a part of me. I want to know you, to know your name. And I hope you’ll guide me to learn how to communicate with you.* The flame swirled rapidly in response, its golden light pairing with a deepening crimson, then shrank into a shimmering pool of dichroitic light within her palm. For a moment, the tendrils caressed her hand, then poured from the tips of her fingers, spilling onto the hard packed earth below. As she watched, the flames poured along the ground slowly, traversing the training field to the opposite side where Lena, Quinn, Killion, Jayce, Adrian and Bear all stood transfixed. A single line was being formed by the flames, stretching across the expanse, blazing a pathway. A pathway that led her directly to Jayce.

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She instinctively knew that the guidance she had requested was before her; however, she recalled the conversation with Adrian the night before, how he had said that Jayce would only balk at any notion of a connection between them. She hesitated. The flames along the ground that provided a visual representation of a connection between them curled toward Jayce in a beckoning gesture, intensifying in color to a gold-and-garnet gleam in response to her reluctance, as if becoming more insistent.

Jayce watched Rayne intently, his grey eyes clouded with an emotion she couldn't quite place. As she maintained a small flame within her palm, a familiar warmth bloomed in her chest, reminiscent of the connection she'd felt with him before. Jayce's jaw tightened, and he took a step back. *Yeah, he’s taking this well,* she thought sarcastically.

She felt a pang of disappointment at Jayce's reaction, but in some ways, she had expected it. As the flames continued to gyrate above her palm, now mimicking rolling waves, Rayne made a decision. *One step at a time*, she told herself. With a resolute expression, she took a step forward, following the path the flames had laid out towards Jayce. Each footfall felt like an eternity, her anxious energy pulsing through her veins with every beat of her heart.

Jayce's gaze followed her every movement, his mask of neutrality slipping to reveal a flicker of something she couldn't quite define. As Rayne stopped in front of him, the flames swirling fervently in her palm. She lifted her eyes to meet his, the unspoken tension crackled between them like an electric current.

"Rayne," Jayce's voice was a low rumble, filled with a mix of awe and concern. "What you just did... it's extraordinary."

She took a tentative step forward, the flames flickering brighter in response to her emotions. "I don't understand it fully yet, but I feel a connection... with something that’s part of me, yet greater than myself."

He paled slightly, the steely resolve that had settled on his face wavered almost imperceptibly. “A c-connection? To what?” He shifted his weight from foot to foot, his hand knotting the front of his tattered t-shirt even tighter around him.

“I’m not entirely certain,” she admitted. “I can only feel it, like something that has been dormant within me has awakened.”

“Can you control it?” he asked tentatively.

“Yes and no,” she said. “It’s not a question of control, it’s a question of cooperation. I asked for a flame to appear. I asked for guidance on how to hone this connection because as of right now, I can only sense emotions and physical contact from this power. And it led me to you, so I’m guessing you can help me understand more.”

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Jayce raked his fingers roughly through his hair with his free hand, the other wringing the bedraggled material in his fist. He looked at Rayne, taking stock of the radiant aura surrounding her, like a fusion of pure light and flame coalescing into a gentle halo surrounding her body; dread squeezed his chest. *This can’t be happening,* he thought, his mind snapping shut like a steel trap, his psionic protections forming an impenetrable barrier as he fought to maintain his careful composure. *Not again.* Cold sweat beaded his brow; he took a reflexive step backward from the intensity of her presence, his every instinct screaming at him to flee. But he couldn't move; his feet felt rooted to the ground as if held by invisible chains.

Rayne sensed the shift in Jayce's demeanor, the subtle withdrawal that spoke so much louder than words ever could. She fought the hurt that threatened to blossom in her chest, reminding herself that he was likely to be as overwhelmed as she felt. That before yesterday, they had been complete strangers. And that her power, this connection, it was all a mystery; she couldn't fault him for his caution.

"I don't want to make you uncomfortable," she said softly, her voice touched with a vulnerability she rarely showed. "And I know this might be overwhelming for both of us, but I believe we can learn from each other. I am choosing to trust you to help me navigate this newfound power within me." She reached out tentatively, her hand extending towards Jayce as if drawn by an invisible thread linking them. The flames in her palm danced wildly, mirroring the tumultuous emotions swirling between them.

He flinched momentarily, as if the warmth radiating from Rayne's connection unnerved him. The memories of his past mistakes clawed at the edges of his consciousness, threatening to engulf him in a tidal wave of guilt and regret. His stormy gray eyes locked with hers, a battle raging behind their depths. The scars on his forearms seemed to pulse with a ghostly light, a reminder of the sacrifices he had made in ages past. And of the price he had paid.

He wanted desperately to turn away, to shut down this burgeoning connection before it could deepen into something he feared. But the earnestness in her voice, the sheer vulnerability she displayed tugged at something long buried within him. A protective instinct that had lain dormant stirred to life, a reluctant acknowledgment that he couldn't ignore the entwining paths of fate that seemed determined to bind them together.

As Rayne's hand drew closer, the flames in her palm flickered with a renewed sense of purpose. He nodded in resignation, the war within himself dying away; he extended his own hand. With a steadiness borne from her shifter training, she gently placed her hand over his, allowing the warmth of their combined energy to mingle and merge.

A jolt ran through Jayce at her touch, a surge of power that resonated deep within his core. His breath caught in his throat as he felt a connection forming, not just with Rayne, but with the elemental force that dwelled within her as well. It whispered to him, caressing the source of his own immense gifts, soothing away the self-doubt and hidden fears he had buried for too long; it murmured gently and the world seemed to tilt on its axis and fall away from where they both stood, bound by the elemental energies surging between them.

In that suspended moment, a silent understanding settled within him, transcending words and the barriers he had built through a century of self-imposed torture, solitude and regret. His gaze softened as an ember within him that had been crushed out long ago flickered to life once again. Hope. A single word that held so many conflicting meanings for him.

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Rayne's eyes widened; she could sense an echo of his energy responding to the call of hers, intertwining in a dance of ancient power that defied logic and reason. It was as if the elements themselves had recognized each other, drawn together by a force older than time. In that moment of connection, she saw fragmented images of another war, another time. A battle between light and darkness served as the backdrop; a fierce angelic warrior, silvery-white wings spread, hands raised with pure light arcing against a throng of demons unlike any she had ever seen; and a shattering scream from somewhere within the churning darkness.

As the vision faded, Rayne felt an overwhelming sense of grief wash over her, not entirely her own. The elemental energies ebbed, flickered and faded; slowly, almost reluctantly, she withdrew her hand from his. She wanted to comfort him but couldn’t shake the feeling that she had witnessed something she was not supposed to, an intimate tragedy that had emotionally claimed the silver-winged warrior, shaping him into the brooding mentor before her. The remnants of the vision left Rayne shaken, a profound sorrow lingering in her heart; her elemental energy pulsed around her, synchronizing with its broken beat.

“Jayce,” she began softly, but faltered, an unspoken question hanging heavy in the air between them.

He took a deep breath, his eyes meeting hers once more, a flicker of pain crossing his features before he masked it behind a veil of stoicism. “I know you have so many questions; honestly, so do I.” His eyes became hazy as if he slipped back into an abyss of his own thoughts and memories. He swallowed hard. “But I’m going to ask you to give me some time.”

He vanished then, at least to the other silent onlookers; she saw his shimmering form turn slowly and walk away, head downcast and shoulders slumped.

Lena’s soft voice filled the clearing. “Killion, would you please go with him? I’m sure he will need some space to think, maybe a change of clothes?”

“Yeah, of course,” Killion answered.

“I should probably go along, in case he, um, needs anything,” Adrian said. To Rayne he said, “And if you need me, I’ll be in that charming gazebo. When you’re ready, please come and find me.”

“I-I will, Adrian. And thank you,” Rayne mumbled. Her eyes had dropped to her hands; she flexed her fingers, then laced them loosely together. A sense of longing filled her then, and her palms warmed in response. *Wow,* she thought, *you really are with me.* The warmth crept up her arms in what could only be interpreted as a phantom embrace.

She hadn’t noticed Lena cautiously moving toward her. “Rayne, are you alright?”

She nodded in response, feeling the light pressure of Lena’s hand on her shoulder. “Actually, I think I’m better than ever. I may not know all I need to at this point, but I know enough for now. I don’t control this power, but it works with me, like an extension of myself. We can share thoughts and feelings for now until I find a way to communicate with it fully.” Rayne stood up straighter, her resolve solidifying as she spoke. "I may not have all the answers, but I have a purpose now. And I won't let fear or uncertainty hold me back."

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Rayne and Quinn shuffled through the front door to her small, but cozy cabin; he made a beeline for her overstuffed couch, his makeshift bed, while Rayne slumped into a threadbare recliner. “I hate being right sometimes,” she said through a yawn, kicking off her boots.

“Huh?” Quinn asked, fluffing his borrowed pillow.

“Remember when I said I had a feeling we were going to regret that we both weren’t hallucinating?”

“Yeah. And you probably jinxed us by saying that, you know.”

“Probably,” she said with a shrug. She let her response hang in the air between them while she gathered her thoughts carefully. “Quinn, I can’t thank you enough for helping me today. Without you, I’d still be fuming in a forest,” she hesitated, a wary edge lacing her voice when she continued. “I’m especially grateful considering this has all been hardest on you. You’re going through much more than anyone. I haven’t wanted to pry or intrude, or bring up everything, but I do want to prop open the door, so to speak. You’re my best friend and I haven’t lost sight of that; your loss is mine as well, and you don’t have to pretend you’re okay or push aside your feelings just because of all this chaos that’s been dumped on our heads. Whenever you’re ready to talk or need me, I hope you know that I’m here.”

“Thanks. I just don’t know what to say. I’m still kind of numb. It’s like…I keep thinking I’m going to wake up any minute. Things are just so unreal. And I hope you don’t take this wrong, but your Firestarter act adds to that whole surreal-this-can’t-possibly-be-happening feeling.”

“I totally get that,” Rayne said. “And no, I’m not offended at all. I can’t be; I’m still trying to figure out how my mind says the exact same thing when I’m actually experiencing it firsthand.”

“What does it feel like," he asked, sounding genuinely interested.

“Most of it is too hard to explain, but I feel all tingly wherever the power moves, I feel a warmth that is so tender and gentle. It’s exciting, but scary and confusing. And while I wish it wasn’t happening to me, I’m still grateful,” she thought for a minute. “And I bet none of that makes any sense at all.” She sighed.

“You’d be surprised. I feel a lot like that right now. I mean, losing my mom, having what’s left of my family unaccounted for—yeah, I wish that all hadn’t happened with all my heart and soul. And it’s all so new that it still doesn’t feel real and I haven’t had time to process it, under the circumstances. And I kinda think that might be a blessing in disguise since that isn’t all I have to focus on. I’m so grateful for you and Lena, and how your entire pack has been helping the survivors, and even for all the weirdness going on. At least I don’t have to dwell on it all alone, and I have plenty to distract me; or wonderful people who would understand if I need to take a step back. I could have it a lot worse,” Quinn said, sounding exhausted. “A lot of what Adrian said yesterday really helped, too.”

“Oh, man,” Rayne bolted upright in her chair. “Adrian. I think he was trying to tell me he wanted to speak with me.”

Quinn yawned. “Don’t stay on my account, I’m probably going to take a nap until lunch. This morning wiped me.”

“Ugh, me too. Take a nap for me, okay?”

Quinn snickered. “Gladly. And I might be a real jerk and let you know how wonderful yours was.”

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She found Adrian perched on a picnic table in the common area, enjoying the sights and smells of the shifter camp around him. Community lunch was already being prepared, the tantalizing smells of a thick, hearty stew bubbling over the hearth had him sniffing the breeze as she approached. “Hello, Rayne, I’m glad you came to join me. I figured you might have some general blanks from everything you experienced that I may be able to fill in for you.” His auburn hair caught in the breeze, tousling the few tendrils that had worked loose from the otherwise carefully smoothed, long ponytail neatly pinned at his nape. His warm brown eyes danced with excitement. “It’s been quite the morning, after all. And I hope you’ll indulge me in asking you a few questions as well.”

“Of course,” she said, taking a seat next to him on the picnic table, her feet resting on the bench seat. Any vestiges of sleepiness left her; his excitement seemed contagious. “I’ll answer what I can.”

“I’m assuming that you saw something today,” he began carefully, “and it gave Jayce a full-blown case of the moody-broodies.”

“Wow. You and Quinn are too much alike,” she snickered, shaking her head slightly. “But yes, I saw a memory of a war. And I got the feeling it was a long, long time ago.”

“Correct. Your history would call it World War One and Two. It’s more widely referred to as the First Sundering. As you probably know, paranormal history differs a bit. But what you might not know is that our history is typically the catalyst for what becomes a human war. Since demons have always sought to wipe out everyone and everything, or control whatever they can’t destroy, any uprising they start sets off a chain reaction that bleeds over to humankind.”

“Makes sense,” Rayne said, nodding. “Lena once explained that when demons start massing, so much negative energy settles in the areas where they congregate, and humans end up picking up on the imbalance. She even said that humans can be infected by those energies. Is that accurate?”

“Yes, but there’s more to it,” he looked a little uneasy for a moment. “I’m hoping what I’m about to tell you won’t be considered rude. You see, demons have a very twisted opinion about humans. They regard humankind as weak, a species to be toyed with, preyed upon or purposefully influenced through coercion, manipulation or possession tactics. The demons believe that by sowing chaos and discord among humans, they can weaken the fabric of reality itself. It's a dangerous game they play, one that we must constantly strive to counteract."

Rayne nodded thoughtfully, absorbing the weight of his words. "So, the First Sundering and what we know as the World Wars were a result of the demons' machinations?"

"Exactly," Adrian confirmed. "It was a time of great upheaval and conflict across all realms. The Archangels and most of the paranormal factions were locked in a grueling war with an unusually large number of greater demons. And there were entire swarms of lesser demons to contend with as well. It was one of the darkest times I’ve ever witnessed in all my long years.”

“I think the vision I saw had greater demons. I’d never seen anything like them,” she said, a shiver overpowering her as the memory flashed through her mind. “But I don’t know what the difference is between greater or lesser demons, if I’m to be perfectly honest.”

“Greater demons are more organized, more calculating and much more dangerous. There are seven different types of greater demons, each type is attributed to one of the deadly sins. They gravitate to mortals and paranormals that are most likely to partake of their type of poison, so to speak.”

“Are there still greater demons out there?” Rayne asked tentatively.

“Of course. Evil never really dies, you see. It keeps being reborn over and over again. Not the exact same greater demon that was already vanquished, mind you, but cut from the same cloth all the same.”

“So, there’s no winning?” She asked, horrified, her voice rising in pitch.

“I wouldn’t say that at all,” Adrian said reassuringly. “If winning is only counted in terms of eradicating evil completely, then you’d be correct. However, the real truth is that there will always be evil. But there will always be good too. When we tip the scales dramatically to one side of that continuum or the other, that’s a win for the respective side. Absolutes don’t exist in paranormal wars, only in human conflicts.”

Rayne chewed her lower lip, considering this new information. “But why stop before completely wiping out the losing side?”

“This world will only survive if there is balance. Light and dark, good and evil, day and night. Each concept has its purpose, and without its counterpart, balance cannot be achieved. Neither have true meaning without its paired opposite.”

“Why wouldn’t the demons want to keep the balance in check then?”

Adrian sighed. “I questioned that for centuries. The only conclusion I’ve been able to find is that maybe demons have embraced the notion that misery loves company; so, they inflict all of the same suffering they have faced on every being they can, knowing that if they achieve their goal, all would be lost, and their suffering will end. In the meantime, they get a sick pleasure out of tempting more to join their doctrine.”

“That still doesn’t make sense.”

“Agreed. But that’s because you and I don’t see the world as they would. It’s not in our natures. And that’s why I have no idea if I’m correct in my train of logic; the only way to know for sure is to pose that question to a demon.”

Rayne wrinkled her nose. “Hard pass,” she said.

“Having interrogated their kind before, I have to say, you’re quite wise. Contemplating such corruption and darkness isn’t a recommendable pastime,” he said with a smirk.

“You’ve interrogated them?” she asked, visibly taken aback.

“Jayce and I have had to try to garner any information we can about the phenomenon that we’ve witnessed. And yes, that included ah, asking them not so nicely for answers,” Adrian shifted his weight slightly; the action seemed to imply subtle discomfort. “Speaking of questions, I have several of my own, if you’ll indulge me,” he said, neatly turning the conversation in a new direction. She nodded and he continued, “You mentioned that you saw images that I had deduced were from Jayce’s memories of the First Sundering. Did you see them from Jayce’s perspective? Or did you see him in those memories?”

“I saw him,” she said with a shrug, not understanding the significance.

Adrian sat forward, his interest becoming keener, but his expression, unreadable. “Fascinating,” he softly mused, more to himself than to her. He rubbed his chin, lost to his thoughts.

After a several minutes had passed, Rayne finally broke the silence. “Um, care to share?”

“Oh, uh, my apologies,” Adrian mumbled, shaking himself out of his reverie. “When you first used your elemental powers, I was there, if you’ll recall. Like the others we freed, your powers had qualities that were not so different from angelic giftings, which is why Jayce gave you the instructions our kind uses with such powers, I’m pretty certain. Then, when you reconnected with those powers again, my own powers reacted, but more intensely than I’ve ever experienced thus far. And now, you mention that the vision was from outside of Jayce’s own memories; that denotes that he didn’t share a memory with you. Somehow, your power did.”

Rayne’s brows furrowed in confusion. “My elemental shared a memory with me?” she repeated, trying to make sense of Adrian’s revelation.

Adrian nodded slowly, his gaze fixed intently on her. “It seems that way. Your elemental powers are tied to ancient forces beyond our full understanding at the present. And this seems to suggest that your gift is connected to something beyond a mere power source, a consciousness that can tap into the past or even communicate in ways we’re only beginning to grasp.”

Rayne felt a shiver run down her spine at the implications of what Adrian was suggesting. The idea that her own powers were guiding her, showing her glimpses of history or messages from another realm, was both exhilarating and terrifying.

“Do you think my elemental is trying to tell me something?” she asked, almost hesitant to voice the question, as if fearing the answer.

Adrian’s expression turned somber. “Undoubtably. Why show you an image otherwise? This was an effort to communicate, but there must be a barrier to direct communication. It would be the same if you and I spoke two different languages, but I needed a glass of water; I would point to the water to communicate that need without words.”

“But what could it have been trying to tell me?” she asked out loud, her brow furrowed deeply.

“I think to know for certain, you’re going to need to find your Rosetta Stone, so to speak. And if I’m right, Jayce is holding it. Your elemental literally blazed a path to him.”

“And the image it showed me; Jayce was the central figure in that memory,” Rayne said hesitantly. “Adrian, I want to bounce an idea off you, but it might sound a little crazy,” she started.

“Bounce away,” he invited, “and just so you know, there aren’t many things that sound crazy after having lived well over a millennium.”

The tension in her face eased into a small smile. “I haven’t had a chance to share that my elemental seemed to recognize whatever power resides within Jayce. I could feel a sense of familiarity, even elation, that was not my own when I connected with him. So, what if my elemental was attempting to awaken something within Jayce?”

Adrian paused, thunderstruck. “It is possible,” he started warily. “I’ve known Jayce since his Creation Day; I served as his teacher for a time, and since then have been blessed with his friendship. I have seen that he is extremely gifted, but nothing that I didn’t attribute to natural talent.”

“Perhaps there is more to it? And maybe something that he isn’t aware of or has been asleep. Like mine.” As she spoke, her core began to tingle.

Adrian leaned back, processing her words carefully. “It’s a risky proposition, Rayne, and one with some barriers, so to speak. I’ve alluded to the fact that Jayce has…issues. Ones that won’t let him accept any of this or explore it without a fight.”

“But it seems that whatever force is guiding me wants me to figure out how Jayce fits into all of this,” she insisted, the warmth in her belly radiating as if in agreement. “I trust my instincts on this, Adrian.”

After a moment of contemplative silence, Adrian exhaled slowly. “Well,” he said, straightening his shirt carefully, as though the act itself would settle him into his decided, yet uncomfortable course of action, “I suppose that would mean I need to go attempt to reason with him.”

“I’ll send my prayers with you, Adrian,” she said earnestly.

He winked in response. “I’ll definitely need them.”