

Chapter 2: Tana

I have no idea why Cedric suddenly believes there's a way for us to escape from this place. We've exhausted every possibility of escape. We've both tried to pull our bars apart, we've attempted not eating the food in case it was poisoned, and we've tried climbing the walls to get to windows or air vents. Cedric even tried shifting, but he was unable to. I tried as well, just in case it would work, but it didn't. Nothing has worked.

The only way we are getting out of here is if someone comes to our rescue. My family is gone, so I know there's no one out there looking for me. Cedric strongly believed that his pack would come to rescue him, but they never did. It's not that I think they left him for dead; based on what he's shared with me, I think that they either were brought here and died in battle, or they were taken for experimentation. Either way, they're probably dead now.

The day I was captured, my family chose death over the possibility of being experimented on. At that time, we were unaware of the existence of the Arena. This part of the underworld is so deep that most supes don't know of its existence. If they did, places like this would be burned to the ground.

Of course, that doesn't mean there aren't supes that help the hunters. Whether it's because they are crazy or they are trying to save someone they love, some supes infiltrate different places and provide the hunters with a way to capture and imprison us before forcing us into the fighting ring.

I reach over and grab my food, snarling at the guy next to me. "What are you, anyway? Some kind of scavenger?" I ask him. He's lanky and unkempt. He looks like a coyote shifter.

"What's it to you?" he asks.

"Nothing, just curious. If you're a coyote, they'll probably match you with something bigger than you, a bear or maybe even Shere Khan over there." I nod my head at our resident Bengal tiger.

I watch his face turn pale as the tiger shifter turns and looks him dead in the eye. Even though he doesn't speak much, he's very observant. The Bengal tiger has been here nearly as long as Cedric and I have.

I eat my food, and Cedric offers me some of his. "No, Ced, eat it. You need to keep your strength up," I insist.

"Says the girl who keeps healing me," he replies before pushing the food at me. "Eat. I'm not." "

I finish my meal, and then we go through the list of those who lost their gifts today.

"The girl who, I'm pretty sure was a bird shifter," Cedric tells me.

"The tall, skinny one from three cells down?"

"Yeah, the one that they brought in yesterday. She didn't make it."

"I'm not surprised; she was too skinny, and birds never survive in here. And, obviously, the warlock and the Kodiak didn't make it," I state.

"I heard rumblings today that they have a dragon," Cedric says.

"A dragon?" I ask. "s**t, did they figure out what I am?"

"Yeah, something about some rare dragon they brought in yesterday. He or she is up tomorrow. I guess we'll see if they survive."

"Aren't all dragons rare?" I say jokingly to Cedric while freaking out inside. If there is a dragon in here, then they will recognize me as one of their own. A dragon always knows another dragon.

"I guess they are. I know I've never seen one. How about you?"

I shake my head no. "Who else is up tomorrow?" I ask, trying to change the subject.

"The coyote and Shere Khan," he says.

Cedric and I have learned to sleep here, but most either can't sleep or have horrible nightmares about what they have had to do or endure while they are here. Tonight is no different.

We started holding hands at night a long time ago. We lay as close to each other as the bars will allow, our fingers entwined. It helps us both sleep, and we both know that the more rest we get, the stronger we will be and the faster we will heal.

The next morning, I'm awakened by the sounds of a cattle prod banging on my bars. "Wakey, wakey. Time for your battle," one of the chiefs of our section says to me.

I sit up, rubbing my eyes. "You made a mistake. I fought yesterday," I say to him, and Cedric sits up in the cell next to me, quietly watching our chief.

"No mistake. The Commander says you're up again today, so you're up again today." He gives me a leering look. I'm still in my torn clothes from yesterday. "I hope you're all healed up."

I'm not, but that's okay; I'm healed enough to fight. I'm just hoping it's not Shere Khan. He's lasted a long time, so I know he's a force to be reckoned with.

"Who am I fighting?" I ask, wanting to know if it's the tiger or maybe I'll get lucky and it'll be the s**t-for-brains coyote.

"Don't know, something new came in last night. Now get up," he tells me.

I feel Cedric squeeze my hand. "You got this," he says to me before I am handcuffed and taken to the holding area. The coyote, the tiger, and two others are brought in after me.

"You!" The chief points his cattle prod at the coyote. "You're up first. Give them a good show and get the crowd going."

It's only 10 minutes before the chief returns without the coyote or whatever he was. He's dead now.

"You!" He points to a fox shifter. "You're up next. Try to do better than your friend," he says as if we're all related or friendly. Shifters don't generally mingle outside of our own.

The fox lasts a little bit longer than the coyote, but he still gets killed. The last shifter is taken, leaving only me and the tiger.

I've been sniffing the air but can't place the scent.

"It's a pride of lions," Shere Khan says. His nose lifts in the air. "If I had to guess, I'd say it's a pride with brothers as the males." He looks at me meaningfully. "We each get to fight a male lion."

First a Kodiak bear and now a full-grown lion, one day apart. I know what this means.

I've been marked for death.