

Chapter 1

The dark side is like quicksand. You know you're sinking, but you have limited time and resources to free yourself before it swallows you whole.

~ S k y e ~

The past six months provided blissful and much needed normality after last fall when I discovered I was a Spirian. My existence as a mere human had ceased and I quickly found myself rushing headlong into a world where good versus evil leaned more toward the evil side. I was destined to wed Khalen—a man who could easily end my life if anger had a hold on him—and to fulfill my role as a legend I didn't believe in.

Spirians, I learned, often lived in self-supporting communities called clans. Each member of the clan filled one or more roles that kept the clan fed, clothed and sheltered. Those who did not contribute were asked to leave. The elders often watched and taught the young ones, while the younger members performed more physical duties.

Khalen and I returned to work at The Wellness Center, his professional health practice that was managed by our good friends, Gregg and Ro. This is where Khalen offered natural and traditional healthcare, while three others and myself offered massage therapy and acupuncture.

At home, I was becoming more involved with the daily activities. I rather enjoyed tending the gardens with Jade and Ember, and caring for the animals with Ian and Aidan. My primary role, however, was tending the physical injuries of the clan members; they came to me with everything from scraped knees to broken bones. My healing capabilities had grown stronger, as well as the intuitive gifts that I had developed even before Khalen's grandfather, Shanuk, awakened my ability to heal.

Since his death last fall, Shanuk often made his presence known to me in subtle breezes that kicked up out of nowhere, and a welcoming peace when I needed it the most. I missed his magnificent smile.

Today was a good day, with sunny weather, a pleasant spring breeze, and healthy plants to roam barefoot among—until Khalen’s rogue twin, Traeger, entered the camp.

As I freed the asparagus patch of medicinal dandelions and plantain, the hair on the back of my neck stood alert. A familiar cold swept over me and Maiyun, my guide dog, released a low growl. Her mixed genes of Malamute and Husky made her appear more wolf than a domestic pet.

“What is it?” asked Ember, her hands filled with limp stalks of chickweed and speedwell.

I glanced toward the direction that held Maiyun’s attention. A black Lincoln Continental was coming up the driveway. The pancakes I ate earlier suddenly felt like lead in my gut. I remembered all too well the time I had endured with Traeger last fall. I had made a grave error that forced me into his grasp and nearly cost me my soul. His ability to draw me in was frightening, even though I wanted nothing to do with him. The calmness that I had enjoyed recently was about to end, I was certain.

Before the car came to a stop, Khalen and his father, Case stood at the end of the drive.

Stay there, Khalen warned me telepathically.

What’s he doing here? I responded in kind. There was no answer. I was sure Khalen wondered the same thing.

Maiyun started to trot toward Khalen. I called her back to my side.

Although I could not see much detail due to my blindness, I recognized the body language of Traeger and, Seth, his quiet and ominous son. The other man who stepped out of the car was a stranger.

Case’s inquiring stare made Traeger’s companions uncomfortable; they kept their eyes lowered and shifted their feet. Traeger, however, sauntered toward the old man with sickening confidence.

“I request council with you,” he said. His hair had grown longer since I saw him last. He had it tied in the back.

Case raised his head a bit, as if to remind the young man of his stature in the presence of a clan elder.

Traeger responded by lowering his head as a sign of respect. That subtle body language gained the attention of everyone around. Conversations ceased and a crowd began to form around the three outsiders.

“Come,” said Case, leading the way toward his yurt.

Khalen waited for the three men to follow his father, and then proceeded behind, shutting the door of the yurt as he entered.

Eve exited the yurt shortly afterward. She had been baking bread for the evening meal. Her flour-dusted apron fluttered. A faint white cloud trailed in her wake as she hurried toward me. Her silver brows were creased and her long gray braid swung wildly as she picked up her pace. Under her apron, she wore blue jeans and a vibrant pink blouse. I still couldn’t get over the fact that she was over fifty years old. She certainly didn’t move like it, even though she was human.

When I had first entered the clan, Shanuk, Khalen’s adoptive grandfather, explained to me that Spirians aged slowly because their pineal glands were so developed. He was over 300 years old when he passed away. My heart felt heavy with the loss, and now Traeger, the very cause of Shanuk’s death, was here in this camp. Shanuk was more than just the eldest Spirian. He was my mentor, and something that mere words could not describe. When he passed into the Spirit realm, he took all that was dead in me and offered a stronger life in return.

I bit back the tears stinging my eyes. “What’s going on?” I whispered to Eve.

She held up her hand, as if to silence me. After concentrating for a moment, she finally spoke. “Traeger is asking Case for help.”

I knew better than to interrupt her while she tapped into Case’s mind. As his mate, she could communicate with him over any distance, which is probably why he sent her out to me. If he didn’t want her tapping his mind, he had the power to block her. I patiently waited for more information. It seemed an eternity before she spoke again.

The sisters, Jade and Ember, moved closer. Apparently, their curiosity was stoked as well. I noticed Jade staring out toward Ian, who was mending the goat pen. She was smitten with him and obviously disappointed with his perceived disinterest.

Eve brought her hand to her mouth. Her expression changed to concern. She started shaking her head.

Jade gasped and so did Ember. They were reading Eve’s mind.

“What?” I finally said, feeling the odd woman out. Until I formally united with Khalen, I was not really part of the clan and was denied the gift of communal telepathy, or so I believed. The clan

could read each other's thoughts, providing the distance was not too great between them. With mates this was different; once Khalen and I united, we would be able to communicate with each other over any distance, just as Eve and Case did.

I was ready for the union, but Khalen was not. He asked for time to sort things out and I vowed to give him as much as he needed. His last union ended very badly with the death of his mate, Valerie. When she fell into the trap of Traeger's allurements, Khalen was forced to kill her, ending their union. If she were allowed to live, she would have placed the entire clan at risk. That unfortunate demise nearly claimed all that was good in his heart, a fear he was not eager to revive.

"Traeger wants Case to train him. He wants peace between the clans," Ember whispered.

I waited for more.

"Khaleen is arguing. He seems mad."

Yeah, I thought. That seems right. He should be angry. I wanted to ask him what his brother was up to, but I knew he wouldn't answer. He was purposely keeping me out of this. Providing we were close enough, I was able to read his thoughts when he kept them open to me. My thoughts, on the other hand, were inexplicably open to the entire clan. I had much to learn about the gift of telepathy.

"He and Case are discussing the issue," Ember continued. "Case believes that a bond between the clans would be good, but Khaleen doesn't trust his twin."

"And Case does?" I asked.

"Shh," all three of them hissed.

I rolled my eyes, wondering if any of them knew how frustrating this was.

Again, Eve shook her head slowly. "No," she whispered.

Ember and Jade looked confused. "Case agreed," said Jade. "I didn't think he would."

She and Ember went back to pulling weeds as if the drama was over. It was far from over and I was not as accepting of Case's decision as the sisters obviously were.

I watched Khaleen leave the yurt and head straight toward his thinking log.

Eve saw me start after him and gripped my shoulder. "You might want to give him some time, dear."

"What is Case thinking?" I asked.

Eve channeled herself back into his thoughts. “He begins Traeger’s training tomorrow morning.” Her shoulders sank and her jaw clenched. “I have a bad feeling about that one.”

“Yeah,” I said, knowing she spoke of Traeger. “Me too.” I removed my gloves and stuffed them into the front pouch of my sweatshirt. “I’m going to talk to Khalen.”

She squeezed my arm as if to say good luck with that.

I knew what she meant. Khalen was not the most pleasant person to talk to when he was angry and amped up.

Maiyun stayed close to my side as we walked toward the log. Khalen was nowhere in sight. I called for him in my mind. *Khalen?*

There was no answer. I reached out with my feelings and closed my eyes. I saw him by the water’s edge. The trail leading down there was precarious for those who could see. It was stupid for someone, like myself, who was blind.

Maiyun stood between me and the trail. “I need to go to him,” I said.

No! Khalen replied in thought.

Then come up here, I thought back. *Please.*

I heard him coming up the trail.

For a long moment, he said nothing. I knew better than to break that silence. In truth, I was happy just to be near him. We sat on the log overlooking the lake. His hazel eyes looked golden against the early noon sun. He was deep in thought, though he kept that thought hidden from me.

He wore blue jeans today, with a white short-sleeved shirt that could easily pass for dressy-casual. This was his day-off look, and it was about as casual as I would ever find him. He wore the moccasins that his mother made for him. I guessed it was his best attempt to connect with his Native American bloodroots.

His thick black hair shone with blue hues against the sun, and his eyes were golden green. His naturally-bronzed skin glowed hairless and smooth.

From his square jaw line and high cheekbones, I knew he was tribal, but little was known about his mom. His biological father, Damon, looked Native American as well, perhaps Cherokee or some neighboring tribe. Khalen wasn’t too interested in sorting it out.

He took my hand in his and squeezed it hard. “My brother will be staying for some time,” he finally said. “I want you to stay away from him.” His voice carried the same British tone that his father and mother spoke, laced with elegant culture and refinement.

I huffed in reply. “No worries about that.”

His grip felt crushing and desperate. “He will lure you to him,” he said. “It’s his gift. Understand?”

I nodded. “I’ll be all right,” I said quietly, not really convinced of my own words. I remembered all too well how easily Traeger had trapped me in his arms and kissed me last fall. My mind had gone blank and shockingly unresponsive. If it had been any other man, he would be clutching his groin in pain the moment he grabbed me. When he had held me, though, I was powerless.

“When I’m not around,” said Khalen. “Stay with Ian and Aidan. They will keep you safe.” His gruff tone did not catch me by surprise. His emotions were on edge and he was incapable of tender words now.

I raised my brow with playful apprehension. Ian and Aidan, the Irish brothers who had a reputation as the clan playboys, were going to keep me safe? Despite their reputation, I did trust them, as did Khalen. They had the gift of illusion and could easily make you believe just about anything, including flying. The flying squirrel suit adventure they took me on months ago still shone bright in my memory. It was a thrill I would not soon forget.

“I promise,” I reluctantly said. Agreeing to his unreasonable request was out of form for me, but deep inside, I was relieved to have the protection. Having Traeger so close made me feel vulnerable; an emotion I was not used to entertaining.

We were silent for a moment before I spoke again. “Why is he here, Khalen?”

His golden eyes flashed down to meet my inquiring stare. They were distractingly hypnotic. “He wants Case to train him.”

“Train him?”

“Traeger wants peace between our clans. He believes that if he learns our ways he will better understand how to calm the ill tendencies of the Shadows.”

“And Case agrees?”

He looked at me. There was a faint hint of pain etched in his eyes. “Case is the clan leader. He cannot refuse to train anyone who approaches him, even if the person is a Shadow.” His muscles tightened when he said it.

Like his twin, Khalen had been born into a Shadow family. At an early age, he developed his most powerful gift—reaping; the ability to take life. Not wanting to be a Shadow, he had also asked for Case’s help. I doubted Traeger’s intentions were similar.

Khalen was ostracized from his blood family and eagerly adopted by Case and Eve. The war between the clans had begun. To maintain some semblance of peace, a treaty was drawn to prevent the clans from entering each other’s territory without prior permission. Along with that agreement, Spirians were not permitted to use their gifts against one another. This treaty was honored until last fall when I inadvertently used my gift to protect Maiyun against Talon’s ill intent. Talon worked for Traeger’s father, Damon. Talon was sent to discover the extent of my gifts, and to lure me away from the Protected clan. My ignorance delivered me straight into Traeger’s clutches.

“How long will he stay here?” I asked. My palms were slightly damp.

Khalen stood. “As long as it takes.” He offered his hand and led me back to our yurt.

As we approached the camp, Traeger was walking toward his car to remove his bags. Judging by the number of them, he was prepared to stay for quite some time.

Khalen wrapped his arm around my shoulder, protectively and possessively.

Traeger responded with a broad smile that made him look like the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland. His dark eyes followed us up the stairs and into the yurt. The hair on the back of my neck stood in eerie response.

Chapter 2

A silhouette looms like a shadow, void of detail and dimension, distorting and darkening our feeble will.

~ S k y e ~

It was a clear evening with a few clouds looming overhead. The fire crackled and provided a welcoming warmth. Khalen and I sat on a log opposite from Eve and Case. Ian and Aidan played with Maiyun and the other dogs near the lake, while various clan members gathered around neighboring fires.

In the distance, Jade watched Ian with admiring eyes. I could almost feel her heart heavy with longing and disappointment. I wanted badly to help her, but it was the Spirian man who chose his mate, not the woman.

“He knows,” said Khalen, obviously reading my thoughts. “The match is not a good one for him.”

I was still very unclear about the etiquette of proper matching. The rules were not defined. “She’s a good woman,” I said.

“Yes, but not a good woman for Ian.”

My brows furrowed. “Why?”

He smiled down at me. “Jade is human and young in spirit. She would never understand Ian’s ways and it would cause strife between them.”

“Hmm,” I said, trying to mull over that weak explanation in my mind. There was so much to learn about the Spirian ways. I felt young in spirit myself, and precariously ignorant. “Perhaps he should tell her so that she can stop pining for something that will never be.”

“That he has,” Khalen assured me. “She is deaf to his words.”

“Son,” Case called from across the fire. “Walk with me.” He stood, looming above us. When Khalen stood, he nearly matched his father’s height of six-foot-four.

Eve came over to sit next to me.

“Is Traeger staying with you?” I asked.

She glanced over her shoulder. “He is staying in the guest tent behind our yurt.”

I had to laugh. The great Traeger, staying in a tent? I wondered how long that would last. He was used to his large mansion with all the convenient amenities of a five-star hotel. “I’m sure he’s very comfortable.”

Eve chuckled, knowing exactly what I referred to. "I certainly hope not," she added.

We both laughed.

I studied the flames for a moment as they rose and fell, dancing on the gentle evening breeze. Case could extinguish them with a thought, but I still struggled with that one. Projecting my energy was unpredictable and often disastrous. I continued with my Qi Gong exercises as Case instructed. He assured me that it would take years for me to develop any kind of consistency with my new gifts. I would have to learn to be patient.

"He's trying to talk Khaleen into claiming me soon," I said, almost as a spoken thought.

Eve nodded. "It is dangerous to wait any longer."

"He's not ready."

She reached out and patted the back of my hand. "His fear consumes his good sense," she said. "It will be his undoing."

I thought about Ian and Aidan and the number of women they had taken to their beds.

"Eve," I hesitantly said.

She raised her brow as if already knowing what I was going to ask. "Yes, my dear."

"Ian and Aidan have shared affections with many women. Why are they not claimed?"

"If a man chooses not to claim a woman, the woman will not be claimed."

I frowned. "Um," I hesitated. "How does a man claim a woman?" At first, I thought that he had to join with her and that was that. But now, I was confused and even more curious. Eve was human and had never really joined with Case as do Spirians, but I knew she was savvy to their ways.

Eve lowered her head, collecting her thoughts for a moment. "Well," she said. "First, the man has to bring the woman to a state in which he can bond with her. Typically this involves a very intense orgasm."

My face instantly reddened and I felt uncomfortable.

"Once she is in that state, he connects with her and draws her into his spirit. The bond is painful at first, and then the woman feels a sense of completeness that is impossible to describe, or so I'm told." She smiled sadly. "Of course, some men are better at this than others."

"So, you can share affections with one another without actually uniting?"

"Yes," she confirmed.

I frowned. Khalen had not made love to me, nor had he even tried. I had thought that it was because he was not ready for the union. Now my speculation was heading in another direction. Perhaps he was not really attracted to me in that way.

“Khaleen will not be intimate with you until the time is right,” she offered. “To him, the entire act is sacred, not just the union.”

I smiled and lowered my head. “I wish I could read your thoughts as easily as you can read mine.”

“What stops you?” She turned to look at me with curiosity etched in her face.

“I am not bound to the clan until Khaleen is ready.”

“Jade and Ember do not have mates, yet they can hear your thoughts.”

I had not thought of that fact, but yet it was true. There were many people in the clan that were not bound to a mate and they could all communicate without words.

“I can hear Khaleen, but no one else.”

“That is because you are entrained to him. When you open yourself to others, you will be able to communicate with them as well.”

The thought of opening myself to others was fraught with feelings of vulnerability. “How can others hear me when I am not open to them?”

“They are open to you, and therefore, your thoughts enter their own.”

“So, how does Khaleen block me from hearing his thoughts?”

She closed her hands together. “He closes the energetic door that connects all things.”

“How?”

“When you heal someone,” she explained. “You empty yourself of yourself, correct?”

I nodded.

“In a sense, you open yourself to the universal flow, God’s energy. Now, what happens when you try to force something to happen?”

“I’m cut off. I can’t make anything happen,” I answered.

“Yes,” said Eve. “Exactly. You cut off the universal flow so that nothing can get through.”

It all made sense to me now, and I felt ridiculous for not being able to figure it out on my own. It was so simple. “That is why his energy closes in around him when he tunes me out,” I said, again speaking my thought out loud.

She nodded, enthusiastically. “Yes, you have it, my dear.”

Another confusing thought entered my mind. “So, how does Case break through, even when I cut myself off?”

She laughed. “He draws you in and invites your thoughts.”

“Draws me in?”

“He taps into your vibrational pattern, entrains to it, and then changes your vibration to match his intention.”

I frowned. “Why can’t others do that to him?”

“Shanuk could do it.”

“How?”

She placed her hand over my arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “You are like an infant asking how to run a marathon, Skye. You and I have neither the strength nor the knowledge to comprehend the level at which Shanuk existed.”

I nodded and thought about what she had said. In many ways, I did feel like an infant, especially in the presence of Case.

~ K h a l e n ~

I followed my father to the thinking log. We sat, maintaining the silence between us. He sensed what lingered my mind, and knew my feelings about it full heartedly.

“You don’t agree with my decision to allow your brother to stay,” he finally voiced.

“I do not.”

“Suggest a better plan, Son.” His voice had a tenderness to it.

“Send him away, Father. He is poison here and will infect the clan.”

Case pursed his lips in thought. “If you have a child, and protect him from the elements, the germs of the world, and the social drama, will he be stronger or weaker for it?”

I knew where he was going with this analogy. “Weaker,” I sighed.

“If I send Traeger away, will he be grateful for my wisdom, or vengeful because of my rejection of him?”

I felt the blood heat my face. “He will be vengeful no matter what you decide,” I growled.

“Is it his respect for me that angers you so, or is it my willingness to help him?”

“Neither. It is the danger he poses to our camp.”

“Is your faith in me so shallow, my son?”

His words struck a chord deep within my soul. My faith in him was as strong as any I had ever felt. In my heart, there was nothing he could do to fail me. “My faith in you is strong, Father.”

“Yet you doubt my ability to control your brother during his stay?”

“I do not.”

Case sighed, something he did when his point was not finding its intended target. “Traeger believes there can be peace between our clans. It is a noble wish, but a feeble one. He is very much like you were when you first came to me, Khalen. He inherently wants to be good, and do the right thing, but his ego and desire for power will overtake him. His own clan members will turn against him. To rise above the pressure, he will have to allow his ego to die and accept a position beneath his current stature.”

“That won’t happen,” I said.

“Yes, I know that as well.”

My knuckles turned white. “Then why continue with this dangerous charade?”

“Events must run their course, my son. The journey provides the lessons, not the destination. By training the man, I will form a bond with him—a strong bond. With each passing day, he will find it harder to thwart me.”

I knew that lesson all too well. Respect was a powerful thing. I nodded, acknowledging his wisdom and foresight.

“Have you considered the matter of Skye?” he asked.

“I have.” My stomach wrenched with the thought of taking her for a mate. It felt more like I offered her a death sentence than the eternal love she deserved.

“She is not Valerie,” said Case, referring to the mate I had ignorantly taken several years back.

“She is strong, and she completes you.”

“That she does,” I said. “To the point where losing her will be the death of me.”

“Then do the right thing and keep her safe, Son. Claim her now. Do not wait.”

“She is not ready,” I growled.

Case gripped my arm. “Then make her ready.”

Chapter 3

When misery's company parts ways, misery bands with anger and hate, raising a formidable foe.

~ T r a e g e r ~

Traeger, I heard in thought. It was the dulcet voice of my alpha mate, Sunjia. She was a beautiful Brazilian woman with obsidian eyes that shone like black diamonds. She was the perfect obedient mate with gifts that complemented my own. Where I could manipulate and lure people to do my bidding, she could make one forget the difference between right and wrong, like a drug that numbs the senses.

Yes, I answered. *What is it, Mate?* There was no need to use names when it came to women. It was easier to simply address them as their stature in life.

The clan is turning against you. They doubt your strength to lead them.

Of course they do, I thought to myself. The benefits of forming a bond with the Protected ones elude them. The mere thought is so far out of the box they live in, how can they possibly conceive it?

Today's training with Case had been grueling and cruel, but well worth the effort. The man was a much stronger teacher than my father had been, and much more generous with praise. My father

was one of the few clan elders who had seen more than two hundred years. Unlike the Protected ones, the Shadows seemed to have a shorter life span.

I intended to change that. Somehow, I would have to convince the Shadows that the elders contained the wisdom and power we needed to survive. We had to do a much better job at preserving our kind. There were too few teachers left to carry on the training of our young spirits.

Woman, I called to Sunjia. Convince them that my gifts grow stronger every day. Tell them that I will not abandon them.

Yes, Traeger, I understand, she responded.

Being confined to this blasted tent was almost more than I could bear. To gain Case's cooperation, I had to agree to stay in this hellhole until my training was complete. I was not allowed to correspond with the other clan members, especially the females. The agreement was unreasonable, and I was going to bring that to my teacher's attention this evening.

His mate, Eve, had graciously brought me my dinner: a scant portion of bread, cold ham and canned beans. I had unfortunately exhausted my bottle of wine last evening, and was in sore need of something refreshing. My best charm did nothing to melt the icy exterior Eve exhibited. She simply looked at me with those coal-black eyes, and softened my intentions with grace and kindness. Honestly, I wanted to choke her.

If I knew Case would never find out, it would have sufficed to have my way with her first. Like Skye, she was sure to offer some intriguing challenges.

Case entered the tent, a glass of brandy in his hand. "I trust you enjoyed your dinner?" he asked. His voice was as silky as the delicate threads of a Monarch butterfly's cocoon.

I glanced down at my half-eaten portion. "It was better than expected," I retorted.

His response was immediate and direct.

I found myself on the floor gasping for breath and fighting the pain that threatened to implode my organs.

"Am I to assume that you disapprove of my mate's cooking?"

I could not gather the breath to speak, let alone think of a suitable answer. His grip on me eased a bit. I breathed deep and stifled my instinct to be sarcastic.

He took a long, slow sip of his brandy as if purposely trying to taunt me.

My mouth watered in response.

He smiled. "I would offer you a drink," he said snidely, "but it seems you've indulged yourself already."

I assumed he referred to the two meager bottles of wine that I had managed to ration through the course of seven long days. It was ridiculous, really, having to go without for so long.

"Perhaps you did not hear me say that you were to have absolutely no alcohol or any other recreational substances during the entire course of your training?"

"I heard," I gasped. The pain ripped through me like rampant flames. I could not break his blasted hold.

"So then you willingly disobeyed me?"

The intensity of his grip thwarted my ability to stay conscious. I was on the verge of fainting, a fact I was sure he knew. "I am weak, my teacher. Please have mercy." My plea disgusted me. I sounded like many of the females I had taken to my bed.

"You will learn to be strong, Student, or you will leave this camp and never return." His voice was calm and even.

I knew there would be no reasoning with him tonight.

Our training continued throughout the evening. I was exhausted and mentally spent. The morning sun filtered in through the door flap. "If it is your will," I said, with as much respect as my worn-out body could muster. "I would like to take a shower."

He eyed me suspiciously. "Yes, perhaps a bit of fresh air will clear your cluttered thoughts. You have two hours to see to your hygiene. Do not mingle with the clan."

I stumbled to my feet. Every inch of my body ached as if it had endured a thousand strikes from a formidable length of stiff hosing. Even my bones ached as I forced them to move. Crossing Case was clearly not an option. I was beginning to rethink my decision to stay here.

He watched me as I gathered my toiletries and headed for the door. As I crossed the camp toward the showers, I saw Skye, Khaleen's female.

She glanced up at me, and then headed in the opposite direction. I willed her to turn around, but like most of my efforts to lure her, it failed. No woman had been able to resist my invites, but this one did, and she repeatedly ignored my efforts to sway her from my traitorous twin.

I continued my trek to the rural outbuilding that housed the showers, willing her to follow. I could feel her as if she were standing before me. Her scent tempted my hunger and my body responded in kind. I smiled, thinking how sweet she would taste. If Khalen would not take her, I would, and soon.

I had about seven more days here before I could return to the comforts of my own home. Seth was charged with keeping things running smoothly in my absence. It was clear, based on what Sunjia reported, that he was not suited for the job just yet. He was seventeen already and had not shown any signs of having gifts of his own. Sunjia, his mother, explained that her own gifts did not manifest until she was nearly thirty. If our nine-year-old daughter does not show promising signs of gifts soon, Sunjia will lose much of her value to me.

Unlike the Protected ones, Shadows are able to take more than one mate without disapproval. I already had five. Sunjia was the only one I impregnated. I now wondered if that had been a mistake.

The shower's water trickled over my head like a poor excuse for a leak. Apparently, water pressure was nonexistent in this godforsaken dirt mound. I wouldn't doubt it if plastic bags had been placed on the roof of this shack and left for the sun to warm. That there was even a trickle at all was no doubt due to the sheer force of gravity. How quaint.

I made quick work of showering, and donned my clean clothes. They were pathetically wrinkled. Honestly, I had no idea how Khalen could stand living like this. It was just short of barbaric.

A lovely redhead met me on the path. She was obviously heading for the women's showers. I smiled and caught her attention.

"You're Traeger, right?"

I nodded. "I am. And you, lovely lady, are?"

She giggled like a young teen, yet this human was clearly in her forties. "I'm Jade." She glanced back at another redheaded woman trailing behind her. "And that is my sister, Ember."

The older one finally caught up and gave me a questioning stare.

"Good day to you, Miss," I said, offering an alluring smile.

She grabbed the young woman's arm. "Come on."

Jade smiled back at me. "See you later."

“No doubt,” I said. It was reassuring to see that I hadn’t lost my gift. Staying in this pit nearly had me convinced that I could not lure anything other than bad food and cruel lessons.

Skye tended the animals with Ian and Aidan as I made my way back. I tried to draw her attention, but she ignored me as usual. Aidan stood with his arm hanging over the end of a shovel handle, watching me pass. I had an odd sensation of walking through a long tunnel made of stone. It was cold and dark save the end, where the light shone through. “Damn illusionist,” I cursed.

Case waited for me outside of my tent. He had the most disturbing stare, as if he could see right through my soul.

“I asked you to stay clear of our women,” he said.

“I sought out no one,” I said. It was the truth. Just because the humans happened to be on the same path as me, and caught my attention did not count as lying, so far as I was concerned.

“You spoke to Jade and Ember, and you tried to lure Skye.”

The old man’s talents knew no bounds. Even my late father could not perceive so much. “I was being kind to the humans,” I explained, “and Skye just happened to gain my attention. Perhaps it was her trying to lure me?”

As expected, the remainder of the day was filled with pleasantries such as unbearable pain and impossible feats to perform. I felt like a polar bear expected to ride a bicycle three sizes too small. Case was ensuring that I had absolutely no energy left to cause more problems within the camp, I was sure.

At midnight, he left my tent. I was more than spent and was looking forward to a good long rest. He then informed me that training would begin at five in the morning. I was to meet him at the lake. Bloody hell.

I had to admit, the old man was making an impression on me. He had more gifts than I could imagine, and his style of training was unsurpassed. He had me believing that I could become one of the Protected. I even started feeling a bit guilty for trying to gain the attention of that young woman, Jade.

I turned out the light, hopeful that my newfound contentment would somehow rub off on my clan brothers.

I was wrong.

Are you becoming one of 'em then? A familiar voice chimed in my head. It was Sean, the leader of the Seattle clan. He was as powerful and ruthless as a hit mob. His clan was half the number of my own, but his pull with the surrounding clans was strong.

No, I assured him. *I am merely learning their ways to understand them better. They can be formidable allies.*

We don't need allies, Traeger. We need the woman that the legend speaks of. Tell me you are doing all this to steal her away and claim her as our own.

That was an added benefit, yes, but my pure intention was to gain the trust and respect of the Protected ones.

Myself and the others are questioning your loyalty, Traeger.

Understood, was my only reply. It was clear that an alliance with the Protected ones was not an option at this time. If I sided against the Shadows, they would kill me. If I pledged loyalty to the Protected, I would be expected to follow Khalen's lead. Never would I claim loyalty to a brother who gave up his own family for another who was clearly not of his kind.

Taking Skye from him was a more attractive choice. As my mate, she would strengthen my clan and gain me the respect I deserved. With any luck, Khalen's anger would bring him back to us, his blood clan, and he would follow my lead.