

Prelude

When the energy of the source is divided, the whole becomes two distinct halves, creating a dualistic wave of events that define history.

~A r m e n ~

I am a Spirian, a human born of an Angel's spirit. Although I was not born in this world, I have lived for thousands of years on Earth. As an elder, I'm tasked with teaching our youth about the Spirian ways and about the truth that has long been forgotten. Though I have seen much in the way of destruction and tragedy, my heart is filled with hope for humans and Spirians alike. As the centuries pass, the division between dimensions will merge, providing all beings the opportunity to see the truth of their existence ... but I'm getting ahead of myself. The Spirians' story is a long one —a tale that has brewed for over three thousand years. The time has finally come for it to be revealed, for our future relies upon its telling.

Lucifer means, "the shining one." He is not who most would expect. He was once a perfect, beautiful being; created by the Spirit, the one we call Father or God. Lucifer once stood beside Father as our most powerful warrior. Pride and ego darkened his soul, giving him desire to rule over the Spirit. Lucifer, being a master of manipulation, convinced other Angels to join in his quest to take the throne and rule over all creation. An ethereal battle ensued, and Lucifer was cast from the Kingdom along with every Angel who followed his ambitions.

Casting Lucifer from the Ethereal Kingdom, however, created a separation of the whole—duality was born—a distinct division of good and evil. Lucifer's name was never spoken again in the Kingdom. He is now known as Satan—the adversary.

Despite the Spirit's efforts to keep the dark side from revealing itself on Earth, Satan convinced the humans to turn away from the Spirit in promise of knowledge—a most powerful asset. The Spirit wanted to protect the humans from evil, but Satan shattered the veil, creating a duality—an illusion of wisdom.

To help protect His children from Satan's lure, Father asked His Angels to fall to Earth and live among the humans as Spirians. There were only twenty of us against a legion of dark Angels known as Shadows strengthened by Satan's influence. We were outnumbered before we began.

Humans were not the only race affected by the Shadows. The Fae, a higher-dimensioned society of beings, proved to be of great value, which later became their ruination. It was soon discovered that when Spirians bred with the Fae, their offspring developed powerful gifts. Fae females were coveted by the Shadows, while Fae men and children were slaughtered despite our efforts to save them.

There were soon legions of gifted Spirians living throughout the world. Some became Shadows, others joined our clans of Protected ones—those committed to the Spirit's will.

We sent our masters out to teach the way of light, but the Shadows' influence was strong and the humans followed them willingly, believing in their powers as if they were gods. This, of course, fed the Shadows' egos and they began acting as gods. The pyramids in Egypt were miraculously erected. Societies were formed. The humans were enslaved beneath the Shadows' will. A magical city called Atlantis was built. The people were in awe. A tower of homes was constructed to reach the heavens as an insult to the Spirit, showing how easily His people were ruled by Satan's Shadows.

By Father's command, we, the Protected, tore the tower down and created confusion among the humans, giving them each a language of their own and encouraging them to spread their numbers over the Earth. This, of course, only slowed the Shadows down. Destroying their City of Atlantis did little to stop their progression.

Soon, the Protected were labeled as demons. We were burned at the stake, drowned, imprisoned, and treated as evil, though we were, indeed, the opposite. The humans, blinded by the Shadows' rule and false prophecies, continued to slaughter the Protected ones, forcing us to live in secrecy until our numbers could be restored.

The Shadows continue to grow, and the Fae are nearly extinct, yet our faith remains strong. We will not give up on the world or the humans who reside upon it. The day will come when they, too, will know our knowledge and see the truth of all things. My hope for this stems from a remarkable young warrior named Shanuk. This is his story.

Chapter 1

~ S h a n u k ~

The Year of Our Lord, 1736

The Scottish Highlands were brilliant in spring. Color that rivaled ethereal beauty dappled the hillsides, providing a stunning backdrop for the river below. The scent of evergreens lingered strong here, perhaps because we remained hidden among the thick of 'em to protect us from the humans. Under the rule of King George II, the humans had grown quite hostile toward us after the Shadows managed to convince them that we were druids of a sort. Let them believe what they wanted. I was tired of hiding. I had come into my own—a Spirian term for adulthood—years ago and was ready to leave my mark on this world. Still, Talden, our leader, held me back ... a fact that only fueled my anger to near the brink of my control.

These training sessions were quite the bore, sparring with wooden swords and keeping our aggression in check. What I really wanted was to fight in the wars against the Shadows, the dark bastards who had claimed my parents' lives. How much longer would I be held back, having to prove myself, before Talden saw my worth?

I dodged the next blow and countered with a jab of my sword. Timult pivoted away with the grace of a seasoned warrior. He truly was my equal, which explained why Barakel liked to pair us together. Just as swiftly, I swooped my sword down, catching Timult at the ankles. The follow through with my shield was enough to send him careening to the ground with an unceremonious thump. I slammed the hilt of my sword to the base of the arrogant bastard's neck.

"Enough!" roared Barakel, a large dark man who stood an impressive 6' 9". Being descendants of ethereal warriors, Spirians were naturally large and athletic. When our ancestors started mating with the Fae, however, much of that height and bulk were lost to the more petite builds of the Fae. Barakel was pure Spirian, much like me. His dark skin shone like ebony against the sun, and his

handsome features were not ignored by the females. He had been mated once and hadn't shown interest in anyone else since her death. A Spirian mates for life and often fades soon after his or her mate's death. Barakel had made a promise, however, and remained to see it through, though no one really knew what that promise entailed or to whom it was made.

"Shanuk, remove your hilt from his throat." Barakel's voice held authority, unlike that of men who used volume behind their words; no, Barakel's demands were spoken clear, soft, and only once. If not obeyed, he often followed up with an impetus of pain that rivaled the puissance of a lightning bolt.

With hesitation, I complied, rising up from my opponent who was eight summers older than me, but not quite as large. Timult grasped his neck and heaved in a breath that held more drama than truth. He was an intelligent man ... a strategist. He could easily advance five steps ahead of any man's thought if given half a chance. I didn't have to concern myself with a counter blow from him, or dirty play that would land me on my arse. That was not his way. He played fair, always to the admiration of the elders. On the surface, he was a model warrior, in control, and precise in every movement. Deep inside, was another being altogether. His intentions rarely matched his actions. If something benefited the man, morals were damned.

With piteous effort, he reached his hand out to me for assistance. Having had quite enough of this charade, I turned from him and walked away, churning a bit of dirt up in his face as I spun. I was quite proud of the assault. Barakel, on the other hand, gave me a disapproving look and a low growl as I passed. Despite my skillful victory, I still wasn't able to pierce that man's emotional barrier. If he could ever be proud, I doubt he would show it. The man loathed me with the animosity of a ferret confronting a snake.

A firm hand squeezed my shoulder, stopping my stride. "A word, Shanuk." The deep voice of Armen sent shivers down my spine. He and the others were not expected to return until the morrow. It became difficult for me to swallow as I turned to face the giant man. Though he stood a few inches shorter than me, his power added to his stature, giving him an intimidating presence that rivaled that of a hungry tiger.

Before I could force my tongue to work, he urged me down on the bench and sat facing me, his expression grim and tired. No one really knew how old the elder was, but the power that emanated

from him could be felt from great distances. Right now, it was enough to turn my lunch to poison with no chance to eliminate it.

"Your attitude is intolerable, Shanuk. The anger inside you festers like mold on old bread and tastes just as foul. I grow tired of these conversations with you."

Armen was the epitome of strength and refinement, all wrapped up in a man whose stare could freeze a charging moose in mid-stride. His short brown hair was a direct contrast to the perpetual shadow over his face that seemed to be thicker than all the hair on his head. Forest green eyes studied mine, their gold flecks shimmering against the afternoon sun. Looking away from him was not an option and would be considered rude and weak. Still, those eyes felt like daggers pressed against the soft flesh of my brain as he probed my deepest thoughts.

"Have you nothing to say?" he pried, speaking to me in the ethereal language of Angels. It was an ancient tongue that he and the other elders stressed on teaching to the young, among several other languages common on Earth. In truth, we could all communicate telepathically with far more efficiency, but to fit into this world, we needed to learn the spoken languages.

There was nothing to say. Armen knew it all before any words could be formed by my tongue. I answered him in Gaelic, the local language of this land. "I wish to fight in the wars."

His thin brows drew together as if puzzling over a dicey plight. "Yet you don't show restraint in your training?"

"I show strength, power, skill—all that is required to kill the Shadows."

He laughed a little, as one who mused over the playful antics of a child. "You show aggression, yes, and skill, but no control. That is what will get you killed."

"I have control," I argued, my fists curled tight against my sweating palms.

"Do you now?" He nodded to where Timult and I had been sparring. "Is that why you scattered dirt in Timult's face in lieu of helping him stand?"

"The cheeky bugger can help himself stand."

"Which is stronger, Shanuk: the water or the mountain?"

"The mountain."

"In what way?"

This was so typical of Armen. He loved to play philosophical volley with my mind and with those of the others he taught. There was no correct answer, of course, for whatever answer we offered, he would counter it with an opposing truth. He made it look so easy.

"Mountains cannot be moved or manipulated. Mountains are strong and unyielding to any force."

"Yet the water, over time, erodes the mountain's adamantine surface with persistence and a willingness to yield."

"You think I should yield to Timult?"

He shook his head with disappointment. The sigh that followed only added to my feeling of inadequacy. Would I ever get it right? Would I ever fit in and have the chance to prove my worth?

"You know the answer to all those questions, young Shanuk. I see so much in you, yet you squander it away with anger and desire for vengeance. When your thoughts shift to doing what is right, and not toward doing what is desired or expected, your true worth will shine so brightly that all will see who and what you are without you even trying."

I didn't respond, having no words to counter his assessment. He was right, however. I was driven by anger that flowed so deeply in my veins there was little room for anything else.

"Go help the others to erect new shelters, now," he said. "There are many new additions to this clan."

That meant Talden had rescued another village from the Shadows. After each new venture, he often returned with twenty or more Fae women and children. If there were any males left, they never lived very long. Every month, the Shadows raided a Fae tribe to steal away their females as breeding stock. It was sick, all of it, and I wanted to help end the massacres—rid this Earth of every Shadow. Without Talden's orders, however, I was kept from the raids and forced to stay here with the women and young—as a man seen unworthy to fight. I stood and offered a respectful nod to the elder before taking my leave.

~A r m e n ~

I watched as the young warrior walked away with purpose in his stride. Shanuk had power in him like no other male I had the pleasure of watching grow. Shanuk was dark of skin with long black hair that flowed over his shoulders. His handsome features were edged with aggression, making him an intimidating prospect for the females—all but one.

Calla was the only female who could stand up to Shanuk. They had grown up together after they were rescued from the wars several years past. Like many of the rescued children, they had their own demons to contend with. Unlike Shanuk, Calla channeled her anger and pain into helping others heal. She showed impressive skill, a gift passed down from her mother, no doubt. All we knew about her father, Tishar, was that he was a powerful Fae knight of the Carador realm.

Birthing records for our kind had not been kept until six hundred years ago when the High Council of Archangels began recording bloodlines. Records didn't become necessary until we learned that breeding with humans produced undesired results. The offspring were giftless, sterile, and often lived short lives, providing the human female survived the birthing process. Spirian females could not be impregnated by human males. It soon became apparent that unions had to be sanctioned by the clan leaders or they were considered illegitimate and the offspring were not recorded as true Spirian. This ruling never did fare well among the Shadows, and few acknowledged the High Council's decree. The Archangels could issue punishment, of course, but the Father's gift of free will overruled the decree.

"He is troubled," said the deep familiar voice of my good friend Barakel.

I turned to see him towering above me before settling himself upon the opposing log bench. He was an impressive male with a physique that rivaled that of a gladiator. Dressed in a simple breechclout, his ebony skin glistened with sweat under the sun.

"He harbors too much anger," I replied.

"He fights with impressive skill and purpose."

"Purpose of vengeance will only get him killed, my friend."

"Aye, it will." Barakel observed the many new faces we had brought back from the raids. His expression darkened, pulling his thin brows into a contracted weave of confusion and concern. "Our clan grows with each passing day. The tensions rise among the men."

It was normal for clans to grow in number, but growth that was too fast stressed the relationship dynamics. Because females were coveted, and the number of males were reduced by the wars, females outnumbered the males. This caused the males to desire more from a female, given that there were more from which to choose. Increased competition within the male population often ended with strife. Many unions were arranged by the leader to prevent arguments, but still, one could not choose with whom he or she bonded. Bondings were rare, but when a male bonded with a female, their union was inevitable if the female agreed to the joining. The Protected honored this choice. The Shadows did not. Females were given no say in the matter and were often shared among other males.

"Yes," I confirmed. "Talden understands this. Our clan will need to split soon when another leader presents himself."

"We have enough elders; perhaps one or two can lead the clans?"

"Something to bring up at the next council meeting, yes?" I jested.

Barakel chuckled and shook his head, knowing as well as any of us how few issues were ever resolved at such meetings. When Spirians became heated in argument, the energy they emitted left many men dead from the shock. Meetings were only called when something of great importance had to be discussed. These meetings were then mediated by the most seasoned elder. This person needed the refined skill of herding cats through a thunderstorm. Not many volunteered for the task.

Gauging by how the males were eyeing the new females, something would have to be done fairly soon.

Chapter 2

~ C a l l a ~

Injured people continued to file in like rubble preceding an avalanche. My body ached, my mind continued to operate as if in a fog. I had been watching Shanuk spar with Timult and was caught off guard when the men returned from their battle. Shanuk moved like a predatory cat, smooth,

powerful, and fast with preternatural speed. The aggression with which he fought concerned me. It was as if he were in some sort of a zone where nothing else mattered except his ultimate goal. He didn't feel pain, nor did he show any fear. The more he exercised this zone, the colder his heart became. I wondered now whether I was ever going to pierce that armor of his.

"Your mind seems elsewhere," said Talden.

I snapped back to his shoulder that I was supposed to be healing. Blood seeped through my fingers. The persistent flow should have been stopped minutes ago. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. "I'm sorry, Sire. I'm tired is all."

His large hand cupped over mine, pulling my palm from his shoulder. "Rest then. The others can tend to my wounds."

I glanced around the large surgery commons, a tent-like structure that could be disassembled at a moment's notice. Our entire camp was littered with such shelters. It had become necessary to live as nomads to avoid either Shadow attacks or human raids. Every clan member with medical training was busy tending to wounds and sickness. I was the only healer among them, seeing that gift was rare among Spirians. In the Fae realm, healers were common and there were at least three or four in every tribe. Only female Spirians inherited the gift. My mother was a powerful Spirian healer, which is why my father protected her above all others. He was pure Fae. My gift was not as potent as my mum's, but it was still valuable in crises such as this.

Squaring my shoulders and silently chastising my weakness, I placed my hand back on the leader's shoulder and forced myself to concentrate. "I will stay."

He could have ordered me to leave and do what he had suggested, but he didn't. Instead, he studied my face as I willed the bleeding to stop and began mending his flesh. I knew he was probing my thoughts. Because he was a leader, I hadn't the ability to block him. Even if I did, doing so would be disrespectful—a manner our leader never allowed.

"You are good for him, you know."

I continued to work, my brows knit in tight concentration. "Who?"

He chuckled as if amused by my ignorance. "Shanuk, dear woman. The man who occupies your thoughts beyond all others."

My hands stilled for a moment, and then resumed on task, moving from one injury to another. Denying Talden's observations was as fatuous as pretending to be dead. He would see through the lie. "He's like a brother to me." True, albeit one who stirred my very core to comply with his every wish—not that Shanuk would ask that of me. When he took a female, it was always one he showed no interest in. He never offered an explanation.

"Uh, huh," the leader grumbled.

"You'll live to fight another day," I said, wiping my hands on a damp cloth.

He slid down from the table, not having far to go. He stood over six feet tall, like most Spirians. He was a handsome man with golden brown eyes and hair to match. His long nose ended at a set of full lips that drew a female's attention. Many women pined for his affections, but he always refused. His mate, Jenra, died after giving birth to their seventh child. He hadn't lain with another since.

"Thank you, my dear. You are a true treasure."

The heat that flooded my face had to have been noticeable. I looked down, making him chuckle.

"Aye, a true treasure, indeed," he repeated, continuing to laugh as he walked away.

"Calla," Tesla's voice rose over the din. I looked up to see my friend waving me over.

"Help me," she said. "I can't get the bleeding to stop."

I looked down at the young Fae male who couldn't have been over twenty summers. He probably hadn't come into his own yet. After placing my hand over his thigh, I knew that saving him was not an option. His femoral artery had been sliced clean through. He'd lost too much blood as it was. "I can't save him."

"You must try," Tesla warned. "Please, Calla, try."

Tesla was pure Fae, brought to this camp when she was just three. She was older than me and much taller, towering over my meager height of 5' 2" by a good eight inches. Being giftless, she was seen as a low-status female among the clan and was treated as such when Talden and the elders were not around. Tesla was beautiful, though, and very popular with the males. She hated every one of them, never giving herself willingly. With the Spirian males, however, she wasn't given much choice. Talden had banned the males who had forced themselves upon her, but there were always others to take their place.

This young Fae male must have struck a chord in her. She never spoke of her family, but then she was very young when she joined our clan. I pressed my hand upon his leg, willing the artery to fuse back together. This would have been easy for my mum. I wished now that she were here. The blood continued to seep through my hand. The lad looked peaceful on the bed, not an etch of pain in his delicate features. I saw myself with such a mate. For some odd reason, I wanted to join with a Fae male and not a Spirian. Perhaps it was their peaceful way that attracted me. The Spirians were warriors, always living for their next fight. The entire concept was foreign to me. Fighting brought nothing but pain and suffering.

"I think it's working," she cried. "Oh Seelie's magic, the bleeding slows."

Aye, it had slowed, though not from the healing. The lad had bled out. He was gone. Swallowing back the bile in my throat, I removed my hands. "I'm sorry," I whispered. "I could not save him."

"What do you mean? The bleeding has stopped."

"No, Tesla; he's passed on to the Kingdom. He is ethereal now."

Tesla collapsed onto the cot, draping the young male with her body, convulsing in sobs. "I hate this world," she cried. "I wish the Angels never came to this place. They bring nothing but death and destruction."

Before I could answer, Barakel's deep silky voice said, "Despite our beliefs, Tesla, things happen for a reason. Talden and the rest of this clan fight to save this world, not destroy it."

"Your efforts didn't save this young Fae, did they?"

"Tesla!" I barked, spurred by her blatant insolence. Barakel was a patient man, yes, but he was still an elder of the clan. If it weren't for him and the others, the rest of us would have met the same end as our friends and relatives.

She looked at me before standing and meeting Barakel's eyes. "When does this end?" she hissed. "This ... pointless fighting?"

Barakel laid his massive hands upon her shoulders. "So long as there is duality in this world, I fear it shall never end."

"And who brought that duality? Not the Fae. Not the humans. The Angels brought it!"

Barakel drew in a deep breath. No one spoke to an elder with such vehemence without repercussion. His dark eyes softened as he stared down at her. "Do not confuse the fallen with those who were sent, my dear, for there is a vast difference between us. Just as all Fae are not good, nor are all humans good; we Angels have our strengths and weaknesses."

"Yet you use our females for breeding purposes, to bear your cursed young."

The argument drew the attention of the others. All conversations ceased and curious gazes were set upon my friend and the elder.

"What do you suppose would happen if our kind went extinct?" asked Barakel.

"You would fade away like the suffocating smoke from an errant fire," she replied. "Peace would be restored."

"No, it wouldn't," he countered. "Hell has been set free upon this world, and it will remain so with or without the Spirians. Curb your anger from things you cannot change and channel that energy into something more useful. Be part of the solution, Tesla, not the problem."

She stiffened with that, but she kept her mouth closed. We had all sensed Barakel's patience nearing its end. He walked away with purpose, probably needing some air and distance from my spiteful friend.

"Have you lost your senses?" I asked her.

"I am a female. He would not hurt me."

"You were lucky it was Barakel to whom you spoke so churlishly. If it were Talden, you would be writhing on the floor by now, begging for respite."

"The pain would be less than seeing my people slaughtered by the hundreds." Giving the deceased young man one last pain-filled look, she turned and stormed away. She had always been full of fire, never short of an opinion. I often wondered whether she and Shanuk would be a good match. With a silent chuckle, I shook my head and scrapped that idea. They would off each other within a week.

I covered the young Fae with a cloth and searched for the next injured soul I could help. As I turned the corner, I nearly collided with Shanuk. His strong arms reached out just in time to prevent me from falling backward over a chair. A thin stream of blood trickled down his forearm, staining his hand and the area where he had grabbed my frock. His towering height placed my head at his

chest, bare, kissed by the sun, and impressively muscled. I had to force myself to start breathing again, which didn't help. My first breath was filled with his masculine scent of woods and spring leaves. My body reacted accordingly and I cursed it for rewarding me with what was promised to be another frustrating night, for Shanuk would never take me to his bed. I wondered whether he even noticed how his body made me feel when I was around him. Given his stern expression, I doubted it.

"Shanuk, what happened?"

"It is nothing. How is Turel? I was told he came in with extensive injuries."

"Turel will live. You can see him when we are done here. He was asking for you." Given the amount of blood that soaked through Shanuk's makeshift bandage, the gash in his arm was deep and wide. "Clearly your injury is not nothing." I pushed aside a pile of rags on a nearby table. "Come, sit."

It took barely a hop for him to plant his backside on the table. I removed the strip of cloth he had tied around the wound, no doubt to stem the bleeding. By the looks of it, the skin had been cut a while ago. The edges of the gash on the upper side of his forearm were puffy and slightly red. The copper scent of blood was strong.

"Did you do this while fighting?"

He shook his head. "No."

A man of few words. Silly of me to think that I might get a real answer from him. "This should have been tended to hours ago."

"Then tend to it now so I can be on my way."

I pressed the edges of his wound, expecting him to wince a little. He showed no signs of pain, not even the slightest reaction. Was he numb in body as well as in heart? "Does this not hurt, Shanuk?"

He glanced down at the wound, his lips firm. "Pain is just an illusion."

"An illusion?"

"Aye, like everything else in this world. What we see, feel, and acknowledge are figments of a perceived reality, nothing more."

I concentrated on stopping the bleeding and mending the flesh. The process took much longer than it should have, but I was energetically drained, and being so close to this man with whom I had grown was making my nerves raw with hunger. Like most Spirians, my need and appetite for physical pleasures was in full force. Females did not require sex as often as males, but my body was primed for what it had been deprived of for far too long.

"Your face is flushed, Calla. Are you well?"

"There you are," came a high-timbered voice from across the room. Timult had a properness about him, but it always seemed a bit shallow to me. Other females enjoyed his affections, but he didn't do much for me. He was handsome enough and those emerald green eyes could warm the coldest nights. Still, my body did not yearn for his touch.

I finished up with Shanuk and promptly removed my hands from his warm flesh. "All set, then," I said, stepping away from the table so he could hop down. He did, creating a sliver of space between us. Lord, he smelled good even through the layer of sweat that moistened his body. My heartbeat quickened, and I could feel my face flush again with heat.

Timult swallowed the distance with purposeful strides. I smiled as Shanuk stepped between him and me as if trying to hide me from Timult's gaze.

"Talden needs you," Timult said to Shanuk's powerful back.

Shanuk stiffened. "He has not summoned me."

"He sent me to find you."

Both Shanuk and I sensed the lie. If the leader wanted any of us, he knew exactly how to find us and would summon our presence through telepathy. He would not send a messenger in his stead.

Stepping around Shanuk, Timult offered me one of his charming smiles. "Have you plans for this eve?"

"Yes, she does," Shanuk answered for me. Nothing ruffled my plumes more than someone speaking for me. When my expression demonstrated that fact, Shanuk frowned.

"I thought to retire early this eve. I'm very tired," I told Timult.

"I shall bring dinner to your quarters, and we can have a relaxing eve in private, yes?"

When he reached for my hand, Shanuk offered a low growl. Odd, he'd never shown that behavior around me before. I wondered now what had sparked the bonding-like reaction. Given the

iceberg imitation he often displayed in my presence, I would never have guessed he had claims to me in any measure.

"I could rub your feet for you again. Remember how much you enjoyed that last time." Not a question, but a statement aimed straight for Shanuk's pride. As expected, the growl grew louder.

"She said she was busy."

Timult turned to face him, though he had to look up to meet Shanuk's eyes. "I don't believe I was speaking to you. Calla can answer for herself."

I hadn't the energy for this, nor did I want to tell Timult to back off. He had a temper that he showed only in private. Saying no to him would only invite his company with a dose of anger. In his way of thinking, females did not have the right to deny a male of any affections. I learned early on that finesse was the best approach to thwarting his unwanted attention. "Dinner in my quarters sounds lovely, thank you." Giving him any other answer would not do anything except make him more persistent and angry.

"I'll be sure to bring plenty of fine wine." He brought my hand to his lips and offered a long, lingering kiss upon my flesh. My body grew cold as I forced a smile in his direction.

After he took his leave, Shanuk grabbed my arm with such force that I cringed from the pain. "Why do you accommodate him?"

"What concern is it of yours?"

"He has no rights to you."

"I'm an unclaimed female, Shanuk. Every male in this clan has rights to me."

"Not against your choice," he spat.

"Tell them that."

"My pleasure."

Before he could leave, I grabbed his arm. "Please don't, Shanuk. It will only anger him, and I will be the one who feels the blunt of it."

"I will ensure you do not."

"You don't know him, Shanuk. Stay out of my affairs." Before he could reply, I walked away.

Why did he care, anyway? He had never sought my affections. And lately, he hardly took the time to talk to me at all unless he needed something. We used to talk all the time. We even came close to

kissing once, before he pulled away as if I had some infectious disease. Did he think me unworthy? Granted, he was of pure Spirian blood, never tainted with Fae blood. Did he only want a pure Spirian female? I silently chortled, thinking he would need to search far and wide for one of those. Pure Spirians were nearly as sparse as Fae men.

"And exactly how well do you know him?" he asked from behind me. How he was able to follow me without my notice left me feeling a bit creepy.

I spun around to face him, half-expecting him to run into me. He didn't. The grim look on his expression left me cold, much like Timult's affections. With a deep breath, I blurted, "Better than I know you." Probably not the best response, but his persistent questioning was making me raw and punchy.

Without a word, he turned and walked away. I prayed he would leave Timult alone. These days, however, I wasn't convinced that the Father and all His Angels could calm Shanuk's anger. He did whatever he chose, my own wishes be dammed.

Chapter 3

~ S h a n u k ~

My strides were fueled by the power of purpose. After checking on Turel, I would find Timult and ensure he hadn't the capacity to visit Calla tonight or any other night. I knew she wasn't an innocent, but exactly how many males had she enjoyed, and what had she meant by that comment of hers where she claimed to know Timult better than me? Damn it. Did she not know how I felt about her? Had I not respected her wishes, her body?

I had taken almost every other female to my bed and used them to relieve my needs. With her, I had shown restraint out of respect. To have her would be to claim her as my own for all eternity. Once I sampled her affections, my heart would never release her. Neither of us was ready for that. The other females served a single purpose and nothing more. I rarely took the same female to my

bed more than once, yet Calla had tended to Timult's needs multiple times. My gut wrenched at the thought.

Shanuk, come to my chambers, said the familiar voice in my head. It was Talden, our leader. Perhaps he was finally ready to announce my warrior status and allow me to fight in the wars.

On my way, I replied. My dealings with Timult would have to wait. We still had hours of work before either of us could retire for the evening. I made my way through camp toward Talden's enormous tent. He waited for me in the commons chamber, staring down at a table with a map draped over the top.

As I entered my adoptive father's quarters, his golden eyes pierced me as if they were daggers aimed at my heart. He had adopted several others and me, though none of us would ever rise above the status of his blood children, and for good reason. His mate had passed away giving birth to their seventh child. If it were not for his children, he would have followed his mate into the afterlife. Tomen, his eldest son, had rights to the next leadership position and showed promise of being a powerful ruler.

"Did Timult not tell you to come?"

I felt my body stiffen, though I did my best to conceal it. That fact did not escape Talden's notice. "He did. I was in the surgery."

"Yes, I know."

I bowed to the leader, doing my best to show respect. "Apologies, Talden. I did not intend for you to wait."

He laughed. "You most certainly did. Young warrior, do not think for a moment that I would imagine you demonstrating compliancy on my account."

Again, I stiffened, cursing my ego that seemed to be offended by the most innocent of gestures. I respected this man. Why was it so hard for me to show it with genuine intent?

His laughter ensured me that he had tapped into my thoughts—an unavoidable inconvenience in the presence of a leader. "Your respect toward me goes unquestioned, Shanuk. Your self-respect, however, remains arguable."

The comment left me struggling to swallow as if a thick dose of reality had been shoved down my throat. "I wish only to fight for the Father's cause."

"No. You want to avenge your parents and your clan."

"Annihilating the Shadows is my desire," I corrected, even though I knew the response was disrespectful.

Judging by the flatness of his lips and the narrowing of his eyes, my insolent clarification weighed his tolerance scale to my disadvantage. "To what end?" he asked.

"Were the Father's Angels not sent here after the fallen to restore balance?"

"Aye, they were. But annihilating the Shadows would be akin to ending all creation, would it not?"

"Explain."

Talden paced the floor—something he did often in my presence. "To remove a half of the greater whole is to rid a man of his organs and expect him to live. Without the balance of equal shares, the whole suffers. Spirit sent His Angels to ensure the balance remained intact."

"Yet He sent only twenty to face a legion of hundreds."

"And here we still stand. Our numbers increase every day."

"As do theirs," I said, certain I had a qualifying argument.

The leader stopped his pacing and studied me with those golden eyes. The shimmering flecks that glistened within his irises were a trait that every Spirian shared. Only species that could sense higher frequency vibrations could see the metallic specks. Humans, of course, could not, which enabled us to blend into their culture, provided we kept our gifts in check. The Fae, too, had iridescent irises, though theirs were more on the prismatic scale.

"If we can touch their hearts and convince them to join our cause, would that not benefit the whole?" he asked.

I scoffed at the ridiculous notion. "Shadows becoming Protected. We'd have better chances at turning humans into Spirians."

"Anything is possible, Shanuk. It is only our beliefs that hinder our actions."

I looked him square in the eye, feeling that truth far more deeply than even he could realize. "I truly believe that ridding this Earth of all that is evil will restore the balance we seek."

"Without pain, how do we experience comfort?"

"We did at one point before the Garden was destroyed."

"No, Shanuk, we did not. Angels do not feel emotions to the extent we feel them now, as Spirians. Everything is amplified here on Earth because opposites exist. Without one, the other becomes muted and gray. Life here is a gift beyond measure."

He would know, I supposed. Talden was one of the few original Angels sent by the Father. "Why did you come here?" I asked him, knowing that only those who volunteered were sent.

"Because I wanted to experience life in all its forms. I wanted to feel pain and suffer in heart so that I could truly feel love."

I gestured to the vastness of the camp. "How can you feel love through all this destruction. The Shadows have killed innocent children, have raped females and slaughtered their males. Where is the love in that?"

"For every loss comes an equal triumph, for you cannot have one without the other. You must decide on which one you place your focus, which one you choose to feed."

"Feed?"

"Aye. The energy you give something enables it to thrive. The more you give in to your anger, the more it grows. This is precisely how Shadows are born. They continue to feed the darkness in their souls until nothing is left of the light." He pondered his words for a moment, a slight smile grazing his face.

"There is an old Indian story I once heard about a grandfather and his grandson. The grandson was angry with a friend who had done him an injustice. The grandfather admitted that he, too, had felt great hate toward those who had taken so much without regret. But the hate wore him down and did nothing to his enemies. It was like taking poison and wishing someone else would die. The grandfather admitted to struggling with these feelings many times. He said, 'It was as if two wolves lived inside me: one good, and one bad. The good wolf lived in harmony with everything around him and took no offense when none was intended. He fought only when it was right to do so. The bad wolf, oh, he was full of anger. The smallest thing would set him into a fit of rage. He fought everyone for no reason. His anger and hate were so great that he could not even think.' The old man sighed, 'It is hard to live with these two wolves inside me. Both of them try to dominate my spirit.'

"The boy looked intently into his Grandfather's eyes and asked, 'Which one lives, Grandfather?'

"The grandfather smiled and quietly said, 'The one I feed.'"

The story gave me pause. All I felt in my heart these days was anger toward the Shadows. It consumed me to the point where I couldn't even enjoy my time with friends, not even my brief encounters with Calla, a female who felt like my second soul. There was nothing I could not tell her, and few things she didn't understand. Calla was important to me, yet I felt as if I had been pushing her away. I sank down on the bench that accompanied the simple table.

"Now you understand," said Talden, his voice barely audible. "You have impressive power about you, Shanuk . . . a power that is most unusual in a pure Spirian. Indeed, you are a rarity. A time will come when you will be forced to make a choice."

"About?"

"The Shadows will tempt you . . . draw you into their snare. You will need to decide which path you want to take."

Again, I stood. "I will never join their cause!"

"Yet your heart grows darker with each passing day."

"Only with spite toward our enemy."

A small smile softened his grim expression. "More is won through compassion than is lost with spite."

"You want me to feel compassion toward them?"

"I want you to make the choice, Shanuk. Do it before it's too late."

He turned his back to me, indicating our conversation was done. "I wish to fight in the wars," I blurted.

"I have made my decision. You will continue to train."

"Talden—"

He raised his hand, demanding me to cease. Pushing him further would only result in pain, something with which I had grown intimately familiar. At this point, it would be welcomed.

"Do not press me further, Shanuk. I promise you will not appreciate the result—despite your acquired appetite for pain."

Fueled with anger, I left the commons and stormed across camp toward the new shelters we had been erecting. It was time to find Timult. Seeking him out would not be difficult. The man drew attention as scat did flies. He had a charm about him that provided an effective mask to disguise the dark heart of his soul. He was evil to the core, yet no one but me seemed to notice. To the elders, Timult was a prodigy of sorts. To the females, he was a treasure to behold. The man was a poisoned dagger lodged in my ribs.

I found him securing a tarp to the wooden frame that had been erected for a new shelter. As if sensing my presence, he turned and offered a sickening smile.

"Ah, Shanuk, just in time. I need you to secure that far corner."

"We need to talk," I said.

He paused as if to read my expression. "Of course, my brother. What burdens your thoughts?"

"You must leave Calla alone, tonight. She is exhausted and requires sleep."

"Aye, and she will have that rest. I'll ensure it." He returned his attention to tying down the tarp.

Gripping his shoulder with far more strength than I had intended, I spun him around to face me.

"You will leave her alone."

He tossed the blade he had been using to sever twine to the ground. "Release me, or find yourself writhing beside that blade, Shanuk."

My fist, wound into a fleshy mallet, connected with his jaw. He stumbled back but quickly recovered. His counter blow was expected and missed its mark as I dodged to the left. A tempting target of open ribs found favor with my fist. My next strike connected with his temple, felling him to the earth like a sack of grain. Feeling the urge to ensure he didn't rise again for quite some time, I straddled his hips and released my anger onto his face. What followed was unexpected. My world turned black.