



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.

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,

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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.

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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 was 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 into 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.

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“Khalen 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 Khalen 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 Khalen 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

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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.