The sharp crack of Jayce's fist slamming into Killion's weathered oak table reverberated through the cabin. “Back off, Adrian,” Jayce snarled, his tone deep and menacing. “This has nothing to do with you.”

Adrian flinched, his warm brown eyes filled with a mix of concern and determination. “I’d argue that it does seeing as how you’re my closest friend. Damn it, Jayce, you can't keep this bottled up forever," Adrian pleaded, his voice a blend of frustration and compassion. "What happened during that connection with Rayne? I know it has something to do with your past."

Jayce's piercing gray eyes flashed with intense anger and defensiveness, then dulled to a storm-cloud of resignation. He ran a hand through his dark, tousled hair, his shoulders sagging under an invisible weight. "You don't understand, Adrian," Jayce growled, his words laced with regret. "Some wounds are better left unopened."

Adrian stepped closer, placing a hand on Jayce's shoulder. "We've known each other for over two centuries, my friend, and it’s been difficult to watch you torture yourself. I’ve respected your boundaries up until now, but there hasn’t been a single day I haven’t wanted to help you. I can’t understand unless you fill me in. Let me help you carry this burden."

Jayce's jaw clenched, the muscles in his neck taut with tension. For a moment, Adrian thought he might lash out again. Instead, Jayce's shoulders slumped, and he let out a long, weary sigh.

"Fine," Jayce conceded, his voice barely above a whisper. "But you're not going to like what you hear."

As Jayce began to speak, Adrian's eyes widened. The fallen angel's words painted a picture of the same memory Rayne had described, but in sharper details; Jayce had closed his eyes, reliving every sound, smell, emotion and sight that Rayne couldn’t have known. Yes, they had been greater demons; it had been an ambush. Yes, Jayce had fought the throng of fiends; he had suffered injuries along his forearms, deep gashes that were now ghostly rifts and daily reminders, yet he had continued to fight for the sake of those around him. It was the mention of a name that made Adrian's breath catch in his throat.

"Hope," Jayce said, his voice cracking with emotion. "She was... special. She was a celebrated clairvoyant with uncanny abilities that had gained attention even in the mortal world. Hope was one of those mortals meant to play a crucial role in the First Sundering."

Adrian's mind raced. "So, she was Marked? You were assigned protection orders for her, weren’t you?"

It was more of a statement than a question, but Jayce nodded abysmally. “It was shortly after World War One had come to an end. Hope had made predictions about another global conflict; mortals at the time were already weary and didn’t want to hear her prediction, no matter that she had been right about every other prediction she had made. Yet, she maintained her status with many powerful leaders, which made her a target for demonic forces; therefore, she required protection. It was while I watched her that I noticed her energy signatures were so like angelic psionics that I sought out our archivist, Mara Thorne, to help me investigate our powers and how they related to humans. The conclusions we drew are that since every mortal being was created by God, we must share the same very basic physiology. And since angelic gifts are psionic…” Jayce reasoned.

“…then all mortals are likely to have the same access to celestial gifts.” Adrian finished for him. “They simply don’t have instruction on how to use them; or that they even exist.”

“Exactly. But from what I saw with Hope, she had somehow accessed a portion of her powers. Mara and I began to watch her more carefully, trying to find some explanation for our theories. The more we observed Hope, the more apparent it became that she possessed a rare and potent connection to the celestial psionics. Her visions were not mere predictions but glimpses into the tapestry of fate itself. She was becoming stronger, too, and I began to worry that she would become a beacon for infernal attention.

“Mara disagreed with me. She thought that since the mortals had all but dismissed what we knew to be a glimpse of the future, that Hope’s talents would likely go unnoticed since they weren’t powers that could be used in battle,” Jayce recounted, his voice thin as if reaching over time and distance. “And, of course, that got me to thinking that maybe Hope had other talents, some that could help her defend herself in the days ahead. The paranormal battles of the Sundering hadn’t ended, and those negative energies were affecting the mortal world, having been aggravated by the devastation of their World War; I feared that she would still be in danger.”

Adrian pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes closed, brow rutted. “I remember those times. The mortal world was uneasy at best; ours was plagued with daily raids, trying to push back any demonic influence from spilling over again. And we were losing ground.”

“Yes. And it’s my guess that one of those losing battles resulted in several demons crossing paths with Hope. Mara and I intervened, covertly as mandated, not realizing that Hope could sense us. She called out to us to thank us and, well…I made a decision to show myself. Hope told me then that she had seen my face in a vision before, that she had been waiting for me,” Jayce’s voice dropped to almost a whisper then. “She wiped blood from my cheek as she said it and then I felt this power surge; I could feel her energy embracing mine. It was like an electrical impulse, but without pain.” He paused, his eyes out of focus.

As Jayce delved further into the memories, Adrian had listened intently, piecing together the puzzle between the past and present. He couldn’t help but notice the similarities and it sent a shiver down Adrian's spine. “You fell in love with her, didn’t you?”

Jayce nodded miserably; he took a deep breath and continued. “Mara also appeared to Rayne that night, but we later argued about my choice. I told her about our energies connecting and theorized about the source being elemental power but somehow connected to angelic gifts. It ended up that I chose to train Hope, to see what human psionics were capable of and try to help her strengthen her powers. Mara’s curiosity won out in the end, and she agreed to help as well. Hope changed everything about what we thought we understood with regard to psionic powers, especially regarding humankind, but also our own. She soon developed the ability to communicate telepathically, displayed powers of telekinesis and most notably, the ability to manipulate elements. Her open-mindedness to our suggestions allowed her to explore her powers fully. We all did.”

“How long did this go on?” Adrian asked tentatively.

“Five years. We shared what we had discovered with many angels; it began to turn the tides of the Sundering, just not in the ways we thought. As more and more angels started enhancing their abilities with elemental energies, the tide of demons seemed to wane. We were all so proud of our discoveries, our accomplishments; it blinded us,” Jayce said sadly. “What we didn’t know is that our display of forceful new powers had drawn the attention of greater demons, and they were amassing in secret, biding their time.” His bitterness bled through his words, his fist tightened, and muscles knotted.

Jayce continued, his voice raw with a mix of sorrow and anger. “Hope awoke early one morning; she had had a vision, one that was particularly strong. I had never seen her in such a state. She was agitated, horrified at what she had seen. She described atrocities beyond anything the world had ever seen before and on such a scale that the leader behind such massacres would be labeled a monster. She had also seen a demonic influence behind it all.”

“The demon lord?” Adrian gasped.

“Yes. She was able to describe him and the plot that he was attempting to enact, and she specified that his plans would be executed through a mortal man. She sought an audience with one of the few mortals that had paid attention to her other warnings, one she had always foreseen as becoming a powerful leader. Her vision came on February 1st, 1938. She was granted a meeting on February 3rd. We never made it to that meeting. That was the day of the ambush,” Jayce’s voice cracked under the weight of his emotions. “All three of us set out that day, knowing this was the key moment that Hope had been predestined for, the reason that I had been assigned to her protection detail. And I failed her.” His head dropped; he hugged his arms tightly to his chest.

Adrian gave him a few moments to gather himself and considered the timeline in comparison to what he knew of human and paranormal history. While none of the dates Jayce mentioned aligned with anything majorly noteworthy, he realized that the day following this meeting was when Germany’s War Ministry was dissolved and the leadership officially channeled to a man that human and paranormal history alike would remember as a monster: Adolph Hitler. Adrian let out a breath with such force that his lungs had to fight to refill; he felt sucker punched.

Jayce lifted his head at the sudden exhale. He turned to look at his friend, eyes haunted with the weight of a century of guilt and self-imposed torture. “Yes. Now you understand. Hope was carrying a single message that could have changed everything. He had listened to her before, even following the guidance of some of her visions during the rise of his military career. She had every reason to believe that he would have received her warning and, knowing his ego, he wouldn’t have wanted to be leading a mission that was predestined to fail and would have his name become synonymous with the purest of evils.”

Adrian sank into a chair across the table from Jayce, all color having drained from his face. He tried to form words but found that his mouth had gone dry; his voice died on his shaking lips.

Jayce cast his eyes to the side and pursed his lips. It was painful to continue, his shame renewed, the grief drowning him as though these events had only just occurred; but he pressed on, his full story, finally, almost confessed. “When we were attacked, it was clear that the demons sought to claim Hope, doubtless to capture her and twist her gifts for their own nefarious purposes. We all fought them, but there were just so many. Mara was badly injured by lesser demons in the first few moments of the battle; I had taken on two greater demons, but the third managed to shred my arms and my injuries broke my concentration just long enough for my shield around Hope to dissolve. She was dragged off through the throng. Mara was unresponsive. And out of desperation, I flung an arc of energy that sliced through the greater demon I fought. That’s when I heard Hope scream. I saw her go limp. And then she was gone. I think I killed her,” he said quietly. “I renewed my fight, and somehow managed to carve a path to where I heard her cries. I never found her; I could no longer feel her. And I’ve been carrying the emptiness with me every day since.”

Adrian placed a reassuring hand on Jayce's arm, silently offering his support. "You did everything you could, my friend. You were not truly at fault for what happened to her."

Jayce shook his head, the weight of centuries-old regret heavy upon his shoulders. "But I was supposed to protect her. It was my duty, and I failed. And because of my involvement and interference with mortal history, I was sent to Judgement. I had to admit that my love for Hope had blinded me, that my decisions had only drawn more attention to a mortal that held the key to stopping one of human history’s most evil events. And while it was deemed that my intentions were pure, the result was too catastrophic to ignore. I was Disgraced, my wings torn from my back and cast down to earth, severed from my formal role.”

As Jayce recounted his fall from grace, his interference in Hope's destiny, and her ultimate demise, Adrian felt a deep ache in his chest. The weight of Jayce's guilt was palpable, filling the cabin with a heavy silence.

"And now, with Rayne," Jayce continued, his voice thick with emotion, "I fear history may be repeating itself. There are too many similarities to ignore."

Adrian understood the fear that history might indeed be repeating itself with Rayne. The parallels between Hope and Rayne’s situations were striking, and Adrian couldn't shake off the feeling of impending danger.

Silence enveloped them like a heavy shroud for a moment before Adrian finally spoke, his voice soft but resolute. "We can't change the past, Jayce, but we can learn from it. We have to do everything in our power to protect Rayne now. You have my full support in this; I will help in any way I can."

“Thank you, Adrian. For everything,”

"We can't tell her everything," Adrian said softly, his brow furrowed with concern. "Not yet."

Jayce nodded, his eyes haunted by the ghosts of his past. "Agreed. But we can't leave her in the dark either. She needs to understand the gravity of her gifts."

As they finalized their plan, deciding what to reveal and what to keep hidden, Jayce felt a flicker of optimism ignite in his chest. Perhaps this was an opportunity to right the wrongs of his past and protect the future that Hope had once fought for.

3 - 3

Rayne's boots crunched over acorns, dry branches and leaves that littered the hiking trail as she pushed deeper into the forest, her fiery hair whipping behind her in the crisp afternoon breeze. The longest of three trails surrounding the Packlands stretched before her, winding up and down hills draped in majestic oak trees and towering conifers. She welcomed the burn in her muscles, using the physical exertion to quiet the tumult in her mind.

"What aren't they telling me?" she muttered, her cerulean eyes flashing even brighter than usual with frustration. The tension back at camp had been palpable; she knew for certain that Adrian wasn’t disclosing everything he knew out of loyalty and respect for his best friend, and she sensed that Jayce was withholding crucial information for reasons unbeknownst to her. “He asks for time to process all this, but I bet mortals and angels have different concepts for how long is too long to wait around,” she grumbled.

As she crested another hill, the hair on the back of her neck stood up. Something felt... off. Rayne paused, her senses on high alert. The forest was quiet, serene and inviting. Patrols had been sweeping Pack territory since yesterday’s attack on Quinn’s home, both to step up security measures and look for any survivors that may require sanctuary. She strained her ears for anything that would explain her unease. The forest answered her with stoic serenity.

But the stillness of the forest was a lie; and inexplicably, she knew it. Rayne's heart hammered in her chest and every cell in her body prepared her to fight just as inhuman shrieks tore through the veil of peace surrounding her.

"Of course," she growled, dropping into a fighting stance. "Because a nice, relaxing hike would be too much to ask for."

Three Shades emerged from the forest like an intrusive nightmare their distorted, twisted bodies barely resembling the humans they had once been. Now bent, broken and misshapen, their dull eyes fixed on Rayne with a mindless, animalistic hunger.

As the first Shade lunged, Rayne felt something snap into place within her. Time seemed to slow as she sidestepped the attack with inhuman speed, her body moving on pure instinct.

"What the—" she gasped, surprised by her own swiftness. But there was no time to dwell on it as the other two Shades converged on her.

Rayne's mind raced, adrenaline surging through her veins. She needed a weapon, anything to defend herself. Her eyes landed on a fallen branch several feet away. Without thinking, she thrust out her hand, and to her astonishment, the branch flew through the air and into her grasp.

"Okay, that's new," she breathed, gripping the makeshift weapon tightly. As she swung it at the nearest Shade, she felt strength beyond her own coursing through her arms. The branch connected with a satisfying thwack, sending the Shade reeling. Rayne spun, her movements fluid and powerful, striking out at the other two in quick succession.

As she fought, her mind whirled with questions. How was she doing this? Had these abilities always been there, lying dormant? The answers eluded her, but one thing was clear – she was no longer just surviving this fight until backup arrived. She was winning it.

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Paws and feet thundered the ground as a small hunting party led by Killion’s large, tawny-colored wolf descended upon where Rayne stood triumphantly. She leaned the cracked, bloody branch against her left shoulder, waving with her right arm. Killion circled the remains of the Shade nearest to him, sniffed, chortled and then lifted his leg. Rayne giggled; she could almost see his grin. He retreated to the cover of the forest, and she knew he intended to transform and dress before he would reappear. For reasons known only to him, he refused to shift in front of her.

The others in his party approached her; even those that were in wolf form appeared stunned. “What happened here?” one of the hunters in human form asked. He eyed the three unmoving Shades and the large, damaged branch.

“I was just going to ask the same thing,” Killion said, emerging once again, fully clothed and breathing heavy. “Is there anyone else out here?” His sharp eyes darted around the pathway as he sniffed the air.

“Nope, just little ol’ me,” Rayne said playfully. Aside from how much she feared Shades, the fight had been extremely satisfying for her, especially now, seeing her packmates’ reactions to the aftermath. She had always had a disadvantage when training with them and had had to work extra hard to not feel like a duck on roller skates when she sparred against them. It felt good to level the playing field. “No worries, I improvised pretty well,” she said, patting the thick branch.

“Clearly,” he said, visibly relaxing. “You know Lena’s going to pitch a fit when she…”

“Hang on,” Rayne cut him off, holding up her hand. More hurried footfalls drew near; Rayne cocked her head, listening intently. “I might not have to wait too long to get chewed out.” Right after she stopped speaking, the rest of her packmates, including Killion, turned in the direction of the approaching sounds. And it dawned on her that she must have heard the noises first. *Whoa. I wonder what else was mysteriously upgraded,* she thought to herself.

Jayce and Adrian skidded to a halt. “We heard the Shades and feared the worst,” Adrian panted. “What the…” Both angels appraised the sight of the defeated Shades scattered on the forest floor. "Rayne, are you alright?" Adrian asked, his voice laced with urgency as he scanned her for any signs of injury.

Rayne nodded, her chest still heaving from the exertion but her eyes bright with exhilaration. She offered them a confident grin, the rush of battle still coursing through her veins. "I'm fine, just a little surprise encounter. Nothing I couldn't handle."

Jayce's gaze lingered on Rayne, a mixture of emotions swirling in his eyes. “You faced them alone? They didn’t help you?” He pointed to the hunting party.

“She didn’t give us a chance,” Killion said, pride and awe in his voice. “Rayne had already mopped the floor with them. We got here a few minutes before you two.”

Jayce’s cheeks flooded with color; his jaw tensed. He opened his mouth to say something, but Adrian stepped forward, clamping a hand down on Jayce’s shoulder and giving a subtle squeeze. Jayce shot him a murderous look and shrugged his hand off his shoulder, but said nothing.

Adrian ignored the glare and addressed Rayne instead. "You handled that remarkably well, Rayne. Your control and strength were impressive," he praised, a hint of a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. “But I must ask, how did you…” he trailed off, making a sweeping gesture toward the three heaped corpses on the ground.

“I don’t know. This was the first time I felt... different. Like something inside me clicked into place.” She turned to Jayce, searching for answers in his enigmatic gaze. “Do you know anything about this?”

Jayce’s expression locked into an unreadable mask, the scars on his forearms catching the dappled light filtering through the dense canopy above. “We need to get back to the encampment,” Jayce said, his voice low and tinged with a note of warning. “This is not a matter to discuss out here in the open.”

His words and demeanor helped the adrenaline from the fight die away; Rayne nodded and a sense of foreboding replaced the euphoria. She exchanged glances with Adrian; his was an unspoken supportive nod, hers, a resigned eyeroll. *Moody-broodie pants strikes again. Oh, this should be fun,* she thought drily.

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Once they reached the safety of the inner sanctum, Jayce led them to a secluded corner of the Wolf Den’s wraparound porch where they could speak freely. Rayne could see the turmoil in his eyes, a storm of emotions barely contained beneath his stoic facade.

“There are things I have kept from you, Rayne,” Jayce began, his voice modulating in such a way as to suggest how hard he was struggling to keep his emotions in check.

But now it was Rayne’ turn to attempt to maintain her composure. “That was pretty obvious to me when you left the training grounds right after I managed to connect with my powers. Yeah, I wanted answers right then, but I tried to be sensitive and give you the time and space you asked for. In the meantime, I’m out here in the dark so to speak, wondering what is happening to me. My best friend is grieving, plus he doesn’t know what’s going on any more than I do. Lena is tending to the wounded, the incoming refugees and managing the Pack. Most of my packmates have no idea of what’s going on with me, and those that aren’t are shoring up our defenses. Adrian has been a little bit of help, but talking with him has brought up more questions than answers at this point. And the bottom line is that I was left, alone, with nobody to answer the questions I have because the one person who seems to be holding all the keys to the answer vault is you. I can tell you’re angry that I was out, taking a hike to clear my head, but if you were so concerned about me being left alone, maybe you should have stayed, no matter how hard that was for you. It was hard for me too, if you hadn’t considered that when I woke up yesterday, I was a normal human being. Today, I’m not. And in the interim, you’ve unloaded a whole lot of information that alludes to something you’re not willing to be open about. Get frustrated all you want, but don’t treat me like I can handle this all on my own and then get pissed when I actually go ahead and do it.”

Jayce's gaze softened as Rayne's impassioned words pierced through his defenses. He exhaled heavily, the weight of his secrets pressing down on him like a mountain on his shoulders. "Rayne," he began, his voice tinged with regret and longing, "I never wanted to burden you with the weight of my past. The things I've done, the choices I've made—they haunt me every day. And unfortunately, my past has everything to do with what I know about all of this. I thought I could shelter you from the worst of it, but…" he trailed off, glancing at Adrian, swallowing hard.

Adrian’s brow knitted together. “Jayce, I think you might have to rehash everything. And I do mean everything. It's clear that Rayne's powers are evolving spontaneously. She needs our guidance and support more than ever; and I think you could use another ally to help piece together what all still remains unknown,” he said carefully.

Rayne watched as Jayce's facade crumbled, revealing the vulnerability and pain he kept locked down. Her anger burned away almost instantly. She reached out tentatively, her hand hovering in the air before gently resting it on his forearm, over one of the faint scars etched into his skin. "You don't have to face this alone, Jayce; I don’t need to be sheltered. And I think we can face this better together. All of us,” she nodded to Adrian. “We're in this together now, whatever 'this' may be."

Tears welled up in Jayce's eyes as he met Rayne's gaze, his walls crumbling under the weight of her understanding and compassion. "You're right, Rayne," he admitted, his voice raw with emotion. "I've been so afraid of history repeating itself, of making the same mistakes again, that I lost sight of the fact that similar circumstances don’t necessitate similar outcomes." Opening his eyes, he locked gazes with her, gratitude and a hint of awe shining in his stormy gray eyes.

He took a deep breath and poured out everything he had never wanted to say. Especially not to her.

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Jayce had watched her carefully as he recounted his story; how her countenance had changed with every detail, from enrapt to

intrigued, to stoic contemplation, to concern, to sadness, to shock and to horror. At the end of it all, even though he felt like a weight had lifted from his scarred shoulders, the lump in his throat was as pronounced as if he had attempted to swallow a boulder. And in many ways, he felt as though he had.

*She’s never going to look at me the same again,* he thought bitterly. His head drifted into his hands as he slumped forward, his elbows resting heavily on his knees. Before today, he had felt strong and righteous for keeping the truth of his past buried; now, he realized how foolish he had been. His actions had been entirely self-serving, justified and masked as protecting others.

The minutes stretched heavy with only the sound of rustling leaves tossed about on the gentle breeze wafting through the encampment. His head grew heavier in his hands, dipping lower and lower as his inner turmoil grew. It was only after his longing to hear something, anything, in response to his story outweighed the dread and fear of what Rayne’s reaction might be that he felt a warm hand gently placed on his back, resting right above the scars that denoted his disgrace.

"Jayce," her voice was barely above a whisper, filled with compassion and empathy, "I can't imagine the pain you've carried all this time. I understand how something so traumatic would color your choices when faced with some of the similar aspects between then and now. Thank you for telling me the truth, especially since I can see how hard it was for you to face. It’s only through admitting the truth that a new path forward can be determined.” The warmth in her hand ebbed, but only for a moment. She sighed.

“I hope you can forgive me,” Jayce began, trembling slightly under her touch. “I shouldn’t have abandoned you out of my shame and fear. Adrian, I owe you an apology as well; I should have trusted the strength of your friendship long before now. You’ve more than earned my fullest confidence.” He picked up his head slowly to face them both, surprised to find it was somehow easier now.

Adrian wore a look of almost fatherly pride. “Apology accepted. I think it’s past time to start forging that path forward Rayne so eloquently spoke of just now.” To her, he said, “Such wisdom in someone so young never fails to inspire me.” He winked, genuine admiration shining through his features.

Rayne let out a sad chuckle, “I can’t take the credit for that wisdom, to be honest. My father used to say the same thing to me.”

“Used to?” Adrian asked gently.

“He was killed by a pack of Shades. My whole family was.”

“Then I owe you yet another apology,” said Jayce. “You were so proud of defeating those Shades today and I handled that all wrong. I didn’t mean to steal anything away from your thunder, Rayne.”

“Both apologies accepted. And I know how you can make it up to me,” she said, her inner fire returning with an impish grin and renewed spark dancing behind her blue eyes. “You can help me develop my powers so I never have to be afraid of them again.”

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