

Chapter 3: Cedric

I'm pacing back and forth in my cell, my mind consumed in worry. They shouldn't have taken Tana two days in a row. Nothing like this has ever happened since I've been here. We ght once a week, every week, but that's it. Then, we are given food and rest until the next ght. But this time, something was different.

If they are taking her again, it can only mean one thing – they want her dead. Tana has become a liability. I'm guessing too many high rollers have bet against her and lost too much money, putting pressure on the Commander. So now they will make sure she dies, and they win.

As I strain my eyes, I hear the rst two ghts and know that it's not the tiger or Tana. Both battles end too quickly. Their ghts are like mine; they last at least 30 minutes, sometimes longer, and we always go last. We are the big events, the strongest ghters in the Arena.

When the fourth ght starts, I hear a lot of growling and snarling. I know one is the tiger. I've gotten used to his sound but can't quite place the other. It sounds similar, but I'd be surprised if they put two tigers together. It's better to have two winners in the betting pool, at least until the other tiger gains popularity.

When I hear the cheers, I know it's over, but I can't tell who won until I see them dragging the tiger back into his cell, leaving a tray of food for him. I notice they put his food close to his body, not near the other cells like they left Tana's yesterday. Another reason to be concerned. They don't care if she eats and gets her strength.

I'm waiting anxiously to hear the start of Tana's ght, but it never begins. The announcer's voice booms through the Arena, declaring the day's ghts over and that there will be a special event next weekend. If there is no other ght, where is Tana?

I'm still pacing when I catch her scent. I've begun to crave her scent of campfire and roasted marshmallows. It's one reason I'm content she's my mate. Her scent is mouthwatering to me.

"What do you mean my ght's been canceled?" I hear her before I see her. The chief is dragging Tana back to her cell. She isn't injured; she looks ne.

I stop pacing, going up to the bars, listening.

"The boss says your ght is canceled. It's canceled," he states with a sly grin on his face. The chief then tosses Tana into her cell, licking his lips before turning to me. "I hear he's got something big scheduled for next weekend. My money's on you, big guy." He says, meaning me. "So don't f**k it up."

"What do you mean, something big?" I ask, hoping he'll give us a clue.

He looks around, leaning closer to the bars when he sees no one around. He gets closer, but not too close. They all know if they give us the opportunity, we'll kill them.

"Boss says there's going to be a premier ght next weekend. The top four of you will go at it until only one is left standing. Seats are starting at \$10,000 each, but I get a front-row seat for free."

He smiles at me, giving me a big, toothy grin. Half of his teeth are gone, the other half are rotted. I can never tell if it's his body that reeks or his mouth. Either way, he always smells like something that died in the middle of summer and has been baking in the sun for too long.

I look at Tana. That means she and I will ght against each other and two other competitors.

"You can take her. I'm sure you can. And if you make sure you win, I'll make sure you get extra food for a week." He says this as if this would make me want to kill not only my only friend in this place, the woman I'm fairly content is my mate, but also two other strong shifters.

He walks off. Secure in his decision that I will win next weekend.

I turn back to Tana. "Are you alright?"

She looks at me. "So, it will be you, me, the tiger, and the lion."

"Lion?"

"Yeah, I couldn't place the scent, but Shere Khan said it was a pride of lions. I'm guessing the females won their matches, but he took out one of the brothers. The other one was supposed to be my match-up."

"You know you've been marked for death?" I ask her.

"Yes." She shrugs. "I guess this is as good a way as any to go out."

I crouch down in front of her. "You're not dying; there has to be another way."

"Oh, there is, but I'm not willing to kill you."

"And I'm not willing to kill you," I tell her.

She smiles at me. "But you aren't marked for death. If we refuse to kill each other, it will be me they take down, not you. Either way, I lose." She turns and looks at the tiger. "And, if I'm being honest, I don't really want to kill him either. I've grown rather fond of our grumpy companion."

"Good to know." I hear the tiger say from his cell. He sits up, leaning against the wall. "There might be another way, but we'd need to get the lion on board."

"What other way?" I ask.

"I have an idea, but let me think about it; we can talk more tonight when everyone is gone," he says before grabbing his food.

I turn back to Tana, ready to continue our conversation, when the chief comes back in with another three trays of food.

"For you," he says and slides mine to me.

"For you," he says and slides a tray to Tana.

"And for you," he says, sliding the last tray to the tiger.

"Hey, what about us?" One of the other prisoners asks.

"You're not among the top four, so you get nothing. If you ght and win, you get food. Otherwise, you can starve until it's your turn to ght," he tells him before walking out.

I watch from the corner of my eye as Tana smells her food before kicking it away from her. "You poisoned mine," she says, glaring at the chief.

He turns, giving her that same disgusting grin. "Commander's orders. He doesn't want you too strong, girlie."

"Why not just starve me then?" Tana asks.

"Because even starved, you win. And like I said, my money's on the big guy here." He points to me again.

I hear the tiger scoff. I'm not surprised. He's easily twice my size.

I watch as Tana's new neighbor grabs her tray of food and devours it. Tana just shakes her head. I take my tray and sit beside her against the bars. "Here, share mine," I tell her.

"You eat it. You'll need your strength."

"We'll both need our strength," I say and wait until she reaches out to grab a slice of meat before beginning to eat.