

Prologue

~ K a i l i ~

Over five years have passed since my brother, Zhentu, was abducted. He's the youngest of my siblings and a shifter.

Not much is known about shifters and why they are so different from other Spirians. It is believed that Fae blood is required to produce shifter offspring. Legend claims that when the first Angels descended from heaven to live as Spirians, they coupled with the Faeries, thus making the Spirian bloodlines strong and diverse in gifts.

Despite my attempt to learn more about shifters, their origin remains a mystery. Unlike typical Spirians, shifters have an animal spirit, making them wild and unpredictable at times. They are stronger than other Spirians, and often struggle to control their instinct to fight. Something about them fascinates me, but I can't say what intrigues me the most. When they shift into their animal form, I feel their thoughts as if they were my own as I do with any animal. It's my gift, though I'm not sure how useful it is.

Zhentu's spirit was the wolf. Because shifters' have unique blood, they have gained the attention of the Shadows, dark Angels who seek to imbalance the scales that monitor good and evil.

Bennet Graves, is one such Shadow and a powerful leader who is not used to being thwarted. The rare female for whom he paid a lofty sum became the mate of my Uncle Seth. When Bennet had tried to take her back, my father, Khalen, defeated him in battle. This makes Bennet the prime suspect behind Zhentu's abduction. The Shadow remains recluse, however, and hasn't made any demands. Why?

Chapter 1

~ Z e b a s t i a n ~

The fury in my father's gray eyes sparkled like demons threatening to break free to stab me in the heart. I had not seen him this angry since I was nine when my brother, Carter, and I wandered too far from camp and became lost. It took Father three weeks to track us down. Today, the anger resided deeper, visceral and unrelenting.

"You had one job, Zebastian: keep your brother safe. Now I discover that it was you who killed him—to save yourself?"

He paced before me, eyes narrowed, mouth held firm and straight—his pondering stance, a posture he took when making a tough but necessary decision.

"Your actions portray those of the Shadows, and are unforgivable."

"Father, I—"

As clan leader, he harnessed the ability to bind people in an energetic hold that could kill if necessary. The pain of it now gripped me like the claws of his shifter animal, the mountain lion. I couldn't breathe, let alone explain. Even if I could explain, my father spoke truth. Carter lay dead, his blood still sharp in my throat. No longer able to hold myself up, I sank to the ground, grateful to land on the cold snow-covered surface.

When Carter and I escaped from the group of Shadows who took us twelve years past, the rage took over, darkening my soul to match that of our torturous captors. The only memory remaining was my brother's throat in my mouth, his copper-tasting blood coating my tongue.

"You have disappointed me, Zebastian. I was wrong about you." Father's energetic hold choked my air and constricted my organs, but hearing the words he spoke hurt like the lash of a soaked bull whip over and over as it tore through my soul, ripping the flesh of my pride.

My father meant everything to me. He had trained me to lead this clan since the time I could walk. Now, I had let him down, being every bit the monster he claimed me to be.

"I ban you from this clan, Zebastian. You are no longer—my son."

Death held mercy, but this—this was unbearable.

"No, Tiban!" Mother screamed. "You can't."

Ren, our clan elder, held her back. "Stay back, Shinda, leave him be for now." He was a man of stature in his own right, adoptive father of my closest friend, Teak.

The elder had led this clan for many years before relinquishing it to Father. Pain laced Ren's voice, yet he supported Father's decree, pulling my mother back, keeping her from reaching me. Red hair clung to her tear-soaked face as trembling hands reached toward me. Her image etched my memory; the last I would see of her—the last I would see of our home in Canada.

Father turned to step away, then hesitated to add, "You are Khalen's problem now. He will address your Shadow soul as he sees fit."

Father's regal, departing form blurred through my tears. My spirit wavered, teetering on the brink of desertion. I had been banished, removed from my clan. At twenty-four, I would not survive for long.

As Father so bluntly pointed out, I was Khalen Dunning's problem now. The regional leader of North America had a reputation—all bad if you were considered a Shadow. He made Father's wrath seem like a hand slap.

Teak reached down to lift me.

"Take him," Ren ordered. "Stay with him. Keep him safe."

Chapter 2

~ Z e b a s t i a n ~

Teak was not a small man by any measure. His spirit animal represented the eagle: strong, regal, and swift. Like me, he had a secondary animal: the grizzly bear. His height of 6' 7" towered mine by a good four inches.

"I can walk," I groaned.

He carried me as if gliding over the ground. I floated in his arms, weightless as a breeze. Perhaps I was; perhaps I just imagined the lightness, the wind, and the cold.

"Don't talk. We're almost there."

We crossed the snow line and headed toward the trees that bordered Canada and Washington. The distance he managed was impossible, yet here we stood. Images faded in and out of my mind, blurring the barrier between illusion and reality.

My eyes fluttered open, struggling against the need to sleep. I lay in a dark cave under furs by a fire. The scent of meat, broth, and sweet root vegetables permeated the air. Attempting to sit, I fought waves of nausea and dizziness clouding my mind.

"Teak, he's up," said a stranger's voice; it sounded male, young, with a hint of attitude.

I wanted to slap myself, force my wits to surface and function. Everything moved in slow motion. My hands felt numb, my limbs weak.

Teak entered the cave with a dripping bota bag in his hand. "You're awake."

"That's debatable. Where am I?"

Handing me the bota bag, he lent a hand to steady me. "Somewhere in the foothills of Bellingham."

I sipped the cold water, letting it awaken my body and senses with its clear mineral-rich purity. Never had water tasted so good as it did at this moment.

"How long have I been out?"

He sat cross-legged beside me. "Three days."

A young man peeked into the cave entrance, curiosity lacing his expression. Teak looked at him and shook his head. The man clenched his jaw and grumbled something as he closed the flimsy cover.

"What is this place, Teak? What's going on?" I asked.

"What do you remember?"

I took another long pull of the water, wanting something stronger; something to make me forget the memories that surfaced like hungry Gremlins.

"My inevitable death."

He chuckled as if I had said something amusing. "Yet, here you are, my friend, alive and well."

"And where is here, Teak? Who are those people outside?"

"Later," he said, tossing a twisted twig into the fire. "Right now, I'm more interested in what happened to you. Who took you? From where did you escape? What is SOAR?"

SOAR—those letters scorched my mind's eye like a brand of evil over my heart.

"I'm hungry. What is there to eat?"

Teak studied me as if trying to solve a mystery. "This is important, Ze. I'll come back with some food, and then you will talk to me, yes?"

I had never seen such intenseness in his near-black eyes. He had to be of Knik descent with his dark skin and chiseled features. He wasn't a ripped man in the sense of muscles and brawn. No, Teak was built more like a cheetah, all power and speed with strength that seemed to come from nowhere.

"Very well, my friend. We'll talk when you return."

I watched him stand with the grace of a subtle breeze, thinking about what I could tell him. So much of it was a blur in my mind.

I remembered growing weaker by the day, my spirit just a sliver of light, struggling against the heavy darkness of a cold hell.

I remembered cries echoing off the stone walls as howls of pain and despair clung to the dampness like moss on trees.

Teak returned with a bowl filled with steaming stew and flatbread. He handed them to me before setting down a bag in his hand and reaching for another log to add to the fire. When he was satisfied with the arrangement of emblazoned wood, he sat back down beside me.

The stew was spicy, hot, and thick with pepper, potatoes, and carrots. My stomach welcomed the hearty substance, grateful for having something to digest. The bread tasted dry but flavorful with herbs and seeds.

Teak stared into the flames, poking at the stray red embers that had scattered when he adjusted the wood. Patient as he appeared, he wouldn't wait for long to hear my story.

I took another swig of water before setting my half-eaten meal aside in hopes of having room for the rest later. I wondered who had prepared it. Teak could cook, but his idea of a meal involved meat skewered over an open flame.

"I searched for you," he said, "every day since the time you were taken."

The sip of water I tried to swallow struggled against my throat as if competing for space. I was twelve when taken; Teak lagged behind me by a year. The thought of him looking for me at such a young age appeared inconceivable, yet I believed him.

Teak had remained my constant companion since the day Ren brought him home, bundled in furs, almost dead. The elder asked me to care for him. I did the best I could.

"Talk to me, Ze. What happened that day?"

I took another long swallow, feeling the bite of a deep thirst that couldn't be quenched. "You were there, Teak. Why don't you tell me?"

He drew a deep breath, his jaw ticking like an overstretched string. "Very well. Twelve of us ventured into the woods that day. Your father tasked you with leading our first hunt. We shifted into our beast forms, you and your brother as wolves, me as my eagle. The others chose wild cats. The hunt was successful; we managed to bring down several moose, enough to feed the clan for months."

I picked at my food, trying to bring forth the memory of the events he spoke of. They were a haze, pieces of a mismatched puzzle in time.

"The first dart hit Carter. He went down hard. You ordered the others to scatter, to flee through the woods. You stayed behind, guarding your brother. There were five men with dart rifles. Two darts entered your side. I attacked the man who shot you, but another grabbed my wing and snapped it like a brittle twig."

My gut twisted with the thought as the sound of broken bones echoed in my mind, distant yet real all the same.

"I don't know how you did it, but you managed to bring down three of the men before they could find the others. I shifted back to my human form, in time to stop my attacker from sticking me with a needle. He was so strong, much too strong for me to battle. The needle poked through my skin, burning with the liquid it dispersed."

Flashes of his story played in my head, like broken film. "I couldn't save you."

"But you did, Ze. Don't you remember? You sprung out of nowhere, downing the man, distracting him from me. I was able to hide."

I remembered nothing.

"The other man hit you again with another dart. He made a comment about how it was sure to kill you. He grabbed Carter, while the other one dragged you away. I couldn't follow. I had no idea where they took you. I didn't even know if you were alive."

"There were times I wished I wasn't."

"Where did they take you?"

"I don't know. I woke up in a dark cell with no one around, including Carter. I couldn't shift back into human form. The walls were lined in lead."

Teak stiffened. Lead was the one substance that could render Spirians giftless. "What was that like?"

"It felt hollow and empty, like life without any will."

He shuddered as if experiencing the coldness of it all. Spirians were born of the Angels; it was the Father's light that fueled our gifts, our powers. Without it, we were nothing but empty souls trapped in a human body.

"What did they want with you?"

"I don't know. They took my blood and injected me with some sort of serum."

"Testing you?"

"Perhaps, but why?"

"They're only taking shifter children," said Teak. "They have facilities all over the Northwest. The organization is called SOAR. I had hoped you knew what it stood for."

"They moved me around a lot," I replied. "I remained separated from other shifters until they sent me to Castlerock. My captors never spoke this word, 'SOAR.' They only bore it on their coats and shirts."

"Castlerock. Is that where you escaped from?"

"Yes, including Carter and many others. I built up a tolerance for the drugs they gave me, and could fake indisposition. I don't remember much after that."

Only the rhythmic sound of the crackling flames broke the heaviness of uncomfortable silence.

"And Carter?"

There it was, the elephant in the cave, so to speak; the crux of my failure.

"I killed him."

His dark eyes sparkled in the firelight, wide with shock and doubt. "I do not believe that, Ze. You wouldn't have done that—ever."

"Carter's throat was in my mouth, Teak. The only thing stopping me from ripping him apart was the voice in my head."

He looked as if he'd just swallowed a bug. "The voice?"

I stared into the flames. "Yeah, a female. She had the voice of an Angel."

Teak cleared his throat, no doubt stifling a derogatory comment. "What did this Angel say?"

"Stop!"

His lips pursed, making him look like a confused camel. "Ah, that does sound angelic."

I picked up a twig from the ground and tossed it into the flames. "You asked. I told you."

"Don't get your fur in a muddle, Ze. I'm just saying it sounds kind of weird, ya know?"

I gestured toward the cave's opening with a nod. "So who are they?"

"Your new clan."

"I have no clan, Teak, not anymore."

"Now you do."

I stood.

"Wait, Ze. These people need you."

"No, they don't. I am done leading, Teak. I don't want that responsibility. I just want to be left alone."

"Don't be stupid, Ze. Where are you going to go? How long will you survive without other Spirians?"

He leaned down to retrieve the bag he had brought in earlier with my meal. "At least clean yourself up. You look like the Wolfman having a bad hair day."

I caught the bag he tossed me.

"I'll wait for you outside."

In the bag, I found a mirror, brush, disposable razor, shaving cream, a fresh pair of jeans, and a black long-sleeved sweatshirt.

The mirror reflected how much had changed in the last twelve years. A man, not a boy, stared back at me now. My jaw had squared out, my chest broadened. I still sported my mother's almond-shaped eyes and my grandfather's steel-gray irises with dark blue highlights. The years of pain and torture shone in the reflection staring back at me.

I had cut my hair before speaking to my father the day he cast me out. I had also shaved my face for the first time in too many years. My tribal roots blessed me with sparse facial hair, but the soft stubble of growth still cast a shadow over my face—a throwback from my mother's Irish blood, I was sure.

As I lathered my chin and jaws with shaving cream, I reveled in how much I mimicked my father in looks. We shared the same dark skin, jet-black hair, and lips that had a natural curl at the corners.

The clothes Teak had packed for me were excessively tight for my comfort, but they were clean and would do for now.

I stepped outside to see at least twenty or so young adults staring at me as if I had sprung horns from my head. I began walking past them when a comment stopped me short.

"I knew he would peter out," spoke a cocky young man.

I turned to face him. He stood daunting as a mountain—not so much tall as he was broad. He looked my age, about my height, and of Spanish descent. The thin mustache he sported gave him a punk-like appeal.

"I'm sorry; do I know you?"

"No, and by the looks of it, you never will."

"Yippee for me."

The punk bristled, moving toward me as if to invoke a challenge. Was he kidding? Shifters were aggressive by nature, but prompting a fight over something so trivial proved excessive.

"Stop!" Teak ordered. "You don't want to do this, Bender. Ze will send you into next Sunday so fast you'll forget the past three days."

Bender spat at my feet. "He's a coward."

I felt the weight of everyone's eyes upon me, waiting to see my reaction. The real question was, did they really want to see it? My rage didn't have a good track record of ending things well.

"You want to lead this bunch?" I asked him. "Go ahead; be my guest." I pushed my way past his bulky frame.

He shifted into a grizzly bear and swiped at my leg, shredding my jeans. Blood seeped down my calf, soaking my leather shoes.

"Oh boy," Teak muttered as I shifted into my wolf. "Everyone, stand back."

Chapter 3

~ K a i l i ~

My heart slammed in my chest as the vision grew clearer, taking my thoughts on an abandoned ride with no destination. The magnificent gray wolf with steel-gray eyes fought a uniformed man, trying to defend a smaller black wolf. The man had a knife. He intended to slit the black wolf's throat. "Stop!" My voiced echoed off the painted walls, snapping me out of my vision.

Everyone in class turned to face me. Our instructor, Mr. Hammond, stopped reading and slid his glasses down on his nose. The bald strip down the center of his head reflected the blue glow from the overhead lights.

"Is there something wrong, Miss Dunning?"

My mind had been elsewhere, somewhere dark and dismal. How long was the vision? What was Mr. Hammond reading?

"No—yes—I mean, I need to go." Grabbing my books and bag, I didn't wait for his reply. I had to find my twin, Shaiya, and tell her what happened. She would be in dance class this hour. The performing arts building stood half-way across campus.

I ran, stuffing my books into my bag as I hurried down the corridor. The wolf shifter I envisioned was connected to my baby brother, Zhentu; he had to be.

Five years ago, during a battle in Uig, Zhentu disappeared. Father had every Spirian on alert to find him. Since that day, many other young Spirians disappeared as well. Somehow, I knew the shifter male in my vision could help. Now I just had to find him.

I pushed the door and continued to run.

An older gentleman waved his hand. "Hey, slow down, missy. No running in the halls."

I ignored him, rushing past. Thank God it wasn't raining. A clear spring day in Washington was a rarity; then again, summer was just around the corner.

Turning left through the Red Square, I headed west toward Shaiya's building. She practiced in PAC room sixteen, I think she said.

Jazz music blared through the doors as a couple of females wandered out carrying bags and tape-wrapped dance shoes. They didn't spare me a second glance as I brushed past them.

Shaiya was dancing with a tall male, she called "The Rhino," on account that he resembled one when he danced. They argued now about the way Shaiya held her arms.

"I'm just saying," the Rhino quibbled, "you look like a flipping faery who lost her ability to fly."

"I am a faery, you dolt. Our performance is called Dance of the Faeries, remember?"

When her gaze fell on me, she didn't hesitate. She turned her back on Rhino and came toward me, her sweet, heart-shaped face scrunched in concern.

The Rhino cursed under his breath. "Hey, where are you going? We have to work on this, Shaiya. Our performance is next month, remember?"

She held up her hand. "I remember. Give me a moment, will ya?" Her green eyes studied mine. They were a shade paler than mine but far more intense. "Hey, are you okay? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"Shaiya, I saw him. He can help find Zhentu, I know it."

She brushed a blonde strand of hair from my dampened face. "Who did you see?"

"That wolf shifter. The one in my dreams."

She smiled, looking hopeful. "You mean the hot one who looks like a black-haired Jason Stratham on steroids?"

I rolled my eyes at the image she conjured based on my dream. "Yes, that one." The man was more rustic than Jason, but I wasn't going to bring that up.

Shaiya looked around at the audience who showed more interest in our conversation than was necessary. "Come with me."

I followed her out of the room and down the hall. We slipped into an empty room that looked like a storeroom for broken speakers and such.

Unlike me, Shaiya wore her hair short and somewhat spiky. Mine was long, past my waist; not quite as thick as Mum's, but it was just as blonde with white streaks running through it. Shaiya and I were the same height, but she was thinner and far more graceful than I could ever dream of being. She had athletic abilities, where I was blessed with intellect, or so I was told.

Shaiya cleared off two chairs. "Sit; tell me what happened."

I could always count on my twin to listen without judgment.

"This shifter, I'm connected to him. I feel him and hear his thoughts—his shifter thoughts."

"Not so strange considering you talk to animals."

"I've never met this man."

She smiled, sitting back in her chair. "From what you told me of your dreams, I'd say you know him very well."

Heat flooded my face. "Yeah, well, we both know those dreams were based on fantasy, yes?"

"There's a thin barrier between fantasy and reality, dear sister. Besides, your fantasy was way better than any reality I've experienced."

I huffed. "At least you have experience."

"You would too if you weren't so bloody picky."

"I haven't found anyone I like."

"Thomas is sweet on you. Why don't you date him?"

The image of Thomas, a short, skinny guy in my chemistry class, made me shiver. He was nice enough, and had a great personality, but he was just too—sweet. "No, I don't think so."

"Let me guess. You don't like 'nice guys.'"

"I like them, I'm just not ... attracted to them."

"Whatever. Tell me about your vision."

"Well, my wolf broke out of this dark mansion-like place, with about seven shifters."

"Your wolf?"

"The man in my vision. Anyway, they fought so many Shadows; it was like watching a massacre. Then, there was this black wolf. My wolf seemed connected to him. During the fight, the Shadow did something horrible. I told him to stop but he didn't hear me. My wolf shifter hesitated. I think he heard me."

"Did he stop the Shadow?"

I thought for a moment. "I don't know. Everything happened so fast. The Shadow rolled over, pulling the black wolf with him. There was so much blood."

"Wow." Shaiya pressed her face into her hands. "Man, I don't want your visions. They sound horrid."

"I think this shifter can help find Zhentu."

"Maybe. Let Father know."

I pulled at a loose string on my shirt. Telling Father might not be the best idea. "I was kind of thinking you and I could find this shifter."

"Oh, no. That is not a good idea, Kaili. Father told us to stay on campus—period. In case you haven't heard, children are missing from around here."

"I'm not a child anymore, and neither are you. I need to find this guy, Shaiya. He's the key to finding Zhentu. I know it."

"Then let Father know. He will find your man. He, Mum, and Gabrihen are coming tonight. You can tell them at dinner, yes?"

Her words made sense, and if Father discovered we went in search of this shifter alone without his knowledge, we would lose our freedom for quite some time. "Very well."

Dinner with my family always proved intense. Mum behaved as if she would never see us again, Father gave his typical lecture about staying on campus, and Gabrihen, our younger brother, acted as if he were already in charge. Granted, Father would deem him our leader when he was of age, but sometimes Gabrihen took things too far. He was two years our junior with a cockiness that stung like a thorn in my side.

Being the daughter of Khalen Dunning, the regional leader, was no picnic. Being the daughter of the infamous legend, Skye Dunning, was even worse. For this reason alone, Shaiya and I chose Western University over the many ivy-league schools in Europe.

Somehow, when your parents were all that and a bag of chips, people expected things from you. Shaiya and I just wanted to be—normal.

Father ordered a few bottles of Borolo wine and three appetizers. The place was nice. Father had a thing for eating at fine restaurants, no matter the cost. Our bill would be close to \$600 by evening's end, I was sure.

He poured my mum's glass first, before pouring one for my twin and me. His and Gabrihen's were filled last. He never paid much attention to the age limit for alcohol, seeing Spirians were immune to it unlike humans. To Father, eating a meal without wine was pure blasphemy.

He didn't have to worry too much about us being carded because he could manipulate the human mind as easily as one could change a radio station.

He raised his glass in salute. "Nice to have everyone together again."

We clinked our glasses, and then waited for Mum and Father's inevitable, often embarrassing, kiss before drinking. They still acted like newlyweds. It was awkward, yet comforting all the same.

The conversation stayed light for the most part. I noticed my mum had brought her sight cane, instead of Maiyun, her guide dog.

"How's Maiyun?" I asked.

Her shoulders dropped. "Tired."

"Mum, she's twenty-six years old. That's longer than most dogs live."

She stiffened and Father shook his head, warning me to drop the subject.

"Kaili has some interesting news," Shaiya stated.

"You finally got laid?" Gabrihen asked.

That earned him a warning look from Father and Mum.

"Very funny, Gabe."

"Don't call me that."

"Enough," Father warned, in that tone that nobody challenged.

"What's your news?" asked Mum.

I told them about my dreams—well, most of them, anyway, and about the vision I'd had during class.

"And you think this shifter knows how to find Zhentu?" asked Father.

"I do. We are connected somehow, and I think it comes from Zhentu. It's the only thing that makes sense."

Shaiya chuckled. "Well, not the only thing."

I narrowed my eyes at her, which made Father smile. He had obviously tapped her mind. Gabrihen smiled as well. Mum had the decency to stay out of my business.

"Nice," I said. "Thanks," I mouthed to Shaiya.

She smiled in return—traitor.

"I'd like to try to find this man," I said.

The weight of Father's stare matched Gabrihen's. "No," they said together.

"Father, I'm no—"

He raised his hand. "Kaili. It took everything I had to allow you and your sister to come to this school. Do not make me regret that decision."

"Are you crazy?" Gabrihen hissed over the table. "Don't you get it? Shadows are taking Spirian children all over the northern territories. Do you want to add to their numbers?"

"I'm not a child, Gabrihen. I'm older than you."

"You're an unmated female."

"Stop it," Mum said. Though her voice was calm, all of us could sense the storm of her wrath in the distance. "I will not listen to you two bicker during our meal. Please, show respect for one another."

"Yes, Mum," I said. "Sorry."

"Sorry," Gabrihen muttered.

The evening progressed with lighter conversation; the subject of my vision long forgotten. That's what I thought, anyway. Father must have tapped my thoughts on the matter.

"I may know the young man in your vision."

That earned everyone's attention.

"Tiban Carue has a son. Rumor has it he killed his brother and was banned from the clan. His father claims he's dangerous and unpredictable."

A chill ran up my spine as I remembered the aggression the young man displayed. Had he turned? Was he a Shadow now?

"I think it's time I find this young man," said Father.

My appetite faded, as did my hope for the poor man who invaded my dreams. I silently prayed he had information to offer my father—something useful. Perhaps then, his life would be spared.