



Chapter 1

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

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A LOW GROWL RUMBLED DEEP in my throat, vibrating all the way down to my gut. The man sitting next to Erika reached for her hand.

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

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

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“Let them talk,” Arcadie added.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What is this about?” I finally said.

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

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

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

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

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

“I have status.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Again, my jaw clenched. "You have my word."

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

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

"May I see her now?"

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

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

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

Erika took my hands, making the gesture seem as comfortable as touching a brother or a good friend. I kissed the backs of hers, keeping my green eyes fixed

on her delicate face. She was remarkably beautiful in that cobalt-blue dress. It matched the color of her eyes, perfectly. Like her mum, she was tall and slender. Her hair, however, was the color of spun honey with golden highlights. She took after Arcadie in that respect.

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

I nodded. “So I’ve heard.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Perhaps another time,” Jazen said to Erika.

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

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

“Until you are mated, yes.”

“I am not ready to mate with anyone.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Do as your mother wishes.”

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

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

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

“Will you stay?”

I glanced over at Kitta, who casually looked away.

“No. I’m returning home.”

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

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

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

“Will you be back soon?”

I looked at her parents. “Perhaps.” I smiled at Erika.

“All ye have to do is ask.”

“Can you come to the dance tonight?”

“You already have an escort,” said Kitta.

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

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

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

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

“I’ll manage,” I said.

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

I nodded to her. “I’ll be there.”

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

THE CLOTHES I’D BROUGHT WERE inappropriate for the formal dance that evening, but a quick illusion could change that. I conjured a black suit with dark-green silk trim. Erika always commented on my eyes and I knew the color would make them stand out. I never liked these formal gatherings, but they were important to her mother.

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

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upbringing and duty as the leader's mate.

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

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

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