

Chapter 1

Illusions alter our perception of reality and offer glimpses of what is possible, leaving us to ponder what is truly real and what is an illusion.

~ I a n ~

A low growl rumbled deep in my throat, vibrating all the way down to my gut. The man sitting next to Erika reached for her hand.

A strong grip on my shoulder halted my advance to the gardens toward the too-cozy couple. “Easy, Ian.” Erika’s father, Arcadie, had a calming yet commanding voice.

I glanced ahead to where Erika still sat. My mate-to-be’s face did not show alarm or interest toward the man’s advances. I forced myself to breathe, reminding my over-protective instincts that she was not yet my mate, nor had I any claim to her. She had a right to court other men, but damned if I was going to be happy about it.

“Let them talk,” Arcadie added.

“I jus’ want t’ let ‘er know I’m ‘ere,” I said, my Irish accent more thick with emotion than I intended.

Arcadie guided me away from the pair, leading me to the study on the far side of his house—a large mansion on a private island in Brazil. It was the main dwelling in the center of his clan. Arcadie owned the island, accessible only by plane and a narrow bridge that was secured by a gate. His clan consisted of over thirty families, all living in close proximity.

Kitta, his mate, greeted us in the corridor. “Ian, we were not expecting you.”

I glanced behind me toward the gardens. “Erika asked me to come.”

“Let’s talk,” said Arcadie. He looped his arm around Kitta’s and led us all to a spacious room down the hall and to the left. It offered no view of the massive gardens that dominated the house.

I took a seat across from the formidable man and his lovely mate. Arcadie's silver hair and blue eyes looked so much like his father, Shanuk's that I felt as if I were staring at the old man who had died nearly ten years ago. Arcadie was a very powerful Spirian and governed the largest territory of any leader. He was not a man to be taken lightly.

His mate Kitta was a tall elegant woman with dark features and a will that rivaled that of a mother bear. She was not keen on me courting her only daughter and never failed to demonstrate that fact.

"What is this about?" I finally said.

Arcadie poured us all a glass of brandy. It was not my favorite. I preferred Irish whiskey, but right now I didn't care. I needed something to ease my nerves.

"I have asked Jazen to court our daughter," Kitta stated, almost as a challenge. She even lifted her chin a bit to emphasize her position.

"Ah, yes," I said, hiding the daggers behind my voice. "The son of Thonel, leader of the Taru clan in New Zealand. Powerful choice."

"You, too, are a good choice," Arcadie added, as if trying to tame my anger.

"But," Kitta added, "Jazen can offer Erika stability, a good home, and status."

"I have status."

"You are not a leader, Ian, nor will you ever be."

My jaw pulsed with tension. I stood and started to pace. "I am a good man for her, Kitta. I can take care of her."

She smiled. "I know you can, Ian. And yes, you are a good man with strong gifts and fine blood. You are also very popular with the ladies." The last remark sounded like an exclamation disguised as an afterthought.

"I have not been with another since the day I met your daughter."

"Ian," she pleaded. "Please do not think I'm judging you. I know you have a good heart and unquestionable integrity. I just want Erika to explore all her options before settling on a mate."

I looked at Arcadie, hoping to glean his perspective. The stone-like expression on his face told me little if anything about his opinion on this matter. As Erika's father, he could trump his mate's decision, but it was clear he would let the situation run its full course without intervention.

“I will not give up,” I assured them, raising my glass and downing the warm, amber liquid.

Arcadie smiled. His eyes sparkled with a knowing as he raised his own glass. “I would be disappointed if you did.”

“Promise me this,” said Kitta. “Do not influence her with your illusions. I want her decision to be made in earnest.”

Again, my jaw clenched. “You have my word.”

As an illusionist, I had the ability to make someone see what I wanted them to see, and feel what I wanted them to feel. It was my gift. I was good at it, almost to a fault. I wondered if Jazen was asked to curb his gifts as well.

If I remembered right, he was an energy bender and could change the shape and function of any object. His gift was strong and rivaled my own. In a practical sense, I could see how Kitta believed he was a better choice for her daughter. My heart knew better.

“May I see her now?”

“Ian,” Erika’s sweet voice filled the room. I turned to see her smile at me. Jazen stood behind her.

“Ye asked me to come,” I said, holding my hands out toward her. “Your requests are something I will not refuse,” I glanced over at Jazen. “Ever.”

Jazen’s eyes narrowed, changing their sienna color to hints of red. He was slightly taller than my six-foot-two-inch frame and styled his honey-brown hair like the cover-model of a GQ magazine. Not a strand of it was out of place. He wore a cream-colored silk shirt and pressed brown slacks that equaled the compulsive pride of my clan leader and good friend, Khalen.

Erika took my hands, making the gesture seem as comfortable as touching a brother or a good friend. I kissed the backs of hers, keeping my green eyes fixed on her delicate face. She was remarkably beautiful in that cobalt-blue dress. It matched the color of her eyes, perfectly. Like her mum, she was tall and slender. Her hair, however, was the color of spun honey with golden highlights. She took after Arcadie in that respect.

“This is Jazen,” she said, gesturing to the man now standing beside her.

I nodded. “So I’ve heard.”

Jazen smiled and extended his hand toward me. “Erika speaks highly of you,” he said, gripping my hand like one would grasp the throat of a threatening snake.

I matched his fervor with the strength of my own. “Jazen.”

My attention returned to Erika. “I understand ye helped solve another case?” I smiled. She had the uncanny ability to talk to deceased humans. The gift seemed useless until she helped the police solve a missing persons case several years back. Now they used her often as a consultant.

She nodded. “Yes, that is why I called you. I was hoping we could celebrate tonight. There’s a —”

“Jazen is taking you to a dance, darling, remember?” said Kitta.

“Perhaps another time,” Jazen said to Erika.

“This dance is important,” Kitta explained. “It is the gathering of all young Spirians who have come of age.”

“Mother, I came of age years ago. Must I attend each of these gatherings?”

“Until you are mated, yes.”

“I am not ready to mate with anyone.”

Erika had the spirit of an eagle and the heart of a lion—the very traits that intrigued me about her. Crossing her mother, however, was not wise.

“Go to the dance,” I told her. “You and I can celebrate later.” I smiled, trying to assure her that our time together would be well worth the wait.

She vehemently stated, “Honestly, this tradition of dance is going to be the death of me. Do I not have a life of my own?”

“Not until you are properly mated,” Kitta retorted.

The hum in the room escalated and I knew Arcadie had reached his level of tolerance.

“Do as your mother wishes.”

Erika immediately looked down and took a deep breath. “Yes, Father.” She had only argued with him once. It was something I never wanted to witness again.

She looked at me apologetically. “You came all this way. I’m so sorry.”

The ten-hour flight from Bremerton, Washington was something I had done often just to see her again. “For a glimpse of yer smile, lass, I’d do it again for the askin’.”

“Will you stay?”

I glanced over at Kitta, who casually looked away.

“No. I’m returning home.”

The sadness veiling her blue eyes weighed heavy as lead on my heart.

She lowered her eyes. “Oh, I understand.”

She really didn’t and I wasn’t in a position to explain things to her. The distance between our clans made it impossible to connect as close clansmen. I was not part of this clan. My place was in Washington State. Kitta and Arcadie shielded their daughter’s thoughts from me. I understood their reasons, but it made things difficult for us.

“Will you be back soon?”

I looked at her parents. “Perhaps.” I smiled at Erika. “All ye have to do is ask.”

“Can you come to the dance tonight?”

“You already have an escort,” said Kitta.

“There will be many fine women there,” said Jazen. “I’m sure Ian will not be alone for long.”

Kitta grinned. “I believe you’re right. That’s a brilliant idea.”

Arcadie smiled at me with an understanding that stood only between us. I had fought many battles beside the man and he knew me better than most. “I agree,” he said. “Join the celebration.”

Erika’s eyes sparkled once again. “Do you have something to wear?”

“I’ll manage,” I said.

She flashed me a brilliant smile that nearly undid my restraint to embrace her. “I’ll see you there, then?”

I nodded to her. “I’ll be there.”

Jazen’s glaring eyes felt like daggers dipped in poison. His intention was not lost on me. The warning was as palpable as the walls around us.

The clothes I’d brought were inappropriate for the formal dance that evening, but a quick illusion could change that. I conjured a black suit with dark-green silk trim. Erika always commented on my

eyes and I knew the color would make them stand out. I never liked these formal gatherings, but they were important to her mother.

When Kitta visited our clan, she traded her formal gowns and fancy dresses for blue jeans and casual shirts. They looked good on her and she always seemed to relax more around the camp in them. Here at home she was far more stuffy and formal. Arcadie attributed it to her upbringing and duty as the leader's mate.

I had witnessed the pressure that clan leaders endured and felt relieved to know I would never be placed in that position. Though my status was high within our clan, I did not carry the blood of a leader. In truth, if it were not for Khaleen, my brother, Aidan and I would be considered misfits and would most likely end up in a Shadow clan.

I finished combing my hair and giving myself one last inspection. "What are ye doing, Ian O'Dougherty?" I was treading deeper waters than I was prepared to swim. Erika and I were good for one another, but we came from different worlds. She was the princess and I was the pauper.

Doubt shadowed my confidence like a dark, damp shroud. The image staring back at me was a man with a mission—a man who knew what he wanted and was willing to die trying to obtain it. I shook my head. "Yer a stubborn, foolish bloke."

Chapter 2

~ I a n ~

There she was, locked in the vise grip of Jazen's arms. He was making sure that Erika never left his side. Again a growl rumbled deep in my throat. An image of snakes constricting his throat began to manifest in my mind. I shook it off, remembering my vow to Kitta. Powerful as my illusions were, I had agreed not to use them around Erika or to influence her decisions.

My brother, Aidan, would say that I'm a leopard trying to disguise myself as a giraffe. Perhaps he was right. I had set my sights on a *débutante* when I should have been targeting someone more in my league. Somehow, that didn't matter. I wanted Erika, *débutante* or not.

I straightened my illusory suit and made my way toward her.

"Ian."

I turned to see Kitta walking toward me. She looked radiant in her emerald green gown decked with more finery than my mother had seen in her lifetime.

"Kitta."

Her smile beamed and the sparkle in her eyes seemed out of place. "I want you to meet some acquaintances of mine." She took my arm and led me toward a group of young women.

"Ladies," she said, interrupting their conversation. As the mate of Arcadie, she was one of the most powerful female Spirians alive. She pretty much had *carte blanche* over all forms of etiquette and no one would dare question her.

"I want you to meet a very dear friend of ours." She gestured me to step forward. "This is Ian O'Dougherty of the Gradhun clan."

A pretty little sprite with long blonde hair smiled sweetly. "That's Khalen's clan in Washington, correct?"

"Aye it is," I confirmed, offering a curt bow.

She extended her white-gloved hand toward me. "I'm Susenna, daughter of Jamiel and Chloe."

I took her hand and pressed my lips to the back of it. "Delighted to meet such a well-informed young woman." I emphasized the word, "young," hoping she would get the hint. The girl was nearly half my age if not more. Granted, age did not mean much to Spirians after maturity, but I preferred to have someone with a bit more wisdom and experience—like Erika.

The young female giggled.

Kitta continued her introduction before explaining my presence. "Ian is visiting us and is not currently mated." I didn't miss the way she raised her brow as an invitation. "He is a very gifted illusionist who has fought many battles. Khalen sees him as a brother."

That last part was added to emphasize my status in the clan. By blood, my status was fairly low. When my sister, Valerie, mated Khalen many years ago, we joined his clan. Our parents had died

when the Shadows attacked our camp. Valerie was the eldest, but she turned against Khalen and became a Shadow. He was forced to kill her. The feat nearly undid him, even though Aidan and I supported his decision.

It took years before he was able to take another mate. Skye was good for him and a much better match than Valerie could have been.

Satisfied with her introduction, Kitta took her leave, allowing what she considered 'nature' to take its course.

Judging by how the ladies were dressed, I assumed they were from lower-ranking families. I had dressed according to my assumed status that Khalen offered. Good enough for these ladies, but not for Kitta's daughter. The message was loud and clear.

So there I was, stuck in the midst of five lovely ladies all vying for my attention while the woman I wanted stood next to a man who held an obvious advantage over me.

Erika's eyes narrowed as her mother pointed me out. Perfect. This couldn't look good.

Erika broke away from Jazen and made a beeline toward me and the ladies.

When she approached, her arm wrapped possessively through mine. She smiled and planted a long, lingering kiss on my lips.

"Ian, I have been waiting for you." She eyed each of the ladies as a warning.

The young blonde began fanning her face. "Forgive us, Erika. We didn't know you had sights on him."

"Now you do," she replied sharply, leading me away.

"Thank you," I said.

"Just like my mother to pull something like this. Ugh! She makes me so angry!"

"Down, lass," I quipped. "Nothin' would'a come of it."

"I should hope not. I'm counting on you to keep it together, Ian O'Dougherty."

I bowed. "As y'wish, m'lady."

Jazen approached, Reclaiming Erika's arm. "Everything all right?"

I smiled down at Erika. "It's perfect."

She returned the smile. The notion was not missed or appreciated by Jazen.

He tugged her arm. “Come,” he said, rather sharply. “The music starts and I would like to dance.”

Erika hated dancing; she always had until I showed her how the Irish danced at Aidan and Sunjia’s union ceremony.

I watched as she glided over the dance floor like a feather on the wind. She was beautiful, refined, and—

“Still in your league,” came a voice from behind me. It was Arcadie. His large hand settled on my shoulder. “I remember looking at her mother the way you look at her. She was well sought after and had every high-status buck rutting for the rights to have her, including me.”

I laughed. “Our blood is slightly different,” I reminded him.

He removed his hand. “Blood has little to do with it, my boy. Integrity, heart, and loyalty rise above anything that flows in our veins. In my opinion, you have what it takes to win that girl’s heart.”

“What about her mother’s?”

“She’s already taken, dear boy,” he bantered. “Besides, it is not her you need to impress.”

I met his eyes. He smiled and walked away.

Arcadie wanted me to prove my worth for his daughter—perfect. To this day, I’d never had to prove anything to anyone. Women were abundant and finding one for a night’s pleasure was not an issue. Earning a mate of worth, however, was nothing short of a challenge. A slow grin started to form on my face. I love challenges.

I noticed a few blokes by the bar chatting over pints of warm beer. A set of pipes, a drum and two flutes rested beside them. A thought sprang to mind. I walked toward them.

“Evenin’, lads,” I said, striding up to the bar beside them. I ordered a Scotch, allowing my Irish accent to bloom.

“Ah, an Irishman,” one of them said.

“Aye.” I extended my hand. “Ian of the Grahduin clan.”

The tall, lanky one with flaming red hair extended his greeting. “Shawn of Praduk, and m’brothers, Tahl, Grenden, and Penn.”

The lot of them nodded as their names were mentioned.

I gestured to the pipes, flutes and hand drums on the floor. “Ye play those things?”

“Like bloody bards,” the younger one said. He was a handsome lad with dark brown hair and hazel eyes that sparkled with mischief.

“Ye think ye c’n play me a song?” I gestured to the methodical band playing a slow waltz. “Somethin’ I c’n dance to?”

“Aye, I think we c’n. Arcadie asked us to come an’ play durin’ the other band’s breaks. Do ye ‘ave a song in mind?”

“Do ye know Glacier’s Spring?”

“Oh, aye,” said Shawn. “We play a lively version o’ it. I think y’ll find it dandy enough.”

“Perfect,” I said, smiling. “Keep the beat goin’ throughout the break, eh?”

I placed a bill on the counter. “Buy yourselves another round on me.”

Shawn spied the bill and raised a brow. “Bloody generous of ye, lad. We’ll play our best fer ye.”

I nodded. “Appreciate it.”

I took my Scotch and meandered my way through the crowds. An older woman with cascading dark hair touched my arm.

“Care to dance?” she asked in a charming British accent.

I kissed the back of her white-gloved hand. “I’m sorry, miss, but m’heart is taken with another.” I glanced toward Erika.

“Lucky woman,” she said and then worked her way through the crowd.

I leaned against the stone wall and sipped my drink, observing as Erika endured one dance after another. It was almost painful to watch.

Finally, after my drink was drained, and the crowd settled, the band took their break.

Jazen led Erika back to a table in the far corner of the room where Arcadie and Kitta waited with two other couples. I followed them over.

“Ian,” Arcadie announced. “Come and meet some friends of ours.” He gestured to the two couples. “This is Brig and Tamrin.” The couple nodded and smiled. “And this is Thonel and Lindi.”

I extended my hand in greeting. When I reached Jazen’s father, my smile broadened. We had met many years ago when I was a younger lad, though I doubted he would ever remember.

“Thonel,” I said. “It’s a pleasure to see you again. Your son is an impressive dancer.”

“Many years of training,” the man added. “You said, ‘again.’ Have we met before?” His thick New Zealand accent was as refined and polished as his son’s.

“Many years ago, when I was very young.”

The man nodded, his expression skewed between confusion and embarrassment.

“Ian comes from the Gradhun clan. He is Khalen’s brother,” Arcadie explained.

Thonel raised his bushy dark brow. “Brother, you say? I heard he had only one; a twin if I remember.”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “Traeger. He walks the next world now. M’ brother and I are Khalen’s in-laws.”

Thonel smiled. “Then you come from Shanuk’s line?” He obviously thought we were Skye’s brothers.

Arcadie cleared his throat, clearly annoyed with the conversation. “Ian and Aidan are Khalen’s first mate, Victoria’s, brothers. She passed away many years past.”

“Yes,” said Lindi, “I remember now.” She touched her mate’s arm and telepathically filled him in on the details of Victoria’s demise.

Thonel’s expression grew solemn. “I’m sorry, mate,” he said.

“It happened long ago.”

Arcadie pulled out a chair. “Come join us, Ian.”

I saw the band begin setting up on the stage. I had a few minutes.

Arcadie ordered me a Scotch and two glasses of wine for him and his mate.

Jazen ordered a glass of Sauvignon Blanc for himself, and a cognac for Erika. It angered me that he knew her drink of choice.

“Erika is a wonderful dancer,” Jazen commented.

The drinks came and I downed a good portion, trying to keep my emotions in check. The illusions I conjured in my mind were leaning on the edge of an abyss. I quickly cleared them away before they manifested into something I would regret.

The band announced their presence and began playing a song to set the mood. It was a short version of I Useta Lover.

I stood and walked around the table. Extending my hand to Erika, I smiled. “Care to dance, love?”

Jazen’s grip on her arm tightened. “I’m sure she’s tired and needs to rest, man.”

She gently pulled her arm away and stood. “I’d love to.”

“Kick yer shoes off, lass.”

She giggled and flung them under the table.

“Erika!” her mother scorned.

“Leave ‘em be,” Arcadie said.

I led her out to the dance floor and began moving to the lively rhythm of the song. When Glacier’s Spring began to play, the smile on her face broadened.

“You’re full of surprises, Ian,” she said.

“More than ye know,” I replied, leading her into a dance that rivaled the play of fire on aged pine.

We breathed hard, laughed, and spun along on the floor as if we were the only couple dancing. I felt several eyes upon us but it didn’t matter. I was in bliss with my heart’s mate, dancing as if life had stood still.

The break was over too soon and Erika was whisked away by an angry and determined Jazen.

Arcadie slapped a hand on my shoulder. “Well done, lad. Impressive display.”

“Yes,” Kitta commented. “You looked very commanding out there.”

I followed them back to the table and swigged my Scotch. My heart still pounded from the exertion of dancing, but more so from the anger welling inside.

Erika was nowhere in sight. The bloke was purposely keeping her from me.

“Come,” said Arcadie. “Let’s walk.”

~ E r i k a ~

The pain of Jazen’s grip on my arm stung clear to my bone. “Jazen, slow down. You’re hurting me.”

He led me to the barn several hundred feet from the main hall. The music could not be heard, only the sounds of night and resting horses.

“You waste your time with that bloke,” he said, pinning me against the dusty wall.

“I don’t appreciate your temper,” I replied, meeting his gaze. His sienna-colored irises were nearly swallowed by the blackness of his pupils.

“Perhaps you should not rile me then by dancing like a harlot.” He dangled my shoes by his fingers. “Put them back on.”

“You do not intimidate me, Jazen, nor do you claim my heart.”

“In time, you will change your mind. By year’s end, you will be my mate.”

“This is not something you have the power to force.”

I felt the hum of his anger increase. I had underestimated his power and will. With little effort, he rendered me helpless. I couldn’t move as he strapped the shoes back on my feet.

“If you ever embarrass me like that again, my dear, I will issue a harsh reminder of the respect I deserve.”

With that, he pressed his lips to mine, willing me to return the affection with equal ardor. My stomach twisted inside while my thoughts reached out to Ian. They bounced back like shards of a shattered mirror.

“He won’t help you.”

~ I a n ~

Something was wrong. I could feel it. Arcadie and I froze and then hurried toward the barn.

When I saw that bloke with his lips on Erika’s, my body stiffened like a bolt eager to find its mark.

Arcadie stilled me with his hand. “Easy, lad. My daughter is not without her own defenses.”

A wave of energy rippled out from her, slamming Jazen against the far wall. He sat, holding his ribs. Before he could retaliate with what would be a destructive blow, Arcadie rendered him helpless.

I hurried toward Erika, struggling to keep my need for vengeance in line. “Are you all right?”

She nodded and then pressed her forehead against my chest. I wrapped my arms around her.

Arcadie stood over Jazen. “You’re lucky to still be conscious, my boy.”

Jazen’s eyes met mine and then fixed on Erika. “She has no respect,” he seethed. “She does not recognize my position.”

“Your position?” Arcadie inquired, extending his hand.

Jazen gripped it, holding his aching side as he painfully hauled himself to a stand. “She broke my ribs.”

“They’ll heal,” said Arcadie.

“I am her future mate, and yet she flaunts herself over this bloke of questionable blood.”

Arcadie displayed an impressive calmness toward the cocky spike. It was clear to me now how Arcadie obtained his high status—he earned it. That position had little to do with his blood and everything to do with how he conducted himself in the heat of turmoil.

“She is my daughter, Jazen. Currently, her heart remains unclaimed. You are not her mate until she agrees to be so. It will be her choice.”

Jazen’s jaw flexed into sharp lines that betrayed his temper. Like myself, he struggled to tame the beast that lurked within. A sliver of me felt sorry for him.

“My status equals her own,” said Jazen, fixing his eyes on mine. “You, Arcadie, give her too much power,” he growled. “She should be—”

He fell to the floor, his face skewed in pain, his words choked.

“Do not tell me how to raise my daughter, young man, lest I remind you of my status.”

“My father will hear of this,” he rasped.

“I’ll make sure that he does,” Arcadie replied, releasing his bind.

Jazen slumped to the straw-laden floor, gasping for air.

Arcadie wrapped his arm around Erika. “Did he hurt you, my dear?”

She arched her brow. “Do you really think I would let him?”

Arcadie laughed a hearty roar filled with relief and pride for his eldest daughter. Erika’s spirit rivaled her mother’s. She would be a challenging catch for any man, including myself.

Her dress was ragged and marred with dust. With a quick thought, I restored its brilliance with an illusion.

Arcadie shook his head. The illusion crumbled as I recalled the promise I had given to Kitta—no illusions, period.

Having read her father's mind, Erika smiled. "It's all right, Ian. You need no illusions to impress me."

She brushed the dust from her dress and brushed back the stray strands of hair that had fallen from her coiffure.

Before we reached the dance hall, I stopped. Arcadie gave me a knowing grin before continuing into the hall leaving Erika and me to talk.

"Aren't you coming in?" she asked me.

"No, I'm headin' back to my room, then leavin' for Washington tomorrow."

Her smile faded, but her eyes shone with understanding and strength. "Will you be back here soon?"

"I'm never far from ye, lass." I leaned over and pressed my lips against hers. The power in that kiss surprised me. It was a claiming, possessive affection that held an unspoken promise. I half expected her to back away. Instead, she pressed into me, matching my desire for more.

"I wish you didn't have to go," she whispered.

"Our time will come, but my life is in Washington, as are my duties. Yours are here."

She lowered her head. We had this discussion before. Arcadie had opened his clan to me, but my loyalty was with Khalen. He had agreed to release me of that vow, but it was not an option I wanted to consider. Khalen had given my brother and me new lives. I was not willing to let that go—not even for love.

"I understand," she said, raising her chin with mock strength and courage.

"That's m'girl," I said.

Chapter 3

~ E r i k a ~

The next few days were filled with work, helping Detective Gray with a few cases involving missing children. I enjoyed the challenge, but contacting the children who had died or were murdered played havoc on my soul. I wasn't sure how much longer I could do it.

Seeing the relief of closure on their parents' faces made things worth the pain of revealing their children's demises. My father was uncomfortable with me using my gifts in the presence of humans, but seeing I was aiding them with a gift that many humans possessed, the risk seemed minor. I made certain not to show too much of my Spirian side, but it was rather draining. I couldn't wait to come home at the end of each day.

The glass of tart Petite Syrah I enjoyed now in the quiet of the study provided a relaxing reprieve. I had a lazy fire burning in the small hearth and a plate of fresh-baked peanut butter cookies beside me. The house was quiet.

I hadn't heard from either Ian or Jazen and wondered if I had bleeped completely off their radar. I couldn't blame them, really. My mother had become quite the tyrant and my father had made it a point to Jazen's father that he keep the boy tamed.

Jazen was a strong male, typical of high-blood Spirians. He was in line to be the next leader of the Australian borders, something his father had recently obtained when their leader passed on. Jazen would make an excellent leader and a strong mate and father. I would need a strong mate. My mother knew it as well. A lesser man would bore me to tears in less than a year.

Ian had a more gentle spirit, yet he was strong in his own right. I could feel the struggle he had with keeping his temper leashed this past weekend. It both frightened and excited me at the same time.

Until now, he had been a good friend; someone to have fun with. His kisses were sweet and gentle. The last had been more possessive and filled with a hunger Ian had never revealed to me. I knew his reputation with the ladies and never considered it—until now.

A smile stretched over my face.

“There you are,” my father said from the doorway. “You’ve been rather absent these past few days, my dear. Is Detective Gray keeping you busy?”

I scoffed. “You might say that.”

My father poured himself a glass of the Petite Syrah and sat across from me. “Keep your boundaries, dear, lest others define them for you.”

I sipped my wine and stared into the flames licking misshapen maple roots like the long tongue of a forbidden lover. The roots burned long and hot. They were my father’s favorite wood source, though they were expensive and hard to find. I loved the sweet smell of them.

“Your mother worries for you,” he said, admiring the flames with vivid blue eyes.

“As well she should for meddling in my affairs as she does.”

“She believes it is for your own good.”

I sipped my wine, giving him a half-baked smile. “And what do you believe?”

He returned the smile, his eyes glistening with a knowing that only years of wisdom could claim. “I believe you know the truth of your heart, my dear, but cannot see it through the webs of your own misconceptions.”

I thought about that for a moment, my brows pinching together as if the gesture could shed light on my father’s obscure logic. “Care to expand on that?”

He shook his head.

“I didn’t think so,” I said.

He finished his wine, set the glass down on a small marble table and then patted my leg as he stood. “I will send for your mother. You two must talk.”

There was no sense in disputing him. When her father made such a statement, his decision was final. “She won’t want to,” I said, quietly as if to myself.

He stepped out of the small dark room without reply. There was no need for one. I knew as well as anyone that mother would not deny his wishes. Not many Spirians did—at least not more than once. I often wondered what it would be like to have his power. I shuddered at the thought.

As I took the last sip of my wine and contemplated heading for bed, my mother walked in with two snifters of cognac in her hands.

“Your father sent me to talk to you,” she said, smiling and handing me a drink.

“Thank you.” My first sip of the amber liquid flowed down my throat like a welcoming flame, torching back the words sticking in my throat. What I wanted to say and what I had a right to say were in conflict. Years of painful reminders warned me to mind my place.

She took a seat across from me. “I know you are unhappy with me,” she began, “and perhaps you have a right to be so.”

I watched as she turned the glass in her hand and stared into the fire. “You are my first, Erika. I want the best for you.”

“And what is the best for me?” My words had an edge to them. She noticed, but chose to ignore it.

“A strong man; one who can take care of you.”

“Do I need to be taken care of?”

She smiled, but still did not meet my eyes. “Not in the traditional sense.”

That piqued my interest. “Explain.”

“You’re a strong woman. The man you choose to mate must be stronger or you will soon grow tired of him.” She looked at me with a seriousness that typically followed a tragedy. “Imagine spending a lifetime with a man who holds you back. Can you do that?”

“You don’t think Ian is strong enough,” I stated, keeping my voice low and respectful.

“I believe he can be.”

My mother was talking in riddles. I sipped the fiery liquid and practiced having patience. After a few deep breaths, and waiting for her to continue, I concluded that I was simply too tired for this game. “Do you care to expand on that?”

“Ian has never had to prove himself to anyone, dear. Women come easy to him. He’s followed in his brother’s footsteps from day one. Khaleen has taken him under his wing. His only status comes from a union that was never meant to be. In his mind, he knows he is out of your league, but his heart won’t listen.”

I fought the need to roll my eyes and feigned patience.

She reached over and held my hand. “Give him something to fight for. Give him a chance to prove his worth. I know he’s strong. Now he needs to find that strength and let it flourish.”

I thought about that for a moment. Until the night he left, his kisses had been sweet, tender—uneventful. That night, however, the kiss nearly undid me. I felt something I had never felt around him—yielding, and perhaps a bit excited.

“Now you’re starting to understand,” she said, smiling. “Nothing is worse than having a man you can rule over. Strong women need something more.”

“Perhaps,” I said. “But what if Ian decides he is not good enough for me and gives up?”

“Then he doesn’t deserve you.”

I frowned. “Do you think he will give up?”

Her grip on my hand tightened. “I hope for your sake, dear, he doesn’t. Jazen is a good man, and the perfect choice to stoke Ian’s fire.”

My eyes widened. “That’s why you’re pushing Jazen and me together.”

“Ian needs something to fight for. I’m merely giving him the opportunity to prove himself. The rest is up to him.”

I sighed. “Jazen will be angry if I choose Ian over him.”

Mother shrugged. “Jazen will be leader of a fairly large territory. He must get used to disappointment.”

“So you really don’t hate Ian?”

She smiled and released my hand. “No, child. I just see something more in him that has been dormant for far too long.”

I studied the woman sitting across from me and saw a side of her that I had overlooked for too many years. We had been close once, and she had been somewhat of a mentor to me. I had always admired her strength, but until now, had failed to see her wisdom. I smiled inwardly. “You are much wiser than I have credited you with, mother.”

She nodded. “You can thank my mother for that.”

“Let me guess. She put you through a similar hell with father?”

“Oh, it was much worse, I assure you. Poor Arcadie. He dealt with several men vying for my attention. My mother cut him down at every chance she got.”

“But he never gave up.”

She shook her head. “No, he never gave up.”

I finished my drink and then placed the glass on the small table beside me. "Thank you," I said.

"For what, dear?"

"Explaining your actions and the reasons behind them."

"You're welcome, my child." She scanned me from head to feet. "You look exhausted."

"I am. I need to be at work early tomorrow." I stood and offered her a lingering hug. "I love you, mother."

Her hold around me tightened. "Thank you."

"Good night."

"Good night, dear."

I took a long hot bath and settled into bed as my phone started to vibrate. It was Ian. What was he doing calling me at midnight? "Ian," I answered. "Are you all right?"

The silence that followed was unnerving. "Ian, it's nearly midnight. What's wrong?"

"I wasn't expectin' ye t'answer," he said. His accent grew thicker when his emotions were roused. At times, he was difficult to understand.

"Why?"

"I was goin' to leave ye a message."

"Talk to me, Ian. What's going on?"

"I had a nightmare, that's all."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Again he was silent. I waited.

"No. Ye sound tired. Go to sleep. I'll talk to ye later."

"Um, very well. Call me tomorrow, yes?"

"Aye, love. Good night."

"Good night," I said. The call terminated with a click. I stared at the phone, half expecting it to ring again. It didn't. I settled it in the charger and turned the light off. Tired as I was, sleep did not come easy.

It was unlike Ian to call like that. He said he wanted to leave me a message. Why? There had never been anything we couldn't tell each other. He didn't sound right.

I rolled over, took a deep breath, and forced my mind to calm. Whatever it was, Ian would tell me tomorrow.