



CAGED WITH THE TIGER

By
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Chapter One

Saloni couldn't believe the trial had ended this way. Two hirsute guards grasped her upper arms and dragged her to the prison hidden below the Portuguese villa. Even as she fought against their hold, part of her thought this must be a nightmare. Her sisterhood had turned against her simply because she had sought revenge on a man who deserved it. Not only had he nearly ruined her life by pretending to love her, but their child had died because he had run away, leaving her pregnant in a time when a single woman couldn't bear a child without social repercussions.

Glancing sideways, she noted that same man whom she had once loved but had learned to despise struggling in his father's savage grip.

"No! Father, no! I will not be locked up again. Not with her!" Rahul growled.

His father, Sanjay, a tall dark-skinned man with long black hair, held his son in a steely grip. Like Rahul, Sanjay's dark eyes flashed with rage.

Rahul shifted from man to beast. The change was so sudden it was scarcely noticeable. His handsome face elongated and his fangs grew sharp and white. Striped black and tan fur sprouted over his entire body. Obviously he'd hoped his change to semi-tiger form would give him greater strength to struggle against his father's hold. Sanjay also changed to partial tiger form. Still retaining his man-like body, his muscles thickened, face became feline rather than human, and he grew a thick black coat, as he was the only black weretiger known in existence.

Weretigers were mystical. Savage. Completely irresistible, Saloni thought with disgust. It was her attraction to Rahul that had gotten her into trouble in the first place.

"I have a career. A life. A fiancée!" Rahul continued, his voice deep and animal-like as he remained somewhere between tiger and man, a striped, bipedal man-cat.

Sanjay growled angrily and stumbled against Rahul's strength. Though Sanjay was taller and bigger than Rahul, Saloni didn't doubt the younger weretiger could have broken free if he wished a bloody battle with his sire. It seemed that in spite of his fury and desire to escape his punishment, he respected Sanjay too much to engage in a serious fight.

"I can't believe you're doing this to me." Saloni glanced at her guards. The *loup-garou* merely fixed their yellow eyes on her with a look that told her it would be useless to argue. The French werewolves had been assigned to bring her to the cell and nothing would stop them from doing their duty. Similar to the weretigers, they were covered in shaggy fur, had elongated snouts and ears, and walked on two legs rather than four. Still, Saloni continued in the vain hope that she could appeal to their feminine hearts. "All I wanted was justice."

"No, you wanted revenge," Fifi, one of the *loup-garou* guards assigned to escort Saloni to prison, growled.

The Wakened Veils were supernatural female assassins whose sworn duty was to punish males, in particular supernatural males, for their crimes against women.

"In all the centuries that The Wakened Veils have existed we have never been forced to punish one of our own," Angelique, the other *loup-garou* guard, said. "You have shamed us all."

"For wanting revenge?" Saloni glared. Rahul had used her and nearly destroyed her life. Not only that, they had lost a child because of his frivolous nature. To him she

had been mere entertainment, a wench to warm his bed, but she had fallen in love with him. That's what made his desertion even more painful.

She snarled and used her formidable strength in an attempt to free herself from the wolves' steely grips. Impossible. Few supernatural creatures could compete with *loup-garou* strength, and as a vampire she could not.

"You were as guilty in this matter as the man was," Fifi continued. "By using the power of The Wakened Veils for a personal vendetta, you almost made us as dishonorable as the men we seek to punish."

"See, father, even *they* know it was *her* fault," Rahul growled.

"Silence!" Sanjay roared. "You are as much to blame and you will serve your sentence."

The group had finally reached the bottom of the stairway. Sanjay, Fifi, and Angelique hauled their rebellious prisoners to a door at the far end of the spacious basement that contained several cells. This specialized prison was located beneath the home of a woman called Vidonia, one of the three founders of The Wakened Veils.

Angelique opened the door and Fifi thrust Saloni inside so hard that she stumbled to her knees. Seconds later Rahul followed, though he managed to remain on his feet in spite of how hard Sanjay flung him through the door.

A roar erupted from Rahul's throat as he tore off his clothes, changed into full tiger form and leapt at the door. He was too late. It slammed shut and the tiger's massive paws pounded against it. Saloni heard another door, which she knew to be made of even thicker steel, slide into place behind it. These cells were created to hold supernatural creatures and she knew there would be no escape.

Still roaring with fury, the tiger continued throwing himself against the door.

"Stop it already!" Saloni snapped, her head throbbing from anger and frustration. The last thing she needed was to listen to him all night. "You're not breaking through."

He ignored her completely. Just like a man.

Raising her eyes to the heavens, Saloni sat on the bed and glanced around the cell. At least the sisterhood had been kind enough to lock them in the special prison. The room was fairly spacious with a large bed, table and chairs, and an adjoining bathroom. It had been created to hold female prisoners--rare since the Veils generally dealt with men. As Angelique had pointed out, no prisoner had ever been a member of the Veils. She was the first and though she had admittedly twisted the truth a bit, she still couldn't help feeling betrayed by her sisterhood.

Two hundred years ago she had fallen in love with the most handsome, irresistible man she'd ever met. She'd risked everything for their secret affair and had ended up losing their child and nearly her life. Since they weren't married or even engaged, their love had been forbidden. Love. What a fool she had been to believe any man could feel such an emotion. All they wanted was physical satisfaction. If not for the midwife, she would have died. Though grateful for the woman's assistance, she had to admit the side effects of her extremely unconventional treatment took some getting used to. It wasn't every day a midwife turned her charge into a vampire. The woman had taken pity on Saloni and changed her into a creature capable of taking the revenge she deserved. She had seen what Saloni had suffered, perhaps even shared her loathing of Rahul. Why else

would she have given Saloni the power of a vampire?

Once she'd crossed into immortality, Saloni had been shocked to learn how many supernatural forces had infiltrated the world. At one time, she'd thought Rahul and his kind were the only creatures of legend in existence. How wrong she had been about so many things.

A century after her change, she had met Kesi, another vampiress who introduced her to The Wakened Veils. She and Kesi had met at a hangout in Spain where many supernatural beings could mingle without the risk of mortals discovering them. They had similar views on men and once Kesi had learned to trust Saloni, she had told her about the Wakened Veils. Saloni loved the idea of women warriors fighting for justice against the men who sought to control them. After passing many rigorous tests, she joined their ranks and had served their cause to the best of her ability. Then she'd learned that the man who had ruined her life was still alive. During their love affair, she had known Rahul was a weretiger, able to change from man to beast, yet he had told her little else about himself. Later she learned that it had been forbidden for him to confide in anyone, except his wife, about his true nature. The all-male tiger clans were close-knit and secrecy was required for their very survival. As a vampire, she understood this all too well. So few in the mortal world accepted and understood those with supernatural powers.

She hadn't realized Rahul's kind, weretigers, were capable of living as many centuries as a vampire. It was quite by chance that, upon returning to India after decades with The Wakened Veils, she discovered Rahul was still alive. To her horror, he was getting *married*. Two hundred years later she still loved him, but apparently he had forgotten her. The rage inside her turned to a kind of madness. She wanted him to suffer as she had to pay for seducing her and indirectly causing the death of her child. Deep inside she knew she was as guilty as he was for the latter crime, yet if she told the true story to The Wakened Veils, they would not help her. The Veils didn't fear punishing those who deserved it--violently when necessary--but their main concern was justice. For the chance to appease her anger and satisfy her jealousy, she had painted Rahul as a monster. The Veils had agreed to punish him, even kill him if she wished it. She hadn't wanted him put to death, merely to suffer a little. During the trial, the situation got out of hand and rather than simply punishing Rahul with a beating or imprisonment, the Veils had decided to put him and his father to death. Saloni's choices were to either watch his execution or tell the complete truth. Unfortunately, the truth made her look almost as guilty as Rahul about their breakup and the loss of their child. She had admitted that he hadn't known she'd been pregnant. Even if he'd wanted to change his mind about their relationship and rescue her from the fate of marrying a horrible man, he couldn't have because he hadn't known she was carrying his baby.

Her teeth gritted, she glared at the tiger who was still hurling himself against the door. No matter how angry she was, part of her still lusted after him. More than lusted. She cared for the bastard. Not that she could *ever* let him know that. Not after all that had happened between them. Not with a man like *him*.

Watching him batter futilely against the door, a great mindless beast trapped in his rage, Saloni started to giggle, and then her giggle erupted into full-blown laughter.

The tiger paused and swung his magnificent head in her direction. His dark gaze fixed on her, his thick ivory fangs a startling contrast to his beautiful tan and black coat. In the space of a heartbeat, he shifted into semi-beast form. Still covered with his animal pelt and retaining a distinctively feline head, he rose onto two legs.

“What are you laughing at?” he demanded, his voice inhumanly deep yet so sexy it sent a shiver down her spine.

Saloni wiped her teary eyes with the back of her hand and stifled giggles. “You. What do you think I’m laughing at? You can beat your stupid head against the door, but it won’t open. We’re stuck here.”

“Stuck.” He growled and began pacing the room. His hairy hands curled into fists, he bared his fangs in her direction. “This situation stinks.”

“Don’t think I’m happy about it!”

“Why shouldn’t you be? It’s your fault. You and your sisterhood probably planned this whole thing.”

Saloni longed to leap up and yank out a couple of handfuls of his striped pelt, but she decided that remaining calm would annoy him more. Sitting cross-legged on the bed, she made a conscious effort to keep a serene half smile on her lips.

“You’re quite right, of course. I planned to be trapped for a month in a room with the man I hate most in the world.”

“Another lie.”

She made a resigned gesture with a graceful hand and said, “Believe what you wish. That’s what you’re good at, anyway, Rahul. Ignoring the truth. Lying.”

His dark brown eyes sparked with anger. “I never lied to you!”

“You lied to yourself.”

“I do not want to talk about this any longer. We have spent several days on trial during which I bared my inner self in a way I never imagined to a room full of strangers--”

“Your father and I are strangers?”

“I mean the members of your sisterhood. My father is not a stranger, but our relationship was not his business. He should never have involved himself.”

“Of course not. He should have let his son die, just like you did.”

Rahul sprang at her so quickly that even with her vampiric reflexes she had no chance to react. One moment she was seated on the bed, the next she was lying flat on her back, trapped beneath Rahul’s semi-beast body. His hands pinned her wrists to the bed and one of his long, muscled legs rested heavily over both of hers.

His gaze fixed on her, holding her captive emotionally just as his body held hers physically. Before her eyes, his tiger’s coat receded and his features molded back into their human shape.

Saloni’s pulse raced out of control. He was so handsome--large dark brown eyes with long, thick lashes, sharp cheekbones, and full lips that she longed to kiss. Even after two centuries he was still the sexiest man she’d ever known. This powerful weretiger made her pulse race--no small feat considering her supernatural constitution.

The truth struck her with staggering impact. She was trapped alone with Rahul for a month with no hope of getting out early for good behavior. Besides, she wondered

how long she could keep up a semblance of good behavior when, just looking at him and feeling his big, warm body against hers, she wanted to behave quite badly. Terribly. She wanted to do the same things that had gotten her into trouble to begin with.

No. It could not happen. She would remain in control and not allow him to seduce her *again*.

"Get off me!" she shouted

"Not until you take back what you said about me letting my son die."

"You did."

"If I had known you were pregnant that never would have happened. You would have been with me instead of with that abusive trash your parents arranged for you to marry. Do you think I wanted you to be stuck with a bastard who beat you? I still want to know, Saloni, how you could have chosen him over me."

Damn, this man knew exactly what to say to shoot her anger off the scale. She struggled against his hold, nearly flinging him off, but his grip tightened. She felt the tiger in him. Powerful, angry, unstoppable.

"If you had told me the truth--"

"By the time I realized I was pregnant, you had already left India! I said that at the trial! As for taking my husband over you, I had no choice. If I didn't marry him, my family would have disowned me. I'd told you that from the first, Rahul, but you pursued me anyway. You *knew* I couldn't marry you."

"Wouldn't, you mean."

"There is no difference."

"Oh, there's a difference, Saloni. A great difference."

His voice had softened to almost a whisper and he lowered his head slightly so their lips nearly touched. In spite of her anger, she wanted him to kiss her. More than that, she wanted to be completely possessed by him and to possess him, as well. The thought of sinking her fangs into the side of his strong neck and tasting his blood aroused her to a dangerous level.

By the lust burning in his eyes, she knew he wanted her, too. Between their bodies, his shaft hardened, an arousing, familiar sensation that she vividly recalled, though it had been two centuries since they'd made love. His warm hands seared her flesh and she felt his heartbeat quicken against her, or perhaps it was her own heartbeat?

Another low growl rumbled in his chest and he stood abruptly, leaving her trembling with need, her nipples hard and a pleasant yet frustrating ache between her legs. If possible, she hated him more than ever.

She sat up and stared at him. Rahul crossed the room to pick up his discarded clothes. Heavens he had a gorgeous body. Tall and sleekly-muscled, he had long limbs and a broad chest dusted with dark hair. His cock, quite thick even in its semi-erect state, rose from a wiry thatch of black pubic hair. Muscles flexed in his powerful legs as he squatted, picked up the clothes, and stood again. His smooth brow furrowed, he examined the shredded shirt and trousers. He'd been in such a hurry to rip them off and change into tiger form that his claws had rendered the garments useless. Saloni nearly laughed at his frustrated expression, and then she realized this meant she was trapped with a naked man who turned her on so much she could scarcely control the urge to lick

him all over.

She flopped onto her back and closed her eyes tightly. Could the situation possibly get any worse?

* * * *

Rahul gritted his teeth and flung aside his shredded clothes. So many emotions churned inside him that he could scarcely think straight. Unable to look at Saloni any longer for fear that he would either kill her or kiss her, he turned his back and braced his hands against the wall. Drawing several deep, slow breaths, he hoped to calm himself.

For two hundred years this woman had plagued him. From the moment he'd seen her walking in the marketplace of a village not far from the jungle where his weretiger clan met, he'd been obsessed with her. Not only was she beautiful with her enormous brown eyes and waist-length black hair, but she had mastered the art of combining innocence with flirtation. A heady mix that made him long to bed her and protect her.

He should certainly know by now that Saloni needed no man's protection. The bitch had nearly gotten him killed by convincing her group of female assassins to punish him for falling in love with her. Perhaps he wasn't completely innocent in what she'd suffered so many years ago, but he was not the monster she'd made him out to be. Yes, he'd taken her virginity though he had no right to it, but afterward he'd practically begged her to marry him. He'd even gone to her parents and asked for her hand, but they had already decided on a husband for her.

Once he realized she wasn't about to leave her family to marry him, he should have done the honorable thing and stopped seeing her. Saloni was like a drug to him, however, and he couldn't resist her. He lost track of how many times they'd met in private and made love. With every kiss, every stroke of her gentle little hands, he'd become more addicted.

Reality finally set in when she told him the date of her wedding. The fight that ensued still flashed through his mind--the shouting and the pain of her final refusal. He was a weretiger, the most powerful beast in the jungle. Other creatures bowed to him, yet he could not convince a mere mortal woman to bend to his wishes. It went against the beliefs of his clan to mistreat women, so kidnapping her and forcing her to live as his mate was out of the question. Even if he could live with himself after committing such a despicable act, other members of his clan, his father especially, would not allow it.

Frustrated and angry at Saloni as well as himself, he fled India. After several months of travel during which he indulged the tiger's savage nature in hunts all over the world, he realized such childish behavior would get him nowhere. His father was the leader of their clan, and Rahul belonged by his father's side. He also needed to see for himself that Saloni was well and happy in her marriage.

Even after so many years it was impossible to describe the sorrow he felt upon learning she had died in childbirth. For nearly two centuries he mourned her before their paths crossed again. She hadn't died as he'd thought, but had become a creature of darkness, a vampire whose power nearly matched his own. No matter what she had become and in spite of the fact that he was engaged to another woman, he still loved her quite passionately. Unfortunately, her love had turned to hate. She'd cursed him and his fiancée then disappeared like a phantom. A short time later, she and other warriors from

her sisterhood, The Wakened Veils, armed with weapons, nearly killed him. If not for his father's intervention, he couldn't say for sure if they would have gone through with the execution or not. Something in Saloni's eyes and in the things she'd said to him that night told him that jealousy rather than hatred had prompted her to act against him. Deep inside he knew she still felt something for him.

Even now her expression and lustful scent told him she wanted him as much as he wanted her. Yet it was impossible for them to be together. At one time sex had been enough, but not anymore. He would never again give her such power over him. The woman had rejected him. Worst of all, she had been pregnant with his child and because of her decision to marry a man of her parent's choosing, his son had died.

Slowly, he turned around and saw that she still rested on the bed, her back to him. He walked into the bathroom, somewhat annoyed that there was no door separating it from the main cell. At least it was better than the actual prison cells he and his father had been kept in while he awaited his trial with The Wakened Veils. Though appreciative of his father's affection, he couldn't help blaming Sanjay for his current situation. If the elder tiger had minded his own business instead of forcing Rahul to undergo a trial with The Wakened Veils, he was certain he could have worked things out with Saloni on his own. He grudgingly admitted that handling the situation his father's way had at least cleared his name somewhat with the vigilante group, but learning the truth about what he and Saloni had lost because of their selfishness was painful. If only he hadn't left India in a fury so much could have been different. Once Saloni had realized she'd been carrying his child, would she have finally gone against her family and married him?

In the bathroom, Rahul relieved himself, then took a quick shower and climbed onto the bed. At the moment, there was nothing better to do than sleep.

Saloni turned to him, her brow furrowed. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Getting some sleep."

She raised herself on her elbow and said, "Not in this bed."

"There's only one bed."

"I refuse to share it with you."

A wicked, leering grin twisted his lips. "That's not something you ever complained about before."

"Get out of this bed. Now!"

"No."

"When you're a beast you sleep on the jungle floor, so you can do the same now."

"We're not in the jungle and at the moment I am a man. Men prefer beds."

She snarled, baring her fangs, and hissed, "You will leave this bed now or you will regret it."

"If you want to sleep alone, Saloni, you get on the floor. I am staying right here. I am more than willing to share this bed with you--"

"I bet you are."

"And I have absolutely no desire to do anything more than sleep in it."

She laughed long and loud. "You expect me to believe that lie? You forget I'm a vampire and can smell your lust for me."

"Just as I can smell yours for me."

Rage gleamed in her eyes, but she turned her back on him and moved as close to the edge of the bed as possible. "Fine. But if you touch me, weretiger, I'll see that your bloodline ends with you."

* * * *

Saloni wasn't sure how long she lay still, her arms wrapped around herself and her back to Rahul. She waited in anticipation, longing for his touch and prepared to fight him every step of the way if he dared lay a finger on her. These contradictory feelings were nothing new when it came to him. Part of her loved him desperately while another part hated him.

Her keen hearing detected the slowing of his heartbeat and even breathing as he drifted to sleep. How could he slumber so comfortably when she lay beside him in turmoil?

Realizing she wouldn't be able to rest, Saloni stood and walked to the bathroom to take a shower. She felt much more comfortable washing without the risk of Rahul spying on her, for she didn't doubt that he would eventually try to make love with her again. In spite of his haughty attitude, she knew the size of his sexual appetite all too well. She also knew that resisting him would be difficult. In two hundred years she had known her share of men, but none compared to the primal beauty of the weretiger. Even in his man form there was something wild about Rahul. The gleam in his brown eyes, the flash of white teeth against dark skin, and the scent of tiger and man sent shivers of delight down her spine. She clearly recalled his firm yet tender kiss, the warmth of his tongue stroking hers and the pressure of his sleekly-muscled body when he claimed her with powerful thrusts that hurled her into ecstasy.

Saloni turned on the faucet in the shower and as the water heated, she undressed and dropped her clothes in a pile on the floor. Seconds later she stood beneath a stream of warm water. Her eyes closed, she relished the sensation of the soothing liquid massage. She washed her hair then picked up a cake of soap and lathered her body. Unable to stop her thoughts from again drifting to Rahul, she imagined him in the shower with her, his long, brown body pushing hers against the tile while his mouth plundered hers.

A shiver of pure desire shot through her. Instinctively her hand drifted over her breasts, pausing to pinch a taut nipple, then continued over the slight swell of her belly and dipped between her legs. She sighed deeply and pushed her finger partway into her wet sheath, then used the slick tip to gently massage her plump clit. She placed aside the soap so that her other hand was free to stroke her breasts while she rubbed and caressed between her legs. All the while she imagined it was Rahul touching her. She fantasized about his full, sexy lips trailing along the side of her neck, down to her breasts then capturing an aching nipple.

Her heartbeat quickened and breathing increased as passion grew. Several more quick rubs and she came, legs trembling and body throbbing. Saloni leaned against the tile, waiting for her breathing to return to normal. In spite of how much she'd needed that release of sexual tension, it couldn't compare to really making love with Rahul. Knowing he was physically near yet emotionally distant upset her more than she wanted to admit.

* * * *

Saloni's alluring scent infiltrated Rahul's pleasant sleep. With an aroused growl, he stretched, smiled, and reached for her only to find an empty space beside him on the bed. His eyes snapped open and he sat up, searching the room for her.

The sound of water running in the shower told him where she was and the delicious sexual aroma announced what she was doing. For a moment he considered joining her in the shower and surrendering to their intense physical need for each other, and then pride brought him back to his senses. He doubted she would welcome him with open arms. The fact that she was now in the shower satisfying herself was a big enough clue that she wouldn't admit her feelings for him.

Knowing that she stood beneath the water, stroking herself to climax, made Rahul's cock swell and his heart beat faster. He resisted the urge to grasp his staff and allow himself the gratification she now enjoyed. He had more self-control than she did. By the time they were released, Saloni would come to him. The beautiful, vengeful woman who had haunted his thoughts for two centuries would give herself to him. Again. When she did, he would not give her up as easily as before.

Finally the water stopped running in the shower. Moments later, Saloni stepped out wearing black shorts and a snug red T-shirt. She wore no bra beneath and her full breasts swayed with every step. Her hard nipples pressed against the thin fabric. All Rahul could think about was sucking those nipples, teasing them with his tongue until she begged him to make love with her.

"There are several changes of clothes on a shelf in the bathroom," she said. "So there's no need for you to parade around naked. I'm surprised you didn't see them when you were in the bathroom earlier."

Truthfully, he hadn't noticed them. He had been so preoccupied with his anger and attraction to Saloni, that taking in the details of their cell hadn't been a priority.

In spite of her casual manner of speaking, Saloni's gaze swept him from head to toe and lingered on his erection. Rahul's cock was bigger than average. When he and Saloni had first met, she'd been completely innocent in the ways of love and had never seen a naked man. Now, after two hundred years as a vampire, he didn't doubt she had many bedmates to compare him with, so he was more grateful than ever for his endowments.

"I am a weretiger. When my kind stalk the jungles, we are free of the hindrance of clothing."

She curled her lip in an irritating yet adorable smirk. "But, as you pointed out when I asked you to leave the bed, you are now in man form and men wear clothes."

"Perhaps I merely wanted to give you a thrill," he retorted. "And speaking of propriety, or lack of, I know what you were doing in the shower. Don't forget, my senses are even keener than yours. At one time you would not have acted so wantonly."

"That's right, Rahul." She held his gaze, her eyes gleaming as once again her agitation grew. "At one time I would have been hesitant to touch myself even in the privacy of my own room with the door locked. You corrupted me, remember? Made me a wanton woman."

"When are you going to stop blaming me for everything? Yes, I took your

innocence, but I didn't steal it, Saloni. It was something you gave to me freely. Perhaps I should have refused, but I did not force you."

"No, you just lured me. How could I have resisted a creature like you?"

Her words pleased him, but also increased his guilt. Their selfish lust had led to the death of an innocent and had almost killed Saloni. He recalled the feeling of devastation when he'd thought she'd died in childbirth. Nothing was worth the risk they had taken.

He stepped nearer to her so they almost touched. "I didn't mean to seduce you."

She tilted her face toward his, her full lips slightly parted so the delicate tips of her fangs were visible. "Don't lie, Rahul. Not anymore. We're stuck here because everyone who matters in our lives now knows the truth."

"If that's the case, then you must also admit your part in our situation."

"Let me tell you something." She poked his chest with her fingertip. "I have lived every day knowing our child was lost. I have suffered more than you could ever imagine."

"I don't deny that you've suffered." He grasped her wrist to keep her from poking his chest again, then used his other hand to gently massage her fingers. "But now that I know the truth, at least understand that I am suffering with you."

"Do you think I care?" She snarled and tried to pull away. He refused to release her. "Let me go."

"I did once before when I should have stayed and fought for you, even if it meant having to fight you."

Chapter Two

Saloni stared at Rahul, her pulse racing. Love and regret shone in his eyes and her anger slipped the slightest bit. She couldn't surrender to him. Not again.

"It's too late, Rahul," she whispered, unable to completely keep the sadness from her voice. "We're different people now. I'm not an innocent young girl anymore. I'm a two hundred year-old vampire and an assassin for The Wakened Veils. I've broken the ties to my mortal life."

"If that's true then you never would have gone after me for revenge. You wanted to punish me, Saloni, and I don't blame you, but you didn't hate me enough to want me executed."

"That doesn't mean I still love you."

"Did you ever love me?" His brow furrowed and his dark eyes took on an intensity that threatened to burn her alive. When he looked at her like that, she nearly melted.

Summoning the inner strength that had come from learning how to survive in a harsh world, she said, "This is pointless, Rahul, and I will not discuss it."

This time when she tugged her hand, he released her.

"We will discuss it, Saloni," he told her. "Perhaps not now, but before our sentence is up we will sort this out."

"There's nothing to sort out."

With swiftness that took her by surprise, he wrapped an arm around her and covered her mouth in a searing kiss.

Saloni stiffened but didn't pull away. Warmth from his body seeped into her flesh and his cock pressed against her. Such intimacy made her tremble, almost overwhelming her with emotion. Her passion rose to a dangerous level and she hated how he turned her on. If only she could get over him and get on with her life.

His lips moved teasingly against hers and she couldn't help responding. The tip of his tongue traced her lips then thrust possessively between them.

A wicked thought darted through her mind and she acted on it. Her fangs sank into his tongue. Rahul grunted, a sound of pleasure-pain. The taste of his bittersweet blood filled her mouth, rousing the vampire in her. Waves of intense pleasure broke over her and she cursed herself silently. In her attempt to hurt him, she had only succeeded in further tormenting herself.

Rahul growled and tightened his arms around her. Her eyes closed to better enjoy the sensations, Saloni thrust her pelvis against him and gyrated, hoping to appease the delicious sexual ache that was quickly consuming her.

At that moment, they were distracted by the sound of metal sliding against metal. A slit at the bottom of the door opened and a tray of food slid inside.

"Saloni? Are you all right in there?"

It was Kesi, fellow vampire, a great warrior, and the woman who had introduced Saloni to The Wakened Veils. Kesi was also a good friend. At least she had been until she'd found out that Saloni had told a few lies to encourage The Wakened Veils to help her seek revenge against Rahul.

Saloni felt badly about what she'd done, but more than anything she'd wanted to

get back at Rahul. Worst of all, she'd been far more angry over his engagement to another woman than what had happened between them so many years ago. She had been as much, perhaps more, to blame for their initial falling out and the tragic loss of their child. She couldn't bear knowing that he had somehow managed to forget her and fall in love with somebody else. She had tried to do the same, but to her no man compared to the weretiger.

"Saloni?" Kesi repeated, harshly this time, but Saloni knew that only meant her friend was concerned. Kesi often disguised what she considered "soft" feelings with a brusque attitude. "Girl, you better answer me or else I'll kick your ass and I'll definitely kick that pussycat's ass if he's done anything to you."

"I'm fine, Kesi," Saloni said. "But if you're so worried about the pussycat hurting me, why did you put me in this cage with him?"

"I didn't put you in the cage. It was the decision of the First Wraths."

The First Wraths were the three supernatural women who had founded The Wakened Veils.

"You agreed with them," Saloni retorted. "I thought we were friends."

"We are, but you can't use the sisterhood for something stupid, like jealousy because the pussycat got engaged to another woman."

"Enough with the pussycat!" Rahul growled.

Saloni glanced at him and saw anger gleaming in his eyes.

"Here, pussy, pussy, pussy," Kesi called. Saloni didn't have to see her to know she was sneering.

Rahul drew a deep breath and released it slowly. When he spoke, he'd regained his composure and said, "What else can I expect from an old bat?" He glanced at Saloni and added, "Forgive me. *Two* old bats."

"As long as you're okay," Kesi said. "I need to leave. While Raine and Sanjay are taking care of business in India, I'm taking over her duties in the USA."

"Has my father already left?" Rahul asked.

"He and Raine left early this morning," Kesi told him, referring to his father's fiancée.

Rahul gritted his teeth and slammed his fist into his palm. Saloni nearly laughed aloud. Apparently he'd hoped his father had remained behind and would perhaps try to convince the First Wraths to free him early.

"What did you expect?" Saloni said. "He did promise you he would go to India and explain to your fiancée why you're going to miss the wedding."

Ignoring her, Rahul snatched the tray of food and brought it to the table.

"Is there anything you need before I go?" Kesi asked.

"Separate cells," Saloni said.

"You know I can't do that. You'll just have to work it out with the pussy--"

This time Rahul roared, a tiger-like sound that shook the walls.

"Work it out with *him*," Kesi said. "I wish you luck. Sounds like you'll need it."

"Thanks *a lot*," Saloni said before Kesi closed the slit, once again leaving her and Rahul completely alone.

Her arms folded beneath her breasts, Saloni paced the cell.

"Aren't you going to eat?" Rahul asked. He glanced at her then back to the tray as he divided the bread, fruit, and meat between them. "Oh yes. Raw meat."

He dipped his fingers into a bowl, removed a chunk of juicy steak, and popped it into his mouth.

Saloni curled her lip and raised her eyes to the heavens.

"Don't look so disgusted," he said. "You're the one who considers blood ambrosia. See. Your sisters haven't forgotten you. Here's a bottle of Type O Positive."

"I don't think you're the least bit funny. I never did."

"Who's joking?" He picked up the wine bottle and pointed to the typed letters pasted to the side. "It says right here. Type O Positive. I know so little about vampires. Tell me, how many people do you kill to fill these bottles?"

"I don't kill anyone. I prefer to take a little from willing donors."

"Really?" Rahul grinned, his white teeth gleaming in contrast to his dark skin. Five-o'clock shadow dusted his handsome jaw line, reminding Saloni of how it had tickled her face when he'd kissed her. He continued, "I'm most interested in hearing about these donors. Do you just drink their essence, or are there other perks to providing the lovely temptress Saloni with blood?"

"Is sex always on your mind, Rahul? Do you think of nothing else?"

"Of course, but if our goal here is to speak the truth I must admit that it's difficult not to think of sex when I'm trapped in a room with you."

"Then I suggest you take a cold shower."

"Like you did?" His eyes gleamed with mischief.

With a snort of annoyance, she stepped closer and snatched the bottle from his long, lean fingers.

"As I said, I don't know all that much about your kind, but if you prefer your blood fresh rather than from a bottle, I am at your disposal." He bowed from the neck but the teasing glint in his eyes contradicted the respectful gesture.

"Don't tempt me, Rahul, or you might just become my first kill."

"Why not? I have been your first for other things."

Her teeth clenched and heart pounded with fury. The man was pushing her past the limits of any normal woman.

Rahul grinned, took another chunk of meat and chewed it slowly while keeping eye contact with her. He ran the tip of his tongue over his full lips.

She quickly took a plate of bread and fruit along with the bottle and sat on the bed to eat.

"Don't drop any crumbs," he said.

Glaring, she turned her back to him. His amused chuckle irked her, but she refused to continue their verbal sparring match. Perhaps the best way to get through their sentence would be to ignore him.

When they finished eating, Saloni placed their dishes on the tray and left it by the door. When she turned around, Rahul emerged from the bathroom wearing black shorts.

"You could at least put on a shirt."

She *needed* him to put on a shirt, damn it. Gazing at those gorgeous pecs and chiseled abs was getting to be too much to handle. Her hands itched to caress him. With

his broad shoulders and sleek chest dusted with black hair, he was the epitome of raw virility. His thick, dark hair randomly streaked with lighter shades of brown brushed his shoulders, reminding her of how tufts of the tiger's striped fur framed its face.

The first time she'd seen him shift shape, she'd been overcome by a combination of fear and awe. He'd only done it a few times in her presence, once to prove to her that he was indeed a creature of myth, then a couple of other times when she'd asked to see the tiger. To a mortal woman the idea of shapeshifters existing was almost beyond comprehension. Now, as a supernatural creature, she was thoroughly aroused by one of the few beings more powerful than herself. Not many creatures compared with weretigers in sheer power or ruthlessness. Though most saved their savage tendencies for the hunt or for their enemies, some clans had sunk to murder. They flaunted their power, slaying humans as well as their own kind if they so desired. Saloni knew Rahul's clan was honorable. His father, Sanjay, was a good leader and made sure his tigers abided by the ancient rules provided by the goddess who created them. She didn't doubt that when it came time for Rahul to lead, he would make his father proud.

She shook her head. When had she started to admit that part of her respected him? Who was she trying to fool? She had made a terrible mistake in refusing to marry him. Instead she had bound herself to a cruel, violent man whose abuse had taken something from her she could never get back.

"What's wrong?" Rahul asked, stepping nearer.

"Why do you ask?"

"Because you looked sad just now." He cupped her cheek and used his thumb to gently stroke her flesh.

Saloni nearly closed her eyes from the pleasure. Instead, she walked away.

"We're going to be here for a month," Rahul said. "Can't we use the time to get to know each other again?"

She turned to him and arched an eyebrow. "I don't believe you, Rahul. Aren't you an engaged man?"

"You know my father has gone to call off the engagement. Even if I wanted Nidhi after this, I doubt I could ever make up for missing our wedding."

"Why should it matter? With your track record, you and she have probably already enjoyed the wedding night."

"I'll have you know that Nidhi is a respectable lady."

"Meaning I'm not?" Saloni glared. "The world has changed, Rahul. Women no longer have to be pure or dependant on men. At least when I gave you my virginity, I loved you. Can you say the same?"

"How many times do I have to say it?" he shouted. "Time and again I told you I loved you and wanted to marry you. I talked to your father and your mother, but they wouldn't listen to reason any more than you did. They wanted you to marry a man of their choosing. One whose family could improve your father's business. I did the honorable thing and stepped down so you could be happy."

"Happy? You think I was happy with a man who took pleasure in abusing me? My family was all I knew. When they threatened to disown me if I didn't marry Geet, I didn't know what to do."

“You could have gone against them.”

“Would you have gone against your father and your clan for my sake? You said you loved me, yet you kept your feelings for me a secret. You never even told your father about us until The Wakened Veils tried to kill you.”

“We were both wrong, Saloni, but if you want the truth then here it is. If you had agreed to marry me, yes, I would have left my father and my clan for you.”

She held his gaze. “And if you hadn’t left India, I would have left my husband for you and for our child.”

“Saloni.” He took her in his arms and held her close to his warm, hard chest. She rested her cheek against it, her body tense. More than anything she wanted to surrender to him, but she couldn’t. “I wish I could go back and change everything. If I had known you were pregnant, I never would have gone.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. I have my own life now and you have--what’s her name? Nidhi. Don’t worry about her not wanting you. She’ll take you back.”

“I’m not going back.” He stepped away and paced the cell. “It wouldn’t be right. I don’t love her.”

“Then why--”

“Because I need an heir for my bloodline.” He paused and shook his head.

“That’s not true, either. By tradition I should have an heir, but after talking to my father I know he would not force it upon me. I don’t love Nidhi and I see now that marrying her would be wrong.”

This time when he took her in his arms, she welcomed his embrace. His mouth covered hers, their tongues stroking and hands caressing as much of each other as they could reach. They poured two centuries of denied love into the kiss.

Saloni sighed. “Well, perhaps this sentence was good for something. At least we saved one woman’s heart from breaking.”

Cursing softly under his breath, Rahul released her abruptly and strode toward the bathroom.

“Where are you going?” she demanded.

“To take a cold shower.”

While Rahul disappeared into the bathroom, Saloni decided some yoga practice would not only help to pass the time, but also keep her focused. She needed something to maintain control around Rahul. The man either aroused or infuriated her. A month seemed like an impossible amount of time to go without attacking him one way or the other.

When he finished showering, he joined her in practice. Unfortunately watching his gorgeous body move into the different positions was terribly distracting.

After several hours, their next meal arrived and this time they sat at the table to eat.

“I must admit I found it strange to learn that you and your father own an architectural firm,” she commented.

“Why?” he asked.

“I was under the impression your kind prefer the wilderness to the confines of an office building.”

"We do, but what you seem to forget is we are weretigers, a combination of man and beast. We have tiger instincts yet the needs of men." A flirtatious grin curved his lips when he mentioned the latter. He picked up a thick bone from his plate and used his fangs to crunch into it. At times she still found it odd how he could manipulate different parts of his body, easily shifting teeth, claws, even his facial shape, without completely changing into the tiger.

"Tell me more about Nidhi." She forced her jealousy into submission and tried to appear genuinely interested.

Rahul laughed. "You don't want to know about her, just as I have no interest in the men in your past."

"What do you mean in the past? Perhaps I have a man in my life right now."

"You do." His steady dark gaze held hers and her appetite vanished, at least her appetite for food. The need to taste his blood again, to feel his body close to hers almost overcame her. She wanted him so badly she was tempted to crawl across the table directly into his arms.

"Then don't tell me about her," she said, pushed her plate aside, and left the table. "You can collect the dishes this time. I'm going to sleep."

"It's a little early for that."

She spun on her heel and glared at him. "What else is there to do?" His lips parted as if to speak, but she held up a hand to stop him. "Don't answer that, Rahul. I have had more than enough of your lewd innuendos."

"You're determined to make this sentence miserable for both of us, aren't you?"

Ignoring him, she walked to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. Afterward she went to bed. Rahul, who had been pacing the cell, placed the tray of dishes by the slit in the door, then lay beside her. His arms folded behind his head, he stared at the ceiling.

"I thought you said it was too early for bed?" she asked.

"I did, but you're right. What else is there to do? At least here I can close my eyes and imagine--"

"You're with Nidhi?"

He glanced at her, an annoyed expression on his face. "No. I was going to say I could imagine I'm home in the jungle. Remember the times you walked through the jungle with me?"

"Yes. I was terrified of being bitten by a snake or eaten alive by some other animal."

"No you weren't. I was there to protect you and I was the only thing eating you alive."

"Rahul, that's disgusting!"

"Is it?" He rolled onto his side, supporting himself with his elbow. The play of his sleek muscles beneath dark brown skin fascinated her. "I remember a time when you begged for the caress of my lips and tongue."

"I never *begged* you for anything."

"Only to leave you alone so you could marry Geet." Once again he flopped onto his back. At least he had the decency not to taunt her by asking what her husband had been like in bed. In truth he seemed angry and disgusted that Geet had mistreated her.

Even her parents hadn't been concerned for her welfare. She had done everything they asked, everything to be the ideal daughter and wife, and what had it gotten her? Physical and emotional pain.

Without further conversation, she slipped into bed and lay with her back to him. She had finally begun to relax when she felt him shift position.

"Saloni." He rested a hand on her shoulder, his touch surprisingly gentle. Warmth from his palm seeped into her and she nearly melted.

"What?"

"I know you still feel something for me. If you didn't, you would have asked your sisters to execute me right away. My father wouldn't have had a chance to track me down, let alone stop the fight between us. And again at the trial, you had the chance to see me and my father killed on the spot, but you stopped it."

"I wanted you punished, Rahul."

"But not killed."

"No."

"Because part of you still loves me. Look at me."

"No."

"Why? Because you're afraid I'll see the truth in your eyes, just like I always have?"

She turned toward him and met his gaze. "It doesn't matter whether I love you now or ever loved you."

"It matters to me." The sincerity in his eyes touched her deeply, nearly forcing her to surrender.

"Then why did you ask Nidhi to marry you?"

"I told you why. The question is, why didn't you come to me right away when you found out I was alive? Why did you spy on me then wait until I finally decided to marry before acting against me?"

"Because you were already engaged to Nidhi when I located you. What was I supposed to do? Throw myself at an engaged man?"

"I did for you. Threw myself at an engaged woman."

"Maybe I learned from our first mistake."

"Up until now, neither of us have learned anything," he said. "No don't turn away." His hand on her hip guided her back into position so they continued facing one another. He cupped her chin in his hand. "We lusted after each other, but we could have had more. I wanted you then, Saloni, and I want you now. When you said our imprisonment saved Nidhi from heartache, you were right. I don't love her. I would have done my best to be a good husband, but I could never feel about her the way I feel about you."

"Rahul, please don't do this."

"Why? Are you stupid, woman? We have been given a second chance. Even for immortals that's a rare opportunity when it comes to love."

"As a vampire I might not be able to give you children, and if we do have a child who knows what will happen to your bloodline? Maybe he will be a tiger, maybe he will be a vampire. There are no guarantees."

“There are never guarantees in life.”

“Rahul, I just don’t know--”

“Then take this time to find out.”

Before she could reply, he covered her mouth with a gentle yet probing kiss. Pushed beyond the brink of passion yet still in emotional turmoil, she surrendered. Her arms slipped around his neck and she pressed her body close to his.

Rahul groaned with pleasure and held her closer. Saloni’s hips moved in time with the slow, steady rhythm of his tongue against hers. For two centuries she had yearned to make love with him again. Now she would wait no longer.

He rolled onto his back, his arms still wrapped around her so that she lay atop him, breast to chest, pelvis to pelvis. Moaning softly, Saloni caressed his face while her tongue explored every inch of his mouth.

Rahul broke the kiss and trailed his lips along the side of her neck. He cupped her breast in his large, warm hand and kneaded gently. The pad of his thumb brushed her nipple and the flesh stiffened to a sensitive peak. It felt so wonderful that Saloni purred with pleasure. Rahul dipped his head lower and took the hard bud between his lips. His tongue ran over it, then he nibbled it gently. Gasping, Saloni tensed with anticipation. Already she wanted to feel his thick, hard length inside her, but he seemed in no mood to hurry. He used the very tip of his tongue to tease her nipple by tracing tiny circles around its taut core then widening them to encompass the areola.

“Oh!” Saloni gasped. She arched against him and clutched his head, holding him even closer. “Rahul, please!”

Growling deep in his chest, he sucked her nipple hard, then released it, leaving it stiff, yearning, and chilled by the air. He lapped the soft flesh beneath her breasts. After kissing her stomach, he began sucking and licking her other nipple. While his lips and tongue teased her breast, he reached down and parted her thighs. He stroked them gently and used a fingertip to trace the ticklish joining of her inner thighs and pelvis. Saloni wriggled, a smile on her lips. This experience was too wonderful for words. His hand covered her soft mound and he stimulated her with his gently kneading palm.

Saloni’s heart raced with desire. For so long she’d dreamed about being with Rahul again. Vivid memories of the times they’d made love filled her mind, yet nothing compared to actually touching and kissing him.

“Saloni,” he murmured, his deep voice raw with emotion. His lips roamed over her breasts while at the same time he slid a long, slender finger into her sheath. A second finger joined it and he stroked her hot, wet flesh.

Moaning, she tightened her vaginal muscles around his exploring fingers. Such stroking felt good, but she knew it wouldn’t compare to the sensations when he finally filled her with this steely cock.

He withdrew his fingers, damp from her sheath, and began stroking her clit in tender circles that soon had her panting and writhing with need. A shiver of passion raced down her spine. With her eyes tightly closed to better enjoy the sensations, Saloni arched her neck against the pillow and moaned, “Oh, yes! Rahul, oh please!” She teetered on the edge of orgasm, unable to think of anything except how much she needed him.

With swiftness that nearly stole her breath, he moved lower, lifted her legs over

his shoulders, and covered her plump, throbbing clit with his mouth. The first caress of his tongue nearly hurled her into bliss. Trembling from head to toe, she clutched handfuls of his thick hair.

Rahul grasped her hips and held her steady as he lapped and sucked her clit.

Saloni hadn't felt such marvelous sensations since she and Rahul had made love all those years ago in India. Several more slick, upwards strokes of his tongue and she convulsed. Waves of pleasure rolled through her body. Her head thrashed back and forth and her muscles strained as Rahul continued to lick until the last pulsation rocked her.

Before she fully recovered from the intense climax, he covered her body with his. Bracing his forearms on either side of her head, he kissed her. The tip of his swollen cock pushed into her lust-slicked pussy. Ever so slowly he eased into her, filling her with his long, thick erection.

"I've dreamed about this, Rahul," she murmured, clinging to him.

"So have I," he whispered so close to her ear that his breath tickled her. Then he kissed her again. His tongue traced the shape of her lips before thrusting between them, matching the rhythm of his steadily pumping hips.

The marvelous friction built, heating their aroused bodies even more. Saloni held him tightly, her legs curving around his. Moaning, she drove her heels into his calves and ran her palms over his back. The feeling of hard, straining muscles beneath his warm flesh thrilled her yet at the same time brought forth feelings of tenderness. Long ago Rahul had made a place for himself in her heart. No matter what happened, part of her had always loved him and would love him forever.

Her keen vampiric ears detected his heartbeat, a staccato rhythm that aroused her to mystical heights. His virile, musky scent encompassed her. The urge to bite him overwhelmed her and she sank her fangs into his shoulder. He responded with a growl of pure lust. The taste of his delicious blood combined with the sensual stroking of his cock hurled her into another climax even more intense than the first.

She sucked and groaned, greedily lapping his essence while her pussy squeezed his cock until he exploded inside her.

Panting, she withdrew her fangs, lay beneath his hot, sated body, and enjoyed their closeness. Her fingers wove through his hair and she inhaled the tempting scent of satisfied male.

With a contented grunt, he rolled onto his back and tugged her close. Saloni rested her cheek against his chest and caressed his sleek abdomen.

"Saloni." He kissed her hair. "I've missed you."

"Oh, Rahul, I've missed you so much. I--I'm so sorry about everything that happened."

"It was as much my fault. More. No matter what the circumstances, I shouldn't have left India before being certain you weren't pregnant. Not only that, I shouldn't have compromised you, regardless of how much I wanted you. I let my desire and my heart rule when I should have listened to my head."

"I wasn't a child, Rahul. I came to you knowing I was engaged to another man. Unless I had the strength to rebel against my family and tradition, I should have walked away from you. And once I knew I loved you, I should have married you. You cared

about me, and my family didn't. I realized that too late and because of that our child--" She paused. Even after so many years, the pain of losing her baby--Rahul's baby--felt as fresh as ever.

He tightened his hold on her and kissed her again. "I wish I could ease your pain. All I can do is promise to love you. I can't make up for the past, but I will do all in my power to make your future happy, if you give me the chance."

"Rahul." She shifted position so their gazes met. "We've wasted enough time. There's so much we need to learn about each other. What if--"

"I'm looking forward to getting to know you again, but the truth is I've never stopped loving you."

"I love you, too, Rahul. All those years ago I was too stupid to fully understand the magnitude of what we shared, but I won't make that mistake again."

Smiling, he caressed her face. "Don't worry. This time I won't let you."

Chapter Three

About a week later, confinement was beginning to wear on both prisoners, particularly Rahul. Saloni knew that to a weretiger, accustomed to the freedom of the jungle, being caged was one of the worst punishments imaginable. Because of the trial, he had already been locked in a cell for nearly a week before their sentence began.

He shifted shape often and she would watch the great tiger pace the cell, growling deep in his chest, his eyes flashing. The tiger's massive paws moved soundlessly yet Saloni could almost feel his restlessness.

Rahul made love with an almost desperate edge. Not that he hurt her. He always treated her with tenderness, licking and stroking in all the right places.

Once day, when she lay naked in his arms, he spoke close to her ear. His deep voice sent a ripple of desire down her spine, as did the caress of his breath against her flesh. "Saloni, if I didn't have you here with me I think I'd go crazy. Making love with you is almost as good as running free through the jungle."

"What do you mean almost?" She tried to turn and face him, but he tightened his grip and chuckled.

"You know what I mean. Of course nothing compares to making love with you--"

"That's better."

"But as far as exercise goes, a run through the jungle really gets the heart pumping."

"I bet I can really get your heart pumping." She tugged away from him only to push him onto his back. He allowed her to guide him, watching her with lust burning in his eyes.

Straddling him, her knees braced against his sides, she leaned down, took his face in her hands, and kissed him. Her tongue darted between his lips and she teasingly evaded his searching tongue for several seconds before meeting it with warm, wet strokes. A soft moan of pleasure escaped her lips. She loved kissing him, touching him, just being with him. How had she managed to survive two hundred years without him?

Saloni ran her hands across his shoulders and chest. She slowly gyrated her hips, rubbing her buttocks along his body. The sensation of his hard cock against her flesh and the feeling of his hands as they kneaded her breasts and gently pinched her nipples soon had her wet and ready. Still, she didn't want to ride him yet. There were other pleasures for them to explore.

Her fangs gently worried his full lower lip, drawing a bit of his delicious blood that sent a shiver of vampiric lust down her spine. Then she broke the kiss and for several seconds they held each other's gaze. The desire between them was almost painful but thrilling. Saloni kissed her way down his neck and over his chest. She loved the way his chest hair tickled her lips and how soft it felt against her face when she paused for a moment and rested her cheek against the plates of muscle. She licked her way down his stomach, grasped the base of his stiff cock and paused with her lips hovering over the bulging head. For several seconds she allowed her breath to fan the tip. Her acute hearing picked up the excited thrumming of his heart. Rather than take him into her mouth as she knew he expected her to do, she slid up his body once again and bent her

head forward so her long, straight hair brushed his chest. Then she moved down the lean, hard length of him, whipping her head from side to side and lashing his torso with her hair. She paused only to scrape her nails over his inner thighs, not enough to break the skin but the perfect pressure to stimulate.

Rahul groaned with delight and she felt his body tense beneath her. She licked the scratches, soothing yet arousing him with slow, wet strokes of her tongue. The very tips of her fangs pricked his stimulated flesh and Rahul nearly bucked them both off the bed from the pleasure. Chuckling softly, Saloni moved to his other thigh and gave it the same intimate treatment.

Finally she turned her full attention to his cock. Bigger and harder than she'd ever seen it, the shaft was a work of art--dark, velvety, well-veined flesh over pulsing hardness. Saloni moistened her lips with her tongue, grasped his staff in one hand and his balls in the other, and rolled her tongue over the crown of his erection. While kneading his sac, she began sucking his cock.

"Saloni, oh, damn." He grunted, his hips thrusting in time with her sucking. She withdrew him from her mouth only to place her lips at the base of his shaft and lick up and down its length. The tip of her tongue ran along the underside of his cock head then swept over the eye from which she tasted a droplet of his essence. By his ragged breathing and the way his big, hard body arched partway off the bed, she knew he wouldn't last much longer.

When she began sucking the head again, drawing it so deeply into her mouth that he brushed the back of her throat, he panted, "Much more of this and you'll suck me dry."

She chuckled and his groan of delight told her the vibrations must have felt good against his cock. After another moment of intense licking and sucking, she released him from her mouth and straddled him.

Rahul's gaze met hers, so intense that a new wave of heat broke over her. Rising onto her knees, she clasped the base of his cock and guided the hard shaft into her. With deliberate slowness she eased herself down until he filled her entirely. His hardness pressed where she was so soft and aching with need. She rode him slowly at first, but her patience was almost at its end. By his lustful expression and the excited rise and fall of his chest she knew he, too, was close to the edge.

"Oh, Rahul!" she cried, unable to control herself any longer. Her eyes closed and her head arched back as she rode him fast and hard.

"Saloni!" He gasped, his hips lunging, meeting her thrust for thrust.

She exploded in a climax that, for several magnificent moments, hurled her into a world of pure bliss. Rahul joined her in ecstasy, his very essence surging into her.

* * * *

Later that day, Saloni's friend Bo came to speak to her and Rahul. The lovely Chinese vampiress crouched down and peered at Saloni through the slit in the door.

"Are you okay in there?"

"Never better." Rahul chuckled softly and Saloni slapped his shoulder.

"What?" Bo asked.

"Nothing," Saloni replied, leaning closer to the slit to meet Bo's gaze. "We're

fine.”

“I have a message from Rahul’s father. He and Raine have arrived in India and everything is all right. They send their love.”

“I’m sure,” Rahul snapped.

“He also said he spoke to Nidhi and she understands. If she doesn’t mind the wedding being called off, she can’t be that much in love.”

“Bo!” Saloni said, caught between amusement and shock. Still, after a hundred years of listening to Bo’s blunt sense of humor, nothing should surprise her.

“By the mating calls the guards report coming from this cell, I don’t think Rahul is too upset about the broken engagement, either.”

“Your friend is charming.” Rahul’s voice dripped sarcasm.

“Thank you so much,” Bo replied sweetly. “Before I go, is there anything you need?”

“No, we’re fine,” Saloni said. “Unless you can negotiate with the First Wraths to get us some exercise time out of this cell, or at least get it for Rahul. It’s hard for a tiger to be caged like this.”

“I doubt they’ll agree, but I’ll try.”

“Thanks, Bo.”

Bo smiled and closed the slit.

When Saloni turned to Rahul, he wore an expression of gratitude she never expected to see on his arrogant face.

“What?” she asked.

“Thank you for asking for some time out of this cage.”

“You probably won’t get it. Should you decide to escape, it would be difficult to control you without killing you. I don’t think the First Wraths are keen on the idea of starting a war with a weretiger clan, so they want to deliver you back to your father alive and well at the end of your sentence.”

“It was the thought that mattered. I can endure the sentence, but it’s nice to know you care.”

Saloni smiled slightly and kissed him. “I do care. It just took me a while to learn how to really show it.”

* * * *

Two nights later, Bo returned, this time with Fifi and Angelique. Saloni knew by the sound of her friend’s voice something was wrong.

“We’re letting Rahul out early,” she announced. “It’s the wish of the First Wraths that he be returned to India immediately.”

“Why?” Rahul demanded. Saloni felt him tense and she took his hand, squeezing it.

“Your clan is battling with another.”

“My father sent for me?”

“No. He wanted you to remain here and finish your sentence. Raine sent a message asking the First Wraths to consider releasing you to help in the battle. It seems a weretiger clan led by a man called Vikrant has been attacking humans.”

“That’s nothing new,” Rahul said. “We’ve fought them before for the same

reason. Vikrant is my father's oldest enemy."

"I guess their attacks have become more frequent. Raine feels your presence is necessary. She risked Sanjay's anger sending for you, so I assume the situation is serious."

The heavy doors slid back and the *loup-garou* guards stared warily at Rahul.

"Don't worry. I'm not about to attack anyone," he said, then met Bo's gaze.

"Thank you for allowing this."

"It's not me," she said. "The decision came from the First Wraths."

"I want to go with you." Saloni clung to Rahul's hand. "I will speak to the First Wraths. Under the circumstances I'm sure they'll allow me to--"

"No. I don't want you involved in this battle." Rahul held her gaze with a ferocity she'd never seen before.

The warrior in her rose to the surface, ready to fight beside him. She also wanted to prove that she was no longer a helpless female whose sole purpose was to bend to the will of men. "I am a good fighter, Rahul. The Wakened Veils have trained me well."

"I've seen you fight and I know what you're capable of." He took her face in his hands and gazed deeply into her eyes. "I love you, Saloni. Two hundred years ago, I thought you died and part of me died, too. I can't risk losing you in this battle. Yes, you are almost immortal, but so are weretigers. They could kill you."

"What about you?" Saloni grasped his wrists. "I can't stay here not knowing if you're dead or alive. I can help you and your clan."

Rahul kissed her passionately on the mouth, then shoved her back into the cage. Before she could react, Fifi and Angelique slammed the door shut.

"Rahul!" Saloni pounded on the door. "If you do this, I'll never forgive you! Never! Bo! Ask the First Wraths if they'll see me. Bo!"

"It doesn't matter what they say," Rahul called. "The decision about who fights rests with the weretigers. I do not want you involved, Saloni. When the battle is over, I'll come back and make you my wife."

"Don't bother!" she screamed. Tears of frustration and fear for his safety sprang into her eyes. How could this be happening? Just when they had finally admitted their love. "I'm not your property, Rahul! I never was and never will be. If you won't take me as an equal partner, then you won't have me at all!"

* * * *

Rahul's paws sank into mud as he prowled through the swamp. His senses strained for any sign of the enemy tigers who had been pushing closer to his clan's territory.

When he'd arrived in India nearly a week ago, he'd been informed by his father's closest advisors that Sanjay himself was stalking the front lines. His father sought a direct confrontation with Vikrant, leader of this rival clan. Vikrant and Sanjay had been bitter enemies since the first clan of weretigers the world had ever known divided after a long and bitter battle. After serving their goddess for centuries, some tigers, like Vikrant, had turned against her and used their power irresponsibly. Others, like those of Rahul's clan, continued to thrive harmoniously, yet secretly, amidst humans.

The battles that raged among weretigers had eventually ended for the most part.

Every now and then one group would try to slip into another's territory and a skirmish would break out. Lately Vikrant and his warriors had gone too far. Sanjay and Rahul had worked hard to keep their territory safe. It had been centuries since a mortal was attacked and killed there, either by weretigers or regular tigers. Attacks brought hunters and that was bad all around. Not only that, several women had been targeted and that went against their clan's fundamental beliefs. Their goddess forbade the mistreatment of women, and Sanjay stood by her creed. It was as if Vikrant was deliberately goading him into war. Well, now he had it.

Rahul paused, his ears flickering, and inhaled deeply. Another tiger was nearby and it was not one of his clan. The scent belonged to Vikrant. He resisted the urge to growl and remained stock still yet ready to spring into battle.

Something struck him with the power of a freight train. Thick claws tore into his sides. He shifted position quickly and Vikrant's fangs sank into his shoulder. Roaring with fury, he twisted and rolled, finally managing to throw off the other weretiger.

Engulfed by battle lust, he scarcely felt the pain from the profusely bleeding wounds. His gaze met that of his enemy. Staring into those cunning yellow eyes, he knew this would be a fight to the death.

They circled one another for several seconds, then sprang at each other, launched by their powerful hind legs. Their roars mingled, echoing through the swamp as they swiped at one another with their front paws. Rahul felt as if his head would snap off beneath strength of the other cat's ferocious whacks, yet he stood his ground. This fight wasn't simply for his life, but for the lives and reputation of his clan. And now he had Saloni. He needed to see her again, to share his life with her like he'd wanted to from the first.

Vikrant growled and batted him closer to the edge of the water. Rahul managed to shove him backward. The other tiger momentarily lost his footing and stumbled. Wasting no time, Rahul leapt atop him. Locked together, they rolled in the mud, their fangs and claws tearing each other bloody. Finally Rahul saw the opening he was looking for and sank his teeth into Vikrant's neck. He clung tightly, thrashing his head from side to side and ignoring the bone-crushing pain of his enemy's claws against his already torn flesh.

Somewhere in the distance Rahul heard a familiar roar. Only when he was certain the other tiger was dead did he move away from the limp body. He sat back on his haunches, panting, every muscle in his body aching.

An enormous black tiger sprang through the trees. Even if Rahul hadn't recognized his father by scent, there was no mistaking Sanjay, the only black weretiger in India.

In the space of a breath, his father shifted to man form and approached, glancing from the dead weretiger to Rahul. He squatted near his son and examined his wounds.

"You need to get back to the meeting place and get these injuries tended."

Rahul growled softly in agreement.

His father's hands roamed gently over his matted fur and Sanjay continued, "You'll heal, though. Our clan owes you great respect, my son, as do I. You destroyed Vikrant."

In spite of his pain and exhaustion, Rahul felt a rush of pride. He had killed his father's oldest enemy and proven himself among his kind.

"I will guide you home," Sanjay said, shifting back to tiger form. Rahul didn't argue but followed him silently. Already weak from blood loss, he was vulnerable to attack and therefore grateful for his father's protection. Though Vikrant was dead, it would take some time for other members of his clan to realize it and withdraw from the area.

They were still several miles from their clan's meeting place when Rahul caught Saloni's scent and also that of Bo and Raine, his father's fiancée.

He and Sanjay glanced at each other and growled softly, questioning sounds rather than angry ones. In spite of his pain, Rahul picked up his pace. What the hell were the women doing here? He had made it plain that he wanted Saloni to stay away until this crisis ended. He knew Sanjay had ordered Raine to keep away, as well. Soon enough they would find out the reason for the women's disobedience.

In spite of his concern for Saloni's safety and irritation that she hadn't listened to him yet again, he longed to see and touch her. At the moment nothing would feel better than the caress of her soft, slender hands.

* * * *

After Rahul had left for India, Bo had spoken to the First Wraths on Saloni's behalf. It had taken much pleading and negotiating on her part, but the First Wraths had finally agreed to allow Saloni to join Raine in India where the women would offer their services as assassins to the weretiger clan. Bo had immediately volunteered to accompany Saloni and she was grateful for her friend's loyalty. Though she wasn't familiar with the laws that governed weretigers, she knew they were proud and courageous. Creatures born to serve their goddess as warrior beasts. Any rift among them was bound to be savage. At least Rahul's clan fought to keep relative peace between mortal and supernatural beings.

When they'd arrived in India, Raine had met them and explained that Sanjay had been completely unwilling to accept help from The Wakened Veils.

"He is unbelievable," the lovely brown-haired Succubus had said upon meeting her sisters at the airport. "Refuses to even think about using women in battle."

"Typical." Bo had shaken her head. "So do we give up?"

"Hell no," Raine had scoffed. "We go back and try again. If they won't let us fight, we can at least help with casualties."

Casualties. Saloni shuddered at the thought of something happening to Rahul.

Near the clan's meeting place, they had been stopped by several weretigers--Sanjay's advisors. They explained that Rahul and Sanjay were miles off, stalking their enemies. The advisors were as stubborn about accepting help as their leader had been and with good reason. Unlike the weretigers who could discern all their brothers by scent, the women wouldn't be able to differentiate between clans. Even the vampires, with their keen sense of smell, hadn't met every member of Sanjay's clan and could accidentally attack someone on their side. Because of this, joining the battle was out of the question. Instead they convinced the advisors to allow them to help with the wounded.

For the last three days, Saloni, Raine, and Bo had done little but wash, stitch, and bandage injuries. In spite of the number of wounded, they were told their clan was doing well and had managed to drive Vikrant's warriors almost back to their own territory.

Saloni was rolling bandages when she caught Rahul's scent. Hurrying out of the makeshift hut they had been using as an infirmary, she saw Rahul and Sanjay in their tiger form striding into the clearing. She nearly forgot to breathe at the sight of Rahul's coat matted with blood and dirt. Obviously he'd suffered terrible injuries and needed medical attention.

"Bo!" she shouted for her friend and hurried to Rahul. He stopped and she dropped to her knees beside him, trying to find the injuries through all the blood and fur. The sound of purring in her ear and the weight of his head against her shoulder as he nuzzled her made her heart ache with love and concern.

Moments later, Bo joined her. Sanjay shifted to his man form.

"I won't ask yet what you women are doing here." Sanjay glared at them with annoyance in his obsidian eyes.

"Good," Raine said, joining the group. "We're too busy around here for foolish arguments about the value of women in battle. Help your son to the infirmary and we'll patch him up."

Sanjay grunted but did as she ordered. Sanjay and Saloni treated Rahul's injuries while Raine and Bo continued helping the others. As they worked, Sanjay told of Rahul's battle with Vikrant. Word spread quickly around the meeting place, and once Rahul was bandaged and settled, weretigers entered, one by one, and offered him their respects for his prowess in battle.

Saloni remained by his side, her hand resting on his powerful shoulder, relishing the warmth of his fur and the knowledge that he would soon be well again. Weretigers healed quickly and Rahul had already proven his strength.

Though she couldn't help feeling proud of him, more than anything Saloni was grateful they would finally have the chance to share their lives.

* * * *

The following night, Rahul felt strong enough to change back to his human form. Saloni knelt beside him on a mat and cleaned the savage claw and fang marks that wrapped around his torso. Though the injuries had stopped bleeding and were healing rapidly, they still appeared red and sore.

"Your father is very proud," she said, placing aside a damp cloth and picking up a fresh roll of bandages.

A slight smile flirted with Rahul's lips. "So he says. I know he wanted to be the one to confront Vikrant."

"Raise your arms."

He did as she asked and as she applied the bandages, she couldn't keep from admiring his lean, chiseled body. When she finished, she gazed into his eyes. Little thrills of passion and love coursed through her. His eyes were so dark and sexy yet full of affection she could not resist.

"Saloni?"

"Yes, Rahul?" She placed a hand to his chest and lightly trailed her palm across

its broad expanse. Leaning a bit closer, she continued holding his gaze. Their lips were nearly touching when he grasped her shoulders and held her at arms length.

“Before we go any further, I need to know. Will you marry me?” he asked.

“I thought we’d settled that while imprisoned?”

“Before I left, I said I would be back to marry you. You told me not to bother. This foolishness must end, Saloni. I must know if you are mine or not. I have already lost you too many times. First when you refused me, then when I thought you were dead. I need an answer.”

“Yes, Rahul. I’ll marry you, but there is a condition.”

He was about to kiss her, then stopped short, his eyes narrowing. “What condition?”

“That you treat me as your partner not your property. That we share our lives. Everything. Always. Before you get angry, I don’t mean that I’ll try to force my way into the affairs of your clan. All I mean is don’t push me away, like you tried to do in this situation, when there’s a chance I can help.”

“All right. I agree, but you must also promise to be honest with me. No more lies, especially about your feelings for me.”

She smiled and slipped her arms around his neck. “All right. I love you, Rahul. I always have and I always will.”

“Saloni.” He returned her embrace and kissed her.

There would be no more vengeance or petty jealousy between them. Just love, now and forever.

The End