

Prelude

To journey means to be present in the moment, gain wisdom from the past, and release expectations for the future.

It had been four months since the Spirian clan leaders had met on an island off the coast of Brazil. Despite the Shadows' rebuttals, it had been decided upon to return to the Father's law. Territories were to be respected by all Spirians and the act of taking another's mate resulted in death. Each Spirian was to have only one mate of pure blood, and all other mates, humans, and halflings were to be set free. An exception was granted to Spirian/human unions that were already established.

The risk of my pregnancy with twins was vastly becoming apparent. I was large, uncomfortable, and still had six months left of my term. My mate, Khalen, worried that I would not survive the birthing. In the dark shadows of my mind, I was too, but I would not reveal it to anyone, not even Khalen.

The issue of Aidan and Sunjia had yet to be resolved. Her templar, Dirk, wanted her back, which meant Aidan could not claim her. It was clear to me, however, that Aidan and Sunjia were perfect for each other. If Khalen would just feel the same, I knew he could change Dirk's mind, but Khalen was stubborn and still believed that Sunjia, his late brother's mate, was a threat to the clan.

Khalen, was designated to head the North American Continent and become the regional leader of the Pacific Northwest. It was his duty to ensure that his clan members selected the proper mate. Despite Aidan's feelings for Sunjia, he would not be able to go against Khalen's decision without severe repercussion.

The Shadow clans had been warned that if they did not heed the new laws, Khalen would personally see to the release of their women and halflings. It was time to follow up on his decree.

Chapter 1

Even the darkest clouds cannot shadow the brilliance of the sun.

In accordance with the new order, Spirian mates were paired with single men of the Shadow clan—with carelessness, no doubt. Khalen admitted that acquiring my ability to read intention had proven to be quite useful when dealing with the Shadows.

He had approached Sage, the Shadow leader of Washington, but the spineless bugger had no intention of enforcing the new law completely. There were still halflings and human females that were not released. Sage's father, Victor, was sure to catch wind of it after Khalen took action, he assured me.

"What will you do with the captives?" I asked, as Khalen quietly reflected over a cup of coffee. He had been silent for most of the morning, keeping his thoughts to himself.

"Without a clan, they will be vulnerable," he admitted.

"What are their choices?"

He looked at me with soft golden eyes and I could feel the pain in them. "The humans are a danger, Skye. The females have had a taste of Spirian affection and will crave it. That cannot happen any longer. The humans will not understand. They will continue their destructive patterns, despite the tragic outcome."

"Destructive patterns?" I asked, confused.

He raised his brow as if curious about my confusion. "You have loved both a Spirian and a human. You know the difference now. Could you ever go back to loving a human and be completely satisfied?"

"No, but I'm a Spirian. Surely it is different for humans. You said so yourself that they would not be able to survive the full power of a Spirian lover."

"This is true. Perhaps you should ask Eve or Ember what their feelings are on the matter?"

My face grew warm with the thought. I sipped my coffee in silence.

He chuckled in response. "God, I love your innocence."

"So, to humans, Spirians could be like an addiction that was difficult but not impossible to ignore?"

"Yes, a very strong addiction. It would be like gorging on fine wine, and then forced to endure grape juice in its stead."

I smiled. "Fine wine, huh? Is that how you describe your lovemaking skills?"

Now it was his turn to blush. I could not see it, of course, but his silence and sudden draw of energy was proof enough.

"How would you describe it?" he cleverly countered.

I set my coffee down and thought for a moment. "I suppose I would compare it to a lavish meal with several fine wines, all carefully selected to compliment each course with perfect balance. And just when you believe the meal is over, and you're satisfied, dessert arrives, accompanied by a twenty-year tawny port. When you take your first bite, the dark chocolate coats your tongue like a soft blanket of rich and delicate flavor. The port adds to the sensation, and your mouth explodes with ecstasy as the combination slides down your throat to tantalize your stomach."

He laughed. "And how would you describe loving a human in comparison?"

I cleared my throat. "Aside from my late husband, Derrick, of course, I would describe it as a happy meal with cold, soggy fries, a flat soda, and no surprise."

His laugh deepened. "Now you understand."

I didn't completely understand but was ready to let the matter go. "What about the halflings?"

"Without the support of a clan, they will soon perish like any Spirian. Unfortunately, any clan who harbors a human or halfling female that is not mated will be breaking the Spirian law." He lowered his head. "Gregg and Ro are fortunate to have found one another. They are both halflings with a good clan to live under. Though they are sterile, they have a good chance at having a long life together."

My stomach lurched. "What will happen to Ember and her sisters?"

He sipped his coffee. "They must leave, Skye."

"No," I cried. "They can't, Khalen, there must be another way."

His shoulders dropped and slumped forward. "Are you going to find them a human mate?"

"If I must."

His eyes turned hard. "You cannot save the world, Skye. The clan must remain pure. We made some horrid mistakes in the past and have left damage in our wake. Now is the time to change, difficult as it is."

"We will figure something out."

He stood from his chair and set his mug on the counter. "This burden is mine to bear. The law must be enforced."

"Khaleen, this is wrong, and you know it. Spirians created the halflings and now they want to leave them for dead? Halflings or no, they are people, not just the spoils of a bad idea."

His eyes were closed when he turned to face me. I knew he was keeping his anger in check and that I was stepping over a volatile line. "As my mate, Skye, I'm asking for your support. If you cannot offer it, I understand, but I really could use it now."

Slowly I wrapped my arms around his waist and laid my head against his warm chest. It was obvious that he did not agree with the humans' and halflings' fate, but he also had obligations to the clans and the Spirian law.

He kissed the top of my head. "Thank you," he whispered against my hair. "If we could form a commune for the halflings, they might stand a chance. Those who are mated will be able to join a Spirian clan."

I nodded. "I like that plan."

"I'm taking Aidan and Ian with me. We'll be back by nightfall."

I kissed him softly. "Stay safe."

He squeezed me tight then grabbed his keys from the counter and left. I watched as the three men climbed into our new silver Escalade. Maiyun pressed against my leg and released a low howl. I scratched behind her ears. A long walk was in order for both of us, I thought.

The twins were growing swiftly in my belly and I could feel their every move. My term with them was half over. In six more months, I would be able to hold them both. The discomfort of carrying them made me wonder how I would ever survive the remaining months. I grabbed my coat from the peg by the door and headed out for the day.

Eve met me near the first fire between our yurts. The dusting of flour that scented her face and shirt indicated that she had been busy baking for the evening meal. She carried an air of sadness about her as she warmed her hands by the glowing coals that lingered throughout the day.

I stood beside her, waiting for her to speak first. When she didn't take the hint, I bumped into her and smiled. "What has you so glum, Eve?"

A small smile tugged at her lips. "Are you going for your walk?"

I nodded, and then glanced up at the cloud-covered sky. “Yeah. I was kind of hoping the sun would be out, though. It was earlier this morning.”

“Typical fall weather,” she said. “Mind if I join you?”

The request caught me off guard. Eve rarely joined me for my walks. She preferred working in the garden over traversing the woods. “Not at all. I would love to have your company.”

Eve dusted herself off before approaching my right side. “Where to?”

Maiyun and I lead her toward the north side of camp. She intended to talk, that much was clear, but what about was a mystery I was sure would unfold in a flash flood of emotion.

“Are your pains easing at all?” she asked. Her weak attempt at small talk did not escape my notice. Her thoughts were a trap of pain, frustration, and yearning all wrapped up in a bundle of confusion.

I shook my head. “Not at all. Khalen is concerned with their rapid growth, but that’s expected with how much food he expects me to eat at each meal.”

More silence followed as we took the right trail that bordered the small lake. The scent of rain lingered in the air. Bright maple leaves that marked the middle of fall cushioned my bare feet, their coolness a welcoming comfort. Instinctively knowing that my vision was weak in this light, Maiyun stayed close by my side and guided me over and around the many obstacles that littered the path.

“It’s important for you to stay strong,” Eve finally said, though her words were distant.

I finally touched her shoulder and led her to one of the many logs that overlooked the lake. I laid down my coat and urged her to sit, thinking that stillness would encourage her to reveal what weighed upon her mind like wet sand.

“What’s on your mind, Eve?” I asked. “Your heart and mind are far too heavy.”

“Case wants us to return home.”

“Home?”

She twisted her hands together. “Yes, to England. He is worried about the clan.”

My close-knitted brows marked my confusion. “Why?”

“Tetris, the man he left in charge, has not responded to any of Case’s messages. The clan has been out of touch for several weeks now—very unusual.”

I studied her expression. It was not one of concern, but one of sadness. “And you don’t want to leave?”

“No, I don’t. Our clan in England lives in houses; together yet separate from one another. I feel my family is here.”

“Perhaps once Case sees that all is well with his clan, he will choose to return?”

She shook her head. “No, he believes that our place is in Europe, not here. This is Khalen’s domain now.”

I wrapped her hand in mine. “Khaleen wants me to birth the twins in Scotland.”

Her eyes widened with surprise and perhaps a bit of hope. “Shanuk’s place?”

“Yes, he thinks it would honor the old man.”

“That it would,” said Eve. She laughed a bit. “Darius will be thrilled to see his brother again.”

“Brother?”

“Darius is Shanuk’s first grandson and Dirk’s older brother. He and Khaleen grew up together. They were inseparable until each of them left for college.” A smile stretched across her face and her eyes regained their sparkle. A quiet chuckle escaped her throat as she slowly shook her head with remembrance. “Lord, those two knew how to find trouble.”

With sadness, I realized there was so much about my mate I had yet to learn. Khaleen rarely talked about his past. Oddly enough, nor did I. In that respect, we were very much alike. “Does Khaleen keep in touch with him?”

“Oh yes, frequently. Darius’ mate, Lenore, is a midwife. Khaleen has been asking her many questions about pregnancy and the birthing process. He wants her to be there when you are ready to give birth.”

I felt a cold rush wash over me. “So the real reason for going to Scotland has nothing to do with honoring Shanuk?”

“I think it has a lot to do with it, Skye. Khaleen would never tell you something that was untrue. It would be just as easy for Darius and Lenore to come here as it would be for you to travel, would it not?”

I smiled and rubbed Maiyun behind her soft ears. She placed her huge head on my thigh. “Yes, it would.” I paused in thought for a moment. “I certainly hope he doesn’t plan to allow Lenore to deliver the girls.”

“Khaleen is not schooled in midwifery. I’m sure he feels uneasy about your request.”

I glanced at her, firm in my decision. “I will not reconsider it, unless our daughters’ lives are in danger.”

“It is not your daughters that worry him, my dear. It is you.”

“He worries too much about me. For pity’s sake, it’s nearly stifling.”

“To me, it is refreshing.” Her eyes sparkled again. “I have not seen him care for anyone for such a long time, this is a true delight, I assure you.”

“Will you be there?” I asked. “For the birth?”

She swallowed hard, opened her mouth as if to speak then swallowed again. Her dark eyes glimmered like polished obsidian as she met my gaze. “You would allow that?”

I squeezed her hand. “Absolutely. I cannot imagine doing this without you.”

Eve half laughed and half cried, making a sound that resembled an excited chipmunk. “I would be honored.” Whatever sadness that had followed her here had quickly turned tail and ran away. I hoped it would stay away for quite some time. Seeing her so hollow was nothing I wanted to experience again.

I stood and offered her a hand up. “Come, it’s getting chilly.”

She placed her hand in mine and we continued our walk with idle chatter. “I will miss you when you go,” I said, staring down at the ground.

I heard the subtle flutter of Eve’s lashes and the slight constriction in her sinuses. She was holding back the tears that wanted so badly to flow. “Ro said she and Gregg would stay here more often, and you have Dania, Caleb’s mate to talk to.”

“Oh, I have many females to talk to, Eve, but none of them are you.”

She squeezed my hand.

Since Khaleen banned all Shadows from the island, it was refreshing to be able to walk outside the camp and not be on high alert.

One of the twins kicked my ribs, nearly dropping me to my knees. “Oh!” I yelped as a sharp pain ripped at my side.

Eve supported my arm. “Skye, are you all right?”

I nodded and clenched my teeth while trying to encourage the little tyke to shift her position. “Honestly, I cannot imagine another six months with these two inside me.”

“Now you know why it is so dangerous for you to carry twins.”

The babe moved and I was able to stand up straight again and continue walking. “My decision to keep them both was the right one,” I assured her.

Her silence and lowered head revealed her doubts, but I was not in the mood to discuss the issue.

Chapter 2

Under the warm blanket of night lies the promise of dawn.

~ K h a l e n ~

As expected, Traeger’s clan dissolved and merged with outlying regions. The members joined neighboring clans, while they waited for Traeger’s successor to rise. The area was free of all Shadows, yet the house looked clean—not a speck of dust anywhere.

I looked at Aidan, who walked through the corridors on full alert. Ian had disappeared into the basement where the females had been chambered. In thought, I asked Aidan if this was an illusion. He shook his head.

I can sense them, he said in thought. There are Shadows here.

Yes, I confirmed. Their coldness was unmistakable. It was the kind that stung clear to your bones.

Ian telepathically called out. Get down here.

Aidan and I hurried through the mansion's corridors and ran downstairs. When we reached the commons' kitchen area, Aidan stopped dead. Bloody hell, there were fifteen of them—all males.

Ian held them trapped in an illusion. They all stood in what looked like wavering water, dazed, confused, and subdued. No doubt they would come out fighting once he released them.

"Get ready," said Aidan.

Ian released the illusion.

I recognized the big man dressed in black leather. His skin was dark enough that his eyes and teeth looked horribly out of place as he hissed. He was crouched in a fighting stance. He was a member of Damon's clan and a loyal warrior of the dark arts. The energy that emanated from his hands felt like stinging daggers against my shield.

I held my hand up. "Easy Pyro, we're not here for you or your blokes."

Another man lurched forward from behind Pyro. I passed enough energy through him to daze an elephant. He dropped to the ground, twitching. A few more of the Shadows stepped back, rethinking their intention to attack us all at once.

Pyro reigned in his power. I was familiar with his gifts. He could stop a freight train dead on its tracks and could crush a boulder to powder. He was an energy bender and very lethal. "I was told you killed your twin," he said with a thick Jamaican accent. "How is it then, that you stand before me now?"

"We've come to free his women," I said, avoiding his question. Revealing how Traeger's mate had helped save my life after I killed her mate would not be wise and would no doubt make her a target of the Shadows.

Pyro looked at me with curiosity and challenge in his dark, narrow eyes. "The women are gone."

"Where were they taken?" I asked.

"We break no laws, Khalen. The mandate you had threatened to endorse has been fulfilled. The Shadow males have one purebred mate, the halflings are gone, and there is nothing left that should concern you."

He was telling the truth, but there was something underlying that truth—something not quite right. "And the halflings?" I prodded.

A sinister smile stretched across his face. "We sold them."

I narrowed my eyes. My anger hummed in my veins. "To whom?"

Aidan placed his hand on my shoulder then jumped back with a curse. He knew better than to touch me when I was amped up, but his intention to bring me back to neutral had worked. The hum around me calmed and my thoughts were clearing. "Whom did you sell them to?"

"It does not matter," Pyro said with indifference. "They are no longer your concern."

I knew there would be no leaving this situation without a fight. In truth, I was looking forward to it. I needed some way to vent my anger, and pounding these Shadow blokes was as good a way as any. Pyro advanced first, followed by the others. Ian and Aidan flanked my sides. Holding the Shadows off provided a challenge. They did not fight honorably. Objects could come flying at you from all angles.

The dilemma with fighting so many gifted beings was that it took concentration to manifest your gifts. That inner concentration opened the door for your opponent's attack. You had to stay alert and in the present moment at all times. Your feelers had to be out and seeking potential threats. One mistake would render you helpless in a fraction of a second, and God forbid if you were knocked out.

The Shadows moved closer. I cleared my mind, formed my shield, and prepared for the onslaught of attacks. Standing on the loose rug was a danger. I silently warned Ian and Aidan to move back until our feet were off the rug. As expected, the Shadows came forward, stepping on the rug we had just cleared. When all of them occupied the volatile footing, I willed it out from under them. They toppled to the ground like wooden soldiers in a shoebox. Before they could regain their wits, we moved in.

Our goal, of course, was not to kill them, just render them unconscious. Pyro reformed his switchblade into a sword then swung it toward my chest. I deflected the blow then pounded my fist across his face. Another quick blow to the side of his neck dropped him like a rag doll. When Drew taught me to fight, he stressed the fact that you never wasted energy. Each blow had to count.

The next attack came from the side. I turned to deflect a piercing blow of energy. The man lunged at me with a knife, while his buddy attempted to sweep my legs. When he made contact, he cursed as if he had just struck solid steel. I grabbed the hand with the knife, twisted it up until the

knife dropped, and then locked his wrist joint. The man dropped to his knees. One solid energy blow rendered him unconscious.

The one who attempted to sweep me stared with wide eyes, backing away slowly. The other five who stayed out of the fight stood behind him confused and dazed. To leave, they would have to pass the three of us, something they obviously felt uncomfortable doing.

A line of blood dripped down Aidan's arm where he had been slashed. He didn't seem too interested in stemming the flow. His eyes were dark and focused, his body tense. Ian looked pumped and ready for more action. He always enjoyed a good fight, unlike his brother, who despised any form of violence.

"Where are the halflings?" I calmly asked.

The one rubbing his leg looked up. "Some of them were taken to Sean's clan. The others were sent overseas, I'm not sure where."

"Sold as slaves, no doubt," Ian spat.

The blood stopped flowing from Aidan's arm and his gash slowly fused. The observing Shadows stared in disbelief. They'd likely never seen a man who possessed the gift to heal. Skye had obviously tapped my thoughts and did a quick assessment of the damage. I could feel her disappointment with the demise of the women. I assured her I would pay Sean a visit.

"Who is your clan leader?" I asked.

"Seth, Traeger's son, but none of us can find him."

"Find another leader," I decreed. "I am claiming this county as Protected territory. Warn the others."

The Shadow nodded then looked down at his incapacitated cohorts. Ian, Aidan, and I left. My sympathy for the Shadows' weaknesses did not concern me so much as how it affected the balance of all Spirians. As in all of life, when the balance shifts, changes automatically occur to restore symmetry. The void of the Shadows would be quickly filled. The smart choice would be to set up Protected clans in every city to ensure purity. As it stood, King County would be the next Shadow dominion in Washington.

Aidan placed his large hand on my shoulder. “Your thoughts are heavy and guarded, my brother. What occupies you?” He was not my brother by blood, but he was as close as any brother I could ever have.

I gently broke away from him to hoist myself into the driver’s seat of the Escalade. Aidan sat shotgun while Ian sat in back. I revved the engine, glancing over at Aidan who waited for an answer. He knew better than to push me. “We have just claimed the county,” I explained. “Sean will not back down lightly.”

Ian cleared his throat. “He has no interest in claiming the peninsula, why would he care?”

“We just dissolved Traeger’s clan and pushed them from the area. Sean will feel the aftermath. He will not be pleased. Sean had high hopes for Seth. Losing him to the Protected would be a hearty blow to his overinflated ego.”

“So, what is your plan?” asked Aidan.

“We need to grow our clan and distribute them throughout the county.”

Both Ian and Aidan remained silent. I could feel their inner turmoil bubbling like the Sol Duc Hot springs. Neither of them wanted the clan to separate. We had resided in close proximity for many years. Having it split was like watching members of a very close family sprout their wings and fly away.

Aidan was the first to speak. “It’s a solid plan.” His words did not match his emotions. Loyal as he was, he trusted my decision. The nice thing about Aidan, though, was that he would challenge me when he felt it was absolutely necessary. He provided a good counterweight to my occasional reckless will.

I looked at Ian’s reflection in the mirror. “You still have connections with the King County clans?”

He nodded. “Are you thinking about relocating them?”

“I am. Sean’s strength is in numbers, while ours lies in gifts. The more consolidated we are, the better we stand in defeating them. Unlike most Shadows, Sean is a strategist and a manipulative one at that. If we are not careful, he will encroach upon us like lava beneath the earth’s surface. We won’t feel the heat until the ground crumbles and we lay open like helpless clams engulfed in steam.”

Aidan's expression changed to amusement. "Colorful analogy."

"We should alert the clans in Port Townsend and Port Angeles as well," Ian added. If the Protected claims Mason County, you can bet that the Shadows will want to claim the neighboring borders."

I glanced into the mirror. "I want to drive them from the entire peninsula and create a safe place for the Protected to dwell."

"A castle surrounded by a very large moat," said Aidan. "Brilliant."

Now it was time to pay Sean a visit in Seattle. The I-5 was slammed when we entered Tacoma. How anyone could tolerate living in the city or surrounding metropolitan areas astounded me. I felt as if I stood among cattle crammed into a small pen awaiting slaughter. My hands gripped the steering wheel.

"We really need to find a way to project ourselves through space," said Aidan, noticing my discomfort and frustration. There were some energy benders known to dematerialize and suddenly reappear miles away but they were rare and the act had proven to be dangerous on several levels. Those who were able to do it never lived for very long. Wizards who were at least second-generation alchemists were the only ones who could transport without repercussion.

"Yes," I said. "I can see how that could be very useful—dangerous, but useful." I crept the car forward a few more feet then stared at the clock. It was already two in the afternoon. At this rate, we would roll into Seattle at three or three-thirty. My stomach roared, reminding me that its last meal had been breakfast. My hunger would have to wait. I wanted this day to be over with and return to my mate. My next meal would be with her.

My love, I called to Skye in my mind. I'm afraid we will not make it home by nightfall.

I figured as much, she responded. We will have dinner when you return.

No, please eat without me. I'm not sure when I will be home.

I will not eat without you. She responded.

I don't want you to wait.

Tough.

I drew my lips back into a tight line and shook my head. Stubborn. How are you feeling?

Her reply was slow and calculated. The girls are very active. I feel good.

You're a horrible liar, Skye. I want you to rest.

Stay safe.

Rest. I demanded

I love you.

I pounded the steering wheel. "Women can be so difficult."

"I'm sure she thinks the same about you," said Ian with a knowing grin.

"I do not like her with twins."

Aidan looked at me. "Then why did you not take one of them away?"

I met his stare. "Could you?"

"It's not one of my gifts."

My expression reflected his sarcasm. "If it were, could you take one of the girls from her?"

He pursed his lips as if weighing his answer. "No, I don't believe I could."

I raised my hands. "Now you understand."

"She's a strong woman, Khalen."

"Strong, but not immortal. The girls are big and are growing too fast."

Aidan looked out the window, fighting his own fears. He tried to hide his feelings from me but I sensed them all the same. He loved Skye almost as much as I did.

"You two are pathetic," said Ian. "Skye will be fine. She has a great doctor and Shanuk protects her from the other side. What could go wrong?"

Aidan turned back to him sharply. "Have you no fear of anything, brother?"

Ian held up his hand. "Whoa, sorry."

Aidan turned back around, his fists were tight and his eyes focused on nothing particular out the window. I had chosen Skye's templar wisely. Aidan would lay his life down for her, I was certain. I felt the pain in his heart, though, and that concerned me. Perhaps Sunjia would be good for him. If there were only some way to convince Dirk to release her to him. The thought of it churned my stomach like tainted meat. Good as she was, she was still a Shadow.

Two hours later, we rolled into Seattle and parked in front of Sean's mansion. As I discovered several months ago when Skye was abducted, he had more than one residence. It was anyone's

guess where he might be staying. I was counting on reading his servant's mind if Sean was not staying here. I reached out the window and rang the buzzer.

"Welcome to Bayer Manor, how may I help you?" a frail voice poured from the speaker.

"We're here to see Sean."

"Master Sean is not available, Sir. May I tell him who came to call?"

"Khalen Dunning."

A long pause filled the silence then the gate's buzzer sounded. The large black wrought iron gate slowly pulled aside. "Please, come through," said the voice.

I glanced over at Aidan, who had his feelers out for any illusionists that might be around. Sean's clan was littered with them. Most of them were young and careless, but under Sean's guidance, they would soon be dangerously efficient. Sean had strong mind skills and could easily get into your head if given half a chance.

The butler met us at the door with a broad smile. His billowing sleeves and satin cummerbund looked oddly out of place. He stepped aside and gestured us into the house. The ambient hum grew louder as Sean met us in the foyer. He was testing our boundaries, which was typical when two opposing forces shared the same space.

"Khalen, to what do I owe this unannounced visit?"

I felt Ian fall into an illusion. His intent was to do some investigating of the premises. Aidan stayed behind to mask the illusion with one of his own. Nested illusions were difficult to master, but incredibly effective when used in the company of other illusionists. When Sean became suspicious of Ian's quiet stance, Aidan mocked a quiet conversation with his brother, something that cannot be done in a typical illusion. It was enough to curb Sean's suspicion for now.

"Where are the halflings?" I asked. I tried probing his thoughts, but it was like sifting through a sandstorm to find a grain of truth.

Sean's smile broadened. "They have been released from our care." His red eyes glistened against the light from the crystal chandelier. It was unknown why the irises of a bloodsucker turned red after several months of being part of the clan. The tradition of drinking the blood of a gifted soul originated hundreds of years ago by a band of gypsies that roamed through Europe. The priest of the tribe believed that the blood of the gifted blessed and strengthened the one who consumed it. Some

believed that gifts were passed from one individual to another by sharing blood. That belief was never confirmed.

It was an odd practice, but one that spawned a new breed of Spirian. The bloodsuckers were cunning by nature, with strong manipulation skills. They tended to band only with their own kind, reaching out to others only for personal gain. They absolutely despised humans. The only thing they could possibly want from the halflings was enslavement. They would become the clan's minions—disposable slaves.

Ian returned with nothing to report. The manor was void of occupants, other than staff. If Sean did stay here, it was short term only.

“I am claiming the entire peninsula, Sean. Shadows are no longer permitted on our territory.”

His eyes narrowed and the hum in the room grew louder. I felt the presence of others in the room, closing the distance.

“Your clan is too small to back that claim, Khalen. Jarel has assumed Traeger's lot, including his property.”

“Not without Seth's release of it all.”

“Seth,” Sean laughed. “That spineless buck couldn't lead a parched herd to water. Let him try to stop us.”

“Seth is backed by my clan. I assure you, Jarel and his lot will not succeed with their unjustified acquisition.”

Although he tried to hide his shock of the news, Sean was truly shaken. His energy drew inward and I could smell his anxiety. Its pungent aroma made my nose sting with the scent of salt water. He took a deep breath and raised his chin. With his guard momentarily down, I saw snippets of his thoughts and knew that his plan had been to take us over, and not the other way around. He was not counting on my aggressive ruling.

“Be careful you do not bite off more than you can chew, Khalen, lest things get caught in your throat.”

“I will back up my claim, Sean, I assure you. If I knew that wiping out your kind would benefit the Father, I would do so. But we both know that voids are quickly filled. I believe that territories

must be established to ensure peace among the clans. I will meet with Victor and seal a treaty with him. He will be responsible for ensuring that treaty is withheld.”

“The clans have always run independently within the region. Getting Victor involved will do nothing.”

“Then he will be removed, according to the Spirian laws.”

Sean clenched his fists. He was clearly uninformed of the outcome of the meeting we had in Brazil. Victor will not have a choice but to assume responsibility for the clans in his region. Until now, clan leaders made up their own rules. Now, they would have to conform to the rulings of the regional leader. The plan was a good one, and was intended to restore some semblance of order and accountability.

“The clans will have to relocate.”

I nodded.

“Where will they go?”

His concern of losing his hold and power consumed him. I could sense his panic now. Strong leaders would be forced to migrate into his territory and he lacked the power to thwart them. It would take nothing for them to overpower his clan and consume them.

“I assume they will take over most of King County.”

Sean’s nostrils flared. “The numbers of our kind dwindle, Khaleen. You know what will happen if the Shadow clans darken this city.”

Sean never saw his kind as Shadows. He saw them as something better, more prestigious and civil.

“I understand there are many of your kind in Europe. Perhaps you could return to your homeland?”

Sean turned away. “That is not an option for me.” He tapped his lower lip with his finger then trained his eyes on me. “I understand your mate carries twins?”

The sudden change in subject was Sean’s way of saying this battle was not over with. Skye was the weak link in my armor and he was testing it now.

“She is not your concern, Sean. I suggest you focus your energy on more personal matters. Your first matter, of course, are the slaves you have sold. Victor will be interested in their fate, I’m sure.”

Sean's face paled. "I carry your mate's blood in me," he seethed. "I will find her."

Without any coaxing, the energy I had built up released and slammed Sean against the wall. His minions closed in. I turned toward the closest one and blocked a metal staff he swung toward my head. The crack against my bones stung clear into my chest. My hand went numb. The other men closed the distance and attacked the three of us with such force and numbers it was impossible to hold them back.

Sean weakened my shield. If I didn't do something fast, we would be overtaken. The minions dropped one by one, their life zapped with only my will.

"Stop!" Sean shouted. "Enough. You made your point, Khalen, now leave." The pain in his ruby eyes was enough to convince me that he understood where things had fallen.

My body shook with my rage and it was hard to gear it down. Aidan gripped my shoulder. "My brother, let's take our leave." I knew that he felt pain in his hand, yet he held firm, grounding me.

My eyes locked on Sean's as we walked toward the door. "Skye is mine," I said. "Understand?" Sean nodded.

Chapter 3

When lightning strikes, does it do so with the intent to harm or is it merely seeking ground?

~ S k y e ~

Something was wrong. I tried to contact Khalen, but all I received was this raging headache and a strange urge to slam my fist into the wall. I paced the circular space of our yurt, feeling the warmth of the tigerwood beneath my feet. The fire crackled as it warmed the space. I left the lights turned off because my eyes needed the rest. My vision was fading lately and I wanted to preserve what

little sight I had left. With any luck at all, I would be able to see the faces of my young after they were born.

Sam and Karin were planning to visit tomorrow and stay for a week or so before leaving for Virginia. I was excited to see them again. I walked over to my nightstand where my iPhone rested. I pressed my finger over the screen. A pleasant British female's voice announced the time, "Eight, forty-two pm" Khalen, where are you? I thought, hoping he would respond.

I'm coming home, he answered. See you soon.

His thoughts were short and tense. I decided not to probe him, my head was aching far too much. I wandered toward the kitchen and increased the flame under the pan of vegetable soup I had made. My stomach growled, anticipating its long-awaited meal. I wrapped the bread that Eve had made in foil then placed it in the oven. I rotated the dial to 200 degrees to keep the loaf warm. The tactile dots that Khalen had placed on the dials made it much easier to set the temperature. I guess he got tired of me burning our meals.

Shortly after we returned from Brazil, he had hired Drew to remodel the yurt. It now had Wolfe ranges and cobalt-blue Silestone counters. The simple pine cupboard had been replaced with solid cherry wood. Khalen's wardrobe had plenty of room in the new closets he had constructed. Brazilian tigerwood floors replaced the laminate flooring that came standard with the yurt. He even replaced the bed with an oversized King, complete with ample blankets that were both soft and purple.

I made my way to the fire pit in the center of our room. Focusing my weak vision on anything was near to impossible anymore, even in good lighting. Khalen thought that maybe the pregnancy had something to do with the sudden decline in my vision, but I doubted that theory. I knew that it was only a matter of time before my vision would fade completely. I reached into the wood stash for another log and laid it upon the embers.

I heard Maiyun gnaw on a bone in her bed. I lowered myself beside her and laid my head against her strong shoulders. My fingers combed through her thick fur. She smelled like bay rum, the soap Khalen used to bathe her in. I felt his presence as the Escalade rolled up the driveway.

The door opened as I pried my arm out from under Maiyun. My extended belly made it difficult to stand. Khalen was by my side, offering a hand. He pulled me up as if I weighed no more than a mere child, embracing me as if we had been apart for days instead of hours.

“How did it go?”

He stepped away from me and walked toward the wet bar to pour himself a brandy. “I will need to request council with Victor.”

Shivers ran down my spine. “Victor? Why?”

He took a long, slow sip of his brandy then turned to face me. I imagined his face was long and sullen. “The halflings were sold as slaves. Sage knows about it but refuses to issue any sort of reprimand.”

I sat down on the bed with a heaviness in my heart that settled like molten lead. “Slaves? Good Lord, why?”

“Personal gain,” he said, taking another sip before joining me on the bed. His warm arm slipped around my waist and pulled me against him. “I intend to remove all Shadows from the peninsula. This will force them to condense in King County.”

“Has it become that desperate then?”

“Yes, it has. I will meet with Victor next week.”

I sighed. “Will you be gone long?”

“Only a night or two.” He placed his hand over my swollen belly. “They grow so fast, Skye.” His hand jumped as one of the girls gave a good kick.

I groaned. “Well, there is no doubt about their strength.”

“None at all,” he agreed, forcing a smile. “How are you feeling these days?”

He knew the answer already. I was surprised he had to ask it. “Tired, uncomfortable.”

“Aye,” he said, slipping back to his native tongue. “The next six months will prove challenging at best.”

“When should we leave for Scotland?”

“Three months. I have already arranged for our tickets.”

I bit back the wave of panic that threatened to rise. “Are you hungry?”

“Starved. I haven’t eaten a thing since breakfast.”

“Let’s get you fed then.” I stood and headed toward the kitchen. I tripped over the stool Khalen had slid out while pouring his drink. His strong hands gripped my arm before I could fall.

“Damn my negligence,” he cursed, slamming his drink on the counter.

“Not your fault,” I said. “I heard you slide the stool out and simply forgot to be careful.”

“Your vision is getting worse then?”

I nodded. “No worries, Khalen. I knew this day would soon come and so did you.”

“It will improve once the twins are born,” he said, but there was doubt lacing his voice.

“Perhaps,” I said, doing my best to appease him. I rubbed my sore arm where he had gripped me and willed the pain away before retrieving a hot pad from the drawer. He took it from my hands.

“Let me get this. I want you to rest. He led me to the counter and pulled out a chair. “Sit.”

“Khalen, I am capable.”

“No doubt,” he said, “but you will sit, anyway.”

“You have become quite bossy lately.”

He did not reply, but I could imagine his expression; narrowed eyes, firm lips, and jaw clenched. Ladling us both a bowl of soup, he spoke in a firm voice that offered no room for rebuttal. “I have asked Gregg and Ro to clear your schedule until further notice.” He slid my bowl before me.

My first inclination was to toss it right back at him, but my stomach overruled that intention. “Why?” I kept my voice calm, which was completely opposite from how I felt on the inside.

He sliced up the bread, placed it in a basket then came to sit beside me. I allowed him to take my hands in his and say a prayer before demanding his answer. He took time gathering his thoughts—too much time for the violent emotions slamming around in my brain.

“Eat,” he said, gesturing to my bowl.

“Not until you explain why you took liberties with my schedule.”

“I believe the reasons are obvious, Skye.”

I pushed my bowl away and started to stand. He gripped my arm, keeping me in my seat. There were dark stains on his shirt. I smelled the faint coppery hints of blood. Probing his thoughts provided the details I would have preferred not to experience. I sat back down, dizzy from the sudden images that flooded my mind. “I don’t like this,” I said, shaking my head. “So much violence.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t want to show you, but you did make me promise to keep my thoughts open.”

“Whose blood is it?”

He spread a thin bit of coconut oil on a piece of warm bread, and then placed it on my plate before preparing his own slice. When he didn’t answer me, I pulled his sleeve up. My hand brushed the many scars along his arm, swollen and crusted with blood. I wasted no time in healing them all.

“I didn’t see these,” I said, slightly confused. “I saw Aidan’s injuries but not yours.”

“They happened later, during our visit with Sean. They were too minor to concern you over.”

I scanned his body with my failing eyes. “Are there anymore?” Judging by the energy his body emitted, there was a sizable bruise on his left lower leg. I healed that then scanned him again. He brought my chin up and his golden eyes glowed.

“Skye, I’m fine. It is you I worry about. If you do anything at all for me, heal your own pain. By taking care of you, you care for me.”

I frowned. “Can I ask you to do the same? Care for yourself?”

“My role as regional leader is difficult for you?”

“You know it is, but I would never ask you to stand down. Leadership is in your blood. What I ask of you is to stop worrying about me so much. You feed the reality that you don’t want and starve the outcome you really do want. Why? You of all people understand that truth, do you not?”

He held both my hands in his as if I would fall away should his grip falter. His breath deepened and the golden glow of his irises dimmed beneath the lids that now cloaked them.

“You’ve had visions,” I said. He was keeping them out of my reach.

“You needn’t know about them.” His voice was low and gruff.

“If it concerns me and our daughters, I most certainly do need to know.”

He slid my bowl of soup before me. “Eat, Skye, please.”

Again, I probed his thoughts and found nothing. He released my hands. I felt as if my emotions were locked in a cold, dark cave, surrounded by heavy dampness. The bowl of soup was cooler now, nearly too cold. I ate it anyway.

When our meal was done, Khalen led me over to the bed, before returning to the kitchen to wash dishes. The silence was discomforting, but I wanted him to speak first. I rose to add another log to the fire. It was far too cold in this yurt tonight and it had little to do with the weather.

I padded my way toward Maiyun who lay sleeping in her bed. Using her belly as a pillow, I snuggled up next to her. The scent of her filled my nose with musky familiarity. I found it comforting along with her soft fur sifting through my fingers.

I listened as Khalen continued to clean the kitchen and put things away—his thoughts still closed to me. I couldn't help but feel the edge of trepidation coursing through my mind, fearing the unknown. Would something happen to the girls? To me? If something were to happen, could fate be changed? I reminded myself that God was in control, not us. All the worrying and planning in the world would not alter the path of what was meant to be.

I heard Khalen approach then stand quietly beside me. With little effort, he lifted me into his arms to carry me to our bed. Without releasing his hold, he lay beside me, burying his face in my hair. Still I waited for him to speak.

He rose, laid his hand upon my belly, eyes glowing. The girls responded in kind. I felt them move and shift beneath his loving touch.

"Let me see what you see," I whispered.

An image of the girls filled my mind as if I had been granted a magic window through which my vision was flawless. I saw every detail of their delicate faces, the dark orbs of their eyes, their tiny beating hearts. A sob escaped me and my eyes filled with warm tears. "God, they're beautiful."

Khalen gently brushed the tears from my cheek. "I love you Skye Dunning, more than life itself."

I pulled him closer to me and closed my eyes. "Then don't hide from me, my love. Whatever you go through, allow me to journey that path by your side, no matter how horrible you think it is."

I felt his breath deepen and a low growl rumbled the bed. "I cannot show you what I've seen."

"Why?"

"Because it won't happen. I won't allow it to."

I leaned up on one elbow and stared down at him. "You are strong, Khalen, but hardly a match for our Father."

“My visions are possible fates, not absolutes. The Father has blessed me with foresight so that I can choose an alternate outcome.”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. “You are a stubborn man, Khalen Dunning.”

“Yes, when you unite with another soul, you tend to pick up a trait or two of theirs.”

I looked at him skeptically. “And what, pray tell, have I acquired from you, Sir?”

“Strength and wisdom, of course.”

I laughed. “Of course.”

That night, he made love to me for the first time in several weeks. I could sense the apprehension in his movements, but also the relief in his body. He slept soundly now, barely moving except to breathe. I felt more relaxed than I had in the past few weeks, but my mind was an electrical storm of thoughts. The remembered images of the girls soothed me. My eyes remained open, yet consumed with darkness. Perhaps if my vision failed me completely before the twins were born, I could see them through their father’s eyes. I was tickled with the thought. A painful kick quickly replaced it. I stifled my groan so I would not awaken Khalen.

I placed my hand on my ever-growing belly to calm the young. Once settled, I rolled onto my side and allowed the beat of Khalen’s heart to sooth me to sleep.

The dream that consumed me was not a typical one. I was weightless like moisture in a cloud colored in various hues of blues and greens. Shanuk appeared before me, dressed in a beige cotton robe that was rather plain compared to the vibrant colors that surrounded us. Concern dulled his vivid-blue eyes.

“Skye,” he said, extending his hands toward me in greeting. “You are radiant.”

I took his ethereal hands in mine and lowered my head. “Shanuk. How I have missed you.” We remained that way for some time, simply enjoying each other’s presence.

“Listen to me, Skye. What I tell you is imperative to your life and the life of your young. Sunjia will instruct Khalen on what to do when the time comes. He will not trust her. You must convince him to do so, understand?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t. Why not just tell me?”

“The information is not for your ears.”

I wanted to scream but instantly knew it would do me no good. It was oddly difficult to accept and trust without knowing the hows or whys of it all.

“Do not ponder this now, Skye. Your answers will be revealed in good time.”

I nodded, while biting back the nagging urge to question him further. If Shanuk had information for me, he would reveal it without my asking. His image started to fade. The hands that fit so protectively over mine lost their mass and faded into the mist that now surrounded me. I wanted to call out his name, but I had no voice.

“Remember, Skye. You must convince Khalen to trust Sunjia’s words.” His voice was hollow.

I felt my body being shaken. “Skye, wake up. You’re dreaming.”

Khalen leaned over me, brushing the damp hair from my forehead. “I saw Shanuk,” I said in a groggy voice.

“I know. You were calling his name.”

“He told me to tell you something.”

“What?”

“He wants you to listen to Sunjia and do what she tells you to do.”

He leaned back. “You were dreaming, Skye. Shanuk would not ask such a thing.”

“He said her instructions would save my life and those of our young. You must listen to her.”

“Shh,” he hissed. “Sleep now. We’ll talk about this tomorrow.”