

Chapter 7: Cedric

My relief is palpable when Tana nally lifts her head. I'm not sure why the water was important until she says they had poisoned that, too. It sounds like the keepers were too stupid to realize that they might actually kill her before the battle.

As the arena begins to ll with fanatics, I feel my strength returning. The fresh air and the extra food this week have made a difference. I look at my hand and attempt to shift, just one claw. I see that my nger shutters with the attempt to shift, but it doesn't happen.

I feel like Tana was able to make an impact on Zaiden, and hopefully, he'll follow through with his part of the deal. I feel more condent when I hear that the rst battle will be with one of his female lions. Even if she wins, he'll realize that the battle to the death is a weekly thing, not a one-and-done as he seemed to think.

Throughout the day, I've watched Tana sit in what looks like a lotus style, just breathing in the air. After her ordeal this week, I'm sure she's trying to regain some strength, but the fresh air must feel incredible.

As the arena lls, those up in the higher levels get a bird's-eye view of us in the cages. I know they wanted us to make a show for the group, but I'm more concerned about seeing if I can shift, at least partially.

As the starter battles are about to begin, I try again and watch as my claw extends from my nger. I'm careful to cover it as I walk to the edge of the cage, and pretending to look down at the arena oor, I tap it against the bars. Three heads pop up to look at me, and I show them my claw before retracting it. It's happening; we're getting our strength back.

Today's lineup seems to be more evenly distributed. The rst match-up with Zaiden's pride member will be up against a hyena. From here, we have an amazing view of the battle. When Zaiden's pride member comes out, she looks up, startled to see Zaiden in the cage above the arena oor. He chuffs at her, and she nods.

As these extremist gamblers watch the battle, I see Ishir attempting to do a partial shift. I watch as he carefully hides the hand that completely shifts into a tiger's paw. I turn to Zaiden, but he's watching the match, concerned for his mate. When I look at Tana, she is still in her sitting position, but her face is raised to the sky, with her eyes closed. I can see from here that she's taking in huge breaths, breaths that are larger than she should be able to take. It almost looks like her body is expanding as she breathes. Ishir is also watching her, and I see him nod as if what she is doing makes sense.

Zaiden's mate wins the ght, killing the hyena. The crowd goes wild, making the walls of the arena shake and causing the cage to vibrate uncomfortably. For a moment, it almost seems as if Tana's cage vibrates even more violently than the rest of ours, but then it is over.

Ishir is watching her closely. I want to call out to him, but we can't say anything with this many people around who could overhear. I turn back to Zaiden as he chuffs at his mate again. I don't know what passes between them, but I see her give me a side-eye, and I'm hoping that means she knows what the plan is. Zaiden will release his pride rst, I have no doubt. It's what I would do in his situation. But I have to hope they will follow the plan and let everyone else out before making their escape.

As the battles continue and the day wanes, the torches get lit. At one point, I see Zaiden shifting a hand into a lion claw. I've watched her all day, but Tana hasn't been able to shift. I'm worried about her going after the Commander if she's unable to tap into her strength.

When they call a Kestrel and a hawk, I refocus my attention on the battle. While a Kestrel is a bird of prey, they are the smallest of the falcon species. Hawks are actually one of their greatest predators.

As the battle begins, the Kestrel climbs straight to Ishir's cage. He makes a point of growling and swiping at her, but I can see her moving around the cage, telling him something. The hawk actually looks like it's trying to get to her, but Ishir swipes at him, knocking him into the stands. Ishir says something to the Kestrel, and she climbs over to me, using the metal bars we are hanging from. Ishir takes a nal swipe at the hawk, knocking it down enough that the Kestrel makes it to me.

She begins moving around my cage as I make a point of swiping the air around her.

"The hyena was the one in charge of the locks on our side. We don't have anyone to assist us if the lions leave. We need someone else to come below to help us."

Just as I nod my agreement, the hawk catches up and knocks the Kestrel off the metal landing she was hanging on to. My fury burns hot, and I reach out, ripping his head from his body and letting them both drop to the arena oor. I look and see the Kestrel lying, unmoving, on the ground. f**k! I hope she's not dead because she was trying to help us escape.

I realize the arena has gone quiet with my killing of the hawk. I turn to them and snarl my anger at all of them for putting us in this position. Rather than the fear that they should feel, they cheer.

I look up and see Tana at the edge of her cage, looking down at the Kestrel. A keeper comes in and checks on her. "She's alive," he yells, and those who bet on her winning cheer loudly.

I look at Ishir. He points to me. I'm responsible for getting underground and opening the doors for those caught under the arena. I nod my agreement.

The nal battle happens before they begin to announce our death match. As the announcer speaks, our cages begin to descend into the arena. Once we're on the ground, they introduce us to the crowd.

"The Bengal Tiger." The crowd goes wild. They love Ishir.

"The African Lion." Fewer cheers, more boos. He hasn't been here long enough to become a crowd favorite.

"The Alpha Wolf – male." I'm the crowd favorite. The cheering and stomping in the arena are deafening.

"The Alpha Wolf – female." Lots of boos but a few cheers. They are foolish to underestimate Tana, and they are about to understand how much they have underestimated her.

As they nish the introductions, the four of us take our stance. We all look like we are ready to run out of our cages and attack. We are, but not in the way they think.