

Chapter 6: Tana

When they move me, they put me in a space that looks and smells like it is where the toilets are. There is no one here except for me; the smell is so terrible I can barely breathe. There is no airow, so breathing becomes dicult.

It's not surprising that they only give me poisoned food, not that I could eat in this literal shithole even if it wasn't poisoned. I realize starting on Thursday that the water they give me is also poisoned. So, basically, before my battle, I can't breathe. I have no food and no water. If I were a regular shifter, like they think I am, the lack of water would be very problematic. But as a dragon, I can go long periods without water. It's the tainted air that's the problem for me. What water I might be able to draw from the air is contaminated. I can't pull enough oxygen into my lungs because of the putrid scent in the air.

On Saturday morning, the keeper comes in and shoots me with some sort of dart. I didn't expect it would affect me, but it makes me feel woozy. I lay down on the oor of my cage. I can feel them as they begin to transport me. The movement makes me sick, and I vomit bile on my cage oor. When they roll me outside, I don't move. I don't want to be sick again, and I'll start to feel better as soon as I get some fresh air. I need to recover if I'm going to take out the Commander.

I feel them attach something to the top of my cage, and then I feel like I'm swinging in the air. The higher up I go, the better the air tastes. I begin taking in gulping lungfuls of the fresh, clean air. Well, it's as fresh as it gets inside the arena, but anything is better than what I've been breathing for the last few days.

I wonder if they are intentionally making my cage swing. They probably think it will continue to make me feel sick since I vomited earlier. However, the rocking motion reminds me of ying in the air; the wind gusts on a blustery day, pushing my body up and down over the air currents.

I hear the keepers speaking on the ground underneath me. "Do you think we overdid it? The Commander will be angry if she can't ght."

"Nah, he'll just nd someone to take her place. He wanted her dead," one of the keepers says uncaringly.

"But he wants her to die in the arena so he can get some of his money back. Maybe I should give her some water, at least."

"Fine, but whatever you do, do it quickly."

Rather than throwing a bottle of water at me, the i***t turns on a hose and shoots it at me. It washes away all the disgusting smells that had been coating my body, making it even easier to breathe. I wait, hoping he'll let the water wash over me.

"Drink, dammit. If you die, I'm as good as dead," the keeper shouts at me; as if I care about his life. He's as good as dead anyway, once I'm released. When I feel like he's close to stopping, I lift my head and open my mouth. The ood of clean water tastes delicious. I don't need it now, but it cleans my mouth of the scents of that disgusting place where they were holding me.

I gulp the water until he shuts it off. "There, now act like you're ready for a ght." I stare him down until he moves away.

"Are you good, Tana?" I look up, and only then do I realize that all four of us are hanging above the arena.

It was Ishir who asked. From across the arena, I can see Cedric looking panicked. I might not have stayed down so long if I'd known he was watching me, concerned. But my nose had been so clogged with the fetid air from below that I was more focused on breathing than smelling.

"Yeah, I'm good," I reply.

"Where were you? We couldn't get eyes on you." I hear Cedric ask me, his voice softer with the distance.

"I was in some septic area. It smelled like the sewer for the toilets." I hear Cedric snarl from his cage.

"Why would they do that?" The lion asks me. "Aren't you supposed to ght?"

I turn to him, seeing how majestic he looks. Majestic and arrogant. "I've been marked for death. I have been given poisoned food all week, and after I was separated from these two," I jerk my head toward Cedric and Ishir, "I was given poisoned water, too."

Cedric snarls again, shaking the cage and causing the keepers below us to look up. "That's right, big guy! Make them sweat!" The Keeper that is betting on Cedric says.

The lion frowns at me. "That's why you were unconscious when you came out?"

"No, they shot me with something. It didn't knock me out so much as make me dizzy and nauseous. The water was a bonus. It washed away the stench of the sewer, and now I have had fresh water. Or, at least, water that isn't poisoned, so it's wearing off," I explain.

He looks across the arena at Ishir, and I see his canines extend. "What's your name, lion?" I ask him.

"What's it to you, gorgeous? Want to join my pride?"

"Really? You're irting before we have to ght to the death?"

"I thought the deal was we ght to their death, not ours."

"There is always a risk. So, what's your name?"

"My name is Zaiden, Tana." He stresses my name. Of course, he heard Ishir say it.

"Zaiden, you're still on board with the plan, right? I don't want your pride or any of the other supes under the arena burning alive because you have a vendetta with the wrong person."

His head snaps to mine. "Wrong person? He killed my brother," he says, pointing at Ishir.

"And why is that Zaiden? Not because we all choose to be here, getting fed once a week. You haven't been here long enough to know how it works. If you refuse to ght, you are killed. They normally feed us once a week, and that's it. Did you happen to notice that your pride wasn't getting food when you were this week?" I ask, knowing he must have recognized the difference in how his pride was treated versus how he was this week.

He drops his gaze. "Yes."

"That's how it always is. Except for this 'celebrity death match.'" I use air quotes as I say it. "Ishir, Cedric, and I have all been here nearly a year."

That gets his attention. "A year?" he asks, and I can see that the realization of what his life would have been is becoming clear.

"There is only one way to leave the arena," I pause, making sure I have his full attention.

"Death." My words hang in the air, heavy and nal, emphasizing the brutal truth of our predicament. The reality of our situation settles between us, casting a shadow over the grim fate we share.